

# The Lives of Julia Child

1.

From our bedroom window in Paris,  
Paul's marble shoulders gunning my sternum,  
I could see the white chimneys, the crowns of horse-chestnuts  
That shaded my dreaming or dappled the thin blue pages  
On which I scrawled the progress of sauces. Hot afternoons  
In which the chill porcelain of an eggplant beneath my palm,  
Or the brush of Paul's chest against my back, as I faced the stove,  
No arms free to return his touch,  
Were my only truancy from documenting  
The point of turbulence and humidity, a single moment  
In which yolks begin their embrace of oil.  
So much mayonnaise! Bowl after bowl  
Commended to the Paris sewers until she choked  
And we were without a toilet for weeks.

2.

Sitting in Chaliapin's dark studio, his cigarettes  
Arranged filters up on his bench like the ferrules  
Of his brushes, my chin was locked  
Where his reeking fingertips had poised it.  
Out of sight my fingers tapped a sentence  
Of admonition on the armrest of my chair:  
*Mechanical kneading, and fast rising, has a disastrous effect on bread.*  
I'd hardly hurried fame - left it  
Covered, not quite dormant, yet in the dark  
When I was 24, crossing the country back  
To Pasadena, the spinning wheels sibilant

Of a vinegar concession, a couple of suitcases filled  
 With my unwritten novels. Such a long trip  
 From abstraction to skill.  
 I found my metaphors in fish.  
 In the balance of a knife against my thumb,  
 In the passion of a man ten years my senior, half my height,  
 Who unbuttoned my blouse, tenderly unfolding  
 A map of France, a tattoo on his heart of roads and towns,  
 Vineyards and mountains, and food.  
 The weight of his knowledge, the catacombs of the city,  
 Splintered me among a thousand different tastes, and  
 I grew younger as I got older.  
 Until, every midday dizzy from Mâcon, my arms  
 Jittery from beating egg whites, my mouth  
 Fragrant with garlic and beurre blanc, my hair  
 Drenched in perspiration by noontime lovemaking,  
 Art was life itself.

3.

Cooking is intimacy. The camera is a voyeur,  
 Observing the freckles of my hands  
 In a mirror suspended above the range top  
 Like the canopy of a bed.  
 Mine is the proximity of a piano teacher,  
 Leaning in to demonstrate an octave.  
 My fingers pinch a shallot -- the nails are blunt.  
 My words jam, uttered and retracted in a single gasp  
 Of air. My emphasis becomes an E-flat, missed.  
 My heart beats to the same stopwatch  
 The prompter holds, turning the pages of a notebook,  
 Advancing an onion soup in bars of concealed, silent music.  
 My face is a taut white sheet stretched to the perimeter

Of the charcoal screen, a smiling, chalk balloon.  
The microphone is a wasp caught within my blouse,  
And I clutch my chest, a maudlin diva, each time  
My fingers come in contact with the stove. The shock  
Of autoscopy, viewing my body on the TV in our den,  
Is death. At 49, I am an amateur again: A trophy  
Of Le Cordon Bleu transposed to Boston, a woman  
Memorizing the day's blocking for brioche, straddling  
Cables, careers, hooked just as inalienably to the generator  
Three floors down in a bus, a weary, overheated tourist.  
And now a tiny light comes on, my fingers tap the seconds  
Against my apron in staccato. Abruptly  
My eyes search the darkness behind the lights,  
Right to left, back across the set again, my life reduced  
In the final second to a single essence,  
And then I find him.  
And we begin.