
POETRY | FALL 2020

Medical Elective in Vietnam

By Violet Kieu

Are you Vietnamese if you've only been there twice?
Once as a tourist,
Another, a starry-eyed medical student.

If you can speak, but
Can't write the people's language?
Your mother tongue.

Saigon by night makes you
A nocturnist on a twilight-shift,
No universal health care, the user pays.

Sparks of violence become *de rigueur*.
Ear chopped off in brawl,
Neck lacerated in attempted suicide.

Unable to pay a loan shark
A young woman presents with head ajar –
A flip top lid, on angle, filleted.

And you look out as the sun rises over motorbikes parked
Electricity wires tangled and thick,
And you realize that this could have been your life.

If not for the war
The diaspora of being scattered like a spore
Into deep Commonwealth.

You witness love in a hospital –
Relatives spoon cháo gà'
Brush teeth, comb hair.

Where patients rotate,
Four to a bed
Head to tail, and floor mattress below.

So much light from the dark
White coat, you, and faded clothes – them,

Random, social determinants of health.

That being Vietnamese now means
Being an outsider,
In the country of your ancestors.

Are you a medical tourist, too?

Violet Kieu is a fertility doctor and writer from Melbourne, Australia, who writes memoir about medicine and motherhood. This author photo was taken during a medical elective in Saigon, Vietnam. Her essays have appeared in *Womankind, Peril, Pulse, Cha, Complete Sentence* and *Hektoen International*. Kieu has won a Boroondara Literary Award 2001 and placed for both the Marjorie Barnard Award for Short Story 2009 and the Alan Russell Award for Memoir 2020. She has been awarded mentorships from ACT Writers' HARDCOPY2019 and the Australian Society of Authors 2019. Her poem "Medical Elective in Vietnam" appears in the Fall 2020 *Intima*.

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