

When the Burning Begins

by Patricia Smith

The recipe for hotwater cornbread is simple—corn meal, hot water
Mix till sluggish, then dollop in a sizzling skillet.
When you smell the burning begin, flip it.
When you smell the burning begin again, dump it onto a plate.
You've got to wait for the burning and get it just right.

Before the bread cools down, smear it with sweet, salted butter and smash it with
your fingers, crumble it up in a bowl of collard greens or buttermilk. Forget that
I'm telling you it's the first thing I ever cooked, that my daddy was laughing and
breath and no bullet in his head when he taught me.

Mix it till it looks like quicksand, he'd say, till it moves
like a slow song sounds. We'd sit there in the kitchen,
licking our fingers and laughing at my mother,
who was probably scrubbing something with bleach,
or watching Bonanza, or thinking how stupid it was
to be burning that nasty old bread in that cast iron skillet.
She always used whole milk and eggs and baked her cornbread
until it was plump and sugary, and she'd branded me hopeless
as a homemaker, too damned interested in sitting in the kitchen
in the half dark, learning nothing at all from a man
who had other women and stayed out late on Saturday nights.

When I told her that I'd fixed my first-ever pan of hotwater cornbread,
and that my daddy had branded it glorious, she sniffed
and kept mopping the floor over and over in the same place.

So here's how you do it.

You take out a bowl, like the one we had with blue flowers
and only one crack, you put the cornmeal in it.
then you turn on the hot water and let it run
while you tell the secret about the boy who kissed your cheek
after school, or about how you really wanted to be a reporter
instead of a teacher or nurse like mama said, and the water
keeps running while daddy says, "You will be a wonderful writer
and you will be famous someday, and if I wrote you a letter
and sent you some money, would you write about me?"

And he was laughing, and breathing, and no bullet in his head.

So you let the water run into the mix until it moves like mud moves
at the bottom of a river, which is another things daddy said,
and even though I'd never even seen a river, I knew exactly
what he meant. You turn the fire way up under the skillet
and you pour in this mix that moves like mud moves
at the bottom of a river, like quicksand, like a slow song sounds

That stuff pops something awful when it first hits that blazing skillet,
and sometimes daddy and I would dance to those angry pop sounds.
He'd let me rest my feet on his and we'd waltz around the kitchen
while my mother huffed and puffed on the other side of the door.

“When you are famous,” Daddy asks me, “White you write about dancing in the
kitchen with your father?” I say, “Everything I write will be about you, then you
will be famous, too,” and we dip and swirl and spin, but then he stops and sniffs
the air. The thing you have to remember about howater cornbread is to wait for
the burning so you know when to flip it, and then again when it's crusty and done.
Then eat it the way we did, with our fingers, our feet still tingling from dancing.
But remember that sometimes the burning takes such a long time, and in that time
—sometimes—poems are born.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_YmuQgYIVuk