

When I Say That My Mother Cooked

I mean that *manang* did, her overworked fingers
dipping into the wok for a quick baptism of fire, testing
the sauce for sweetness, knowing that sheer perfection
would stave off my mother's wrath, earn her a compliment
and perhaps a hundred Hong Kong dollars to add to her wages.

I called her *dear* in Ilocano, a Filipino language
she taught me in brief interludes as I grappled with my heritage:
pre-colonial Cantonese and post-colonial English. Her songs
would be for playtime, when she would sing to me
as I was getting ready for sleep:

Manang Biday, ilukatmo man

'Ta bintana ikalumbabam

Ta kitaem 'toy kinayawan

Ay, matayakon no dinak kaasian

Dear Biday, please open

Open your window

So you can see the one who adores you

Oh, I will die if you do not care

My mother fired her for some reason I never understood,
though I pleaded for *manang* to stay, and for *manang* who came
after to never leave me again. They learnt to cook my mother's
hometown into life – raising Shanghai through steam –
dishes so pungent you could not tell whether

my mother had left the kitchen at all, *manang* so adept
at curating flavours she made our Chinese guests praise
all the chefs in the house, my mother sometimes gracious,
hollering *manang's* name so they might acknowledge
her talent and labour, only for her to return

to the kitchen for more cleaning,
after all the guests had left, after
I had climbed into bed; *Manang Biday*, a tune
I still hum whenever I remember her, my *manang*,
who taught me how to sing.

The Translator

The year sinks into its own bath, blinking
slowly into breath. *Your face looks like a lit
Confucian lantern* my mother observes –
as I translate her questions for my lover
whose Chinese is a riddle well-told.
Tonight, I empty olive oil into my ears,
bless both feet with crushed ginger and
honey to ring in the first year when
my mother jokes that I am no longer
her mistake. A translator: *one who is fully
bilingual, refusing soil and other forms of burial.*

Two poems published in:
***A hurry of English* [ISBN: 9781999741211] / by Mary Jean Chan (ignitionpress, 2018).**

© Mary Jean Chan, 2018. All rights reserved.