

David

by Felix Jung

We bow three times before his name
because tradition is stronger than death. I
am with my father, who's holding flowers
wrapped in a thin gauze of paper.
We stare at the dates on the marble,
trying the math, a difference of years.

In mausoleums nothing marks the years
passing, save only the new names
that appear. Next to his grave, a marble
slab waits for my grandmother. There, I
see her birth, a hyphen, a space blank as paper.
My father reaches to replace the dried flowers

from the vase. Our newer, brighter flowers
have only begun their dying. Three years
ago my father came here alone, and on paper
wrote my grandfather's true name
in Chinese letters. My body is stiff as I
bow, arms by my side, eyes fixed on the marble.

The Chinese words stand out against the marble's
white skin. In the stems and thorns of the flowers
I see brush strokes, delicate curves of black which I
could never draw. I went to Chinese school for years
and learned how to write my own true name,
a handful of simple words scratched onto paper.

But my words never looked correct on paper,
not like the books, not like the letters on the marble.
I am unable to read my grandfather's true name.
We bow three times before departing, leave the flowers
by the grave. I wonder how many more years
we'll have of this, before a day comes when I

will come alone. A part of me knows that I
must practice writing, putting down on paper
all those Chinese words I learned so many years
ago. Against the shine of the white marble,
I see my face reflected, the backs of the flowers,
the thick black strokes that start my family's name.

In the years to come, these are the things I
will have to do: pick a shade of marble, buy flowers,
and on a piece of paper write my father's true name.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 United States License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/us/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.