Sacrifice

Dedicated to all those who are no longer with us following the Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School Florida shooting on February 14, 2018

In old Christian myths
women and children
of the Middle Ages

were entombed—
protection against
disasters of weather

or war: virgins lost
to German lakes,
infortants buried under

castle fortresses and bridges
to ward off tsunamis
or armies...

But the songs
of the sacrificed
are never silent—

their wailing is
wind over the ocean,
weeping

long after
each fortress crumbles.

This Peter Wang knew
the moment he heard the blasts
of the AR-15 semi-automatic.

Among the screams,
he held the door for his classmates
and his teachers, bound

to act with honor
by his Junior reserve uniform
of pressed grey blue.

Gold-pinned,
black insignia stitched
Sacrifice (continued)

into the shape of wings

across his shoulders—
a hero, even as fear
crowded his veins.

No time to think, just
blood rushing through him
like a wave of unbearable grief

in the heaving sobs of his mother,
begging to wake
from her nightmare:

Baby, hold my hand, she says,
Reach me, the words
rippling from her mouth.

Newsprint can’t capture
Peter Wang’s casket
as it is carried away,

stars and stripes
blanketing his memory,
still in uniform,

buried
with a Medal of Heroism,
and a Certificate of Appointment

to West Point, 2025—
the year he would have graduated.

We share the same birthday, he and I,
except one of us
will smell the trees and grass

of a college campus,
and one will remember
what’s been lost. Our fates

intertwined yet never crossing,
except in the gentle March breeze
as I walk to school, whispering
Sacrifice (continued)

through half-open windows, to the soft flap of curtains, to the silhouette—in the silence, I listen.
Huài shì hǎo shì
(Evil Things, Good Things)

Every New Year’s Eve, my friend smashes six pomegranates on her lawn, and when I ask why, she says it is because she is Greek. I want to understand what she means—

on the Internet, I find Persephone: abducted by Hades, her mother Demeter drying the earth into a cold, long winter until Zeus arranged

for Persephone’s return—because she ate six pomegranate seeds, she had to return to Hades to spend each winter in the darkness. I wonder

if the more my friend’s pomegranates break, the more their seeds are spread—the more luck and fertility there will be in the New Year, not so different

from my own superstition, my own need to squeeze the eye dropper six times, never four, because my parents say four is unlucky, since the word for four in Chinese,

šì, sounds almost identical to death, and the only difference is the level of inflection when pronounced. It seems strange that six seeds would have been so unlucky, but without them,

there wouldn’t be seasons to wish for. Without the number four, I couldn’t love the number six, and when she tells me about the pomegranate pulp, tiny seeds clinging to frozen grass

in the January cold, maybe that’s why I understand what she means.
Afterlife

On Tomb Sweeping Day
the one-hundred and sixth day
of the Chinese lunar calendar,
we sweep the tombstones of ancestors
and line them with chrysanthemums,
pay over two thousand Yuan
for paper palaces, bicycles, laptops,
 iPhones, chandeliers,
cruise ships, and Great Danes.

In Chinese, the word for filial piety
is Xiāo shùn (孝順)
and our gifts to our ancestors
are dutiful offerings of protection,
like the ozone giving itself up
to absorb the heat of the sun,
a new cornea shielding its ancient eye
from further wound, present sight
and aged wisdom seeking always
to embrace as one.

At the tombstones, we burn our joss sticks,
our ghost money and papier-mache
for the dead, fire’s black shadows flicking
by our feet, a serpent’s tongue hissing
debts of the Afterlife—there,
in the flame’s yellow tendrils, billowing
like coins spilling from broken pockets
of Shangdi, supreme God
of Heaven and all things.