

Mother, Mutter, Matter

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Mother, Mutter, Matter

by Nancy Kang

A circle of smeared butter melts a fading smile on a hot pan
when we ate her sweet rice pancakes studded with raisins,
dusted with cinnamon like a spray of perfume or a sloppy subway sneeze.
Cold rice, clumped like prayers, made our lunches stick to the bones.
Mingling rough laughter and small fears on a savage tender tongue
she tasted the tasks she scraped out of each day like melon rinds
or cataracts grown over eyes that turned away from sirens, street fights,
and pricey organic berries in stiff paper bags that looked so good she cried.
So tired, the bottoms fell out of words some days, most dinners felt like
chewing newspaper, the bed an antiseptic tank in which floated
her body, serenely tethered to those butterfly blue pills the doctor
said would "lift her spirits" like cellophane crackling between skilled hands
when a gift is wrapped and tied in a taut, taught bow. Her limbs
would kick out suddenly like octopus tendrils in the night, oozing black ink
like the signatures she made on all our forms, permissions, detention slips,
forgeries, admissions trips, and the wondrous arabesques of small power
and willful presence she never knew she had in her hands or the
woodpecker red head she carried high even though it was us who bought
the wrong color to cover her greys and whites and dim flakes of passing seasons.

Nancy Kang teaches at the University of Manitoba where she is Associate Professor of Women's and Gender Studies and Canada Research Chair in Transnational Feminisms and Gender-Based Violence. Her books include *The Once and Future Muse: The Poetry and Poetics of Rhina P. Espaillat* (University of Pittsburgh Press 2018), co-authored with Silvio Torres-Saillant, and *Problematic Paradigms and the Contours of US Latinidad* (University of Texas Press 2026), co-edited with Michael N. Garcia.