

Unspeakable Horrors and Forgettable Tragedies

by Janine Kwok '09

To love. To be loved. To never forget your own insignificance. To never get used to the unspeakable violence and vulgar disparity of life around you. To seek joy in the saddest places. To pursue beauty to its lair. To never simplify what is complicated or complicate what is simple. To respect strength, never power. Above all, to watch. To try and understand. To never look away. And never, never to forget.

Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*

*A young man turns to face his friends. He is tall and handsome with a smile winning enough to melt the hearts of beautiful women and their mothers. A wisp of hair grazes his forehead, but he doesn't sweep it aside because his hands are otherwise occupied: his right hand grips his sword, and his left holds up a freshly severed human head by its bloodied ear. Like a fisherman posing with the first catch of the day, he hoists up the head of the sixteen year old boy up near his own young face, and, grinning proudly, poses for a picture. **

It never ceases to astonish me what we are capable of—both the atrocities that we commit, and our ability to deny and forget them. It is easy to explain away serial killers, pedophiles, and terrorists as results of 'faulty wiring' or fanatical beliefs; they are anomalies, freaks of nature, rotten, wormy apple scrapings in the bottom barrel of humanity, to be hunted down and locked up to keep the rest of us safe from contamination. But how do we separate the 'us' from the 'them' when it is the soldiers, teachers, priests, and next door neighbors who become the rapists and murderers? What does it say about us when those in whom we see reflections of ourselves become the so-called monsters that we convict in international tribunals and the courts of public opinion? We cannot know what we are potentially capable of; the only certainty is that no one is exempt from the dark side of human nature. Despite our laws and personal moral convictions, it escapes through the laughter of children torturing a stray cat, and shines from the flinty stare of a young soldier determined to build his own road to glory on the bodies of 'redskins,' 'jungle bunnies,' 'gooks,' and 'sand monkeys.' It is revitalized by the fatigued stumbling of shackled black hooded 'detainees' stumble while uniformed guards prod them with steel rods and the world looks on with horror, but without enough gumption to act.

Following the orders barked at them and the deadly warning tips of the bayonets that nick the backs of their necks, they slowly stumble into lines around the riverbank and turn around. A slight breeze ruffles through their hair, cooling the sweat running down their faces and their heated, panicked breathing. Machine guns fire, and hundreds of bodies crumple like chests full of rag dolls emptied from the sky. The injured become trapped under the dead, their screams muffled by corpses as line after line of men step forward and turn around to face their imminent deaths. Before long, their desperate cries fade into an eerie stillness, broken only by the slow trickling of blood into the river, the vibrant redness of the water mocking the lifelessness of the bodies from which it seeps. The dignity of silence is desecrated by the disdainful scraping of steel on cloth as soldiers carefully wipe the spattering of blood, flesh, and flecks of bone off of their guns and onto the backs of the newly dead.

In the 1930s and 1940s, in what is often deemed as the Asian Holocaust in certain academic circles (and what is not mentioned at all in others), the Imperial Japanese Army swept through Asia and slaughtered 30 million Chinese, Koreans, Filipinos, Malays, Singaporeans, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Indonesians, and Burmese; the number of deaths exceeded that of the Holocaust by 4 million. Of the 30 million victims, 23 million were ethnically Chinese. After battling in Shanghai in 1937, the Japanese army proceeded into the nearby city of Nanking under the pretext of uncovering and executing Chinese soldiers posing as civilians. For six weeks from December 1937 to February 1938, the scope and level of violence quickly escalated as Japanese soldiers looted, burnt, murdered, and raped. By the end of the infamous Rape of Nanking, 300,000 non-combatant lives had been wrenched from their owners, abused, and discarded in rotting roadside heaps. They leave behind a bitter legacy: unknown numbers of broken families, unmarked graves, and untold stories, their memories sustained only by reoccurring nightmares pieced together through the first-hand accounts of survivors to serve as warnings for those of us left to listen.

The man vehemently denies that he is a soldier—he is a shopkeeper, his store is just down the street—pleading his innocence while the soldiers raid his house and drag his wife and baby son into the courtyard. One soldier tears the infant from his mother's arms. He passes him off to another, who tosses the baby high into the air and spears him on his bayonet as the crying child comes falling down. The soldiers standing around laugh. With a cry, the mother lunges for her baby, whose entrails dangle down loosely against the cold steel spike that has torn apart his body, taking away the life it had no right to touch. "Take her away," orders the commanding officer. She is still young, and will provide much amusement for his men. The remaining soldiers drag the shopkeeper, shaking with grief and numb with shock, into the street and nail him alive to a nearby tree. They are merciful; they could have hung him by his tongue on iron hooks or buried

him waist-deep to be eaten alive by dogs. He is a lucky bastard.

While the massacre was, in a sense, the rape of a city burned and razed to the ground, as well as the effective rape of Chinese spirit and morale, it was also a very literal rape of the city's women. The Post-WWII International Military Tribunal of the Far East estimated that between 20,000 and 80,000 women, including infants and the elderly, were raped during the Nanjing Massacre. Rapes and gang-rapes were committed in public during the daytime, often in front of loved ones, before the women were bayoneted and young girls were forced into military prostitution as "comfort women," (a euphemism so ridiculous it would be funny if it wasn't coined from the terror of innocent women and the violent violation of their bodies). Threatened at gunpoint, sons raped their mothers and sisters, fathers raped their daughters, celibate monks raped women, and men had sex with corpses. The rapes were systematic and widespread-it was not one soldier indulging his perverted urges, but hundreds of respectable citizens, celebrated soldiers and war heroes, giving into latent desires aroused by circumstance. So what happens when we find that we have become the 'them,' that we have used the divisions of race, religion, and culture to sanction the utter dehumanization of all those who are different without stopping to consider what we have become and why?

She tries to crawl away, violated, bleeding, and pregnant. Her rapists, two officers, stand over her watching half in amusement, half in disinterest as if deciding how to best dispose of a flea-bitten stray. "She puts up a good fight," remarks the younger man, "I bet it's a boy." The other flashes his wolfish grin, nods, and without a word yanks the young mother back by the roots of her blood and sweat soaked hair. Her head snaps back, eyes pain-riddled but still as defiant as the sudden flash of steel in the daytime sun, slicing her stomach open in one fluid, well-practiced motion. The officer rips out the fetus and, seeing that he has lost the bet, throws it off to the side of the street. Better luck next time. They heave her body on top of a growing mound of mutilated female bodies that have been disemboweled, roasted, and hacked into pieces, severed arms and legs haphazardly tossed on top, like razed trees on a grotesque mountain of flesh left over from some hellish celebration. Behind the bodies, a poster proclaims: "Trust Our Army-They Will Protect and Feed You."

The extent and nature of the massacre is still widely disputed among both Asian and western scholars. During the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal, the Imperial Japanese army maintained that the massacre was entirely military in nature and that no war crimes had been committed. The depiction of the Japanese invasion of Asia in Japanese textbooks has long been a controversial and heated topic: in the famous Ienaga textbook controversy in 1952, the Japanese Ministry of Education censored the textbook's section on Japanese war crimes, citing factual errors and the injection of inappropriate personal opinions. In 2005, anti-Japanese riots broke out in China and Korea to protest the use of the "New History Textbook," which they claimed downplayed and sterilized the scope and nature of Japanese military aggression. Seven decades later, the memories have been passed down from generation to generation, so that those who seek to understand and speak up or choose to ignore and disregard are not those who were there, but are rather us children of the lingering aftermath.

On the way home from school, we look out at the damage wreaked by the riots earlier in the day. Although Shanghai's streets are already regularly decorated with litter, spit, and urine and most of the storefronts cannot be considered anything more than drab and dirty, the torn store canopies and broken windows stand out because it is bitter violence, uncontrollable hatred, and immutable grief that have caused the destruction, rather than routine carelessness or indifference. We press our noses to the glass, like visitors marveling at the sharks and stingrays swimming all around in one of those aquarium tunnels that you travel through on a big conveyor belt. The danger is so close that we can almost drown in it, and yet we are safe from it all, insulated by a thin pane of glass and protected from the horror by the color of our passports and the self-absorbed ignorance of youth.

"Why are the Chinese rioting?"

"Because they don't like the Japanese."

Events don't happen in a vacuum-they are products of history and circumstance. It is dangerous to pass judgment without first gaining a clear understanding of longstanding conflicts and complex motivations. Unfortunately, we like our world to be tidy and quickly explainable. It seems simpler to divide the human race into those who are good and those who are evil, identifying and containing all who refuse to play by the rules. But oftentimes the rules aren't clear-they are muddled by secret orders, historically deep-seated fears and ideologies, and the seductive rush of power and self-righteousness that we condemn, but secretly understand because we've also felt its temptation. In cases where thousands of citizens and entire governments are complicit in committing massacres and travesties of supposed human morality, it is so much easier to label them as incidents and unfortunate tragedies, and then move on satisfied after having issued half-hearted, semi-truthful justifications of war and national security. However, these trespasses should not be viewed as distant or separate from those of us without swords in our hands and guns in our faces. It will not always be one people or one handful of individuals who will harm others- anyone from anywhere is capable of torture, murder, and rape-and if you examine history, you will see that people across time and geographic boundaries have taken advantage of these capabilities.

I hear talk of compassion, of a universal human spirit, of basic, intrinsic connections to others just because they are human too. But as lovely as these concepts are, I can't help but wonder if these bonds of humanity exist in any helpful capacity. The number of murders and rapes committed everyday and throughout history is startling, but to face the reality of what the numbers represent is too horrifying to grasp, too disturbing to confront. To even attempt to use words and images to describe what I can't begin to imagine seems futile and superficial. I feel at a loss as to what I can do besides rail against those who have the same faults I see in myself.

But then again, even though there isn't a solution now, we might still be inching towards one. Maybe the goal is not to

stand up immediately, but to pull ourselves up a little higher every time we fall back, and to not forget that we fell.

* The indented paragraphs are composites that I wrote based on photographs, first hand accounts, and second hand descriptions. While I read many of these accounts online while researching for this piece, a lot of the images used also came from my memories of my visit to the Nanjing Massacre Museum as well as stories I heard from my family. Here are some of sites I look at that provide first hand accounts:

[The Nanjing Massacre](#)

[Online Documentary: The Nanjing Atrocities](#)

[Japanese Imperialism and the Massacre in Nanjing](#) (An English translation of a classified Chinese document on the Nanjing Massacre)

[Excerpts from The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II \(1997\)](#) by Iris Chang