



THE TOMBSTONE POETRY *of* ROBERT ZOTT



For the past 30 years, Robert Zott has taken photographs of tombstones bearing single last names that are common English words. His subjects appear as he found them; no details have been changed. For Zott, it is essential that the names he uses are part of the genealogical record, returned to common language through the omission of supporting text. When describing his work, he cites Michelangelo who said, “The greatest artist has no single concept that a marble block does not contain already.”

Zott began with groupings of nouns. His first work entitled *The Death of Color* (1995) was composed of six black and white photos of tombstones bearing the names WHITE, GREEN, GRAY, GOLD, BROWN, and BLACK. Inspired by his colorblindness, while the names described colors, the photographic exposures formed a graduated spectrum of grays. Later groupings included professions, chess pieces, body parts, and the cardinal directions. “When I found BAKER carved on a tombstone, I didn’t treat it as a surname and ask, ‘Is that Joe Baker or Jane Baker?’ I treated it as an ordinary word and said, ‘Oh, look! The baker is dead.’”

Other parts of speech followed sequentially. He expanded into adjective-noun combinations like MERRY CHRISTMAS and SWEET VALENTINE. “Once I began incorporating verbs, my first sentence quickly formed. It was SEE DICK SWIM, SWIM DICK SWIM, SEE DICK DROWN, DROWN DICK DROWN. I called it *Bon Voyage!* Ironically, my first tombstone sentence used the same syntax as the classic Sally, Dick and Jane educational readers that I used to form my first written sentences as a child. At this point I realized that in some nebulous way, I was tracing the evolution of language.”

The first 25 years of black and white images, shot on film, were published as *Robert Zott - The Tombstone Photographs* (2020). Zott refers to this period as “learning to speak.”

Regarding how he finds the names: “Each cemetery is surveyed in person; it’s a game of hide-and-seek played on a national scale. I’m often asked whether I reference some external database to find specific names, and the answer is generally no. Databases such as findagrave.com are wonderful research tools, but being user-generated, the images tend to focus on tombstones bearing more information, rather than less. Every once in a while, if I need a specific name, I might get lucky and find it this way.”

Later in 2020, he began to form short poems, restricting each to the tombstones found in a single cemetery. This resulted in *Stone Poems* (2025), a chapbook of seventeen poems made from color images taken with a digital camera in cemeteries across the Northeast U.S. He called this experiment *A Poetics of Neighbors*, wherein each cemetery could speak—not in a supernatural way, but through its collective surnames. “While I have no belief in the afterlife, I feel that through the medium of photography I’m helping the dead to speak metaphorically, to be counted and remembered. There’s an ancient Egyptian proverb that says, ‘To speak the name of the dead is to make them live again.’”

The further expansion of vocabulary and the recent incorporation of single letters and numbers provided all the building blocks needed to construct full-scale poems. Each single letter is the first initial of a family surname that appeared on a square, marble plot marker used to designate the boundaries of a burial site. From these plot markers, an alphabet of mixed letter forms was created to spell abbreviations, articles, conjunctions, prepositions, or any word that is rare or non-existent in the genealogical record. The numbers have a more tragic origin. Tombstones made of cement were once cast with numbers to provide anonymity to psychiatric patients who died while under a hospital’s care and were buried on its grounds.

The advancements described above combined with allowing each poem to include tombstones from any location have resulted in the present volume, *Life Lessons - The Tombstone Poetry of Robert Zott* (2025). It was inspired by events from Zott’s early childhood to the present.

Zott attributes the creation of these poems to two factors. The first is the wealth of synonyms available in English, enabling ideas to be expressed even when specific surnames are unavailable. The second is GPS technology, enabling: 1) the relative size of a cemetery to be evaluated remotely, 2) ease of travel to a particular site, and 3) the automatic documentation of the location of every tombstone photographed.

A final word from the author:

Special thanks to Meg Browning for our many tombstone safaris that helped to build the vocabulary for these poems. I encourage the reader to visit their local cemeteries, read the tombstones, and perhaps become inspired to create tombstone poems of their own. Lastly, page numbers have been intentionally omitted—like walking in a cemetery, wander and enjoy!