

## PORTRAIT OF AN EGGPLANT

An eggplant lay in the dirt beside a tree which stood by a river. A fork stuck out of the side of the eggplant, a plain, tarnished fork.

It was a midsummer's evening. The air was warm and soft and the sinking sun hung auburn in the darkening sky. People were all about. Young ones played and old ones strolled and lovers twined around one another, but among all these and others only one person stopped beside the tree where the eggplant lay, a woman named Ariadne.

Ariadne was an artist, a painter. She often went walking along the river, and this walking was for her an inspiration and a balm. She lost herself in the things she saw, the things that were there and the things that were not, and these gave her joy and these gave her peace and she could go on in the world.

Ariadne crouched beside the eggplant. It was a large, ripe-looking vegetable with skin, richly purple, stretched taut around its curves. It bore no bruises, no flaws, no damage except for the fork. She'd never seen a more beautiful eggplant.

Ariadne reached out one finger and drew it over the curves. She imagined a meal of eggplant grilled with sage and thyme, or sauteed in butter with scallions and white wine, but then she thought about poison and disease and so she withdrew her finger and left the eggplant where it lay and walked home along the river but her heart was not light. She cooked spaghetti for dinner with sauce from a jar and stayed up late painting a purple dragon on her closet door. She dreamt of the eggplant that night and woke hugging herself tightly.

It was not until three evenings later that Ariadne walked again along the river. She had stayed away in order to purge herself of her fascination with the eggplant, yet for three days the eggplant had not left her thoughts. She made unneeded trips to the grocery store, each time straying to the produce aisle where she lingered near the eggplants, tracing their

curves with her eyes. None compared to the one beneath the tree. She told herself that she needed air when she left her apartment and walked towards the river.

She tried to lose herself in the evening, the play of light on the water and clouds, the lengthening shadows, and yet her gaze fell to the base of each tree, one after another, until she came to the eggplant. It lay as she'd left it, beautifully swollen with skin stretched taut, with not a scratch nor a bruise, no sign of insects or rodents or rot.

Ariadne leaned her shoulder against the tree, pausing as if her decision had not already been made. At last she leaned over, picked up the eggplant and dusted it off. Then, cradled in the crook of her arm, she carried it home. She was careful not to touch the fork.

She walked quickly without meaning to and by the time she reached her apartment she was warm and damp with sweat and wanting a bath. She set the eggplant on the counter that divided her living room from her kitchen, but did not lift her hands from it. In one swift motion as though taking it by surprise, she pulled out the fork. Four small holes remained. The tines of the fork were shiny.

A trickle of sweat ran down Ariadne's neck. She wiped it away with her hand and went to run water for her bath, but before getting into the tub she returned to the eggplant. Once more she ran her fingers along it, feeling the smooth skin with a sigh that embarrassed her, still she stroked it for a minute more before shutting herself in the bathroom.

Ariadne lay in the tub with her eyes closed, letting the day soak out of her body, feeling the light seep out of the day, and trying to think of nothing at all, while all she could think of was the eggplant, stroking the eggplant, eating the eggplant. Could she bear to lose the sight of it whose beauty soothed her eyes, the touch of it whose memory clung to her fingers? Yet could she bear to never taste it, and surely it would not last forever. In time it would rot and she would be left with nothing. She decided to cook it and rose out of the tub.

A foul smell struck Ariadne as she opened the bathroom door. She ran to the living room, holding her towel over her nose and mouth. On the floor beside the counter a pool of rank brown juice was growing, fed by a stream that ran down from a dark slimy mass which lay beside the fork with the shiny tines. Ariadne cried out. Her knees buckled and she sank to the floor and the rank pool collected around her. She breathed shallowly through her mouth to keep from gagging, but still it was twenty minutes before she found the strength to rise and get a sponge.

By then the juice had stopped oozing from the remains of the eggplant. Ariadne wiped the counter around it and then cleaned her legs and then the floor. The towel had

fallen into the pool of juice and this she tied up in a plastic bag which she tied up in another bag and set beside the garbage and all this time she did not cry.

When everything was clean she opened the windows wide. Then she walked back to the counter where the remains of the eggplant still lay. There was no way of telling what it had been. The color was of something not alive and it had shriveled to half its former size. The holes made by the tines of the fork had grown to small craters, each one filled with the rank brown juice.

Ariadne carried her garbage can to the counter and reached towards the slimy mass, and even as she did she remembered the eggplant as it had been. This memory loosed the storm of tears that had been causing her heart to ache and her hands began to shake at the thought of losing the eggplant forever so that she could not throw it out with the garbage and instead she buried it in her window box.

A year passed. During that year she painted the window box purple and watered it twice a week. She slept badly, cried often, ate only crackers with lettuce, drank only water and painted pictures of everything but eggplants.

Spring came again, and as the days grew longer Ariadne cried less. Then one day, as she was watering the window box, she noticed a tiny green shoot. She watched it daily, and daily it grew until a plant filled her window. The plant bloomed, and the base of one blossom swelled into a small fruit. Ariadne watched it anxiously. She began to cook again, to eat again. She nurtured the plant, played soft music for it, spoke to it gently, and gently she stroked the growing fruit. She resurrected her recipes for eggplant: ratatouille, parmesan, grilled, sauteed, and all this time the eggplant grew. Its curves swelled, its color deepened, and one day Ariadne saw that it was as perfect as the other had been, and yet more so, for the skin was not marred by a single hole, much less four.

Ariadne plucked the eggplant and sliced it and sauteed it with scallions. The flesh, once pale, turned a golden brown and the skin turned the darkest of purples. The aroma enveloped her, caused her mouth to water, her knees to become weak.

Ariadne set the table with her best china, lit a candle and poured a glass of white wine. Then she layered the slices of eggplant upon her plate like garden steps and seated herself with ceremony. She cut off a piece with her fork alone and slipped it into her mouth and chewed and stopped. A nauseating taste coated her tongue, metallic and bitter and hinting at rot. She spit out the eggplant, gulped a mouthful of wine and another and still the taste of tin clung to her tongue, the taste that poisons canned vegetables. Her chest tightened and tears clouded her eyes. With great hesitation she cut a piece from a different slice and set it on her tongue. The same taste filled her mouth. Ariadne dropped her fork and covered her face with her hands and cried and could not stop.

The sun set long before her tears had dried and she lifted her face into darkness. Through an open window a draft of air extinguished the candle and mixed the smell of the river with the smell of sauteed eggplant. Ariadne relit the candle, and by candle light she dug a hole in her window box and buried the remains of the eggplant and cut down the plant from which it had grown and buried that too.

The next day she stretched a canvas over a frame the size of her living room wall and began a violent portrait of an eggplant in which flames consumed a ripe, swollen vegetable whose ruptured sides bled molten tin which flowed down over its skin and hardened into twisted bits of cutlery. She ate nothing but rare meat and ripe tomatoes and drank only red wine. By day she screamed at the walls and by night she beat her pillow until it bled feathers.

Ariadne worked on the portrait for nearly a year. On the day that it was done she noticed a green shoot growing in her window box. The shoot was young and small and did not know its past. An ache gripped Ariadne's heart, different from the anger which had fueled the past year of her life. She did not pluck the shoot, but let it grow.

The shoot grew into a plant that filled her window. The plant bloomed, and at the base of one blossom an eggplant began to grow. In time its curves swelled, and in time its skin darkened, until at last it was as perfect as the one before. This eggplant Ariadne did not touch, but she watched it for hours on end. The brutal portrait of the other still hung on her wall, yet its anger caused the aching in her heart to overflow so that she could not eat and sometimes could not breathe. She stretched another canvas and began a second portrait, this one of an eggplant floating on a crystal lake, bathed in the rays of the late afternoon sun.

As summer turned to fall the eggplant withered and fell from its stem, and so Ariadne consigned it to the earth, but this one she buried with compassion.

She continued to water the window box, and as winter turned to spring a new shoot appeared, a new plant bloomed, a new eggplant grew. The sight of the eggplant filled her with longing and with anguish. She painted it, but from a distance, a small, formal portrait. The next year was the same, and the one after that. But time became, for Ariadne, a balm, and so, in time, her longing faded, and with it her anguish, until there came a spring when the sight of a new eggplant brought to Ariadne only a quiet sadness. In sadness she touched the small green fruit, and in sadness she cradled it in her palm. The eggplant was warm from the sun, and Ariadne's palm grew warm from the eggplant.

The warmth spread through her hand and rose up through her wrist. It flowed along her arm and slipped over her shoulder to pool beneath her breastbone. There

Ariadne's sadness lay, and there, bathed in the warmth of the eggplant, Ariadne's sadness began to melt.

In peace she withdrew her hand, and in peace she began a portrait of the new eggplant, small and green, cradled in a thin pale hand.

In each spring that followed, Ariadne grew more easy with the eggplant, and so she grew more easy in the world. She walked again beside the river, and cooked again and ate again, though never eggplant, but she nurtured each one as it grew.

Many years passed in this way, and just as, in time, each eggplant withered, so in time did Ariadne. The hours she'd once spent walking she now passed in a chair beside the window, dozing in the sunlight, waking when the evening chilled her bones. And so she sat dozing one spring afternoon, her window open to the breeze, the newest eggplant cradled in her palm. When the sun set the chill did not rouse her, and when the sun rose she did not move.

As the warmth from an eggplant once flowed into Ariadne, so her warmth now flowed into the newest eggplant, and when the earth at its roots grew parched, Ariadne became its spring. Its curves grew full and its color rich while Ariadne grew thinner and more pale until, when the eggplant was as ripe as it could be, the sun shone through her and cast no shadow.