April 2010

My Mother's Fire

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“I know my fire,”
says my mother
In response to my grandmother’s criticism
Of her culinary prowess,
And she speaks with such passion
That for a moment I forget
That she is referring to the
Feeble, orange-blue flame
That crowns her battered stovetop.

I stand, awestruck,
My hands in the flour bin
As I recognize the scorching, concentrated power
Of those four, simple words.

It might have been a response
To our overeager willingness
To box her neatly into the kitchen
And label the package “mother.”

The words might have been meant
To take burning wings and swoop down
Upon my grandmother’s sharp tongue
Or my father’s glazed eyes
Upon my own deafness,
Upon the general grayness
That has coloured the room
Until this moment.

It might have been intended
To scare us away
From the few private spaces she inhabits,
To burn the borders between us
With bluish tongues of flame.

And in that instant
My mother is no longer my mother.
She has stripped down to her own naked fire.
She is hollow, scorching eyes in an unfamiliar face
She is covered with battle-scared skin;
She is someone I would not dare to name.
And then my vision is put out
By the bubbling of the pot
And the flour clumping
In my sweating palms.

I see her once more
As the word “mother” has made her.

“I know my fire,” she repeats,
Stirring the pot fiercely.
The room recedes before her
As her invisible flame blazes up to the ceiling
And consumes the house.