



Dal Away Dutch

by Aritha van Herk

Dutch women (too) keep clean kitchens, scour the counter cracks with toothbrushes and cleanser, polish their sinks with steel wool, spray room freshener. Terrible dread of dirt, they have. She (Dutch too) has a white and polished-stone kitchen, white, white, white, too contemporary to be steamy with years of old cookings. She has forty-three cookbooks, with recipes for making crepes, de-boning chicken, peeling rhubarb. She emulates the elegance of *marsepein* roses, lightly oiling a light bulb and rolling it three quarters of the way around the outer edges of a *marsepein* nub to a thin transparent disc. It is the *pein* in *marsepein* she works, like *pijn* but more pleasurable, one pain for another. She is not addicted to recipe books, does not read them religiously, with head bent and hands folded. Scattered *rotzooi* of food erotica, the gorgeous excess of food photography, when she cooks for friends, she

pulls all the cookbooks out, opens them to measure what she might make, but ends up slamming them shut, chopping and frying serviceable food, tasty but plain, cheese and cucumbers, hothouse cucumbers. Her mother learned English from a cookbook. *Pijn* too. She learned (Dutch too) from a dictionary.

She wants to cook dal, mung dal, Classic Quality—washed—a packet of kernels that glows inside her pantry, lighting up its dark shelves with a shivering aura. She wants to cook tender, make dal an eloquent *marsepein*. She dreams of her small sandbag of dal waiting to be cooked; she is useless with dal, a dal tourist (Dutch too), voyeur, dal curious more than connoisseur, and that too a French concept, like *pain* or *pijn*, expert without consanguinity's blessing. She wants to cook dal, cook dal tender, wants to know *how* to cook dal, wants to believe in the outcome of her recipe. But there is no recipe for dal, she can find no guide for how to kiss the grains, sift them into a measuring cup, skin the water from their bubbling.

She mines cookbooks, thumbing index and contents, appetizers and main dishes, stews and stuffings. No dal. Lentils mentioned, sneeringly, peasant food, substitution for *real* vegetables, carrots and potatoes? Advice: "Cook lentils with spices to relieve their blandness." What blandness? What spices? Nutritious and protein-rich, she memorizes to soak or not to soak, earnest mysteries. She needs a treasure of story, yearns dal's bare-footed unfolding, peasant, garlic and *marsepein*, Dutch dal impossible, no words for love and terror, more tourist than woman, and woman and dal alone are a conundrum, a couple grappling in the dark through layers of winter clothing.

Her packet of dal sits in the pantry and glowers like a stomach colony. She wants to make love to dal. Cookbooks conspiring, relentlessly European (Dutch too), *zabaglione* and *spätzle*, *coquilles saint jacques* and *endive*. No dal. She finds miso soup and shui may and even basmati rice. Dutch dal, what would that be? Thick, pureed, full of milk. A grain of rain, a texture of herring, wrong translation.

Her mother made curry the chicken pieces simmered, the pepper and cumin added in tense amounts, the smell mounting high in the house, fogging up the polish of kitchen, garlic and onions in oil, windows open to the sky's prairie blandness, and the pierce of hot hot hot, the ring of them seven around the table, and her father spitting the first bite onto his plate, the burn of curry, coriander, cumin, turmeric and cayenne, too sharp, too gloriously strange for him to dare to swallow its sword. Her mother furious, swearing and running to shut all the windows against the taste of taste, blaming the recipe, the measurements, the

numbers and words that promised this curry would be tractable, docile (Dutch too) as other food. "The recipe is wrong," she cried. "They can't mean that it should taste so sharp." They watched her push the curry into the slop pail for the pigs as if the food were dangerous, poison terrible, and ate shaves of gouda cheese on brown bread for supper instead.

She (Dutch too) loves dal, its sing and ring, its sweet deportment. She wants to leap into a bin of dal, to wade, pour profligate handfuls over her head, feel the smooth shillings lap against her belly and thighs, flat teardrops of strung protein, granular water. In her dreams dals cook in an endless pot, steaming the nourishment of sweat's food, working class sustenance more than celebration, the sinewy body channeling legume to strength, translating the lift and sway of carry and tired. Dal can sustain a poor woman through an endless trek for water, through days of wind and prairie dust, through Calgary air.

She tries to transform herself (Dutch too), eats dal with her fingers, right handed, a reverent pat, a delicate pinch, tongue foreplay. But dal resists her stranger, turns its back, mysterious as sand. Dutch canal raga into a pallauv falling off the shoulder, her queer inquisitive heart jostling difference, sadness researching strange food and heat, when the heart holds the only measurement, when distance is a voyeur.

Please come close, *marsepein* (Dutch too) she cries, riding dal's knees, pulsing with want for hands hardened by callouses to push under her shirt, touch the bend and push of body steps, turn and turn again, artery's rhythmical stroke, stroke and flood, knees weakening. Pale as a spring sun, shucked with the skin of an embrace, hull and hollow, chafe and palea, such a carapace. Come closer, she cries, yearning the soul of journey, milky allegory, dal dancing toward the spinach of gossip and trust, Dutch goosefoot and cauliflower bottoms, the thyme of almonds cinnamon across an ocean or two, sly immigration that garlics and rosemary and tarragon of all hollandaise. She will coriander the simmer and skim off dancing kernels, pimento the pot that brings dal to a boil, dal flowering into the dish of taste, caress brief as a zucchini blossom. Willing, tractable, pleased, scooping hands full of alchemy without recipe book recitation of mimicry, red/orange the sizzling burn, lazy with pinches of extra and add, with the moment that lifts the lid. Sprinkle the world and sing, she cumins her (Dutch too).



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