

Wing Tek Lum, The Nanjing Massacre: Poems

INSIDE HER WOODEN CHEST

My mother tells me to be brave.
She fears for me, a young girl.
When she goes out
I must hide inside her wooden chest,
the one she brought from her home,
when she got married.
It is a black lacquered box
with a simple lotus on the top
inlaid in mother-of-pearl.
She takes out all the clothes and blankets,
then spreads out one
to line the inside for me.
She gives me a knife
and shows me how from the inside
to slip it through the crack
between the top and bottom of the chest
until I can feel the latch
and push it open.
We practice this several times
so I know I can get out by myself.
But she says I should not worry
because she will return soon.
Before she leaves
she places inside the chest
a small ball of rice,
a jar of tea, and another jar
for me to urinate into.
She also makes sure
I see that she has put the lock
in the bottom of the chest
so that I do not feel trapped.
I climb in and she closes the lid,
folding the latch over its pin.
It is dark and quiet
though I can peek through the crack
and watch as the shadows
deepen into twilight, and into night.
I quickly learn that I can sit up
and extend my legs completely
if I push my feet against the far upper corners.
Sometimes I turn over
and crouch on my knees.
To while away the time

I add and subtract my numbers.
I think about the weaving I was working on.
I finish off the rice
and wait for my mother for a long time.
I fall asleep, curled up on my side.
I dream about the crickets my father kept
inside a small gourd cage
that he often carried in the palm of his hand.
I used to help him scrape the bottom clean
and replace it with new loam and lime.
It had an ivory top
carved through with five round holes
to allow for air.
I remember they sang so sweetly.

*Wing Tek Lum is a Honolulu businessman and poet. The poems in this teacher's guide were originally published in his collection of poetry, *The Nanjing Massacre: Poems* (Bamboo Ridge Press, 2012).*

1. Hundreds of thousands of Chinese civilians suffered and died under the Japanese occupation. Why is the experience of just one person so powerful?
2. Children arouse our pity more than adults. How was Anne Frank hidden during the Holocaust?

