

*Herman Fong*

## **Passing Away**

We come each spring to this deserted field  
where headstones reach up  
like pale tongues tasting the living air.  
The names chipped out on cracking marble  
are unknown to me,  
and you only half remember,  
but still we trek through congested streets,  
half the afternoon gone,  
and walk into the windy valley  
to lay a square of antique cloth  
on thinning grass  
and to set for ancestors  
a simple meal of boiled duck,  
bits of fatty pork,  
and round lotus seed cakes  
sprinkled with sesame seeds roasted brown.  
After prayers and bowing,  
whiskey and wine,  
warmed in porcelain teacups by the sun,  
are thrown down and soaked into the earth.  
Bamboo chopsticks are laid on end in pairs,  
and slender red candles shaped like cattails  
are lit for good fortune  
along with orange stacks of crisp hell money,  
thousands of sheets burned to ashes  
which lift to the sky with an April breeze.  
We leave the flames burning,

the meat and cakes glistening in their oils  
as we go and look  
for other gravestones rows away,  
and when we return,  
we must chase off a cemetery dog  
that has stolen the largest piece of grey fat.  
We are the last in a line  
to carry on this ceremony.  
I do not believe, as you do,  
that it does the dead some good,  
but I wish that I could.  
Then, I would go on kneeling and rising,  
holding bundles of incense  
by bowls of tangerines and sprays of kumquats,  
but I could probably count the years left  
on just my hands.

## Miles Away, To My Friend

The blue summer you journeyed down  
and I traveled north,  
two days each,  
to Pengyou River  
to pitch tents to the sound  
of rippling waves on rock  
stays with me.

In firelight, after roast fish,  
we heard strings plucked in the distance,  
and we drank plum wine  
and sang slowly of Xiwang village  
and its sinewy trees  
heavy with birds and spring blossoms,  
where we ate and slept and opened books.

In the morning, as bright water geese

flew with August clouds,  
we parted like two leaves  
yellow and weighted with dew  
falling from the same bough  
and returned across valleys and ranges  
to our desolate cities.

Our time those months ago  
makes the winter frost cling longer  
to the leafless branches  
outside my window.