

Empress of Pears

She stands at the stove like it's an altar
on which she will baptize vegetables in
hot oil and chilis, stirring sacred crab
into a thick and holy broth

I've never seen hands like my grandmother's—
each finger long and wavering like
bamboo stalks in a soft wind, and knuckles
that curl in ease, like they're performing
a plié with each movement

To conduct her symphony of sizzling pans,
she holds her wooden chopsticks like batons,
folding forward over her podium
to taste a water chestnut

She rarely asks for assistance, but occasionally
she'll have me extract those fibrous veins
from snap peas, or husk skin from persimmons,
all the while lingering to catch my errors—
tailgating my tasks with muttered criticism

It's through this judgement, through her
knotted brow and dissatisfied tongue clicks
that we converse.

When I bring the prawns to a proper shade of golden,
though, she pats my back and her lips upturn
at their intersection like the crest of a wave.

My chest unfolds into an exhale
and I cleanse my palms in the sink.
She scrubs her altar till the black granite glows
once more, each grain lit up in a constellation.

The light switch nods off
and she puts her kitchen to sleep for the time being