

Ode to the Eggplant

by Persis M. Karim

A much misunderstood creature,
the eggplant is like an exile.
The tongue of its deep purple
mouth, trapped in the bitterness
of those who cannot speak.

Poor eggplant—even your name
compromises your beauty.
Like a wayward traveler
arriving at Ellis Island,
someone took one look at you
and declared: “Eggplant!”

If only they’d spoken French,
and wrote down “aubergine” instead.
Your American name belies your mystery--
you are an egg, yes, but also the curve
of a human calf, a shiny black phallus
in the starkness of day.
You are the waxy underbelly of a bird,
the slope of a mountain,
smooth stones from the bottom of a river.

How could anyone have missed
your taste in the appellation?
You are neither animal nor vegetable,
but your flavor is requited love—
The thing that makes all others complete:
garlic, tomato, lentil, lamb, rice.
Olive oil would simply be lost without you.

And the heat from which you are born
is the heat you unleash
in the slow simmer of sauce and stew
that gathers people to an intimate table.

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