

A family recipe that cannot be
followed written down
Finalist for the 2017 Poetry Prize

1.

To make jasmine tea, you need nine days and nights,
a wide-mouthed jar, and the distress that comes with
finding your eyes as dry as your throat, your throat
as dry as the long-empty glass bottles
of Coke that you snuck into your room to drink alone.

2.

You must fling the bottles to the ground after dinner.
Pick through the shards and think:
Isn't it strange
how until last night you did not notice
the cracks in the double-layered tea cups
Papa set out for you, the nice ones that do not burn
your knuckles, and the tea is always cool on your tongue.

3.

You must remember that you are drinking jasmine tea.
Every cup might taste a little different, but do not worry—
the tea has not spoiled, nor has your mind done that curious thing
of imagining troubles. The jasmine flowers' scent
changes with the season. You learn this
when you wake up at dawn and go, yawning still,
to watch Papa cradle the just-opened blossoms in his heavy hand.
Cut short your yawn to inhale when he holds them before your nose,
accept them into your own indelicate fingers when he offers.

4.

You must bury the white flowers beneath layers of green tea leaves
before violet tints the place where the petals meet.
Do this in a wide-mouthed jar you buy just for this.
Papa will say *there are too many at home*, that *the jars for pickling work perfectly fine*.
But you must insist, because this is nothing else.

5.

When you have your jar and it is boiled clean, when it is dry,
after the first layer of blossoms is underneath the first layer of leaves,
and a day has passed—
repeat eight more times, starting from dawn.

6.

On the ninth day, wait for Papa to pick out shriveled jasmine, then
toss tea leaves into the teapot. Warm the kettle and
sit on the edge of the kitchen chair as he pours. Fragrant tea
brushes the brim of two cups. When he offers one to you, sip
long, and do not interrupt him.

7.

After the silence he will begin to tell you of his years in Singapore,
the white snake he saw near a trench there,
of how his love for abalone and shrimp grew
during his weeks by the sea.
When the water in the kettle is gone,
Papa will reach for a bottle of rice vinegar
and, with a steady hand, pour you a spoonful
to drink plain.