

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Book Review: *The War Still Within* by Tanya Ko Hong

Alexandra Umlas · Wednesday, March 11th, 2020

In the title poem of Tanya Ko Hong's newest collection, *The War Still Within*, Hong writes:

I said

*Go ahead  
Cut and burn my tongue  
You can't set fire to my secrets  
My other tongue will speak  
I carry my eyes, my bones  
through this war (57)*

Poem after poem offers an "other tongue," one that gives voice to, as the dedication to the book states, "all the women everywhere who have lost their names" (11). As the title suggests, history is not just a thing of the past, especially since so much of the past has been misrepresented or erased. Instead, history is a breathing body, it is testimony, it is many truths, it is what has been experienced and passed down.

Hong ushers us into the collection with a reminder in the form of a two-line poem, *The Way to Cross the Desert*: "Do not think about / the oasis" (12). The poem serves as a kind of preparation, a warning that these are not poems that we will read and easily forget. Instead, we are asked to consider more fully what has happened in the past, without the sugar coating that the past is often sprinkled with, without the "oasis." Just as the speaker in the title poem carries "eyes" and "bones," things that allow her to exist and to see, we are asked to carry both the silence and the words these poems offer and use them to make a better future.

Hong's is a writing of remembrance—lines that give voice to a history that has been traditionally unknown. The collection includes a section of six powerful poems that are spoken in the voice of a comfort woman, a euphemism for the women who were forced into being sex slaves by the Imperial Japanese Army during World War II. The book pays special homage to Hak Soon Kim, the first woman to speak publicly about her experience in August of 1991. It took over 50 years before the term "comfort woman" was recognized widely for what it actually was. Tanya Ko Hong carries through these poems Hak Soon Kim's remarkable bravery and spirit. Through poetry, Hong is able to immerse the reader in the brutality that these women endured, while consistently reminding us of their humanity. In *1941, That Autumn*, Hong writes:

Autumn night, Japanese  
soldiers wielding swords

dragged me away  
 while I was gathering pine needles  
  
 that fell from my basket  
 filling the air with the scent  
 of their white blood (19)

The poem is an object of marvelous power here, placing the reader in 1941, in that Autumn night, so that the horrors that have happened become more than concepts. Details like the scent of pine needles offer a tangibility that can only happen through literature. Putting ourselves in the past and imagining what a person has actually experienced requires a discipline from the reader to more fully confront what has happened. In doing so, we recognize these women, not just as a group that has suffered collectively, but also as individuals who have each suffered.

In this collection, those who have suffered survive by reaching through these poems to us, changing us for the better, allowing us to reaffirm our humanity. Hong inspires us to help reshape the histories of things that have been misrepresented or not represented at all. Here, poetry provides something more than facts. The human element is placed at the forefront; it is imperative that we read the multitudinous truths these poems carry in them so that we can recognize and prevent atrocities like these from ever happening again.

Tanya Ko Hong's poetry has a clear, steadfast voice. It is multi-generational and multi-cultural. An immigrant of the Korean diaspora, Hong is able to guide us through some of her experience being both Korean and American. In the poem *Second Period*, Hong describes a student who is called out of class to learn to correctly say the word "river":

That's what I said, river, river, river, khang—  
 It's a khang!

She shakes her head,  
*Look at my mouth, she says, RRRRR*  
 VVVVVVVVVVVVVVV

River.  
 River, I say.  
 Then shut my mouth.

Again and again, Hong gives words to those who have struggled with words or who refuse to speak because of fear of getting it wrong. By refusing to be silenced by the need for perfection, Hong suggests to us all that the important thing isn't getting every fact correct. It also isn't saying everything perfectly. Instead, it is the act of trying to understand, of trying to do better and better, that is necessary.

In poems like *Look Back*, Hong describes the dilemma of wanting to "pretend / Delete names. / Disconnect" while simultaneously needing "to write this story for me" (46). We are reminded through the specificity of her words that we are connected through time and place. It is in the act of looking back that we can begin to progress forward. Each poem links us to a past, a place, and paves the way for a future where space for doing better has been cleared. We can be hopeful not because something has been covered up or pushed aside, but because we understand more; we see not just the facts, but also the material that lives between the facts.

Hong's book is multifaceted, loving, compassionate, and extraordinary. The poems she carves out from her world experience span many subjects, from myths of how a baby is born (through the belly button of course!), to a lovely poem about death titled *Oxtail Soup*, to a persona, noir poem called *The Crying Game*, that has one of the most satisfying turns I have ever read (and was included in episode four of poet Suzanne Lummis's noir poetry series *They Write by Night*).

In the last poem in the book, Hong writes of a train station in Dublin, where a girl makes a simple request:

Get me a McDonald's hamburger and a cup of coffee,  
And tell me a story of your star,  
The land where you came from, please. (68)

We build ourselves out of the stories we tell ourselves. We build compassion and understanding out of the stories we tell each other. Give Hong your ear. Let her tell you her stories. Listen carefully as what has been unnamed is named, what has been silenced is spoken, and as the war within is laid across the page. Add these poems to your truths. The world is a better place for them.

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