A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Section 1’s 災 is a calligraphic character that means “disaster”; the pictogram from which it derives signifies a fire in a house. Section 2 begins with two characters that come together to mean “to silence someone”: 灭口; the term’s first character contains the water radical and means “to extinguish or put out,” and the second character means “mouth or speech.” The characters that begin the poem’s third section, 花火, mean “flower” and “fire,” respectively; together, they signify “fireworks.” I am grateful to M. Alexander Turner for his generous help with Chinese vocabulary and characters. The calligrapher is the father of firework artist Cai Guo-Qiang, and the story of his perilous love for his manuscripts is related in the profile “Meet the Artist Who Blows Things Up for a Living,” by Ron Rosenbaum, in the April 2013 issue of *Smithsonian*. — Kimberly Johnson

INSPIRATION FOR THE ART

Many people will remember Cai Guo-Qiang as the artist who created the firework sculptures that kicked off the 2008 Olympics. Fewer people will know the inspiration behind this unusual artform.

Cai’s childhood in Quanzhou, China, was shaped by the Cultural Revolution in the mid-’60s under Mao Zedong. During this time, anyone considered
1. 災
Radical for house. Radical for fire. After a last practiced Stroke the calligrapher
Into the metal pan passes His last scrap of paper. Quiet the fall of paraffin
Light on the library wall, The calligrapher’s library Burns itself down: every scroll
Unscrolls its sallow to the yellow flame, The heat unstitches Each spine to a spill of pages,
All the loose slips blister into black Lace, until that last Paper smokes, sizzles its wet ink,
And collapses. The metrical boottaps Of the state Pass by in the dark street.
Hush here this beautiful catastrophe: In the basin’s brass A bouquet of ash.

2. 滅口
Radical for water, radical for talk. The ardent Lexicons of the revolution
Blaze on beyond the monastery gate, But abandoned, remote, Its corridors and dormitories
Murmur the calligrapher’s strange exile. He keeps the lamps Unlit. He keeps himself quiet,
Ghosting the ruined rooms, perusing The bare bookshelves While on his soundless lips move
Poems no longer bound there. Out on the grounds After every rain The calligrapher wanders,
With a stick extinguishing each word, Stroke by beloved Stroke, into the puddles.

3. 花火
At a quick strike on the steel-scratch, the match Flares, the fuse catches And crawls in a slow sparkle
To the powderbox propped at the canvas. The calligrapher’s son Knows his explosives—the blow-
Force of saltpeter, the scatter patterns, The weights and burn-rates Of his elements and their velocities,
The hues of their various char against cloth: Blueburning copper, Salt red. What is characterized there
In the linen weave is the mind burning The thing it loves best To sear its afterimage against
Its forgetting. This is his inheritance, This the farewell letter His father never left: radical
For fire and flower together.

Inspired by his father’s story and the violence he often saw growing up in China, Cai uses gunpowder, a lethal weapon, to create beautiful and healing art.
—Emma Campbell (Editorial Supervisor)

1. All information is taken from “Meet the Artist Who Blows Things Up for a Living” by Ron Rosenbaum. April 2013, Smithsonian. bit.ly/magmeettheartist

Cai Guo-Qiang, artist