

"Books & Babies & Beef Stews": The Culinary Passion of Sylvia Plath

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Cooking, like writing, takes patience and stamina—it takes energy, and time. No one describes the analogy between these activities quite as passionately as Sylvia Plath: throughout her intensely recorded life, she describes her literary and culinary triumphs or disappointments side by side in her journals. She finds solace in reading Virginia Woolf's diary, delighted that "she works off her depression over rejections from *Harper's* by cleaning out the kitchen. And cooks haddock & sausage. Bless her. I feel my life linked to her, somehow. I love her" (Plath 269). Cooking, for Plath (and Woolf, apparently, though it's more difficult to imagine Woolf in the kitchen) was therapeutic. Though Plath wanted to be the best female American poetess, she also wanted to be a good wife and mother—a caregiver. She realized that she both wanted and needed a partner, so she married. She lived in the 1950s when women were expected to wait on their husbands and also anticipated the coming revolution when women would be expected to go out and earn money in the workforce. It's not surprising that her writing has become so iconic when one places her in this American historical context.

Though much has changed since 1958, when Ted Hughes ordered Plath to do his sewing, ("Quarrel with Ted over sewing buttons on jackets (which I must do"), I was conflicted last year during a period of unemployment when I found myself drawn to the domestic sphere (349). I kept busy applying for jobs, going to interviews (sometimes up to four or five a week) and writing. But I was enamored with the extra time I had, particularly in the late afternoon for grocery shopping and preparing dinner. For the first time in my life, cooking became something I enjoyed; dishes became projects I was proud of—all because I had the "luxury" to take my time in the kitchen. (I put luxury in quotes because, in reality, I was eaten alive by anxiety over my joblessness and desperate to find work.) Ultimately I realized, my goal in life is to have the space and time, both to write, but also to be a caretaker of my partner, and hopefully someday, my children. This may not sound inflammatory, but for someone who considers herself a feminist, to discover that I like to cook and would be happy to stay at home to write, cook, and take care of my family feels as though I'm committing treason.

Reading Plath's journals coached me through this epiphany. Not only does she describe her meals at length, but she also describes entertaining, and the challenges in trying to be an artist



and a wife and mother at the same time. "I was getting worried about becoming too happily stodgily practical," she writes. "Instead of studying Locke,— I go make an apple pie, or study *Joy of Cooking*, reading it like a rare novel. Whoa, you will escape into domesticity & stifle yourself by falling headfirst into a bowl of cookie batter" (269). (Part of the pleasure of reading these journals is learning that Plath is funny.) She goes on to describe the thrill of hostessing in her outfit of an avocado green skirt, the tightness of her blouse, warm against her, and the soothing power of white wine "marshmellowy frosting singing thin in my veins. The apartment clean-carpeted and empty, bowls of sour cream & onion, pots of tomato & meat sauce, garlic butter, hot water, waiting, waiting. Soon the rude bell-buzz will sound . . ." (329). Plath is an incredible writer—she captures the stomach-flip before one's guests arrive through her description of the sights, smell, and feel of her preparations. Will everything taste alright? Do I look alright?

The dark side of cooking is also adequately recorded. Plath's entries show the inextricable link between emotion and food. If she's had a tough day, she can't write, and doesn't want to cook. Frustration clouds her creative impulse. "Not touching on my deep self. This bad beginning depressed me inordinately. It made me not hungry nor want to cook, because of the bestialness of eating and cooking without keen thought and creation" (285). Later, the disappointment of a canned soup during a lonely afternoon: "Lonely lunch of bottled potato salad on dry lettuce, canned cup of chicken & rice soup, chicken bits some sort of spiced cat-flesh. How I hated canned soups—so uniform, always feel cheated" (309). And dinner-party planning: "Robert Lowell and his wife and the Fassetts are coming to dinner this week. I am wondering what to serve them all in one dish. Lemon meringue pie" (465). Robert Lowell as a dinner guest? I'd be nervous, too. But a successful day, filled with work, writing, and another successful lemon meringue pie (seems to be her favorite), "redeems." Writing for herself and cooking for those she loves gives Plath joy. "Making order, the rugs smoothed clean, maple-wood tables & dark tables cleared. Shaping a meal, people, I grew back to joy. I serve" (310).

The romance between Plath and Hughes is also recorded dutifully—her memory jolted by food and drink. "And the smells—the delicious transference of my obsession with Ted's delicious fragrances which to me are lovelier than any field of new cut grasses?" (380). The very next morning: "Today I rose & made breakfast – coffee, and toast & bacon, and chilled peaches & pineapple. Then making love, hearing the cars come and go in regular battalions, to and from the hourly masses" (381). Plath also uses food a tool for seduction. In Benidorm, Spain, on their honeymoon, Plath works tirelessly over a petrol stove to make Hughes favorite dish: "a platter of stringbeans and fried fresh sardines" (243). Their mornings together sound like pure bliss. "steaming mugs of café con leche in the morning, a cold picnic of bread, cheese, tomatoes and

onions, fruit and milk at noon, and dinner of meat or fish with vegetables, and wine, at twilight under the moon and stars" (241). After re-reading this part of her journals, I took to eating "bananas and sugar" every morning as she describes their breakfasts. The section continues with what is perhaps the most romantic passage Plath records of her marriage to Ted Hughes: her description of their writing table, which is too lengthy to reproduce. If you were ever doubtful on Plath's literary talents, read this passage of her journal, pages 259-260. For lunch on Hughes' birthday in 1956, they have "new green honeydew melon: wild cold honey-flavored melon-flesh; creamy texture, refreshing, sweet the way sunlight would taste, coming through clear glassy green bulk of waves" (258).

Reading Plath's journals an undeniably sensuous experience—she records nearly all of her habits: work, sex, hygiene, shopping, etc. Ever since I picked up Karen Kukil's excellently edited *Unabridged Journals*, never having read them in any form before, in a bookstore in Evanston, Illinois in 2002, I have returned again and again to this volume for details and inspiration from Plath's life. For me, her diaries reinforce my nostalgia for "journaling," and the joy at returning to entry after entry, remembering the events of my life and the emotions surrounding them—just as a meal revisited can bring back the memories of the first time you made it or tasted it.

In that summer when I was exasperated with the job market, the simple task of making dinner made me feel as if I had accomplished something. The depth of Plath's passion for creation, her seemingly endless energy to investigate and create in or out of the kitchen is an inspiration for any artist. At the end of her journals, rich and lengthy despite her short life, I am left hungry for more.



Works Cited

Plath, Sylvia. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Karen V. Kukil. New York: Anchor Books, 2000. Print.