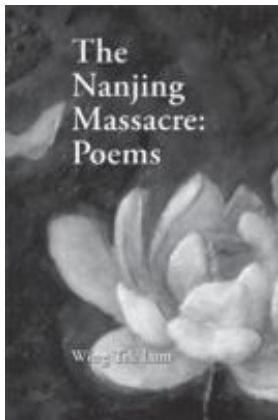


Ignored Tragedy

The Moment Before Tears Would Well Up

By Noam Scheindlin



In the standard Western narrative, World War 2 began on September 3, 1939, when the inchoate Allied Powers invaded imperial Germany. Putting the frame around the war this way, however, excludes from its scope the Japanese invasion and subsequent

occupation of Nanjing, China; the victims, in turn, are excluded from being commemorated in the context of the greater war.

The Japanese took control of Nanjing on December 13, 1937. Their occupation lasted for eight years. In just the first six weeks, the International Military Tribunal of the Far East reported that 260,000 civilians were murdered, though other sources place the number far higher. Iris Chang, in her 1997, *The Rape of Nanjing: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*, reports that during the initial weeks of the invasion, torture and bodily degradation was an institutional practice. Between 20,000 and 80,000 women were raped; many of these were mutilated, or mutilated to death. Chinese men served as human targets in bayonet practice. They were often castrated. People were buried alive, roasted alive, hung by their tongues, or were immobilized and then attacked by vicious dogs among other practices (Chang, 4-7).

World War II (1939-1945): the hushed, just-in-case-you-forgot parenthetical date-range, does a double violence to these victims, to these people whose experience in life, and in death, will never be known, and may never be known *of* by those who believe they know their history.

Ezra Pound wrote that an epic is a “poem including history.” To put history into an epic is to turn it into History, a making-sense of history, and giving

meaning to history in a cosmic movement from origin to ending. In an epic there is a gathering of the fragments, and a turning of these into destiny, will. Each unit of history in such an epic becomes a letter, which only takes its meaning as it joins with others and becomes word, sentence, book.

Wing Tek Lum, in his recently published *Nanjing Massacre: Poems* (Bamboo Ridge, 2013) reverses Pound’s dictum. This devastating collection of poems inserts the unquantifiable into history, and reminds us that history is not a synonym for truth. Lum refuses to be complicit in the notion that history can be meaningfully recounted. Lum offers another function for the poet. No longer the keeper of history, poetry now has a different, non-epic function, unofficial where the epic gives the sanctified story. Lum tells the stories of individuals.

An individual is in many ways, the opposite of history. The individual: a fragment in the social record, but whole in him- or herself. In this book, the poem doesn’t keep history, but dwells alongside it, unquantifiable when measured against the surging narratives of world power, of individuals coalescing through time into impersonal social forces. Lum does not use poetry as a means to create historical meaning. History, here, is not something that makes sense, not something that fits together like one puzzle piece into the next creating a whole. It is not material for a poem. Rather, in these poems, history can only be understood in the context of the fragment, in the experience of being fragmented, in the experience of not making sense, in the experience of consciousness.

Wing Tek Lum’s poems are about people who have been displaced not just in history, but by History, people who have lost not only their lives, but their ability to be commemorated. “The victims of war,” he writes, “especially those who did not survive, seldom have their experiences told... It is up to creative writers to imagine the stories of those who have been forgotten, whose existence may have been deliberately erased.” The poems traverse the margins of what we can know.

Lum’s privileged vehicle for portraying consciousness is the photograph. Many of the poems are inspired by photographs. Yet all of them offer a photographic quality, and in doing so, they pit our own



Wing Tek Lum of Honolulu, Hawaii is an American poet. He received the 1970 Poetry Center Award (now known as the Discovery/*The Nation* Award) and the 1988 American Book Award. He graduated from Brown University in 1969, where he majored in engineering and from the Union Theological Seminary, with a master's degree in divinity in 1973. His work appeared in *New York Quarterly*. Under the guidance of Makoto Ooka, he participated with Joseph Stanton and others in the collaborative renshi poem *What the Kite Thinks*.

Mr. Lum's book is available for purchase either at Amazon or via his publisher's website at www.bamboorage.com.

warmness of being against the cold eye of the camera.

The fictional consciousness that is often portrayed in Lum's poems remind us that something remains unsaid; the stillness of the camera's product lies behind every thought that had to be constructed to represent the thought that can never be heard. Even as we hear the thoughts of a woman being raped, we know, her very "thoughts" as they are represented, signify to us that we will never hear them, and we will never know them. Even as he memorializes, he has us confront the impossibility to remember. The objects of everyday life, the "Beans and preserved plums, / salt fish, pickled cabbage, / dried scallops and baby shrimp, / bamboo shoots, pumpkin seeds," do not so much as conjure up the people that consumed these things, as much as seem to sit unused, resounding not through history, but against history.

At times, Lum turns the camera back on the observer. He evokes the thoughts that we have no time to have even when we are alive, precisely because we are too busy living, reacting. We could say that Lum brings us to the origin of fiction, where the fictional portrayal becomes what life elides, but what underlies all meaningful living. In "A Village Burial," for example, Lum offers a description of the discovery (but by who?) of a group of decapitated bodies. There is an impersonal, objectivity as the voice of the poem methodically catalogs and reports:

*they are wearing soldier's uniforms,
ragged and caked with mud*

*shorn of their belts, one without shoes.
they have been decapitated.*

And at the same time, the photographic objectivity yields now to an observer, someone who sees, and who feels, but who pushes past his emotion in order to give words to its origin. The observer seems to catch the moment before becoming overwhelmed by the horror of the find:

*where their heads should have been, now empty,
the feeling of something missing, unnerving like a small
pin boring through
to prick the heart.*

The camera-eye of the poem here now moves into the consciousness of the observer, and stops, sees, takes a picture of that. And when the poem moves its lens back to the original scene, the reader is accompanied by an anonymous feeling—a discoverer—attached to no one, as if it were the camera itself:

*each body is laid out on the bank,
and turned over onto its back,
and heads are pressed on top of the necks
to see which fits.*

Who is seeing this? In this poem, things happen, but there is no actor represented. The passive construction ("each body is laid out"; "heads are pressed") offer us actions with no agent. Paralysis, not of the body, but of vision. We can see arms, we can see bodies extended out, but we cannot see eyes, we cannot see the part that sees: something always stands outside the visual field, something always escapes our sight. And as these detached bodies are absent in life, we also see our own absence, we see our own decapitation, the one that accompanies all perception.

And in this, the disparity between those who can see, and those who can no longer see; and yet, what they share, why they are commemorated.

In the *impossible perspective* that these poems offer, victim and reader both stand together

*as if no one could breathe,
the moment before tears would well up.*

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References:

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Ezra Pound, *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*. (Norfolk, CT: New Directions: 1954).

