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Democritus' Onion

by Billy Williams

The story goes that Democritus sliced
an onion and nailed his atoms to the great
chopping board of truth, proving with a geometry
of inside turned out that all's matter
and void. A simple culinary chore defined
the course of Western government and science.



The question, though, remains—why did Democritus
slice his onion in the first place?

Perhaps, some beauty
of Abdera twisted elder braids as her philosopher
stirred the slices golden in olive oil
and wore his linen chiton loose, belted with a buckle
of ram's horn.

Perhaps he softened her with strains
of his aulos, then revealed her Pythagorean beauty
as he drew a tetractys of the decad
across the soft arc of her dark belly.

“Your navel,”
he whispered, “is the lead goose of this little delta,
mirrors this other one with its firm
uncuttable perfection.”

But more likely, he ate the onion raw
alone with his equations for converging
lines along a simple planar surface,
then turned in early, dreaming of atoms,
the wrestling invisibilities of his body,
and the tiny, iron souls of magnets.

