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Interlude: Human Food

Our connection with energy is never more intimate than with food. We consume other organisms to fuel our biomass-burning bodies. Because food has so many rich and complex connotations involving tradition, ritual, hospitality, and artistry, and because it is so redolent to our many food-attuned senses, it is easy to forget that, stripped of connotation, food is simply fuel. To reduce it to this basic entity of energy is not to destroy its higher-level metaphorical life. Reducing food to fuel is the most direct way to reckon with the idea that our choices in food represent particular attitudes toward nature. When Wendell Berry declares that “eating is an agricultural act,” he reminds us of a direct line between the heaping plate and the soil, now obscured by the massive, fossil-fueled industry of modern capitalist food production (Young 11).

Whether we’re conscious of the agriculture of eating or not, our choices in food translate directly to which segments of the food economy we support: local or global; organic or conventional; whole or processed. The Green Revolution of agriculture after the Second World War utterly changed agrarian practices across the globe, effectively substituting muscle-driven labor and organic fertilizers for petroleum-driven machine work and synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. While this paradigm shift is credited with saving developing nations like India from famine, its environmental legacy is checkered, at best. The costs of high-yield conventional food production include loss of crop biodiversity inherent to traditional polyculture systems, and exponentially higher levels of energy consumption from fossil fuels, causing greenhouse gas emissions, dependence on chemical fertilizers, and exposure to pesticides. Neo-Malthusians see the Green Revolution as the fossil-fuel-driven force that has permitted exponential population increases beyond the carrying capacity of a globe that subsists on renewable energy.

By eating, we extend the chain of chemical conversions that begins with sunlight and proceeds through photosynthesis to plants—their edible leaves,

roots, and fruits—delectable biomass. When we eat animals, the chain is a link longer, since animals convert rough biomass, often downright inedible to humans, into meat, milk, and eggs. Polyface Farm's Joel Salatin, the "grass farmer" made famous by Michael Pollan in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, calls his work "mob-stocking herbivorous solar conversion lignified carbon sequestration fertilization" (Anderson and Slovic 128). All food is synthesized sunlight, and the biodynamic loop among the sun, inorganic elements of the soil, and microbes, plants, and animals is self-sustaining.

As the chain from sun to plate gets longer, the ecological burden of the food grows: only about 10 percent of biomass calories fed to an animal become meat; the rest is dedicated to metabolism. This 10 percent rule is a moot point when animals graze and browse on things we cannot digest, like grass and scrub. But the industrial meat system has long used agricultural commodities edible to humans, like corn, soybeans, and wheat, to fatten animals for the slaughter. In this system, a hundred calories of corn yield ten calories of sirloin, so the meat represents a luxuriant use of biomass calories. Eating steak is like burning diesel: it is high-energy and high-input fuel, and the act is unsustainable in the sense that industrial meat factories consume many times the calories they produce. A large portion of those calories come from conventional feed corn energized by fossil fuels as well as photosynthesis. Eating blackberries foraged from the woods is like plugging a solar panel into your belly: it is a free recharge, courtesy of the sun. Eating conventional meat and vegetables produced on remote farms that use fertilizer and large machines is somewhere in the middle: the energy entering your belly is part sun, part petroleum: fossil food.

The energetic burden of a particular kind of food is closely, and sometimes confusingly, tied to its methods of production and distribution. Michael Pollan estimates that one of the least efficient food choices available at the supermarket is actually an organic vegetable. Lettuce grown in industrial-scale organic farms in California contain about eighty calories per pound; when transported to the East Coast markets, that lettuce requires about fifty-seven calories of fossil fuel energy per one calorie of food (167). Multiply 57 by 80, and you get nearly 4,600 petro-calories input to each plastic box of organic lettuce. Americans use nearly three times the energy that developing nations use to produce the same amount of food—that discrepancy in energy is fuel-based (Johnson 39). Clearly, eating is an agricultural and ethical act, and its complexities are not resolved by organic or vegetarian strictures: organic food uses more land than conventional, and it requires high-impact animal manure for fertilizer.

One reason this chapter is an interlude rather than a portion of the biomass or fossil-fuel sections is because our food is almost always a blend of sunlight and hydrocarbon. Think back on the last meal you ate that was grown or gathered by hand using no chemical fertilizer or pesticide, no machine transportation, and that was either raw or cooked over a wood fire (or one of those solar stoves distributed in developing countries). Anything bought from a store is disqualified, since even the local organic whole foods were brought in on trucks. Most cooked foods use the fossil-fuel calories that provide electricity or natural gas. Remember it? That meal represents pure biomass subsistence. I expect many of us have never eaten a single such meal, and the rest of us would appeal to garden tomatoes or their youthful forage of wild summer berries.

Literature about food often helps reduce its excessive connotative-ness down to basic relations between berry and body. These relations linger with the senses, taste and aroma, color and texture, and they help explicate how all the complex intimacy of eating can be clarified when it is paired with energy. Wild berries and nuts are a trope in literature of primordial satisfaction, since hunting and gathering is inherent to our evolution. In “August,” Mary Oliver imagines her body and soul as a “thick paw of my life darting among / the black bells the leaves; there is / this happy tongue” (ll. 12–14). By synecdoche she reduces her human self to its animal portion, the paw and tongue, utterly satisfied with the wild harvest that is at once ritual and basic subsistence.

In “Fall,” Wendell Berry gathers wild cherries like a latter-day Adam, enjoying “paradisaal fruits that taste of no man’s / sweat” (ll. 2–3). Though they represent the spontaneous bounty of nature, unsalted by human sweat and tears, they have a wild bitter flavor that requires patience from the palate. Berry concludes, “Reach up, pull down the laden branch, and eat; / When you have learned their bitterness, they taste sweet” (ll. 4–7). The sweetness operates on levels figurative and literal, but at its base the sweetness is our evolved preference for things that have calories, and the bitterness our evolved distrust of botanical toxins. When food is self-produced, stewardship cultivates pleasure. In Li-Young Lee’s “From Blossoms,” the fruit plays synecdoche for the idyllic landscape that fosters it: “To carry within us an orchard, to eat / not only the skin, but the shade, / not only the sugar, but the days, to hold / the fruit in our hands, adore it, then bite into / the round jubilation of peach” (ll. 12–16). The sweetness, in promising to prolong life, is a form of love between the animal and his habitat. Sugar love reaches back into its origins in the coevolutionary landscape, and the fertilizing, pollinating animal becomes a loyal steward by connecting seeds with the means of its production—sunlight, water, and time. John Keats invokes sugar as the emotive

energy of joy, available to him “whose strenuous tongue / Can burst Joy’s grape against his palate fine” (ll. 27–8). For Keats, these joyous sugars contrast the bitter sensations of melancholy, and result in the bittersweet ruminations of a life well-lived. Energy is life, and life is that higher-order flow of perception and reaction that unfurls in an unbroken series of instants.

Fruit tastes of sunlight-made-sugar, but butter is a more complex delectation. Butter odes abound, perhaps because butter’s production is evocative at every stage. From the pastoral graze to the swollen udder to the nubile milkmaid to the strenuous churn master, butter has a series of connotations before it even gets to the table to adorn bread, to golden poultry, to mortar confections. Seamus Heaney calls it “coagulated sunlight” in his poem “Churning-Day,” a close reading of the physical labor required to produce butter traditionally (l. 24). Following Heaney’s lead, in “Ode to Butter” Linton Hopkins praises butter’s material appeal, noting how the qualities of the pasture directly translate into the flavor of each batch, in effect flashing a biodiverse landscape upon the taster. Hopkins writes, “Cool and spreadable I taste your season, / bright, fat and herbal in spring and summer when / fed on clover and fresh grass / in the winter you taste of hay and grain” (ll. 28–31). Butter is as close as we get to being ungulates at graze in the fields, mildly noting the varied taste of each mouthful. Theriophily—admiration of animals for their serene presence in the present tense—emerges in butter odes as a compelling point of identification and sympathy between the cow and her caretaker. Hopkins concludes that butter’s “very nature may be good for the fabric of our brain”—a nod not only to revised views of cholesterol science, but also to the figurative link between our fatty-brain imaginations and the network of life that conspires to bring butter into being (l. 76). The fabric of our brain is strengthened, literally and metaphorically, by its subsistence upon coagulated sunlight.

This unbroken gustatory chain from sunlight to season to forage to churn to table is such stuff as idylls are made of but the links can also be inconvenient for dairy farmers. In Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, for example, Farmer Craik’s hard work is ruined by garlic in his grazing field. An entire batch of butter has a garlic twang, rather than the sweetness of clover and lavender. This is not an haute cuisine fuss; it is a matter of economic survival for a dairy farmer whose butter supplies the whole town. Craik sends his hands to root out the pungent invaders: “With eyes fixed upon the ground they crept slowly across a strip of the field, returning a little further down in such a manner that, when they should have finished, not a single inch of the pasture but would have fallen under the eye of some one of them. It was a most tedious business, not more than half a

dozen shoots of garlic being discoverable in the whole field; yet such was the herb's pungency that probably one bite of it by one cow had been sufficient to season the whole dairy's produce for the day" (178).

In the twenty-first century, our palates are not trained to discern among the cow's selections because industrial butter is standardized, "quality-controlled." The cost of living in a world without garlic-twang butter is losing that leap of imagination back to the field and the sunlight that brought the butter into being. Heaney, Hopkins, and Hardy knew that butter did not come from the cold little box in the grocery store. In a poem more aligned with our times, Les Murray's "The Butter Factory" details the unappealing modern-day origins of that most bucolic spread: "It was built of things that must not mix: / paint, cream and water, fire and dusty oil" (ll. 1–2). The factory is fueled by biomass, an energy source that exacts hard labor: "The cordwood / our fathers cut for the furnace stood in walls / like the sleeper-stacks of a continental railway" (ll. 4–6). Food-making work is no longer the direct exchange between a provisioned landscape and the active harvester; in the industrial system it is triangulated through the factory outfit that demands its own fuel. And thus, along with grass and sunlight, timber, coal, and petroleum become present-day butter.

Sometimes food labor is pleasure turned to pain. Bringing in a ripe harvest requires prolonged and often manic days of work—calories exerted for calories secured. Robert Frost is haunted by the aural qualities of apples in "After Apple-Picking," and appetite turns to disgust as the body suffers in the aftermath of its labor: "I keep hearing from the cellar bin / The rumbling sound / Of load on load of apples coming in. / For I have had too much / Of apple-picking: I am overtired / Of the great harvest I myself desired" (ll. 24–9). Unlike Wendell Berry's Adamic pluck of the cherry, in Frost's poem the body suffers in its toil to preserve itself, a lapsarian economy between exerting and refueling. The setting is an orchard, where the harvest represents market value in a cash economy, rather than subsistence. The laborer's exhaustion comes from harvesting apples not only for himself but for the entire region—he runs an energy deficit. Even the apples "I myself desired" turn nauseous in their overabundance, a reworking of the pleasurable cornucopia.

Farm labor supplying a region with fruits is a form of civic service exacted upon a sore body, but the individual collecting wild fruits pays for his selfishness with a sore conscience. In "Nutting," the boy Wordsworth finds himself "rich beyond the wealth of kings" after he wrecks a wild hazelnut bower to collect its fruits for himself (l. 50). But this energetic wealth is attenuated by the "sense of pain" and guilt he feels from the "spirit in the woods" that seems to look in on

the ruins of his incursion (l. 51, 55). In the unrestrained assault of “Blackberry-Picking,” Seamus Heaney imagines a murderous scene in which “big dark blobs burned / Like a plate of eyes. Our hands were peppered / With thorn pricks, our palms sticky as Bluebeard’s” (ll. 14–16). The coveted, visceral pleasures of these unwieldy sugar sacks turn to pain when Heaney loses them to spoilage. Nature deploys fungus and bacteria to reclaim the energy that humans squander by over-harvesting.

Perhaps most intriguing about these wild-food poems is their attention to guilt, a surprising emotion considering the light ecological footprint these particular food energies impose. Though they represent the least impact, they require close attention to the landscapes that provide them, so the gatherer is more aware of his actions’ consequences. Wordsworth’s “Nutting” is a microcosm: the actions of one boy in a bower extrapolate out to the violence of the entire human species against nature, which, Wordsworth observes, “deformed and sullied, / Patiently gave up [its] quiet being” (ll. 46–7). Stewardship does not work without qualms and moments of violation—these poignancies strengthen the ethic of care.

With most industrial-era food, sheer ignorance erodes individual responsibility. Methods of production are carefully hidden from the consumer, but literature has a knack for turning up the dirty underside of food making to act as an investigative report. The pastoral idyll is a suspicious nostalgia to readers who are aware of modern industrial methods, as Michael Pollan shows in his essay on “The Supermarket Pastoral” in *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*. Corporate marketers strategically deploy pastoral imagery—quaint red barns and cud-chewing cows—to sell products that can be highly processed and full of artificial ingredients. We pay a premium for the bucolic narrative that we desire as the story of our food.

Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* is a book-length study of the ways in which humans can oppress each other in the industrial food system. Laboring immigrants are preyed upon by a rabble of corrupt, greedy, and pitiless officials in Chicago’s Packingtown. Their life conditions are luridly revolting:

All day long the blazing midsummer sun beat down upon that square mile of abominations: upon tens of thousands of cattle crowded into pens whose wooden floors stank and steamed contagion; upon bare, blistering, cinder-strewn railroad tracks, and huge blocks of dingy meat factories, whose labyrinthine passages defied a breath of fresh air to penetrate them; and there were not merely rivers of hot blood, and carloads of moist flesh, and rendering vats and soap caldrons, glue factories and fertilizer tanks, that smelt like the craters of hell—there were also tons of garbage festering in the sun, and the greasy laundry of the workers

hung out to dry, and dining rooms littered with food and black with flies, and toilet rooms that were open sewers. (284)

Sinclair cleverly flips the appeal of food over to revulsion for the disgusting conditions of its production. The fetish gaze of his realist prose plunges into the gross materiality of factory work on such an unnaturally large scale. Poisoned rats are tidbits in the sausages. Workers that fall into rendering vats are canned with the lard. Rats, cows, and human workers share the same fate—literally to be eviscerated and eaten by the unsuspecting consumer. Sinclair characteristically appeals to unions and socialism as an anodyne to heal this corrupt, miserable food-making machine that literally eats up the bodies that labor to keep it running.

His novel's disgust factor supports a literary propaganda that did capture the public's attention. By direct consequence of *The Jungle*, the Meat Inspection Act and the Food and Drug Act were passed in 1906. These were anthropocentric measures; concern for animal welfare in the form of the Humane Slaughter Act would not emerge for another half-century (Spiegel xvii). Sinclair's novel is perhaps the most famous jeremiad against the industrial food system, enabled further by its publication at a time when industry and food were just beginning to fuse. The public's innocence was itself a tasty feast for the literary rhetorician.

More than a century later, our food system is more entrenched in the economics of biggerring. Provisional improvements in worker, landscape, and animal rights acknowledged, we still operate within a system that looks a lot like Sinclair's Packingtown except it is even more sprawling and fossil-energy intensive. Billeh Nickerson's volume *McPoems* delves into his experiences as a McDonald's employee. Absurdity is on the value menu: in nearly every poem Nickerson cooks the absurd using measures of pathos and comedy. In "Diet," minimum-wage overwork causes him consume "two cheeseburgers, a large fries, and a big cola" every day—"a ritual . . . to induce comfort and satisfaction" (ll. 3, 6, 7). The nutrition of the food and his compulsion to eat the same meal are hardly conscious, until a coworker "points out you've eaten / twenty eight cheeseburgers, fourteen large fries, and a kitchen sink's worth of cola"—the gross arithmetic of accumulation for the fast food addict in the spirit of *Super Size Me* (ll. 8–10). Nickerson snaps out of it: "You make a mental note / to pack a sandwich for lunch tomorrow, / eat an apple, possibly some celery" (ll. 11–13).

Many of the poems profile customers whose addiction to the high-density, low-quality fat, salt, and sugar-laced industrial food has become a defining feature of their lives. Nickerson can pick between customers who will order diet

versus regular cola, and the woman who orders the salad with two packets of oily dressing. He writes of a bulimic woman who parks in the same location with her meal, leaving the vomit for a swarm of trained birds, and of the man who cruises the drive-thru four times in a day, from breakfast to dessert, and “pretends he doesn’t know you, / you don’t know him” (ll. 7–8). The drive-thru is the genius invention that united the exuberant car culture of 1950s America with the growing demand for cheap and easy mass-produced food, a culinary conjunction enabled by fossil fuels. Another drive-thru character is the “Fish-Filletmobile” filled with migrant workers: “In a heavy accent someone orders / fourteen fish burgers, parks the van for a while / then drives through again, / orders fourteen more” (ll. 5–8). These workers may have legal reasons to remain anonymous but, more broadly, anonymity is a powerful ally in shame culture. Nickerson’s poems toe the line between a poet’s sharp perceptions and the generalities of (usually bad and sad) behavior among his customers, who could be anybody.

It is the nature of the food that causes the behavior. Its nutritional profile causes addiction. Its culinary engineering sparks sensory appeal, as in “Alchemy”: “Even you still marvel / at how quickly / everything transforms. / One moment it’s frozen, / the next moment golden” (ll. 1–5). Its cheapness means that it is treated like garbage: pickles smacked on ceilings, soft-serve cones doubling as unicorn horns, ketchup that ensanguines the parking lot. Nobody pays attention to its origins or methods of production, distribution, preparation. When a chicken truck overturns in front of the restaurant, sprinkling the property with “zonked / out chickens,” a man runs over one with his car (ll. 5–6). He screams through the drive-thru window that “he didn’t take his family out to dinner to kill something. That made you think a long time” (ll. 8–10). Apparently, a McChicken sandwich is so processed that it no longer represents the body of an animal.

Fast food is culture as much as food, and Nickerson’s volume teases out the rituals that keep this machine running: minimum wage, minimal quality, maximum volume, cheap energy, and the evolutionary pleasure buttons of taste that delude our industrial-era brains into tasting survival, rather than obesity and diabetes, in fat, sugar, and salt. For some customers, particularly the poor and immobile, the food does represent a form of survival since it is the only food offered in North America’s “food deserts” (Nickerson is Canadian). He tells the story of an elderly man who orders a hundred cheeseburgers: “He intends to freeze them, they’ll get him through the winter, no need for pesky walks on cold days, no danger of slipping and breaking a hip. *100 cheeseburgers will keep me going for a little while longer, at least. I don’t need much*” (ll. 7–11).

The fundamental message beneath the volume's absurdity is that the fossil food Nickerson serves is a cultural failure of care and responsibility, for the workers, the consumers, and the animals and agricultural lands that produce it. The shadowy corporate beneficiaries emerge only in the trite mantra from the training manual, which Nickerson chooses as his epigraph: "The recipe for success must always include quality, service, cleanliness, and value. These are your most important ingredients" (ll. 1–3). Nickerson deconstructs this folderol by dividing his poems into sections that lampoon each of the four pillars of fast food.

Entrenched as we are in this industrial food system, what steps might we take to disengage? Gerald Stern is a guerilla gardener amid the factories of Easton, Pennsylvania on the Delaware River. In "Planting Strawberries," his pleasure comes not only from fruit sugars, but also from a revolutionary postapocalyptic vision of agriculture reclaiming trammelled places:

What I like best is having a garden this close to
the factories and stores of Easton.
It is like carrying a knife in my pocket!
It is like kissing in the streets!
I would like to convert all the new spaces
Back into trees and rocks.
I would like to turn the earth up after the bulldozers
have gone and plant corn and tomatoes.
I would like to guard our new property—with helmets and dogs.
I would like us to feed ourselves in the middle of their civilization.

(ll. 15–24)

Agriculture has entered a time in which traditional, low-energy, down-scale methods of production are having a renaissance in the face of the tragicomic wastage of the industrial food system. With local farmers' markets and urban agricultural systems on the rise, we are beginning to kiss in the streets again. As with all other aspects of life, industrialism injected fossil fuel energy into agriculture, massively ramping up scale and yield while eliding issues of environmental damage, ethical failure, and consumer health.

As developed countries reconsider the costs of industrial scale, energy dwells at the heart of the matter. We evolved as opportunistic omnivores, subsisting entirely on biomass energy. With industrialization, our omnivory came to include fossil fuels: we became petrovores. As we look for solutions in the twenty-first century, the sprawling infrastructure that enables the mass

production of low-quality processed food at heaping profits for corporations, all enabled by hydrocarbons, will come under more scrutiny as an unsustainable system designed to feed Mammon. If Gerald Stern gets his way, our strawberries will taste like the day they were picked. But we may have to stoop to pick them, our muscles working the sugars of the sun.