

## *Substitutions*

Balsamic, for Zhenjiang vinegar.  
Letters, for the family gathered.

A Cuisinart, for many hands.  
Petty burglars, for warring bands.

A baby's room, for tight quarters.  
Passing cars, for neighbors.

Lawn-mower buzzing, for bicycle bells.  
Cod fillets, for carp head-to-tail.

Children who overhear the language,  
for children who speak the language.

Virginia ham, for Jinhua ham,  
and nothing, for the noodle man,

calling as he bears his pole  
down alley and street, its baskets full

of pickled mustard, scallions, spice,  
minced pork, and a stove he lights

where the customer happens to be,  
the balance of hot, sour, salty, sweet,

which decades later you still crave,  
a formula he'll take to the grave.

## *Ginger*

We'll affirm its arrival  
when it's not in the titles  
of recipes in which it figures  
quietly, as moderate slivers.

When it's always available,  
not lumped with root vegetables  
nor flecked with blue mold.

When everyone knows  
not to bite the large pieces.

When everyone preaches  
the best means of peeling  
(knife, spoon, or not-peeling)  
and disagrees, without violence.

When its unexpected absence  
causes fundamental hunger  
but it's like running out of sugar:  
you can ask any neighbor.

When the nation remembers  
how it treated as barbaric  
the eaters of garlic  
as they fled persecution

and sees its reflection  
in black-and-white photos  
of mobs against risotto.

## *My Mother's Pantry*

Cured ham,  
rice wine, wine rice,  
gefilte fish, Dole fruit cocktail,  
thousand-year eggs, chrysanthemum  
tea, rice.

## *Serve Immediately*

The techniques evolved, reasonably,  
out of cooking-fuel scarcity,

but if one more recipe ends with the phrase,  
I'm throwing out the book. Already the days

overflow with imperatives. If I weren't so hungry,  
I'd be reading, sleeping, or burning energy

at the gym, where exertion is meant  
to result in replenishment.

My appetite is less for calories  
than for forms that live in obscurity

most of the year, assembled in albums  
my grandfather made—thousands

of restaurant tables—before documenting  
meals became fashionable. In the moment,

we sometimes grumbled. How many fish  
needed to be immortalized, glistening

on platters, one eye admiring the chandelier,  
one side adorned with scallions and ginger?

Now I go in search of the not-yet-filleted.  
The authors demand that I shop each day,

quizzing the fish man, seeking out chickens  
still warm from the kill, and simulate kitchens

teeming with servants, aunts, grandmothers.  
The original second-person narrators,

they preach the ancient urgency  
of staying ahead of rot, thus the pantry:

salted, pickled, fermented, dried,  
able to withstand neglect and survive

the months until I finally come back  
from tetrazzini and chili mac,

embracing the tyranny of generations  
who have departed, but left instructions.

## *Lychee Express*

What would the lovely Yang Guifei,  
concubine to the emperor,  
a Helen of China, have made  
of our gleaming grocery stores,

always awash in berries, melons,  
tangerines? Her passion for lychees,  
rushed north by a chain of horsemen,  
laid waste to a dynasty.

She must have understood,  
at least upon the deadly finale,  
the cost of transporting food  
so fragile over so many *li*

for pleasure, not necessity,  
while the kingdom faltered.  
History wants a great beauty  
to undermine a ruler

through human weakness.  
And who with highest power  
would deny his most-loved mistress  
her longing for a flavor

available briefly, far away?  
There's something classical  
about her appetite, about the chain  
of sweating couriers, thirsty, fearful

of bruising the delicate fruit.  
It proves how far we've come,  
those tiny stickers with PLUs  
and far-flung nations of origin

so common, we decry the waste.  
The good peasants of antiquity  
always ate locally, if at the cost  
of variety, and under tyranny.

Neither they nor we would refuse  
a bunch of ripe lychees in December.  
Neither they nor we get to choose  
who would eat humbly, who like an emperor.