Lucent Figs and Suave Veal Chops
Sylvia Plath and Food

When I tell people that I am a Sylvia Plath scholar, they say, “Oh, she’s the poet who killed herself,” and “Wasn’t she very young?” Or, if they are at all familiar with her poetry in Ariel or her novel, The Bell Jar, they might say something about her iconic status with feminists and depending on how they feel about feminism, either say something about how man-hating she sounds—“Wasn’t she the one who said ‘I eat men like air’?”—or express a shared outrage toward her unfaithful husband, Ted Hughes. In either case, I often tell them that they might be surprised.
domestic goddess, but one who did not see such a big difference between the art of composing a poem and the skill of preparing a good meal. In one of her strange reflections on “battering out a good life,” she declares, “I want to be one of the Makaris: with Ted. Books & Babies & Beef Stews.” This line is most likely an allusion to Scottish poet William Dunbar’s “Lament for the Makaris, Quhen He Wes Sek” (ca. 1505), where only poets are esteemed as “makaris” (makers), as in “the noble Chaucer, of makaris flour.” Here Dunbar is not thinking so much of “battering out a good life” but of meditating on last things, because the refrain of the poem is *timor mortis conturbat me* (fear of death confounds me). When Plath thinks of being a “maker,” she gives priority to her marriage with fellow poet Ted Hughes, and then their partnership in making books, babies, and finally, for her at least, beef stews. And, we know from Hughes, other culinary delights. While on their Cape Cod honeymoon in August 1957, Hughes writes to his brother that though Plath is “the princess of cooks,” she has cloys his appetite with her efforts: “I have made a pact with Sylvia that when I don’t want cream-chiffon pies & all the other fairy palace dishes it’s not because she isn’t an exquisite cook but because she cooks for relaxation while I eat only by necessity so that there must come occasions when the most Himalayan heaps of pork...cannot so much as brighten my eye.” He also reveals what will become obvious to a reader of Plath’s *Journals*, that cooking was an all-too-tempting diversion: “when she’s faced by some tedious or unpleasant piece of work she escapes into cooking.”

Hughes was probably describing Plath’s procrastination thinking from about the forthcoming year of teaching at Smith—her first and last year, it turned out. At the same time, though, she was seeking relief from one of her frequent and painful bouts of writer’s block. While Hughes seemed to be having no trouble settling down to write on Cape Cod, Plath was anxious and restless. As Hughes would write years later to Frances McCullough, the first editor of Plath’s *Journals*, that cooking was an all-too-tempting diversion: “when she’s faced by some tedious or unpleasant piece of work she escapes into cooking.”

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Either Kafka litmag serious or SATEVEPOST aim high: woman at end of rope with husband, children: lost sense of order in universe, all meaningless, loss of hopes, quarrel with husband: loose ends, bills, problems, dead end. Waving between running away or committing suicide: stayed by need to create an order: slowly, methodically begins to bake cakes, each one, calls store for eggs, etc. from midnight to midnight. Husband comes home: new understanding. She can go on making order in her limited way: beautiful cakes: can’t bear to leave them. Try both styles: do it to your heart’s content. (J 288)

A Kafkaesque Martha Stewart run amok? Or simply a desperate housewife? She ultimately decides on the latter version, and even has her protagonist think of leaving “Jock, her strong-willed, taciturn but loving husband [who] is a salesman of office furniture, rising fast” (J 292). It is the woman’s compulsion, though, “to leave something for [their] children” that stops her flight, and that’s when she begins to start baking: “feels the need to keep on, orders four dozen eggs, confectioners sugar, measures out vanilla, baking powder: sense of order, neatness, creativeness. Born homemaker, sense of dignity, richness, knowledge that she’s what Jock really needs and wants.” When Jock comes home to find her in the kitchen, “she is vital, flushed from baking, at peace with herself” (J 293). Even Norman Rockwell might gag over this.

Before I give you the impression that Plath’s fondness for cooking was really a personality disorder, I need to give you a sampling of Plath’s hearty appetite and aesthetic appreciation for food. She is quite able to make a reader drool over the simplest menus. Invited to a family dinner by her boyfriend Dick Norton, she waxes rhapsodic over the meal. As she describes the atmosphere in her journal, the table is luminous with “warm, glowing aqua candles, bright
Much later in her journals Plath describes another meal with Ted Hughes that has a totally different aesthetic pitch. After a brisk walk with Hughes in freezing temperatures, they come “home ravenous, to devour seared steak, quenching chef salad, wine, luxurious lucent green figs in thick chilled cream” (J338). In one of her most enticing descriptions, as if she were insatiable Laura in Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market,” she worships a honeydew melon as “wild cold honey-flavored melon-flesh; creamy texture, refreshing, sweet the way sunlight would taste, coming through the clear glassy green bulk of waves” (J258). One must pause to

sudden pink-petaled yellow-centered asters. Swordfish and sour cream broiled...Hollandaise and broccoli. Grape pie and icecream [sic], rich, warm. And port, sharp, sweet, startling gulped with a sudden good sting behind the eyes and a relaxing into easy laughter. Good scalding black coffee. And Dick and I at home an evening, mutually warm, rich, seething with peace." What an odd mixture of pleasure and pain: “sharp” but “sweet”; “startling gulped” but with a “good sting”; “scalding” coffee; and a mood “seething with peace.” Eventually Plath’s romantic reverie turns to whether Norton is really the mate she seeks: “The long prosaic loaf of daily bread. But who to eat it with, and when to begin?” (J148).

Norton, as most Plathophiles know, was the model for the all-too-prosaic Buddy Willard of The Bell Jar, and no match for Plath’s alter ego, Esther Greenwood.

Above: Sylvia Plath’s diary for the week of 25 February–3 March 1962, showing one of many pages containing entries about food.

Sylvia Plath Collection, Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College © Estate of Sylvia Plath.
reflect on why a salad is “quenching,” what a “lucent” fig looks like, or what sunlight might taste like, and then on how it might taste if reflected through ocean waves. Finally, celebrating the prize-winning publication of Hughes’s first volume of poems, The Hawk in the Rain, the couple first “had salad & ham & clear pungent cider at the Eagle pub” for lunch, and later a “gala supper” in a restaurant where she would love to order “Escargots? Oh yes, madam. And pheasant & venison,” but of frugal necessity and “at the end of resources, settled for…chicken soup, good & creamy, delicious stuffed tomatoes, turkey with the usual unredeemed chip potatoes & overcooked dried peas, or canned.” All is not lost though, because for dessert, “Chablis & iced lemon mousse transfigured it all. We idled, nibbled, dreamed aloud” (J 271).

For her own culinary endeavors Plath relied heavily on the Joy of Cooking, no less a sacred text for her generation than Julia Child’s Mastering the Art of French Cooking (1961) was for the next. Before the baby boomers, and long before Child made French cuisine au courant in America, there was Irma Rombauer’s Joy, self-published in 1931 to create income after her husband committed suicide. The first edition was illustrated by her daughter Marion Rombauer Becker, with a dramatic cover of St. Martha of Bethany, the patron saint of cooking, wielding a sword over a soon-to-be-slain dragon. It does stir the imagination to wonder what St. Martha of Bethany had in mind for dinner. The subtitle for this first edition promised a “Compilation of Reliable Recipes with a Casual Culinary Chat,” and, in the Depression era, many of those reliable recipes were for game like rabbits, squirrel, and opossum. The casual culinary chat offered instructions on canning and preserving fruits and vegetables from the garden. It is doubtful that Sylvia Plath saw this first edition, but she may have been raised on one of the several commercially published editions that followed, and we do know for certain that when she wanted to get serious about cooking in graduate school (as a Fulbright Fellow in Cambridge, England), she suddenly needed to have her 1953 edition.8 Breathless with the excitement of her new love for Ted Hughes and probably determined to impress him with her cooking skills, she writes her mother: “Ted is teaching me about horoscopes, how to cook herring roes, and we are going to the world’s biggest circus tonight. God, such a life!…If you have a chance, could you send over my Joy of Cooking? It’s the one book I really miss!” (April 26, 1956).7 She reminds her mother again on May 18, 1956, “could you please send my Joy of Cooking” (JH 253). Aurelia Plath apparently remembered to bring the Joy when she came to England in June.

A year later finds Plath reading her “blessed Rombauter” (J 249) as if it were a “rare novel,” when she should be “studying Locke” for her Cambridge final exams. She then chastises herself: “Whoa, I said to myself. You will escape into domesticity & stifle yourself by falling headfirst into a bowl of cookie batter.” But, she reasons, even the “Big Ones” like Virginia Woolf find comfort “by cleaning out the kitchen. And cooks haddock & sausage. Bless her” (J 269). The Joy even went with her and Hughes to Spain after their swift marriage in June 1956. On August 17, Hughes’s twenty-sixth birthday, she records the contents of “Mr. and Mrs. Hughes’ Writing Table,” including “an open cookbook…at Ted’s right elbow, where I’d left it after finishing reading out recipes of stewed rabbit” for his birthday dinner, and close by on her side of the table, “a ragged brown covered Thesaurus…close to Ted’s red covered Shakespeare” (J 259, August 17, 1956). Her preparations for this first birthday dinner she will cook for Ted as his wife are lovingly documented. The morning is devoted first to “shopping for rabbit and myriad garnishes for gala stew” (J 256–257) in their honeymoon Spanish village, Benidorm. Then, undaunted by the one-burner petrol stove, she creates a feast. She must first “dress” a rabbit, and the 1953 Joy of Cooking still has the Depression-era illustration for this delicate operation. But it is late afternoon, and Plath has just awakened from what she describes as a “long deep nap, dropping off end of pier into hypnotized sleep.” Now she must pull herself up from the depths and gird her loins for the task:

Cleared head with washing and cold drink of water; sweaty, reserve of energy growing. Gulped scalding coffee, like surgeon before difficult new operation to be performed for first time. Got out ingredients from larder: Ted lit carbon fire, glowing to red coals in black oven, after much smoking and glowing clouds; scraped carrots naked, cut onion, squishy [sic] tomato; cooked down strips of salt pork, floured pink tight rabbit flesh; seared rabbit to savoury brown, chunked in big kettle; made rich dense gravy from drippings, adding flour, salt, boiling water, two packets of condensed soup—vegetable and beef and chicken, glass and a half of wine at Ted’s insistence; added sauce to kettle with can of peas, onions, tomato & carrots. Boiled and bubbled, savoury, steaming and delectable. (August 17, 1956; J 258)

The “wine at Ted’s insistence” is an ingredient Rombauer says the French like to add. But a reader might pause over some of these details—why should carrots be violently scraped naked? Or, why does Plath portray herself as a surgeon, flaying a bunny’s skin to expose “pink tight rabbit flesh”? After a few years, Plath seems more comfortable in the kitchen than she did assembling this first birthday meal.
for her husband. Entertaining friends for dinner and playing the part of competent hostess, Plath is swept into a sensual haze while she finishes preparations. She titlesthe journal entry “a moment, caught, in the stillness of waiting for guests” and attempts to re-create the moment impressionistically. She revels in her own scent and colors—“my own tigress perfume & the dull-avocado green of my skirt and bright turquoise & gold-lined & white & black paisley patterned jersey warm & snug on me”—while she puts the finishing touches on her cake. A glass of wine gives her the necessary brio: “the white wine drunk during smoothing on thick white marshmellowy [sic] frosting singing thin in my veins—oh the absolute free willingness unleashed which wine brings. The apartment clean-carpeted and empty, bowls of sour cream & onion, pots of tomato & meat sauce, garlic butter, hot water, waiting, waiting.” The “moment” comes to a crashing halt, however, and we never learn how the dinner party unfolded. From wine singing in her veins and unleashing an exuberant “free willingness,” Plath suddenly turns to “after, after, to hell with Sophocles, I shall pick you up & go on with you, to catch up” (J 329), and begins a long complaint about never catching up with her teaching preparations. A journal entry that begins with heady excitement descends even further into a “nightmare to record,” mingling images from paintings of “suffering Christs & corrupt judges & lawyers by Roualt” with images from newspaper clippings about the Holocaust: “three men behind barbwire at a Concentration Camp clipped from the Times from a review which I read about tortures & black trains bearing victims to the furnace” (J 330). The passage is reminiscent of Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” where he first extols the liberating effects of wine—“That I might drink, and leave the world unseen” with the nightingale’s song—and then plummets downward to “Where but to think is to be full of sorrow/And leaden-eyed despairs.”

Throughout her year of teaching at Smith (1957–1958) Plath’s happiest moments revolve around food, reveries to interrupt classroom anxieties and the familiar drudgery of pedagogy—grading papers, preparing lectures, reading exams. In the middle of a long journal entry wondering, “What is it teaching kills?” and self-Flagellation over her own sense of fraudulence—“And I: what am I but a glorified automaton hearing myself, through a vast space of weariness, speak from the shell speaking-trumpet that is my mouth the dead words about life, suffering, and deep knowledge and ritual sacrifice”—she will suddenly turn to the calm of preparing dinner, paring “potatoes into cool white ovoids, carrots into long conical spears, onions slippery glossed & bulbous popped & cracked from their rattle-paper skins” (J 346). In answer to her sense of being trapped “between two unachieved shapes: between the original teacher & the original writer: neither,” Plath turns to the serenity of those cooking shapes, so easily achieved—ovoids, cones, bulbs. Occasionally she simply pats herself on the back for company-pleasing desserts—a “trusty angel-topped lemon meringue pie” (J 323) or “runny but delicious custard-meringue raspberry pie” (J 358)—while at other times she seems to revel in hearty meals inspired by her reading. Hence, after “rereading Moby Dick in preparation for the exam deluge tomorrow—am whelmed and wondrous at the swimming Biblical & craggy Shakespearean cadences, the rich & lustrous & fragrant recreation of spermaceti, ambergris—miracle, marvel, the ton-thunderous leviathan”—she “made a huge fish soup.” The next day she interrupts her boredom from sorting exams for a senior professor with “steaming & savory fish soup for lunch, smacking good all onion-essence, chunks of soaked fish & potato steaming, hot, bacon bits, buttery crackers foundering in it” (J 370). Abah’s ship foundered, we know, but crackers?

In contrast to the year of teaching at Smith, marked by many journal entries expressing pleasure over cooking and food, the following year (1958–1959) is principally devoted to Plath’s “Panic Bird”—her writer’s block—and trying to ferret out its neurotic roots in her sessions with psychoanalyst Ruth Beuscher. There are very few lengthy journal entries about cooking from this year—brief mentions by Ted for a return from the library, back ached” (J 423) and also complaints by Ted about apparently too-light meals (J 421). Plath’s longest entry records a day when she “had been sitting at an abstract poem about mirrors & identity which I hated,” followed by “a rejection from The Kenyon sealing hopelessness.” This gloom over her writing extends to her efforts in the kitchen and, as the following passage shows, nearly threatens Plath with being cut off like her heroine in The Bell Jar:

Where, how, with what & for what to begin? No incident in my life seemed ready to stand up for even a 20 page story. I sat paralyzed, feeling no person in the world to speak to, cut off totally from humanity in a self-induced vacuum. I felt sicker & sicker. I couldn’t happen be anything but a writer & I couldn’t be a writer: I couldn’t even set down one sentence: I was paralyzed with fear, with deadly hysteria. I sat in the hot kitchen, unable to blame lack of time, the sultry July weather, anything but myself. The white hardboiled egg, the green head of lettuce, the two suave pink veal chops dared me to do anything with them, to make a meal out of them, to alter their single, leaden identity into a digestible meal. I had been living in an idle dream of being a
writer. And here stupid housewives & people with polio were getting their stories into the Satevepost. I went into Ted, utterly shattered, & asked him to tackle the veal chops. And burst into tears. Useless, good-for-nothing (J 405).

What is most curious about this passage is the attribution of “suave” to veal chops—as if they were worldly, sophisticated, and debonair young men mocking a young girl of no skill or experience to “Make something of me!” There is also the convergence of composing a poem about identity and the leaden identities of the cooking ingredients, in need of the same kind of magical inspiration from her to turn them into a “digestible meal.” Still in a bleak mood months later, Plath says, “I’m not working, only studying to change my ways of writing poems. A disgust for my work. My poems begin on one track, in one dimension and never surprise or shock or even much please.” To get out of her doldrums, she reads other poets and then blends her taste in poetry—her aesthetic preferences—with the gustatory pleasures of drink: “Read [Richard] Wilbur and [Adrienne] Rich this morning. Wilbur a bland turning of pleasances [sic], a fresh speaking and picturing with incalculable grace and all sweet, pure, clear, fabulous, the maestro with the imperceptible marcel. Robert Lowell after this is like good strong shocking brandy after a too lucidly sweet dinner wine, desert [sic] wine” (J 465). Wilbur, like those damnable veal chops, sounds a little too suave for Plath, who was looking for a way to “surprise or shock” that would not come until Ariel.9

We don’t have the two journals Plath kept after she and Hughes moved back to England in 1959 because Hughes—infamously—lost one of them and destroyed the final journal, he says, “because he did not want her children to have to read it (in those days he regarded forgetfulness as an essential part of survival).”10 The earlier one, with entries covering 1960–1962, is presumed stolen, since Hughes left it out for anyone to read in the Devon home he returned to after Plath’s suicide. Plath kept a final journal after she moved to London in December 1962, and this is the one Hughes says he destroyed. From her letters to her mother, though, we know that Plath continued to take great pleasure in being a homemaker and mother. When she was pregnant with Frieda and Nicholas, she seemed to give up on her writing altogether and devoted her time to nesting, feeling, she says, “quite cowlike and interested suddenly in soppy women’s magazines and cooking and sewing” (LH 439). She is ecstatic when she receives “a big Christmas parcel from you [mother Aurelia] with the two Ladies’ Home Journal magazines, which I fell upon with joy—that magazine has so much Americana, I love it. Look forward to a good read by the wood fire tonight and to trying the luscious recipes. Recipes in English women’s magazines are for things like ‘Lard and Stale Bread Pie, garnished with Cold Pigs Feet’ or ‘Left-Over Pot Roast in Aspic’ (LH 438).

Like the Joy of Cooking, this magazine represented for Plath “an Americanness which I feel a need to dip into, now I’m in exile, and especially as I’m writing for women’s magazines in a small way now. I shall have fulfilled a very long-time ambition if a story of mine ever makes the LHF” (LH 433). Plath may have seen the feature by fellow American poet Phyllis McGinley, “Cooking to Me Is Poetry,” in the January 1956 issue, where she compares the skills of cooking to those of composing poems and supports good “old-fashioned” recipes,11 confirming Plath’s own aesthetic perceptions about traditional cooking in the American mold—and her antipathy for English cooking. Indeed, for Christmas she spurns the English goose, instead roasting her “first simply beautiful golden-brown turkey with your [Aurelia’s] bread dressing, creamed brussels sprouts and chestnuts, swede (like squash, orange), giblet gravy and apple pies with our last and preciously saved own apples” (LH 441). Before the birth of her second child, Nicholas, she tells her mother, “Each day I bake something to hide away for Ted and Frieda when I’m recovering from the new baby. I have a box of sand tarts cut in shapes, trimmed with cherries and almonds, a box of Tollhouse cookies and a fruit cake. Tomorrow I’ll try an apple pie with the very last of our apples” (LH 442). What could be more American than Tollhouse cookies and apple pie?

Only nine months after Nicholas’s birth, Plath is contemplating divorce from Ted Hughes, who has deserted her and their two children for another woman. She is also “writing like mad—have managed a poem a day before breakfast. All book poems. Terrific stuff, as if domesticity had choked me” (October 12, 1962; LH 466). These are, of course, the Ariel poems—Plath’s October miracle. If we had only the evidence of these poems, then we would probably assume that Plath had never found any joy in cooking. Domesticity in Ariel is both dangerous and scary. In “A Birthday Present” the speaker imagines something monstrous hiding just “behind this veil” that “shimmers, it does not stop, and I think it wants me,” and “When I am quiet at my cooking I feel it looking, I feel it thinking.”12 In “Cut” a Freudian slip of the knife turns a kitchen accident—“What a thrill—/My thumb instead of an onion” (A 13)—into an epiphany of self-hatred: “Dirty girl, /Thump stump” (A 14). And then there’s the coffee-clatch of two housewives in “Lesbos,” the title itself ironic because there is no love lost between these
two women. The first line exclaims, “Viciousness in the kitchen! The potatoes hiss” (A 30), while they complain to each other about their lives—tending small children, putting up with boring husbands characterized as “An old pole for the lightning” (A 31) or “hugging his ball and chain” (A 32) as he heads off to work. And “meanwhile there’s a stink of fat and baby crap” and “the smog of cooking, the smog of hell” (A 31) hovering over the women. The suffocation of housewifery closes in as one woman leaves and looks back: “I see your cute décor/Close on you like the fist of a baby” (A 32). Even the rabbit Plath dressed and stewed to “back: “I see your cute décor/Close on you like the fist of a baby” (A 32). Even the rabbit Plath dressed and stewed to

Before Ariel, though, and even while Plath was still writing those rosy letters to her mother about domestic bliss with Ted Hughes and singing the praises of Ladies’ Home Journal, she was writing her novel The Bell Jar, much of which is an outright repudiation and satire of 1950s norms for women. Plath did not want her mother to read The Bell Jar, characterizing it as a “potboiler” of no artistic merit, and she published it under the nom de plume Victoria Lucas. It is as if Plath split herself in two: for her mother, she was the sentimental “Sissy” of the letters, in love with soppy women’s magazines; but in The Bell Jar she is the proto-feminist Esther Greenwood, who suspects “maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterward you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state,” an epiphany that Esther arrives at after her boyfriend tells her that she won’t want to write poetry anymore after she has children (BJ 85). As for cooking, Esther is purposely hopeless: “My grandmother and my mother were such good cooks that I left everything to them. They were always trying to teach me one dish or another, but I would just look on and say, ‘Yes, yes, I see,’ while the instructions slid through my head like water, and then I’d always spoil what I did so nobody would ask me to do it again” (BJ 76).

One episode of the novel in particular suggests that Plath regarded women’s magazines like Ladies’ Home Journal as poison—figuratively speaking. Plath’s heroine, Esther Greenwood, is a college guest editor for a posh women’s magazine, just as Plath herself was for Mademoiselle in the summer of 1953, before her first breakdown and attempted suicide. On one of their jaunts Esther and the other guest editors in The Bell Jar are invited to a banquet by Ladies’ Day magazine, a portmanteau combining Ladies’ Home Journal and Woman’s Day. Esther is thrilled with the food being served by the “staff of the Ladies’ Day Food Testing Kitchens in hygienic white smocks, neat hairnets and flawless makeup of a uniform peach-pie color” (BJ 25)—a far cry from the kitchen’s “stink of fat and baby crap” in “Lesbos.” Esther tells the reader, “I love food more than just about anything else” and “No matter how much I eat, I never put on weight”; so when she sees the “yellow-green avocado pear halves stuffed with crabmeat and mayonnaise, and platters of rare roast beef and cold chicken, and every so often a cut-glass bowl heaped with black caviar” (BJ 24), she pigs out. And I do mean pigs out. She greedily strategizes the placement of one of the caviar bowls, figuring that the girl across from her “couldn’t reach it because of the mountainous centerpiece of marzipan fruit,” and the girl next to her “would be too nice to ask me to share it with her if I just kept it out of the way at my elbow by my bread-and-butter plate” (BJ 26). While everyone else is behaving decorously, Esther knows that “if you do something incorrect at table with a certain arrogance,” not only can you “get away with it,” but everyone will “think you are original and very witty.” So Esther dispenses with the cutlery altogether:

I paved my plate with chicken slices. Then I covered the chicken slices with caviar thickly as if I were spreading peanut butter on a piece of bread. Then I picked up the chicken slices in my fingers one by one, rolled them so the caviar wouldn’t ooze off and ate them. (BJ 27)

Nor, in this porcine depiction, does Esther stop with one plate of chicken and caviar. She polishes off a second and goes on to tackle the avocado and crabmeat salad, announcing, “Avocados are my favorite fruit.” She especially loves them with melted grape jelly in French dressing, “filling the cup of the pear with the garnet sauce.” Only after she has thoroughly gorged herself and is “no longer worried about competition over my caviar,” does Esther begin a conversation with her fellow guest editor Betsy (BJ 28).

Later, after a very bad night of continuous waves of nausea and diarrhea, Esther passes out on the bathroom floor. She feels “limp as a wet leaf and shivering all over” (BJ 44). Informed the following morning that the crabmeat “was chock-full of ptomaine,” Esther has

…a vision of the celestially white kitchens of Ladies’ Day stretching into infinity. I saw avocado pear after avocado pear being stuffed with crabmeat and mayonnaise and photographed under brilliant lights. I saw the delicate, pink-mottled clam meat poking seductively through

Left: A drawing by Sylvia Plath from her journal, June 26, 1956.
its blanket of mayonnaise and the bland yellow pear cup with its rim of alligator-green cradling the whole mess.

Poison (BJ 48)

The poison here represents a sickeningly coquetish domesticity. The crab claws poke above the mayonnaise like a coy woman peeping over a blanket, and the avocado holds its poison lovingly like a mother cradling a baby. Plath also suggests that the hygienic purity of the kitchens and the staff—female role models of domestic engineering with their smocks, hairnets, and peach-pie perfect makeup—masks an underlying toxicity for women, and that the American magazine genre typified by Ladies’ Home Journal is sinister propaganda. Nothing terrible seems to happen to the bright, efficient, stay-at-home-moms in their pages, and if something does, there is always the good advice of the monthly feature, “Can This Marriage Be Saved?” The problem, as Plath explains to her mother (in a letter signed “Sylvia,” not “Sivvy”), is that “It is much more help for me, for example, to know that people are divorced and go through hell, than to hear about happy marriages. Let the Ladies’ Home Journal blither about those!…I believe in going through and facing the worst, not hiding from it. That is why I am going to London this week, partly, to face all the people we know and tell them happily and squarely I am divorcing Ted, so they won’t picture me as a poor country wife” (October 25, 1962; LH 477). Instead of being a “poor country wife,” she tells her mother that she wants “to be the most loving and fascinating mother in the world” with a flat in London, where “Frieda and Nick shall have the intelligences of the day as their visitors, and I the Salon that I will deserve” (October 25, 1962; LH 475).

Despite Plath’s apparent scorn in The Bell Jar for the representations of ideal homemakers in American women’s magazines and her eventual revelation of this scorn to her mother, she was not immune to its consumer fantasies. In her memoir, “Vessel of Wrath,” Dido Merwin takes it as “a warning shot across the bows” when Plath rejects her offer to provide Plath and Hughes with most of what they need to furnish their apartment in London: “But if the Hughes’s [sic] elected to go splurging on a posh cooker, refrigerator, and bed, what the hell? Never mind if it made no sense to a couple of flea-marketers like Bill [W.S. Merwin] and me.” Dido goes on to deride Plath’s “need for morale-boosting toys” as a sign of her deep-seated insecurity. In December 1962, when Plath was once again equipping a London flat—this time alone—her visiting friend Clarissa Roche reports that “her kitchen was full of American-style gadgets.” Even though “the rooms were tidy, the beds made, and the kitchen” spotless, “Clarissa suspected Sylvia rarely prepared the meals so carefully planned on her weekly menu” (BF 286).

There is an odd pathos to how often Plath is reported to have eaten heartily in her final days. We have two accounts of Plath’s last weekend before she committed suicide: Jillian Becker’s testimony in the Anne Stevenson biography Bitter Fame, and Becker’s own memoir Giving Up: The Last Days of Sylvia Plath. Despite some discrepancies in tone, both versions portray Plath as deeply depressed, but most composed and sociable when dining. Both, however, depict something incongruous or off-kilter about someone as sick as Plath quite evidently having such a healthy appetite. Plath calls Becker on Thursday, February 7, 1963, and, according to Stevenson, is “hysterical and desperate,” “asking for asylum” for herself and her children with Becker (BF 292). In Becker’s own account she simply notes that Plath asked, “‘May I come round with the children?’” When Plath arrives, she immediately withdraws for a nap, ignoring the presence of “one of her erstwhile friends” (GU 1). After her nap, Jillian Becker invites her to stay the weekend with the children. According to Stevenson, “At dinner Jillian was surprised to see Sylvia eat her steak with enormous relish, commenting on how wonderful it tasted after her diet of mince. Had she forgotten how often the Beckers themselves had taken her out, Jillian wondered” (BF 292). Becker more generously describes Plath enjoying her menu of “chicken soup, grilled large rump steaks…mashed potato with plenty of milk and butter, and a salad”: “She ate heartily. She always did and it always pleased me; not only because it was a compliment to my cooking but chiefly because eating well was bound to make her feel better. Like most Jewish mothers, I believed in the therapeutic power of good food” (GU 4). Stevenson notes that “however distraught Sylvia seemed at other times, she always appeared neatly dressed for meals, was calm at table, ate extremely well, and was warmly appreciative of the food Jillian served” (BF 292). After what is clearly a harrowing night according to both versions, Plath somehow “devoured a good breakfast” (GU 7), and in Stevenson’s version “ate a hearty breakfast, and returned to bed” (BF 294). Plath was on a cocktail of drugs—both sleeping pills and an antidepressant—and the Becker and Stevenson versions differ on how much medication Plath consumed. Becker claims that she carefully
subjecting her to a middle-of-the-night “rodomontade, which always trailed round the same course: she hated her mother; she hated Ted for betraying her; ‘she’ (Sylvia would never speak [Ted’s mistress] Assia’s name) was hateful; the Hughes family had rejected her,” and so on and on. As for her listener, “She might just as well have been ‘a mask hanging on the wall,’ Jillian says, as Sylvia poured out chaotic memories and obsessions in a feverish delirium.”

monitored the dosage, making sure that Plath did not take more than the two prescribed sleeping pills, even though she woke at 3:00 A.M. begging for another. Plath’s sleep medication, according to Becker, “didn’t seem to make her somnolent or even soothe her” (GU 5). Stevenson, however, reports that Jillian described Plath swallowing “pill after pill—what seemed to her far more than a safe dose—before lying back to rehearse the litany of anguish that was to be repeated day and night throughout the weekend” (BF 292).

If we believe Stevenson, Jillian Becker regarded Plath as a tiresome house guest, foisting her children’s care onto Jillian, alternately eating heartily and sleeping, and
Because Stevenson makes Jillian Becker sound irritated and unsympathetic, and Plath monstrously self-absorbed, Becker may well have written her memoir as an antidote to Bitter Fame’s barely disguised venom. On the Sunday before her suicide, Stevenson says that “although it was a bitterly cold day, Sylvia had not thought to dress [Nicholas] warmly” before sending him off with Jillian’s Plath “joined us at the table for our usual ample Sunday lunch and went up to rest” (BF 295). This combination of details suggests that Plath was sick enough to be a careless mother but not sick enough to refuse another hearty meal from her gracious hostess, and then, behaving discourteously, to leave the table suddenly to nap. But in Becker’s memoir, Plath “joined us at the table for our usual ample Sunday lunch of soup, roast lamb or beef with all the trimmings, salad, cheese, dessert, wine. I remember that she enjoyed it, saying it was ‘wonderful’ or ‘marvellous’ or something of the sort. She helped Nick with his food, and seemed, I thought, a little more cheerful, a little less tense.” Becker also says that everyone “lingered at the table...for an hour or so after the coffee cups had gone cold, talking about something that has left not a trace of memory...and the wine we had drunk made us sleepy too so we all went to lie down” (GU 9), which sounds far more benign than Stevenson’s version.

This is really the last meal we know Plath had. She insisted on returning to her own London flat after she woke up. After putting Frieda and Nicholas in their upstairs bedroom, opening their windows and placing bread and milk next to their “high-sided cots,” Plath stuffed towels and cloths under their door and the kitchen door, and turned on the gas in the stove. The following morning she was found “sprawled on the floor, her head on a little folded cloth in the oven” (BF 296).

NOTES
1. Sylvia Plath, The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath, ed. Karen V. Kokil (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 269. Subsequent quotes from Plath’s journals are taken from this edition and will be cited parenthetically as J.
9. There is another journal entry where Plath compares her various boyfriends to food. Thinking about Richard Sassoon, her greatest love before Ted Hughes, she says, “he can’t swim, he is weak in a certain sense, he will never play baseball or teach math; that orange juice and broiled chicken solidity is utterly lacking and it is what Gary has and Gordon has...” (January 1960): 66–67.
12. Sylvia Plath, Ariel (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 42. All subsequent quotes are taken from this edition and will be cited parenthetically as A.
13. Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 85. All subsequent quotes are taken from this edition and will be cited parenthetically as BJ.
14. Dido Merwin, “Vessel of Wrath,” Appendix A to Anne Stevenson, Bitter Fame (Boston: Houghton Mifflin/Peter Davison Book, 1989), 375. Subsequent quotations are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically as BF.
15. Jillian Becker, Giving Up: The Last Days of Sylvia Plath (London: Ferrington, Bookseller and Publisher, 2002), 1. Subsequent quotations will be cited parenthetically as GU.