

A Trio of Poems: Ode to Chopsticks, Ode to Potato and Omelet

By Fiona Tinwei Lam

Ode to Chopsticks by Fiona Tinwei Lam

Grandfather sets the bowl full of marbles before me.

I pick up the chopsticks and hover,
then picture my hand as a heron
with a long, long beak plunging down
to pluck each orb, lift it
through air and held breath
in a tremulous trip toward the saucer.

Five thousand years of evolution in hand:
branches honed to stir ancient cauldrons
become sleek batons of ivory, gold or jade
adorning an aristocrat's table.

With their deft dance and dip,
more adroit than a fork.

Twin acrobats poised
to hoist choice morsels—
crisp shard of duck skin,
noodle strands, fish cheeks,
single green pea.

*Let your elders lead, he tells me,
Never point your chopsticks at a guest.
Never spear your food like a fisherman.
Don't tap the side of your bowl like a beggar.
Keep them by the plate when you rest
or across the bowl at meal's end. But never
upright like incense burning
in an urn for the dead.*

While he watches, stiff bamboo
grows nimble. One by one
each small glassy planet arcs up
then lands with a *clink!*
The bowl gleams, empty.
He nods.

Ode to the Potato by Fiona Tinwei Lam

On the table's altar,
roast beasts and ornate sweets
might claim the limelight.
But for you we labour
through the necessary ablutions,
scraping skin, gouging out

imperfection to reveal
your pearly flesh.
Stalwart one, you cushion
against famine's edge
with the reprise of storied feasts,
Steaming clouds crowned with molten gold.

One afternoon, I plunged
my hands in dirt, seeking
your lumps of rosy, tawny treasure.
Soul of the soil, how you gleamed
in the damp loam as if Gods
had transformed stones to sate
the hungers of the world.
Your many eyes questing in darkness
for moisture, mineral, sun,
Gazed up at me.

Omelet by Fiona Tinwei Lam

First, the egg.
I teach him the way I taught myself,
food group by food group
through the tattered cookbook.

I break the eggs; he stirs them.

A flick of salt, a few drops of cream.

I heat the pan, grate the cheese.

He pours the eggs in. Opacity
spreads from the edges inward:

an ocean sizzles into land.

Perched on the countertop,

he observes me like the scientist

he might become.

I flip one side over. Voila!

Last night, we played a game

and pulled a card. What would the world

come to in a hundred years?

I feared a polluted war zone

unless humankind changed.

He said we'd live on Mars.

I pour the claret tea as fragrant

as a berry patch into the good cups.

Warming his hands, he wiggles his fingers

through the prospect of clouds.

He stirs in the honey, licks the spoon,

says "Thank you bees".

White cyclamen on the table. Blaze of winter
sun through trees. A plate
of simple food. Beside us,
the ones we love.