

Don't Go Back to Sleep

Timothy Liu

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Liu is the first to the wreckage, like a reporter at the scene, but his understanding moves far beyond the factual into the metaphorical.

*"You ask me to speak but my mouth
holds back—my heart
a house God remodels daily
with an axe."*

So begins "Unsleeping, 5:18 A.M.," a poem late in Timothy Liu's newest volume, *Don't Go Back to Sleep*. The lines speak to the combination of violence and love and the Heraclitean nature of emotion and relationships. These poems question history, from the massacre at Nanking to the sexual and romantic history of the narrator, asking about the aftermath of knowledge and how it can change understanding and cast doubt across decades.

Liu, author of eight previous books of poetry, is a professor of English at William Paterson University in New Jersey. His poems have appeared in *Best American Poetry*, *Paris Review*, and the *Yale Review*, among other prestigious publications. Liu writes tough, stable lines that can change on the line break, cracking open new meaning. Their formal strength shows a consideration of lyric composition and each line as a kind of poem within the poem, so measured is the language which creates tension with the emotional turmoil of the content.

The book begins with a sprawling series that begins to unpack the atrocities at Nanking—the news coverage, the photos of beheaded Chinese citizens, of women sexually assaulted with various objects. This stare-down, this willingness to engage the violent, the difficult, is Liu's hallmark. He doesn't attempt to explain so much as experience, whether it is engaging what is left after loss—music, the phrase of a lover, a plate of ribs cooling in front of the poet.

Nanking's violence threads through a marriage almost broken, a lost love, a mother taken by her own hand. Still, in the end, the book offers a measure of calm, the symbiotic habits of long-married couples who sneak the odd bits off the other's plate or offer a secret language of pen clicks. Liu's desire to see and articulate connections between the profane and the holy moments of living will compel.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (Spring 2015)

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