

She Tastes Everything First

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Grind the posto/poppy seeds to a fine powder

morning sun brushes the lips of night—
a shy young lover slow inexperienced
my mother unlocks the kitchen door
stove pots pressure-cooker saucepan teapot spoons and cups
quiet as the tongue curled behind the teeth

Cut the potato in cubes and soak in water, else they develop black spots

she reaches for the spoon names them:
tea leaves, three spoonfuls
water, eight cups
sugar, only in four

Heat oil in a kadai. Mustard oil is preferred.

cement countertop gas stove old kerosene stove
cooking dal vegetables fish stew all at once
behind her, the slit of a window
a view of the street ahead—busses, trucks, cars:
my mother chops onions facing the soot-black wall
in the balcony my grandfather drinks his tea smokes bidis with Satyendadu our neighbor
they mourn *bangal women could make meat curry out of plain old grass*

Add the whole jeera/cumin seeds and wait till they splutter. You can add 2-3 dry red chilies too.

my mother chops onions facing the soot-black wall
the grass streak of light through papaya leaves
greens her face tears down her cheeks
she does not wipe them off my mother stops lays down the knife
lifts up the end of her sari fans herself unbuttons her blouse

Add the potato cubes in the oil with a pinch of turmeric powder

she unbuttons her blouse the recycled pickle-bottle of cumin seeds
the measuring spoon she lets it slip scratches the skin of her wrist
six cumin seeds on the kitchen floor my mother sticks out her tongue to lick
the ladle: that's how she checks the heat of the sizzling fishstew every day

Sauté the potato pieces lightly till they develop a golden tinge. Do not over or deep fry them.

my grandfather likes to talk about my mother's love for us
she loves us so much that she tastes everything first
My mother lifts a green papaya holds it against the light
by its stem digs her thumbnail into the green of the skin
the milk oozing out for a moment this is a new beginning
like her nipple oozing milk birth only it is not

Add the posto/poppy seed paste.

she squeezes the lemon into the cabbage one two three four counts
a sweatdrop dances on her nose falls into the stew one two three four stirs the wok
mutters *can't even stop for a second or two*
mutters *ei, come and scratch my back for me* she calls me in
yes, there ... and down...down...yes.. now leave...get your homework done
my mother continues to mutter in the porch my grandfather sits in his easychair
solves crossword puzzle needs his third cup of tea hollers no one knows if my mother hears it
or not she mutters

Cook on medium heat till the paste has uniformly coated to the potatoes. Stir occasionally.

her hair tied back in a bun she stops her knife her ladle
to look out of the window the corners of her fingernails black from vegetable-juice
the lines of her palm yellow disobedient turmeric she mutters

Add little water (around ¾ cup), adequate salt, and the chopped green chilies. You can sprinkle very little sugar if you want.

my mother peels the bottle gourd elongated white sticks chopped fine she gathers the skins
in the leaf of her palm one by one throws them away *no daughter of mine grows up eating*
rubbish at night mustard oil leaks into my pillow urges me to recreate the faded genealogies of
grease
my grandfather and satyendadu keep talking
about lost cuisines my mother mutters

Cover and cook till the potatoes are done. Wait for the water to dry up.

she grates the coconuts sprinkles the white dust into the boiling dal stirs
cuts her index finger beads of red in coconut's white she does not shriek in pain shouts the
roof off our house
one day I will let loose these gas ovens set this whole house on fire sure I will I steal
a green chili from my mother's basket sink my teeth into its skin search for the fragrance ma says they
add to a stew heat occupies my tongue
bit by bit

At this point you can add about 1 tsp of mustard oil and stir well before you remove from heat. Take care that the potatoes don't get mashed up though.

she repeats to herself all our favorites
my father loves coconut sweets me stew curried chicken legs
my grandmother mango pickles my aunt fish in nigella seeds
my grandfather ilish in mustard sauce she tastes everything first
discards if they are not good enough my father says *this is because her love for us is so big*
that it cannot be measured I don't know how much she loves us what I do know
she tastes everything first because some things she wants to avoid the frown on my father's face
the sound of the stainless steel bowl banging against the wall
the lotus of my grandfather's fingers around the edge of the bowl
before he throws it away.