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Personality Profile

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Mong Lan

By VIVIENNE KENRICK

Although she was only 5 when, with her family, she was evacuated from Saigon, Mong-Lan thinks the events of war and suffering in her early life traumatized her. Thirty years later, critics find in her poetry "the tectonic force of history, beauty and despair." Poetry, giving release to her emotions, is only one of Mong-Lan's disciplines. She is acclaimed also as a writer, painter and photographer, and a dancer of the tango. Primarily, she is a teacher.



Mong-Lan writes with a "quiet intensity." She also speaks nine languages, and is a teacher and professional dancer.

Mong-Lan's parents were both medical doctors who after leaving their home in Vietnam re-established themselves in practice in America. "As a child I moved around a lot, so it seems natural to have continued to do so," Mong-Lan said.

She always wanted to paint and began in childhood. The writing of poetry came later. "And I always wanted to teach," she said. "That was my calling, and I still think it is."

As a recipient of a four-year endowed art scholarship, she studied in Texas. In San Francisco she earned her certificate in English-language teaching to adults. She went to New York to gain her bachelor's degree in English and American literature and psychology. With a graduate school fellowship and the Dean's Master of Fine Arts Fellowship, she went to Tucson, Ariz., for her master's degree in fine arts-poetry. In 2000 she was awarded the Wallace E. Stegner Fellowship in poetry, which gave her two years at Stanford University. "My responsibilities there were only to write poetry and meet with other poets twice a week," she said. In 2003 she received a Fulbright grant that took her back on a visit to Vietnam, the land of her birth.

At each level of her progress Mong-Lan distinguished herself, and undertook her extra activities of exhibiting, public readings and inclusion of her work in published anthologies and journals. Her honors include invitations to read at world poetry festivals, most recently last year in Heidelberg, Germany.



"Rose 1," a watercolor

Mong-Lan's teaching positions moved her around, and the subjects she taught varied. From teaching English as a foreign language in San Francisco, she taught Vietnamese in Oregon. At the University of Arizona she instructed in English composition, poetry writing and business writing. At the Dallas Museum of Art, where she was artist and poet in residence, her students ranged in age from 7 to 70. She served as poetry and art editor for different periodicals. Throughout her mainline work, she presented exhibitions of her paintings, photographs, videos and calligraphy. Since 2002 she has been assistant professor of English creative writing at the University of Maryland University College, Tokyo. Recently she served as a faculty member of the San Diego State University Writers' Conference.

She is tireless, disciplined, multitalented and achieving beyond one normal person's portion. She maintains her output and activities even with the distractions of frequent foreign travel and overseas residence. She lists nine languages in which she is fluent or on the way to becoming so. She is also a dancer.

She said: "Since childhood I have been involved with dance, and earlier in life studied ballet, flamenco, ballroom and salsa. For the last several years I have concentrated almost exclusively on the Argentine tango. I have studied with several of the world's most prominent tango teachers and dancers, when they were teaching and performing in San Francisco and Tokyo, as well as in Buenos Aires. In pursuit of my love of the tango, I have traveled four times to Argentina to study and dance, and have given professional tango performances in San Francisco and Tokyo."

Mong-Lan's first book of poems, "Song of the Cicadas," won the Juniper Prize, the Great Lakes College Association's New Writers Award for Poetry, and was a finalist for the Poetry Society of America's Norma Farber First Book Award. As part of the Great Lakes College Association's New Writers Award, Mong-Lan toured, read her poetry and gave photography presentations at nine locations in the United States. The content of her first book, Mong-Lan said, "has a lot to do with my experiences." One critic described it as "deft, graceful in the way words move and in the cadence that carries them. . . . One is moved by the quiet intensity of their information." Her second book -- "Why Is the Edge Always Windy?" -- "picks up from where the first left off," Mong-Lan said.

She will read from her published work at a special event, with free admission, on March 19 from 5 to 7 p.m. at The Pink Cow in Shibuya, Tokyo, tel: (03) 3406-5597. On this occasion Mong-Lan will also be showing her paintings and photographs.

Web site: http://www.monglan.com/