

The weather in San Francisco last July was beautiful. At least when we were there. Invited to attend a series of meetings with the local Vietnamese community, we flew out of Long Beach to Oakland, took BART across the Bay, and walked a few blocks from the stop at the corner of Market and Powell to our hotel.

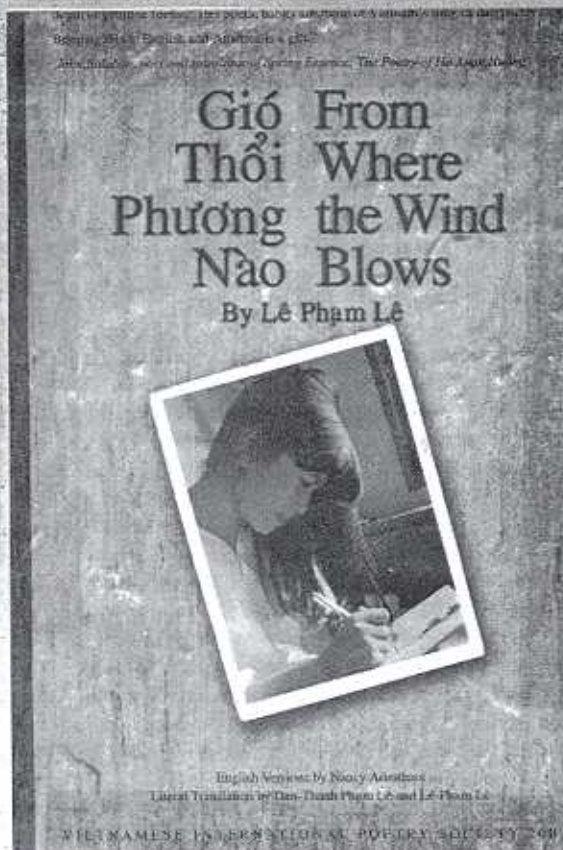
Since we arrived on Sunday, large crowds of tourists were gathered to ride the world famous cable cars. Street musicians and mimes vied with one another for adulation (and tips) from the people. During our few days there we met a number of new friends, visited the elegant Asian Art Museum, and found a whole new component has been added to the Bay Area's demographic mix. When I lived on the Peninsula many years ago there were few Asians in northern California. Most were isolated in The City's Chinatown and Little Tokyo. Now large numbers of Southeast Asians, and particularly Vietnamese, are spread throughout the area from San Jose to the East Bay.

The last night we were in The City we were part of a large party dining at one of San Francisco's better restaurants. Seated across the long table from me was a professor from San Francisco State University and an elegant and very quiet Vietnamese woman with a wonderful smile. During the course of the evening both the professor and her friend chatted with me. We exchanged cards and have corresponded by e-mail over the intervening months.

The elegant and very quiet Vietnamese woman is Lê Phạm Lê and I just received her first book of poetry, *From Where the Wind Blows / Gió Thổi Phương Nào*. Lê was born in Dalat and attended the University of Pedagogy in Saigon, where she earned a BA in Vietnamese language and literature. She taught language and literature in high school for five years and then left the country with her family, first going to the Pulau Bidong refugee camp in Malaysia and eventually to San Francisco. She has been working with the English Department at Los Medanos College as a lab coordinator since 1989.

Lê's volume is written in two parts. The poems were originally written in *quoc ngu* and these compose the first half of the book. This section is mirrored in an English translation by Nancy Arbuthnot, who is a poet and teaches at the U.S. Naval Academy. Land one of her daughters, Dan-Thanh Phạm Lê provided literal translations and Ms. Arbuthnot created her "imitation" of the original, as Robert Lowell refers to all such translations.

Since I am culturally deprived and do not read Vietnamese I must rely on the expertise and sensitivity of Professor Arbuthnot as she



From Where the Wind Blows

BY SANDY McLEOD

presents her sense of Lê's imagery. She does a difficult task admirably.

Each of the two sections of the volume is divided into six parts, with prefatory notes. The sections stand separately, with a preface by Nhu Hoa Lê Quang Sinh, President of the Vietnamese International Poetry Society for the Vietnamese language component. Nancy Arbuthnot and Lê write for the English language half.

The six parts, with their accompanying photographs and calligraphic script, are the story of Lê's life as she physically but never emotionally leaves Vietnam and eventually arrives in the United States. They trace her traumatic tenure in Malaysia, her nostalgia for Vietnam, her arrival in her second homeland, her brief return home, and the love she has for her family and her friends.

John Balaban, a poet anyone interested in Vietnam should read, comments on the influence of *ca dao* on Lê's poetry and she acknowledges his influence on her writing. But while he has influenced her, she has written her own "life journey," as she calls it. In one of our e-mail conversations she commented on how adventuresome I am for taking the trips I have taken and contemplating others to complement them. I told her she was the adventuresome one, not I, but she would not accept that. "I did what I had to do," she said. "Anyone would do it."

Perhaps. But to do what she did, and indeed she is correct in that so many did do the same thing, and to write of it as she does, sets her apart from most of us. Of her time in Malaysia she writes, "Wind, carry my worries / to the other side of the sea!" She speaks of her long-haired sister in Saigon and comments that "My dark hair has faded in the years since, / my life a wandering boat, storm-tossed."

When she and her husband and young son reach San Francisco they are chilled by an autumn wind, even though it is July. Confused, she wanders trying to find peace: "Hair tangled, vision blurred, / I wander town lost, / a young bird / fallen from its nest / under a clear sky / that is crying." Friends help restore her to herself. A long-haired girl "fallen out of love" who listened to her and gave her an oil painting of a boat. "Do you still have / long, silky hair?" Her family, now two girls with her son: Xuan-Vu, Dan Thanh, Hoang-Tuoc. "Buoyed by family, I rise to the surface / singing my never-ending love."

When her father dies she writes "Rest in peace, *Ba*, one thousand autumns, / far from this life" and a longer verse titled *When the Last Leaf Falls* which I think is the most poignant and loving in the book.

Father, from the invisible world,
are you calling me?

Reading your diary in my dreams
I feel you are still alive.

Your words resound:
I see the last leaf falling

*Like my soul sailing toward my ancestors,
my body still anchored to this shore.*

In the same dream my sister appears.
I show her your diary, then close it.

The ripe plum she was eating
is squeezed tight in her palm.

Outside, wind blows, rain falls.

At one point in our e-mail conversations, Lê asked if I would write a brief comment for her book cover. I had read the proofs of the book and told her I would be honored. I wrote, "From *Where the Winds Blow*, a new collection of poetry by Lê Phạm Lê, is a collage of vivid memories of her first homeland and of her journey to her new one. It is filled with love and hope. The winds which have blown her to California have not erased her memories of the past but brightened her hopes for the future. Would we all be so windblown."

Now that I have the handsome finished copy in hand, I am looking even more eagerly to the west, hoping for the wind to touch me too. ■