

“Find Work”

By Rhina P. Espailat

*I tie my Hat—I crease my Shawl—
Life's little duties do—precisely
As the very least
Were infinite—to me—
—Emily Dickinson, #443*

My mother's mother, widowed very young
of her first love, and of that love's first fruit,
moved through her father's farm, her country tongue
and country heart anaesthetized and mute
with labor. So her kind was taught to do—
“Find work,” she would reply to every grief—
and her one dictum, whether false or true,
tolled heavy with her passionate belief.
Widowed again, with children, in her prime,
she spoke so little it was hard to bear
so much composure, such a truce with time
spent in the lifelong practice of despair.
But I recall her floors, scrubbed white as bone,
her dishes, and how painfully they shone.

Notes:

The epigraph of this poem was originally omitted in the changeover to the new website. Because of this, reciting the epigraph is optional for the 2019-2020 Poetry Out Loud season.

Source: Poetry



Rhina P. Espailat was born in the Dominican Republic under the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo. After Espailat's father opposed the regime, her family was exiled to the United States, where they settled in New York City. She began writing poetry as a young girl, first in Spanish, then English, and has published in both languages.