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.