

# The VVA Veteran

*The Official Voice of Vietnam Veterans of America, Inc. ®  
An organization chartered by the U.S. Congress*

---

**May/June 2004  
OFF THE SHELF**

## Sparse Delicacies

REVIEWED BY WAYNE KARLIN

---

*From Where the Wind Blows/Gio Thoi Phuong Nao* by Le Pham Le, translated by Dan Than Pham Le and Nancy Arbuthnot, Vietnamese International Poetry Society, 178 pp., \$14.99, paper.

Born in Da Lat, Le Pham Le taught Languages and Literature in a high school. After the fall of South Vietnam in 1975, along with hundreds of thousands of others, she left her country for the dangers of the open sea, the hardships of the refugee camps, and an uncertain future in the United States. One of the most important contributions of those who came in that migration is the addition of a vibrant new set of voices to the American literary canon.

The poems in Le Pham Le's *From Where the Wind Blows* are presented in Vietnamese and English. They weave together cultures and generations through the traditional pattern of the journey that is really a circle, a coming and then a return with new, forever changed eyes. The journey includes displacement: *Only days before/a high school teacher/now a beggar/suddenly the mother realizes/this is the first step/of her journey/and stops crying*; feelings of nostalgia for the old homeland; and the discovery that one has found a new homeland, even as echoes of the old war are still heard in a strange and confusing new context.

*Night of gunshots/someone shouting/someone knocking,/footsteps hurrying off--roaring cars/stumbling drunks/howling dogs--I'm lost in the Monkey New Year day--like/smoky haze.*

The broken, somewhat awkward quality of those words reflects the unease and uncertainty of the refugee searching for new words to explain a new world. Several poems, such as a paean to her ambitious immigrant students at the community college where Le works, are earnest but do not rise above the level of banal yearbook verse. In fairness to the poet, however, it is very difficult to translate and capture the beautiful music and word-play of Vietnamese poetry, which can make the seemingly simplistic or prosaic poetic, a fact translator Nancy Arbuthnot acknowledges in her thoughtful and useful introductory essay and captures in her best translations.

For those who can only read the English, that complexity of meaning sometimes

can occur only through the reader's awareness of context. "Song of a Soldier's Wife," for example, can be seen simply as the traditional lament of the wife of an absent soldier: *It's raining in the East/and wet here, too, in the West, dew or snow/always falling/Have autumn breezes/blown in the wilderness yet?/Lonely nights,/How much I miss you.* Yet, seeing it from the perspective of the refugee experience, the separation becomes much more resonant and poignant.

The sparse delicacy and emotional layering of that poem typifies some of Le's best work. The book is filled with poems that touch delicately and stir the heart.

*The novelist and essayist, Wayne Karlin, who served as a U.S. Marine in the Vietnam War, is the series editor of Voices From Vietnam.*

---

**Visit *The VVA Veteran* archives  
to locate back issues.**

E-mail us at [TheVeteran@vva.org](mailto:TheVeteran@vva.org)