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Author(s): Patricia Vigderman

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Patricia Vigderman



RUMI AND THE FISH

The Qur'an says, "We are all returning."

Whoever brought me here will have to take me home, says Rumi. What I am supposed to be doing I have no idea. Well, if that isn't to the point I don't know what is. Rumi, of course, is frying some very big fish, and I'm only just shopping for the frying pan here—probably will find myself at Cost Plus this afternoon in a fog of consumer drunkenness. But Rumi has a position on that, too: *This drunkenness began in some other tavern*, he says. *When I get back around to that place I'll be completely sober*. If only I could believe that last point! It's all about desire—so many things to want in life, and wanting being so much what it is to be alive, and then the cause of so much suffering. The need for a frying pan, to take just the example at hand: maybe it comes before the fish, which has got to be absurd. Because then there's the choosing of the pan. Whether it should be just something cheap to warm up the oil, or a mid-range item with a wash of copper on the bottom and a cover that fits exactly, or something with a lot of coated-aluminum heft and a contrasting stainless handle that doesn't conduct the heat (showing you are a serious cook and the fish just one ingredient in the mixed media of your art).

So, right there an identity issue in the kitchen store. The fish itself almost out of sight as something fryable, something big and important by itself. Something that requires your attention. Instead, there's this fussing about whether you're the kind of person who would use a mid-range pan, or one of those horribly heavy iron skillet things that rusts and could be used to bop a bad husband on the head in the comics. Possibly the point

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of this business about frying fish and what I'm doing here at all is just to get to seeing that I'm hungry and might just as well push a stick through the thing and hold it over the fire until it's done enough to pull the flesh off and get something to eat. Thanking the creature, of course, for its contribution, for the donation. First for the meat itself, which satisfies hunger, the desire to eat. And then for the metaphor about the big fish and the labor of turning it into something that can satisfy desire, which is something else, but finally can't be pushed aside by drunken consumer choices.

It's that business about what I am supposed to be doing I have no idea. Rumi, I guess, is saying it's not his responsibility to figure that out. Whoever brought him here will have to take him home, with or without whatever frying pan, the fish cooked or uncooked, the metaphor spun out to its fullest meaning or left as a joke or a cliché or a main course with accompanying potatoes roasted with garlic and a little rosemary and either some plain asparagus drizzled with butter or fiddlehead ferns, if they're in season and you're in that sort of place. And if I'm lucky whoever brought me here will pay the bill—or maybe this is my house and I've made the meal and Rumi will eat it with me, and we will be completely sober, and this will be the tavern where it began, and this will be what I was supposed to do.

Patricia Vigderman teaches at Kenyon College. Her writing has appeared in the Nation, Parabola, the New York Times, Working Papers, and other publications. She is currently working on an extended meditation about the Boston art collector Isabella Stewart Gardner.