

ON MY GRANDMOTHER'S BIRTHDAY

The stove element rims red like an ancient dragon's eye,
the metal of its oil-scaled body rumbling an electric fire
beneath a silver stack of pots. I palm the lid,
lift to the sea-scented steam of a Shanghai crab.
Nearby, scallions simmering in sheer stock witness
my novice hands hesitate around the hair-bristled claws.

What comes next?

I was taught this sequence only once,
back when she still could embank my youth
between the cutting board and her five foot one,
when her plump fingers caught my wrists
as I whizzed around the kitchen, determined to leave

something of herself behind. But the dialect of her recipe
has become a lacuna as wide as the carapace I wrest
clumsily away from a shellfish heart. Somehow, I still find
gold: a sticky *huāng*, crustacean mustard she claimed
tasted sweeter than the meat she peeled and saved
in my ceramic bowl like a steadfast mountain.

Today, I make the mountains.

I mix *huāng* sauce with rice, cut my fingertips
scraping every flake of protein from their shells
like the eggs I plummet runny into spinning soup.
My chopsticks are nubivagant through wisps of yolk,
the folk song I hum ours from across another sea.

Today, her meal is set on a tablecloth of red
with a plate of oranges, two golden-bellied pears.

I light three sticks of incense to ashes and ask,
chī guò le ma? to the smile in a darkwood frame
and I bow. I bow, and feel warm smoke balter
around every grain, an ephemeral trail of spices

to carry *have you eaten yet?* into the mid-autumn wind.