

BOOK REVIEWS

Behind Blue Eyes

BY ROBERT HUGHES

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What do you do on a weekend if you're an expatriate living in Vietnam? If you're Robert Hughes, you write poetry. Hughes, a twice-published poet, arrived in 1996 as Country Manager for Hewlett Packard. He recorded his impressions of Vietnam in verse. While citizen poets are more rare today, Hughes is in the mold of the lay observer who, in another age, recorded his thoughts in poetry. *Behind Blue Eyes* is an extraordinary collection of 104 vignettes and reflections, in a book punctuated with 38 stunning black and white photographs.

This is poetry written by a traditionalist. It is meant to be read aloud. It has cadence. It has structure. It rhymes. It is pleasing to the ear. But it is much more. It penetrates—and it records what a camera often misses.

The titles themselves provide a tour of Vietnam, old and new: "Lament of the Soldier's Wife," "The Schoolgirls," "The Continental Hotel," "The Rainy Season," "Cyclo Drivers," and so on.

Among his first impressions, Hughes describes "The Ao Dai," the traditional, feminine Vietnamese tunic which "mesmerizes with its gentle teases" and "sways and twirls and twists and plays and pleases." In a few short words he has described the dress that has captivated generations of foreign travelers to Vietnam and, to some, he has described Vietnam itself.

Hughes, an American, is a 15-year resident of Asia going first to Hong Kong in 1984 to perfect his Mandarin. His observations are written largely in the first person. However, in an interesting way, these observations are not just personal to Hughes, but are made to be personal to the reader.

The many ironies of Vietnam are no better illustrated than in "No Smoking" in which, under a no-smoking sign at the airport, "a uniform smoked."

*"But I am NOT a passenger,
I am an airport officer."
Stunned by his logic there,
I gasped the acrid air.*

Vietnam's ambivalence toward overseas Vietnamese, who left as boat people during the decades after the American war, is recorded in "Viet Kieu." They are welcomed abroad, but their return visits to Vietnam are "branded as trespasses."

*Now victims of discrimination,
now victims of the situation;*

Hughes does not just record observations and analyze what he sees. If this collection did only that, it would be worth reading. But there is also a fascination with sounds. "I worry, hurry, quickly scurry by" to seek shelter from a sudden thunderstorm. The dragon in "Halong Bay" "scraped and scoured and scratched the ground."

"Tea" muses on the struggle for supremacy between tea and coffee in this Confucian, ex-colony that has remained so traditionally Asian. "[F]ine coffee gets the press," but tea, "the simple, slow, symbolic preparation" remains the nation's choice. It's an apt metaphor for the struggle between the old and the new that Vietnam is now experiencing long after its neighbors have taken the path toward modernization. Vietnam must also modernize, but struggles to retain links to its traditions and its past.

The style is a variation of the Shakespearean iambic pentameter, 14-line sonnet, with 140 syllables. The 14 lines remain, but are arranged differently, and the aim is only 120 syllables. It means that word choice must be more precise. At times precision is sacrificed for meter or rhyme. At other times the reader has to supply an empty syllable in order to make the meter work. In some lines, the reader feels compelled to try to improve on Hughes's word selection. These are distractions, but they are only minor distractions.

Some of the poems are meant to be read together, like "Influences: French":

*Observers should not misconceive,
no one was sad to see them leave;
but many do not mind
some things they left behind.*

And "Influences: Russian":

*I thought the Soviets were here?
Where is a Russian souvenir?*

In the title piece "Behind Blue Eyes," Hughes reverses the role of observed and observer, and is the foreigner seen through the eyes of a Vietnamese child:

*"My interest, Mama, I cannot conceal,
do you think it will surprise
him when I ask him if his nose is real?"*

For the person who knows Vietnam even only in passing, an hour or two spent reading *Behind Blue Eyes* will validate many partially formed, partially articulated impressions. Hughes has supplied extraordinary word pictures that confirm Vietnam's own contradictions and charm.

Vietnam, as it is perceived by many Americans, is synonymous with war, social upheaval, protest, and dissent. While today's students may not be totally burdened by this view, Vietnam is still often misunderstood. In fact, Vietnam is an ancient civilization with lively, modern, energetic people. *Behind Blue Eyes* is a look into the heart of this culture. It will invite many young Americans to see Vietnam as their parents could not—as a country, not as a war. ■

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