



The Nanjing Massacre: Poems

Wing Tek Lum

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THE NANJING MASSACRE: POEMS offers us a series of snapshots of human cruelty, courage, and compassion that together compose a frightening yet accurate and unforgettable portrait of a historical nightmare. Like Goya's prints in *DISASTERS OF WAR*, or Ian MacMillan's prose sketches in *PROUD MONSTER*, Wing Tek Lum's poems confront readers with fully realized vignettes of brutality, love, and suffering whose effect is cumulative.

The subject is the notorious Japanese occupation of Nanjing, China, in 1937. The poems capture all perspectives of the tragedy—from the weary, casually cruel Japanese soldiers to the uncomprehending child victims, and from the desperate helpless parents and the brutalized comfort women to the bloodless yet vicious bureaucrats of death.

“Too often history is written by those who survive, those who won,” Lum writes. Drawing on published histories, memoirs, photographic collections, and oral histories, he composes testimony after testimony for the silenced—poetic memorials that also provide some measure of revenge against the victors. At key moments, he also broadens the frame of reference, linking the crimes in China to the atrocities committed since then at different times, on different continents. Massacres, Lum suggests, bear a family resemblance—the human family.

But THE NANJING MASSACRE is much more than a chamber of horrors. Lum's spare and meticulous verse offers up vivid, memorable, and even beautiful images, and many of the poems are mini-narratives, suspenseful and compelling. The result is a gallery of disturbing portraits that nevertheless move us through their artistry and truth.

—Craig Howes

Director, Center for Biographic Research
University of Hawai'i at Manoa

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