

Kitchen Cabinet

By Rizwan Akhtar

Sunken in own her weight, mother leaves
for the market, and brushes with every vendor
that comes her way,
the fish not finned,
the meat not skinned
and the garlic too thin.

The sellers swear, take oaths of honesty
but she doubts them with an epicurean grin.

A breed of lusty stomachs she obeys
the fingers and lips make forays
the pots she cooks smell for days.
(The season changes and spices
scatter on a charpoy, lentils bask under sun,
orange peels curl into saffron shavings.)
A wave of steam,
comes from that gauze door,
ginger, tamarind and thyme
she grounds in a pestle
and murmurs her prayers
bending over a grime-crusting stove
while tomatoes struggle in coriander
keema * sizzles in the bottom
as her kitchen battles for a new taste.

The smells spread like a rumour
in the neighbourhood.
The aroma of mother's pot colonises
each nose, out of appetite

they make speculations
about brands and tags
some mimic the vendors
the others giggle and nag
the dripping rain chips in
the onions brown in globs
of ghee for tarka*
under her vigilant eyes
the ladle goes here and there
with her swinging braid.

To this day, the spices need some interlocutor
for elaboration. In an iron basket
the yogurt resists its shape
while flakes of garlic and cloves
are in the back-up plan.
With nimble surgeon's fingers
she examines and gets rid of each
and takes her recipes out of their reach

the sheets are unrolled
the recipes remain untold
though the rituals are bold
aunts and uncles trickle from that door
she serves and everyone belches for more.

*urdu word for seasoning

*urdu word for minced meat