

# Chinese American Poetry: An Anthology

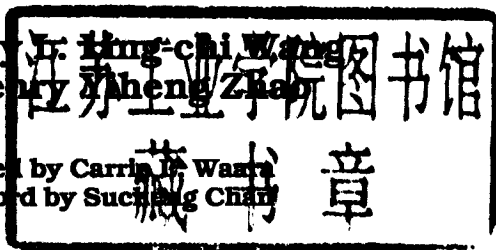


edited by L. Ling-chi Wang and Henry Yiheng Zhao

# Chinese American Poetry: An Anthology

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# **Chinese American Poetry: An Anthology**

## Foreword

Getting this anthology published has been a collective enterprise. It was conceived by Ling-chi Wang and Henry Yiheng Zhao in the mid-1980s. Their goal was to compile a bilingual volume of poems by Chinese Americans—individuals of Chinese ancestry now living in the United States and writing and publishing works in English. They contacted every Chinese American poet they could think of and asked each to send a portfolio of the poems, published and unpublished, that he or she wished to have considered. Out of the materials they received, the editors chose 162 poems for inclusion.

Only after making the selections did they turn to the task of finding a publisher, but none seemed interested in producing a bilingual text. Zhao, who is from the People's Republic of China and who translated the poems from English to Chinese in consultation with Sauling Wong, eventually persuaded Shanghai Wenyi Chubanshe (Shanghai Literature and Art Publishers) to print the Chinese version, which appeared in 1990. The Chinese edition is entitled *The Intention of Two Rivers*, a phrase borrowed from Mei-meï Berssenbrugge and rendered as *Liangtiao he di yitu* in Chinese. The Chinese and English versions of the anthology do not contain the same number of poems, however. For reasons of economy, the former includes only about one-third of the poems found here.

While the Chinese edition was in press, Zhao received his Ph.D., found a teaching job in England, and left the country. Wang, meanwhile, became too preoccupied with other responsibilities to take care of the details required to get an English edition published. He asked me if I would be willing to complete the project that he and Zhao had initiated. I agreed to do so, as all the poems had already been chosen and the introduction had been written. All that was left to do was to check who owned the copyright for each poem, obtain permission to reprint, produce camera-ready copy for the entire anthology, and find a publisher and distributor. I was lucky to have a patient and dedicated assistant, Carrie L. Waara, who took care of many of these details.

Though literature is not my field, I felt it was imperative to bring closure to the project because we have an obligation to the poets who have so generously contributed their writings to make this compilation

possible. Moreover, I believe this collection has an importance that transcends poetry *per se*.

As a historian, I am painfully aware of the many gaps that exist in our knowledge of Asian American history. The Chinese and other Asian immigrants who came to America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries left fewer written records than did most European immigrant groups. The Asian immigrants' struggle for survival in a hostile environment, as well as cataclysmic events beyond their control, account for the paucity of materials. Large numbers of the first wave of immigrants—be they Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Filipinos, or Indians—managed to find only seasonal work that forced them to live as migrant laborers. Some were illiterate, but even those who were not found little time to write. Some who did write had no permanent homes in which their manuscripts could be safely kept.

In the case of the Chinese, though they used professional letter writers to send missives home, not a great deal of what was mailed to China has been preserved, as war and revolution ravaged that country virtually without pause for more than a century. In the United States, the fire that accompanied the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco demolished that city's Chinatown, so all written records then in existence went up in flames. Most of the extant Chinese-language sources (many listed by Him Mark Lai in *A History Reclaimed: An Annotated Bibliography of Chinese Language Materials on the Chinese of America*, 1988) are organizational, and not personal, records. While these will definitely enable scholars to produce a more multi-dimensional history—one that reflects Chinese American perspectives—they do not necessarily tap at Chinese American sensibilities.

The Japanese left far more documents but these are also incomplete. After the United States declared war against Japan in December, 1941, agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation picked up the most important leaders in the Japanese immigrant communities along the Pacific Coast and in Hawaii and interned them. Members of some families, fearful that Japanese-language writings and cultural artifacts might be used to incriminate them, purposely destroyed what documents, letters, and photographs they had in their possession. In short, Asian American history has been cruel to historiography.

Given this shortage of personal memorabilia, it is very difficult for historians of Asian America to reconstruct and depict the subjective consciousness of Asian immigrants. Joy, contentment, resignation, anguish, anger—all these, with rare exceptions, can only be inferred. Though there are some autobiographies, essays, and poems available, we can never be sure how representative they are. More has been left by the immigrants' children, some of whom were interviewed by, or who wrote autobiographies at the request of, social scientists in the 1920s,

but these reflect the kind of information the scholars sought more than what the youngsters themselves felt and thought.

With the existence of such a vacuum, the creative writings of Asian American novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and poets take on added significance. Whether or not they wish to, Asian American writers and artists shoulder a special burden: the products of their imagination must often be used to flesh out the skeletal frames that historians and social scientists construct. This does not mean that "history" and "literature" are interchangeable or should be conflated; rather, they complement each other, each in its own way adding a few more strokes to the canvas. More so than for members of other ethnic groups, Asian American writers and artists must see forms and colors where others perceive only murky depths; they must sing of truths that others find inchoate.

When I was a child, many of the sing-song verses I wrote were published in school magazines. Ah, my teachers predicted, she will be a poet. But that was not to be. Though I still read poetry for solace, the more scholarly I became, the less poetry links me to sentient worlds within and beyond, for my mind now moves along a different plane. Perhaps my decision to complete the project that Ling-chi Wang and Henry Zhao started is a compensation of sorts for the poetic sensibility I lost so long ago.

*Sucheng Chan*

*Santa Barbara, 1991*

## Acknowledgments

The people to whom we owe the most are the poets who contributed their work to this anthology. We are also deeply grateful to Sucheng Chan and Carrie L. Waara, who assumed responsibility for the production of this volume, and to Hung Liu, who generously allowed us to reproduce her painting, "Men and Elephant," on the cover of this book.

We also wish to acknowledge the pioneering role played by the following publications and publishers, who first introduced many of the poems included here to the American public: *Amerasia Journal*; *American Poetry Review*; *Antioch Review*; Asian Women United; Bamboo Ridge Press; Boa Editions, Ltd.; *boundary 2*; *Boxcar*; *Bridge*; *Burning Deck*; *Cincinnati Poetry Review*; *Columbia: A Magazine of Poetry & Prose*; *Contact II*; Copper Canyon Press; Floating Island Publications; Great Raven Press; Greenfield Review Press; *Hapa*; Heinemann; Holt, Rinehart, Winston; *International Examiner*; Jordan Davis; *Journal of Ethnic Studies*; Lost Roads Publishers; *Milkweed Chronicle*; *Missouri Review*; *North Dakota Quarterly*; *Painted Bride Quarterly*; *Pembroke Magazine*; Radical Women Publications; Reed & Cannon; Sheep Meadow Press; *Sunbury Magazine*; *The Literary Review*; Tooth of Time Books; *University of Windsor Review*; *Village Voice*; *Virginia Quarterly Review*; Washington State University Press; West End Press; *Westerly*; *Wisconsin Review*; *Women's Review of Books*; and *World Englishes*.

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L.L.C.W and H.Y.Z.



## Introduction

Chinese American literature does not have a very long history. Most of the poets included in this anthology are rather young. Even those who have had a longer writing career—Diana Chang, Alan Lau, Alex Kuo, John Yau and some others—did not have their solo publications until the late 1970s. Not until the mid-1980s did a noticeable group of Chinese Americans producing good poetry appear. Their collective effort has become a sociocultural phenomenon that can no longer be ignored. In 1986 we decided to compile this anthology to record samples of their work.

Though the history of Chinese American literature is brief, Chinese living in the United States began to write in English almost a century ago. Sui Sin Far, an Eurasian born in England, began to publish short stories in the late nineteenth century, but she was an exceptional case.<sup>1</sup> A few other writers of Chinese ancestry, born and brought up in China but cast upon this land for various reasons, also published works in English. The earliest collection of poems in English seems to have been published by Moon Kwan, a student in Los Angeles.<sup>2</sup> The fall of the Qing Dynasty spurred Princess Der Ling to produce exotic novels about Manchu palace life, while the subsequent political turmoil turned the journalist H. T. Tsiang into a “proletarian” novelist who wrote about the 1911 Chinese revolution. The works of Lin Yutang, a Chinese writer extremely well-versed in English, won a broad readership in the 1940s. With a few exceptions, none of the works these writers produced, however, are about the Chinese-American experience *per se*.<sup>3</sup> Chinese American literature, in contrast, is the cultural expression of Chinese living in America. It is a part of the emerging ethnic minority literature of the United States.

In her 1984 bibliographic review of Asian American writers in *American Studies International*, Elaine Kim observed “a continual broadening” of contemporary Asian American creative writing both in complexity and diversity and suggested that Asian American writers can no longer be confined to “Asian American themes” or to “a narrow definition of Asian American identity.” She concluded,

Asian American writers are better represented today than in the past, but there is a need for further efforts to encourage the production and



publication of literature written about a variety of subjects from diverse Asian American perspectives that are still too little understood and appreciated by mainstream American publishers. Meanwhile, Asian American writers continue to celebrate the complexity and diversity of the Asian American experience, contributing at the same time to the ever-evolving mosaic of American literature and culture.<sup>4</sup>

This anthology highlights a small part of this "ever-evolving mosaic of American literature." Chinese American poetry is an integral part of Asian American literature. In their path-breaking 1974 publication, *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers*, Frank Chin, Jeffery P. Chan, Lawson F. Inada, and Shawn Wong defined Asian Americans as those "American-born and raised, who got their China and Japan from the radio, off the silver screen, from television, out of comic books, from the pushers of white American culture" and who have long been ignored and forcibly excluded from creative participation in American culture.<sup>5</sup> According to them, neither Asian nor American culture can define Asian American sensibility except in "the most superficial terms." In their view, there is, however, an Asian American identity and a body of Asian American literature that is neither white mimicry nor exotic artifact. Unlike writings catering to the taste of the dominant majority, this corpus of literary expressions is based on sensitive and honest depictions of Asian American experiences from Asian American viewpoints. On this basis, the four editors compiled *Aiiieeeee!* and forcefully and convincingly demonstrated that an Asian American cultural tradition exists.

While we agree with Chin et al.'s emphasis on Asian American sensibility, we consider their definition based primarily on one's nativity and ideology too restrictive. The continuing influx of Asian immigrants, including a substantial number of intellectuals, in the last three decades alone has transformed the Asian American population from a predominantly American-born population to a largely foreign-born one and has given rise to a voluminous body of literary works, mostly in Asian languages and literary forms, yet showing some of the sensitivity identified by *Aiiieeeee!*'s editors. We argue, therefore, for a more inclusive definition, as suggested by Kai-yu Hsu, David Hsin-fu Wand, Elaine Kim, and Amy Ling. This anthology is a testimony to the richness and diversity of Chinese American poetry. It also demonstrates why we should be more inclusive. For example, there are novelists and poets who were born in China and who did not start to learn English until their adulthood. Stephen Liu, who is truly bilingual, is a case in point. Another gifted poet, Li-Young Lee, did not learn English until his family immigrated to America when he was about ten years old.

China, a country with about three thousand years of poetic tradition which has exerted an immense influence on the world of poetry, is bound to affect either directly or indirectly poetry writing among the overseas Chinese. Through oral and written traditions transmitted from generation to generation among the Chinese in the United States and through cultural and international exchanges in intellectual circles, Chinese Americans have been and will continue to be affected by China's strong poetic tradition. It is a constant call to poets of Chinese ancestry now dispersed in other lands and talking in diverse tongues. Though different poets will have varying attitudes towards this tradition, ranging from those such as Carolyn Lau and Arthur Sze, who embrace the tradition enthusiastically, to others such as Nellie Wong and Genny Lim, who view the tradition with ambivalent feelings, no one can ignore the tradition as though it has no relevance to his or her poetry writing.

This is a unique collection with a significant relationship to two distinctively different poetic traditions, Chinese and American. A documentation of the continuity as well as far-reaching changes in the Chinese poetic tradition and simultaneously a contribution to a much-neglected aspect of contemporary American poetry, this collection is being published separately in Chinese in China and in English in the United States. It is the first venture of its kind; we are certain it will not be the last.

**C**hinese American poets who write in English are mostly the descendants of pre-World War II Chinese immigrants who were predominantly peasants and merchants from China's southeastern Guangdong province. Racially segregated, economically discriminated against, and politically disenfranchised, the pre-war immigrants were forced to live as second-class "aliens ineligible to citizenship" in ghettos in major American cities called Chinatowns, which survive today not only as monuments of American institutional racism but also as traditional centers or symbols of Chinese American social, political, and cultural life. For many a Chinese American, Chinatown is the sole link they have with their ancestors and the distant land whence the latter came.

For quite a number of Chinese American authors, the Chinatown experience, or a Chinatown-type of community, is an unforgettable memory or an embodiment of Chinese American history. Nellie Wong's poem, "My Chinese Love," makes this clear:

My Chinese love does not climb the moongate toward heaven  
nor flowers in a garden of peonies and chrysanthemums.

My Chinese love lives in the stare of a man in a coolie hat,  
smiling to himself, content in the meanderings of his mind.

This memory is kept at the expense of "Chinese culture." For her uncle, who was a cook but suffered from an addiction to opium, the poet has stronger feelings than the remote "concubines and priestesses" in the imperial palace in Beijing. Wing Tek Lum, the Hawaiian poet, proudly calls this cultural association a "local sensibility," by which he refers to the particular environment in which poets acquired their self-consciousness as people or as poets of a particular kind.

This "Chinatown syndrome" is not necessarily geographically defined. "Local" here means a culturally localized scope of experience. In Alan Lau's poems we find not the characteristic Chinatown ambience but, rather, a powerful nostalgia for what his parents and grandparents lived and felt. In his poem, "Water That Springs from a Rock," this experience is expanded to the whole history of Chinese in America. Recalling the 1885 massacre of Chinese mine workers in Rock Springs, Wyoming, Lau's poem points directly to the feeling of those Chinese Americans who still see themselves as victims of racism in a white-dominated society here and now.

As strong and dominating as this historical symbolism is in Chinese American consciousness, it would be wrong to say that all Chinese American poets find this tradition very attractive. Some actually harbor resentment against it. In fact, to many of them, Chinatown is the personification of backwardness, bitterness, degradation, and collective humiliation, just as it represented corruption, slavery, alienness, treachery, and immorality to some whites. Many Chinese American women poets, like Chinese American novelist Jade Snow Wong, especially feel the oppressive patriarchal and sexist aspects of Chinatown life, which carries with it a message most present-day women find abhorrent, repressive, and unbearable. Such sentiment is expressed emphatically in the poems of some of the women poets in this anthology. Diane Mark, for example, warns white men, in "Suzie Wong Does Not Live Here," not to try to find their sexy Oriental dolls in Chinese American women:

no one here  
but  
ourselves  
    stepping on,  
without downcast eyes,  
without calculating dragon power,  
without tight red cheongsams  
    embroidered with peonies  
without the  
silence

that you've come to  
 know so well  
 and we,  
 to feel so alien with

Other Chinese American women poets also feel acutely the need to maintain a critical distance toward the Chinese tradition, which is patriarchal and discriminatory toward women. Marilyn Chin in her poem, "So Lost in Him," which dramatizes the devotion typical of Asian women, ironically fills her poem with beautiful "Oriental images" that normally accompany a traditional love poem:

In the morning, half way down  
 toward the tended grove,  
 bamboo and acacia tangled.  
 So lost in him, she couldn't feel  
 the underbrush, wet with dew,  
 soaking her zori and  
 the hem of her new dungarees,  
 nor the fawn dying within her.

And though Shirley Lim, a poet born in a Malaysian Chinese family, feels sad in front of her father's grave for failing to be a filial child, she finds that she has no other choice except to live an entirely different life.

He did not live for my returning.  
 News came after burial.  
 I did not put on straw, black,  
 Gunny-sack, have not fastened  
 Grief on shoulder, walked mourning  
 Behind, pouring grief before him,  
 Not submitted to his heart.

This then must be enough, . . .  
 For nights, remembering bamboo  
 And bats cleared in his laughter.  
 My father's daughter, I pour  
 No brandy before memory,

But labour, constantly labour,  
 Bearing sunwards grave bitter smoke.

In Carolyn Lau's works, the rebellion against Chinese tradition takes a breathtaking twist toward an attempt to demolish the Electra complex. In "On the Fifth Anniversary of My Father's Death," the poet confesses her sexual attraction toward her father but ends the poem with a surprising macabre warning:

If it is true that after a person dies  
 the spirit can hear and see its past life  
 I want you to know, Daddy,  
 I'm glad you're dead.

The semi-deified father figure, so essential to traditional Chinese mentality, is then devastatingly humanized and, with it, oppressive male dominance.

**T**he de-traditionalized image in which some poets are proudly depicting themselves is totally modern, seemingly without any national legacy. Marilyn Chin sneers in her poem, "So Lost in Him," at the role women are supposed to play: in her view, it is ridiculously slavish. In another poem, "A Chinaman's Chance," she provides a devastating negation of a Chinatown tradition full of pain and agony, too broken and weak to ensure the survival of Chinese Americans.

The railroad killed your great-grandfather  
 His arms here, his legs there . . .  
*How can we remake ourselves in his image?*

Your father worked his knuckles black  
 So you might have pink cheeks. Your father  
 Burped you on the back; why must you water his face?

This is the cultural dilemma most Chinese Americans find painful yet difficult to escape, a dilemma, they feel, that was created and defined by the dominant society. In their effort to seek roots, Chinese Americans found their roots easy to uncover: they had always been there. Perhaps this is the reason that such roots are not attractive: they still live and thus cannot be romanticized. Wing Tek Lum, who once condemned assimilation into American society as "becoming a mule," that is, "perforce sterile," finds the steak on his table of a very peculiar nature in "T-Bone Steak":

No, it was not  
 Chinese, much less  
 American, that pink piece  
 sitting in my rice  
 bowl.

As many Chinese American poets see it, such a situation places them on the periphery of American society and turns them into what sociologists call marginal men. They suffer from a lack of attachment,

ment, but they also gain the advantage of being able to choose commitment to either culture. They have the frustration of lacking connections to society, but they can more easily adopt a critical distance vis-à-vis that society.

Social criticism or protest, then, sounds a dissonant note in the works of Chinese American poets. This characteristic shows up in works of the former San Francisco group, Unbound Feet Six, which broke up on ideological differences in the late 1970s. Three of its members, Nellie Wong, Merle Woo, and Genny Lim, whose works appear in this anthology, still keep their critical spirit—a spirit manifested in the sympathy toward the downtrodden and the miserable. As Merle Woo puts it,

Yellow woman, a revolutionary speaks:

"They have mutilated our genitals, but I will  
 restore them;  
 I will render our shames and praise them,  
 Our beauties, our mothers:  
 Those young Chinese whores on display in barracoons;  
 the domestics in soiled aprons;  
 the miners, loggers, railroad workers  
 holed up in Truckee in winters.  
 I will create armies of their descendants. . . ."

The same critical stance appears in Arthur Sze's "Listening to a Broken Radio" and Shalin Hai-Jew's "Kinged." It also can be seen in a more ambivalent way in the subtle and ironical criticism of the American dream of success in such poems as John Yau's "Rumors":

An architect wants to build a house  
 rivaling the mountains surrounding  
 his sleep, each turret mute as a hat.  
 He crosses a river to reach ground  
 hard enough to begin his plan. He crosses  
 a river the way a river crosses his sleep,  
 swirling with questions.

Arthur Sze's poem, "The Aphrodisiac," is another good example of implicit criticism of the American way of life, where aggressiveness and ambition are highly praised but look out of place when they come into contact with another culture:

"Power is my aphrodisiac."  
 Power enables him to  
 connect a candle-lit dinner  
 to the landing on the moon.

He sees a plot in the acid  
content of American soil,  
malice in a configuration  
of palm leaf shadows.  
He is obsessed with  
the appearance of democracy  
in a terrorized nation.

Criticism of that which is taken as natural in American culture can likewise be observed in such poems as Marilyn Chin's "A Dream in the Life of an American Joe" and Wing Tek Lum's "A Moment of the Truest Terror," which focus on the role the United States plays in the Third World.

Being critical of America does not mean that Chinese American poets are blind to the shortcomings in Chinese culture. Being outside of China provides some of them with a sharper insight into the deficiencies of that culture. Stephen Liu, who remains more connected to China than the others in this anthology, depicts this in a dramatic way in "My Father's Martial Art":

From a busy street I brood over high cliffs  
on O Mei, where my father and his Master sit:  
shadows spread across their faces as the smog  
between us deepens into a funeral pyre.

But don't retreat into night, my father.  
Come down from the cliffs. Come  
with a single Black Dragon Sweep and hush  
this oncoming traffic with your *hah, hah, hah*.

The impotence of Chinese martial art confronting the modern world brings the poem to a frustrating, comic ending.

**A**rtistically, the works of Chinese American poets cover a much wider range than can be imagined from the term "Chinese American." The stylistic adaptability of Chinese American poets convinces us that a monolithic artistic perspective would surely fall short of presenting Chinese American poetry in all its colors.

John Yau, a New York-based art critic by profession, is a poet who has a close association with the New York School of contemporary poetry which has a strong inclination toward surrealism. The experience of Manhattan brings itself into a language distorted under the intensity of urban pressure. Some of his poems read like a Dali painting: they are phantasmagoria full of cruel images of modern life. Thus in "Third Variation on Corpse and Mirror,"



two dogs played catch  
 with someone's head,  
 while a hand waved good-bye  
 to the body it once carried.

This horror does not live only in an imagination squeezed by the intensity of experience; it lives, too, in daily life. The late night movies, the coffin factories in Massachusetts or in a neighbor's garden, all undergo a horrified metamorphosis, as in "Carp and Goldfish":

Some fish we peel back, leaving only bones. Others devour us, leaving only the stories.

Thus, Yau's poems participate in an all-permeating fantasy. Or we might say that poetry is now more substantial than real life. John Yau is fond of teasing his readers with his playful handling of language because he seems to believe that the only way to survive is to outplay the horror of life with the uncanniness of poetry.

Diana Chang, another New York poet, is also a painter. In her poems she chases the same concise minimalism as in modern painting, trying to leave enough space in which a free artistic imagination can roam by undoing language. The rhythm of space and plane is reflected in the rhythm of language, as in "Codes":

An undulation  
 on too many legs  
 crossing the path  
 in such a manner as to suggest  
 it would blush if it were noticed

Is a cat.

Jettisoning normal balance, the syncopated rhythm in Chang's sentence structure makes the lines meaningful not only semantically but also as language itself, that is, in its very linguistic form. This self-reflection of poetic message upon itself is more visible in another poem of hers, "Implosion":

Someone says something lovely  
 in the late afternoon  
 We listen  
 transoms let down everywhere  
 meanings telling us what they mean  
 another sentence arrives

It seems that, to her, language can go on by itself without referents, just as in paintings, where colors and figures can be significant

in their own dynamics without depicting any objects. This ideal state is not as easy to achieve in poetry as in painting. Yet Diana Chang proves that it is still a possibility worth striving for.

Mei-mei Berssenbrugge of New Mexico, in her pursuit of artistic perfection, turns her subtle experience into deftly drawn sketches with short but graceful continuous strokes, as in "The Intention of Two Rivers":

Friday, you'll be here. Confluence  
across the delta again. A pattern fans out  
on the sand. When at lowest tide it is sunset  
I can wade across, holding my shoes.

In *Empathy*, a later collection, however, she turns to a different style, with longer lines and sentences. Her newer poems sound more like incantations. She is also a choreographer, and some of these poems, according to her, were written "as spoken texts to accompany the choreography" of her collaborators in a New York dance company.

For me, the insignificant or everyday gesture constructs a  
choreography of parts  
and what touches me is where the inarticulate, the error or  
tension finds concrete manifestation  
and is recognized.

Here, what is important is not what the poetic discourse is about but the poetic language itself. These sentences are argumentative, but the effect of the lines comes not from argument but from the spell the swirling rhythm casts on the listeners and readers.

Alan C. Lau, a poet from the Pacific Northwest, strives to maintain a calmness in his rumination of memories and impressions of the present. In his major work, "Water that Springs from a Rock," he uses the "collage" technique seen in such major American works as William Carlos Williams' "Patterson," or black poet Robert Haydon's "The Middle Passage." Two entirely opposite styles—lyrical and historiographical—are juxtaposed to achieve the magnitude and emotional power of epics. The shock produced by the massacre it tells about thus becomes a solid sediment. The passion in the lyrics, which is short-lived, is thus contextualized in history and presses on present-day life.

Jason Hwang, a musician by profession, has a fine sense of control of speed in his lovely short poems, just like the contrast of successive movements in music. We can see the simple image in poems like "Uncountable" gradually building up its momentum:

On the sand  
holding each other