

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Elizabeth Cohen: Four Poems

Elizabeth Cohen · Wednesday, March 13th, 2019

THE ARTICHOKE

“Every time you make someone laugh, you give them a small vacation.”

-Joan Rivers

The artichoke is laughing at you, my friend,
The way you are working away, pulling off its clothes,
nibbling at its elbows and knees, like the sex starved, like the lonely,
like the ones whose desire compels them to ridiculous
measures, it's embarrassing. And all of that work, even scraping away
with your bottom teeth, like a Neanderthal version of yourself,
only brings you to this smallest core of intensity,
this little orgasm of flesh that comes in a strange grass skirt
that your mother told you never to eat, her dark warning—
beware that shift of angel hair, the fuzz.

The artichoke always leaves you wanting more,
left in the green mess of its clothes, spread all around
in the places you left them in your rush.
You have eaten, but barely.
The amount of calories you have expended
is at least twice what you have consumed.
Working away at the spiked leaves, narrowing inward for days,
like a Russian nesting doll, directing you straight to the heart,
you discovered is nothing like a heart, but rather a yellow mash-up
of leafmeal concentrate, this tenderness.

The artichoke has a stand up act on Thursday nights
in the market, where it recounts the whole story
of your drooling anticipation, your sweat equity, the whole
of your investment toward the acquisition of that precious,
fibrous heart. Barely a mouthful, then gone.

*

THE BOOK OF CABBAGE

It took me far too long to open the silken pages
and read the book of the cabbage.
Peruse the pages of its luminous flesh
and consider its smooth, ivory opinions.
In the vegetable aisle of Price Chopper
I felt its heft, the whole planet of it,
It's tough, variegated and squeaky jacket

It had a story which had come up from the dark loam,
traveled with its siblings, captive in a bin,
immigrants to this fluorescent country,
miraculous and solid and sure.

It took me years to read the braille of the cabbage,
where I discovered its natural intelligence, the way it could
instruct bellies to be brim-full, finished with hunger.
Simmered in the pan with a single cleft of garlic,
the thick leaves go soft to the spoon;
inside the mouth, they are wholesome and rubbery,

*

AFTERMATH

in the latter days, the devastation was feathered
by the delicate embrace of smoke

the voices of the survivors arrived like blown kisses
there was a sense

of a softening
or maybe we were just used to it all

someone said that there was bread
at the supermarket on Upper Front Street

someone else said no, it was all gone
there were the aubades of children, whimpering

the operatic sighings of the elderly, who wore the beautiful woven
blankets of their sorrow

someone said the corona of the sun had untethered
a storm of electromagnetic waves

someone else said they saw a field of sunflowers
davening

In the latter days, water was warmer, the air

was warmer, the planet was warm and weary of us

after the earthquake, the flood,
after the flood, the wildfire

after the wildfire, the fund-raising rock festival
and the hurricanes, one and two and three

later, came the polar winters

and food harvested by the child-armies
in the hills. They were told they were the future

which they were not sure they believed

*

SPELL FOR THE RIGHT AVOCADO

my mother taught me
how to crush a clove of garlic
with the heel of my hand
and watch the skin fall right off,
like a bride disrobing, her dress
left behind, in a heap of tulle

she taught me how to peel
a hardboiled egg perfectly,
leaving the smooth skin
unblemished and pure,
and how to unwind the thick glossy
shawl of the orange,
leaving an enchanted swirl

also, how to:

toothpick a cake
harden sugar
salt caramel
braise flesh

and because of her mammoth patience
I know how to rumcake and fruitcake,
how to gingerbread and even soufflé
(which is touchy)

in the grocery store, she would use her secret powers
to knock on the melons and assess the beans,
she was a necromancer of beets

but it was green-black oval of the avocado

that showcased her best sorcery;
she could parse the contents with a single touch
and split one neatly, removing its heart
like the woodsman in Snow White
who had been instructed by the witch,
“bring me the heart”

in this case, you keep it; leave it there in the crushed
green flesh of the guacamole, salted and leaved
with chopped cilantro and garlic,
the seed heart will protect this stew like a charm

“leave it right in there,” she said
tossing a pinch of salt over her shoulder.
“Remove the pit and before you know it
the whole thing will go black”

(Author photo by Allison Lett)

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