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Food Work

I'VE BEEN THROUGH two food movements now. I keep mixing them up. I keep getting mixed up in them. Which is my mother's and which is mine. Whether they might be both and whether they can be neither. Why they can each seem at once past and ongoing.

What kind of work they require. Nearly a decade ago, when *The Omnivore's Dilemma* taught America the horrors of industrial food and the pleasures of local, organic eating, what was pitched as revelation was for me an echo. Back to when I first was aware of food—three or four, I think—and aware, thus, that my parents and siblings and I ate what was called a macrobiotic diet. Macrobiotic is mainstream enough now that its rules are somewhat legible. As a child, I knew only that there were many. No meat, little fat, no dairy, a lot of brown grains. Basmati rice counted as a treat. Lots of beans, many vegetables. My mother was always cooking.

Strict macrobiotics didn't last, of course. But the strictures shifted only slightly. Organic was still good and the rest was bad. Whole was still good and the rest was bad. The worst thing in food was something called preservatives. Preservatives were not allowed. Nor was sugar. I remember a natural-foods event at which a friend of my mother's demonstrated that a lump of sugar on someone's tongue makes it easier to push down her extended arm. Plastic containers were dangerous. Microwaves were dangerous. Neither were allowed in our house. We also lacked a dishwasher; I'm not sure if that was dangerous. Much of our food came from a food co-op based in the Hudson Valley. Glass-bottled apple juice collecting fruit dust like algae shifting along its depths. Flour in gray sacks, raisins in gray boxes, legumes in large bags, rice in different large bags. It takes effort to turn such things into meals. My mother's effort.

Even co-op ordering back then was a serious business. You paged through booklets of pulpy gray paper—no pictures—to find products you wanted. Then one person pooled the various choices of local families and called in totals. Bulk minimums applied, so some products would be split among several accounts. On delivery day a truck arrived at a town hall and everyone figured out their shares, wrote careful checks, and loaded up cars. A lot of work.

I remember my mother being in charge of that work. I remember her being the one to tally fractions and direct traffic. My mother has the energy, especially the organizational energy, to run a complicated operation, especially a complicated food operation. When she was just out of college she worked for *Brides* magazine as a food and tabletop editor. By the time I was born she had left that post; at home, she babysat and ran cooking classes but mostly she was the editor of our household. Food and tabletop. She stirred porridge, put fruit leather into lunchboxes, chopped onions, thumped refried beans.

When I was in the fifth or sixth grade my mother began to work outside of the home again. She got a job at our church and went back to school for a master's degree. One class a semester, credit by slow credit. She was away from home for one dinner per week. I was not quite old enough to fix that dinner. I was old enough to register the terror and resentment it engendered. My mother would always leave something for us to eat and my father would always find some way that it was inadequate. I hated his anger and her absence equally. I hated my fear and my hatred. I recall in particular one night when my father sat at the kitchen table frowning at the ingredient list for a bottle of ketchup my mother had set out. The list contained preservatives. He hurled it across the room in a rage. The bottle was glass, of course. It broke.

When I read *Omnivore's Dilemma*, I was finishing my third postgraduate degree.

FOOD MOVEMENTS are built on women's labor, though food movements are slow to recognize the labor involved. Or quick to cloak it in other terms. Culture is one. Culture "is really just a fancy word for your mother," Pollan wrote in *Omnivore's Dilemma*. America's food problem was that it didn't have enough culture. Mothering too, presumably.

To get culture, we need practices, customs, traditions, standards. *Food Rules* is the book Pollan wrote after *In Defense of Food*, which he wrote after *The Omnivore's Dilemma*—because too many people kept asking him what they should eat. The books get slimmer, simpler, easier to read. Political questions about a broad-based food movement for all become the personal prescriptions of a diet for the privileged. Many have made this criticism. Even Pollan's own subsequent writings have made it. Julie Guthman's version of the analysis is particularly good. I nodded through her informed dismissal of Whole Foods "buycotts," of farm-to-table pretension, of "voting with your fork," of anything less than systemic economic change. But then,

Guthman is also a self-confessed “foodie.” In the introduction to her book she mentions how “nervous” she is to admit the “personal stake” she has in her political arguments. My own nervous admission is that I wanted to hear more about her nerves. I wasn’t trying to indict hypocrisy. I was trying to solve it. To put the personal and the political together.

That’s a feminist concern, of course. Women—culture—is the very ground of the project. But where is that ground? What is women’s work? Pollan’s *Cooked* raises the “difficult conversation” of gender roles only to advise that “cooking is too important to be left to any one gender or member of the family.” And *The Third Plate*, a book by Dan Barber hailed as the successor to Pollan’s work, is a long, detailed narrative of male pronouncements that barely includes any female voices at all.

Maybe it’s outdated, the personal/political problem: my mother’s question, not mine. As long ago as college, when I chose feminism as my theoretical angle in a junior seminar, the smartest person in the class casually implied that it was an outdated choice. She was doing Marxism. She was the best writer I knew. We smoked American Spirit cigarettes on the steps before seminar. Later, she generously sent me her advance copy of *Food, Inc.* when I was putting together a review-essay that ended up calling for more feminism in the food movement. By then the undergraduate presentation was far away. So was the presentation for my master’s degree when I again volunteered for feminism and read through another swath of theory. I shared my slot with the smartest person in that class, and the best writer. Later I listened to her read Auden in a student kitchen, railing against his privilege in between sighing at his lines. She sent money home every month to her mother in St. Lucia, who sometimes responded to queries of whether she had enough to eat with the reassurance “It’s mango season.” I was cooking dinner as my friend read: chicken, bread, salad.

Or maybe it’s already settled, the personal/political problem: my mother’s answer, and therefore mine. When I baked bread I used my mother’s recipe. A nonrecipe, like most of hers. Once you have been cooking long enough you don’t need instruction. You get a feel for things. How long to fry the chicken, how much garlic to crush into the dressing. Taste, feel, adjust. Such estimation works better for cooking than baking, which needs precise measurements, mostly. When I was very young, I preferred baking because I preferred exactitude. But bread is the exception to this truth since bread is always slightly different. No real measurements. You just watch for the shaggy-mass stage, my mother explained; you knead

toward the smooth elastic stage. You keep it in the oven till it sounds hollow when you tap. I've made my mother's bread in every kitchen I used after hers—the various stained, peeling, coffinlike rooms of college and postgraduate life. I stretched out the dough for pizza and dimpled it for focaccia and cut it up for rolls and rolled it up, spiraled, painted with chocolate, for breakfast. And you do get a feel. The lack of a recipe doesn't mean a lack of precision. My mother was right. The rules become part of you. That's culture, I suppose.

None of my reading about feminism in graduate school taught me the origin of the phrase “the personal is political,” which I went after later. An essay by Carol Hanisch, maybe, but that piece set into print what was already widely spoken and quoted. There's no single source. Always something I should have known, already, should have understood. The Auden poem was “Out on the lawn we lie in bed,” by the way, a poem about a boy's school; I can still recite some of it. It rhymes “whom hunger does not move” with “the tyrannies of love.” I dislike Auden in part because he is so easy to memorize and so didactic. You don't realize you have it by heart, and then, unfortunately, you do.

MODERN POETRY—Auden included—was my graduate school specialty. I studied it rather than writing it. In fact when I began my doctorate I stopped writing: that was how I paradoxically phrased it in my head. I meant that I stopped the writing I wanted to do—which was insecure and unprofitable, poems and fiction—to do the writing I had to, which was tied to a secure career, conference papers and articles and books. I studied and drafted and worried and cooked and shopped and budgeted. I went to the library every day. I prepared dinner for my husband and me (and often others) every night. When I traveled for conferences or research trips I made sure to leave a freezer full of meals to be reheated. I searched for those recipes in Wednesday food sections that I could make with cheaper ingredients (plain rice for Arborio, flounder for salmon). When my dissertation was accepted, I threw a small party for which I baked so much bread that my husband complained of our apartment's smell. Earlier, when I passed the oral exams for my Ph.D., my parents gave me my own copy of *Larousse Gastronomique*.

I loved *Larousse Gastronomique*: its glossy pictures, its unsurprising authority, its condescending, comprehensive evenhandedness. Inside I could read about *rillettes* and *paella* and *croquembouche* and *stollen* and Roquefort and shiitake and Marsala and *à la marinière*. Words I knew from my mother,

dishes that she had described if not prepared: inoculations of sophistication that she had fed to me along with the collard greens and buckwheat that were supposed to keep me healthy. Just as crucial, this knowledge, as the B vitamins in fresh produce. Important to roll phrases in French on one's tongue even when—especially when—one was saving coupons for natural peanut butter or furrowing brows over the protein content of organic millet. Important that one keep together, in some long-term cognitive dissonance, the glamorous food-and-tabletop past and the virtuous macrobiotic present. *Larousse* was part of a shadow existence in graduate school, in which I pretended to be doing something practical (taking notes on a monograph, writing a grocery list) but in which I was really, impractically, reading about food.

Not important, political-environmental studies, like Pollan's or Guthman's. Those I could admit to. And not the insignificant, by-the-way posts of "new domesticity" (Emily Matchar's phrase)—in which bloggers lead readers through their supposedly hapless but always contented cookery adventures, paced with beautiful, casual photographs as one scrolled through the page. I read older, more personal, more snobbish food books. I binged through insomniac nights with Julia Child's enthusiasms or Elizabeth David's discriminations. I spent guilty Sundays with M. F. K. Fisher's bittersweet hedonism and Laurie Colwin's ironic practicality. These were literary women. Auden himself admired Fisher's prose. David was friends with Norman Douglas. Colwin wrote novels. These were writers.

Thwarted writers, some. "Instead of making a loaf of bread that might keep for a week," Betty Fussell writes in *My Kitchen Wars*, "I wanted to make a book that would last for years." That very wish, though—that very wish seemed to expose Fussell as less worthy an artist than the others. Or less powerful as an agent of my escapism. I needed to believe what I thought these books professed—with the very sensuality of their prose, the very self-fulfillment I thought was manifest in descriptions of chopping and stirring. I needed to believe that real writing and serious cooking are seamless. One becomes the other, one is no different from the other. Throwing a dinner party is just as potent a use of creativity and power as preparing a poem.

I threw a lot of dinner parties in graduate school.

Mostly I threw dinner parties, we all did, because we couldn't afford to go out to eat. Graduate stipends are scant. Jobs to follow are few. (The irony or incoherence of my trust in academic study as economic security is that academic study offers little.) Teaching is not a profession, supposedly,

that one enters for financial reasons. Therefore teaching is a profession that does not need to pay very well to attract devoted candidates. This is the logic of work as love—the “do what you love” problem, as Miya Tokumitsu explains it—which is the logic of women’s work; women’s work taught capitalism how to use the value of the labor as an argument against its compensation. “Capitalism had to convince us that it is a natural, unavoidable, and even fulfilling activity to make us accept working without a wage,” writes Silvia Federici. Food preparation represents the extremity of a presumption that one should not expect material reward for a vocation that feeds one’s soul. For a job that one would do anyway.

But wouldn’t I? I liked having people over. I liked cooking. I liked the conversations one can have over food. Such evenings felt like a reprieve from the conditions of my life rather than an example of them. And I believed that the measure of art was not financial, that part of creation was generosity. I knew that I would always write, even if it never paid to do so. Wasn’t cooking like that? Shouldn’t there be part of everyone’s life that was gratuitous? What if women had always provided that margin, what if cooking had: fine. It should exist, nonetheless.

My mother and father told a story of their early days in New York, when she was working at *Brides*. He was employed as a stage manager at an off-Broadway theater—part-volunteer and then badly paid. One evening he was at rehearsal when my mother pulled up in a taxi and began to unload food—trays and trays of it, luscious and free. Leftovers from a shoot. The actors were, of course, starving. She and my father set up the feast in the empty theater.

I loved that story. But it wasn’t mine. I had misread the books. Cooking, hosting, baking bread, setting out plates, unloading trays—this is not like writing. (Like teaching, maybe.) Writing is pushing a single spoon through the solidified lava on the top of a mason jar of chocolate ganache. Unwrapping the ashy coagulation of goat cheese and laying slice by near-translucent slice, ringed like shadow agate, on one’s tongue. Testing five tiny portions of pepper, slowly, with the edge of one’s teeth, to see which one becomes too hot to bear. Writing is feeding oneself, alone.



OR NOT FEEDING ONESELF.

In my early thirties, when I had against the odds gotten a teaching job that might, after all, offer that elusive financial security, when it finally happened—my health fell apart.

Nothing single or too specific. I was amenorrheic and I couldn't sleep. I was worried and exhausted. Sleeplessness makes the world at once shrill and vague; when I woke, hours too early, in a haze of desperation at the realization that I would have to make it through more than twelve hours of existence until I could lie down again, at which point my body would refuse to relinquish consciousness for half the night, I could not bear to recognize that my digestion was still terrible, that my hair was still falling out in long strands, that my skin was so dry that the backs of my hands were red and scaly on the sheet. That I hadn't bled in months. All of it was too insignificant in isolation, too overwhelming in aggregate.

I told myself that all this would pass. This was normal. But I also mentioned my problems to my gynecologist, who ordered some routine tests—and who, when the results came in, was triumphant, definitive. I was diabetic. I was type 2.

I was shocked. Diabetic? My BMI was 18.5, the lowest in the “normal” range; I moved between 118 and 120 pounds at 5'7”, with a body fat percentage between 16 and 18; I wore size 2 or occasionally 4. But my A1cs—a measure of blood sugar—hovered around 6, in pre-diabetic range, and my glucose tolerance test was well into the 200s, squarely diabetic, and my glucose readings, after eating, spiked in dangerous gradients. There were other troubling numbers, in the days and weeks and tests and more tests and still more tests that followed, when I saw an endocrinologist, then a gastroenterologist, a rheumatologist, a nurse educator, another endocrinologist. I was osteopenic, having lost a half-inch to an inch of height somewhere in my twenties; my thyroid function was off. But the diabetes numbers were most important. Through months of appointments—I created a spreadsheet for all the results; I knew at one point all the acronyms in the CBC—I kept pricking my finger, seven times a day, and feeding a drop of my blood into a reader, and waiting, and worrying over the digits that appeared.

We all know diabetes. Diabetes is the disease you get if you are fat, if you don't “take care of yourself.” Diabetes is the reason that our cultural distaste for fat is not prejudice. Diabetes is the reason that our cultural excoriation of fat people is not cruelty. The cheapest accurate blood-sugar monitor is sold at Walmart and cannot be ordered online, which meant that every month or so I traveled to the diabetes aisle to pick up a box of test strips, passing by all of the related paraphernalia: the different meters for managing insulin, the medicine case, locking, which has “four straps for diabetic pen, insulin vial, syringe, lancet holder,” the glucose

pills in orange, tropical, fruit punch, grape, raspberry, and mixed berry, the Atkins bars and Slim-Fast tubs and Hydroxycut gummie supplements and Ketone gummie supplements, the diabetic neuropathy foot cream, the lotion for pain and tingling relief (nerve and eye damage are often a result of diabetes). This was my place, now, my prognosis. Fluorescent-lit.

We all know that diabetes is a lifestyle disease. Do not gain any weight, my endocrinologist told me. Do not eat any added sugars, my educator explained to me. I did not gain weight. I was free of added sugars. I cut out even the sugar in fruit. forty-five grams of carbohydrate a meal or less, the literature says. Sometimes I didn't go over forty-five grams in a day. Since sensitivities could exacerbate diabetes, I eliminated gluten. I went on to eliminate grains, dairy products, legumes, nightshades, eggs, and white potatoes. Then I eliminated alcohol (I had already long ago eliminated caffeine). I eliminated all foods containing excess histamines. I eliminated FODMAPs, specific kinds of carbohydrate. I ate only organic grass-fed beef and fresh green organic vegetables, plus a few carrots. The numbers kept up their same, terrifying dance. The premise of the elimination diet is, pare down your list of foods to those that are never harmful. Then wait until you feel better and add foods back in, one by one, till you pinpoint the culprit. The process is scientific and foolproof. But I could never get started because I never reached that first step. I kept waiting to feel better. I kept waiting for the numbers to change.

But if nothing had worked so far, I reasoned, I had yet to try something extreme enough. A desperation takes hold, a more and more deranged bid for cause and effect. I could dismantle the logic of the Paleo diet but went carefully beyond its strictures. I also tried the GAPS diet, which is supposed to reset your digestive system and thereby, testimonials vow, cure any- and everything, diabetes included. This diet prescribes nothing but broth for several days; I remember locking myself in the bathroom at a work conference to uncap a bottle of lukewarm brown liquid at lunchtime. After the broth I went through my eliminations all over again. I was patient and careful, since one slip-up would render the experiment useless. I remember going out for dinner on my birthday and eating a side order of steamed fish. I started turning down dinner invitations. I stopped hosting dinner parties.

Much later, when I asked her about it, my mother told me that she and my father decided to eat a macrobiotic diet because my father's father had been diagnosed with lung cancer. Macrobiotic food was supposed to cure cancer. My parents thought that if they provided him with

an example, my grandfather might try the diet. He died before he did.

My own trial couldn't last. Whatever had been coiling tighter and tighter, with each more extreme plan, finally—after about two years—sprung loose in the opposite direction. The one thing I hadn't tried, I told myself in my exhausted delirium, was nothing. What if I ate whatever I wanted? What if I disregarded every rule? I told myself that it was another experiment; I would consume food whenever I was hungry, until I wasn't, and whatever I wanted, for a limited time—say, three months. Or until I felt so awful I had to stop. But it was really the end of experimentation. That night I ate ice cream. The next day I ate white rice, tomatoes, eggs, yogurt. I ate a cookie that contained gluten and butter. From the store! I bought a pumpernickel bagel with cream cheese. At a deli! I ate pizza. I stopped taking my blood sugar. I no longer calculated grams of carbohydrates. I slept more and more; I was exhausted, but I could finally, actually, rest. My skin improved. My digestion improved. My hair and nails grew again. My body began to ache, all over, for days at a time; then the aching stopped; I was larger and larger, I had exactly one skirt, one dress, and one pair of pants that fit. I gained thirty-five pounds in four months. In three, my period returned. My thyroid was normal. Tests showed no wheat allergy. My weight leveled off, then dropped. I gained back half an inch of height. By the eighteen-month mark I was no longer ravenous, I was eating whatever I wanted, and I had lost twenty of the pounds I gained. I was a size 8.

But it was after only five months of this nonexperiment, when I was still technically “overweight” in BMI and wearing only elastic-waisted skirts, that my blood glucose returned to the normal range. Which meant my diabetes was gone.

I returned to the endocrinologist and explained what happened, the same endocrinologist who told me never to gain weight. He had no idea about the diabetes, he said, but my progress made sense. The weight gain cured my hypothalamic amenorrhea. That had been my real diagnosis, he said, all along. Now he was sure of it.

I was shaking when I left his office. I had thought that my problem was managing food and staying thin. My problem was allowing food and staying female.

Type 2 diabetes is not always caused by overweight, actually. (I did a lot of research.) Also, overweight is not always physically deleterious. Weight can be a symptom of other problems, not a cause. Weight can be neutral, weight can even be beneficial. In 2013, an immense survey determined

that people in the “overweight” section of the BMI chart are least likely to die. Scientists at Harvard convened a conference to refute the findings and banish the idea that one’s primary health goal shouldn’t, always, everywhere, be thinness.

Meanwhile psychologists of eating disorders debate if one can be “cured” entirely, or if the condition is always just in remission. After all, no one can avoid food. Everyone lives in culture. Everyone needs rules.

OF COURSE, I told myself, I never really had an eating disorder. An eating disorder is extreme and dangerous and I knew what it looked like: women who chew ice and swallow cotton balls and live for days on Diet Coke and rice cakes. I, by contrast, was clipping cooking columns from the *New York Times*. I was exclaiming over garlic scapes. I was Googling the flavor differences among types of lentils. I wasn’t even dieting. Dieting itself is a weakness, a shoddy submission to infomercials and frozen meals and orange-skinned doctors in checkout racks. Like obvious makeup, dieting is feminine and shameful. Thinness should come naturally (naturally!) as the external manifestation of inner virtue, the same that prompts one’s patronage of artisanal poultry farmers and organic vineyards and small-batch beekeepers. I did not have an eating disorder.

My mother rarely wears makeup and I have never seen her extremely thin. But when she got her job at *Brides*, she told me, the editor interviewing her asked her a few questions to test her knowledge of the food world, one of which was what she thought about *cuisine minceur*. She was lucky because she had just read an article about that subject. Actually, my father passed the article to her as potentially useful for her interview. For years before I knew any French I assumed that *cuisine minceur* indicated some sophisticated, decadent style of eating. Then I figured it out. Not a feast but a regime.

A regime. Throughout my decade of graduate and postgraduate work I woke up early and exercised—every day, including Christmas and Thanksgiving; I cursed the weakness of gym personnel who closed during blizzards—before I ate a small breakfast, packed a small lunch, walked to work, worked, ate my lunch, worked, walked home, cooked dinner and ate before the few hours during which I needed to trick my body into not eating until it was time to sleep. I kept a full water bottle at hand for when I was hungry. I drank decaf with skim milk. I worked mostly in a carrel of the university library: a metal desk, at the end of an upper floor of stacks, that was dusty and cold. I wore a sweatshirt with the hood pulled up as I

typed. Day after day, crumpled pale hearts of waxed paper gathered in the metal trash can under the desk. Then it was emptied. Then it was filled again. I was training to think about big ideas, to make philosophical interventions, to unpack the cluster of meanings in the smallest, densest, and most beautiful literary productions, and I did all that only while thinking forward to exactly when I was allowed to eat my midday smear of natural peanut butter on whole-wheat bread, my raw organic carrot, my organic apple. Which I needed to make me full but keep me light.

Of course I weighed myself every day—on the same scale, in all of my clothes, so that I couldn't trick myself into thinking I was thinner than I was. I wrote down the number. I wrote down all food consumption. Lists litter the backs of my notebooks from those years. Splash of milk, $\frac{1}{4}$ c. oatmeal, 2 c. chicken, 1 c. vegetables, 1 apple, 1 carrot, 1 small bunch grapes. Pages and pages. I had to finish my doctorate in six years—that was the limit of my funding—and then finish my book in a year—that was my contract—and then get a job as soon as possible—that was how I would pay off loans and make rent. The notebooks were intended for lists of volumes to read, articles to consult, notes to type, outlines of chapters, chapters to write, chapters to revise, chapters to revise again. Consistency was key. Everyone said so. Set a target and stick to it. 1,000 words before noon. Then I was allowed to eat lunch. 1,000 before 3 p.m. Then I was allowed to drink something hot. Another 500 before 5 p.m. Then I was allowed to go home. Many nights, another 200 after dinner. I was hungry long before noon, 3, 5. But I was also struggling to reach my word counts. I wanted time to stretch and shrink at once. I hated my days, and I needed more of them. I craved food, and I feared it. The only satisfaction I trusted was my reassuring glance at the numbers. The weight every morning, the words every day, the hours logged per month. The miles run per week. The pages submitted per term.

Various studies forward various reasons for extreme restriction of food. “Many women,” explains Susie Orbach, “have reported that the need to excel academically was a response to feeling that if they should fail they would disappoint their parents. This worry about the right to exist is also linked to the academic excellence and performance aspects of anorexia.” Others fear “allowing their futures to develop in the same direction as their mothers’ lives,” writes Susan Bordo. “The mothers had often been career women, who felt they had sacrificed their aspirations for the good of the family,” notes Hilde Bruch. “In spite of superior intelligence and education, practically all had given up their careers when they married.” All this

concern with mothers: rejecting them, pleasing them. Rejecting them by pleasing them. But behind that push and pull is a bigger problem. “The world gets harder and harder,” writes Hilary Mantel in her analysis of anorexia. “There’s no pleasing it. No wonder some girls want out.”

To get out—a fierce, self-determining struggle. “That is the premise / of renunciation,” writes Louise Glück in her poem called “Dedication to Hunger,” “the child, the model of / restraint / having no self to speak of, / comes to life in denial.” She writes that in denying herself, “I felt / what I feel now, aligning these words.” Not eating replaced poetry, for Glück. But it also prevented it. Glück sought treatment when she worried that her disease would impede the work she needed to do.

IN AN ESSAY, Glück writes that what she supposed to be the uniqueness of anorexia was essential; she would have found other means for her psychological battles, she writes, had she regarded the ailment as “so common, so typical.” No one can regard it otherwise now. The extent is worth underlining. When Pollan writes about a “national eating disorder,” it’s a metaphor, he means that Americans don’t know how to eat, and when Guthman writes that we live in the “political economy of bulimia,” it’s a metaphor, she means that we live in a culture that encourages consumption but stigmatizes obesity. But eating disorders are not metaphors. Up to twenty-four million Americans have an eating disorder. About 80 percent of those are women. I can count on two hands, in the many places I’ve been in my career so far, in the numerous professional situations I’ve inhabited and observed, the number of women who seemed to have no anxiety about eating and their bodies. (One of them is my sister, which disproves any deterministic conclusion about family life.) When I began to eat more, when I was assuring myself that I did not have an eating disorder, I joined a Facebook group for eating-disorder recovery, and it is the single most diverse space I have ever been in, jumbling together people from different races, backgrounds, religions, education, classes, countries, voting patterns. Except for the fact that it is overwhelmingly female.

Prevalence is not much comfort, though. When I look back on how I ate for most of my adulthood, I cringe not with sorrow at the suffering so much as shame at the stereotype. How had I fallen into this, I who had read all that theory, who had all those opinions, who scorned the Photoshopped models of women’s magazines and the shoddy numbers in the *VIDA* counts, who discarded my childhood religion and its right-to-life marches to write angry-citizen letters for pro-choice campaigns.

There are certain rules—of food, of femininity—that you can criticize, it seems, only if you have already proven you can follow them. That's culture, too.

And there is no “already” in the “already proven.” There is only proving, without end. When I completed my doctorate, I won a fellowship that offered me three years of time, including time to write poems, at a decent salary. Also—what seemed almost more amazing to me—three free, catered meals a week. I called to tell my parents. My father got on the phone first. Was I sure about this offer, my father said. There's no mistake? How could you be certain?

YOU CAN NEVER BE CERTAIN.

My mother insists that health food—our days of chickpeas in the curry and applesauce in the whole-wheat brownies—was not a matter of economy. We were not poor. When the church distributed collection boxes for “operation rice bowl,” a yearly charity drive, we children were instructed to give up one dessert per week so that we could empathize with those who suffered deprivation. My family was never really deprived.

Yet we were different. We qualified for the reduced rate at school lunch (which was unhealthy, therefore off-limits, also gross), and the particulars of my midday brown bag seemed consistent with our car, which had holes in its floor, with our house, which lacked a shower and a furnace, with our school clothes, a few of which each year came from the Goodwill room. But one is not poor if facts are choices rather than deprivations. Kitchen wisdom offers a long tradition of turning necessity into virtue. Gruel becomes polenta. Porridge becomes congee. You could be the kind of person who decides to make such things. You could be the kind of person who decides against television and for homemade yogurt, against the excesses of meat and for the reuse of tinfoil. You could be cultured.

My feminism presentation now is the one that I teach. It includes Silvia Federici and bell hooks as well as Luce Irigaray and Toril Moi. It includes the unspoken memory of my colleague on the steps with her American Spirits and socialism, of my friend in the kitchen with her Auden and mango-eating mother. It includes my mother pulling up with a tray of leftovers and my own earlier self packing a freezer with dinners. I talk to my students about women and work.

I don't talk to them about food in particular. That seems too personal, or too political. I don't tell them that when my mother gave birth to me, the largest and most troublesome of her babies, the first food movement

was flourishing and women were settling into the workplace in large numbers and the U.S. economy was entering its still-ongoing trend of flat real wages and widening inequality and fewer and fewer possibilities of feeding a family on a single income. I don't try to sort through the complications of "culture" presuming and labeling different kinds of labor at different times in different ways.

Ways that one learns. When I was a child and my mother had just gone back to work, she told me that she couldn't quit, even if my father wanted her to, because we needed the income. This was meant to encourage my help around the house. Do more of the dishes. Do more of the cooking. I remember understanding that worry over money and responsibility for cooking were coeval. I remember once, when I was sifting flour for a cookie recipe, and found at the bottom of the mesh three mouse droppings—I remember calculating that if told my mother, she would have to throw the rest of that large sack away, whereas if I didn't, that much would be saved, and I remember closing the sack and keeping silent. I remember feeling grown-up, mature.

I wasn't always, of course. One of the incidents from childhood that can still make me cringe was the span in fourth grade when I began begging from classmates at school lunch, ignoring the healthy items in my own sack to look at others', pointing and asking: Can I have one of your Oreos? Can I have one of your Doritos? Always the forbidden, unhealthy foods. When the inevitable happened, the tale of my pitiable tendencies reached someone's parent, and that mother told my mother—my mother took immediate action: she said ominously, one night with all of her children assembled, that one of us had a reputation for something embarrassing, and looked at me pointedly. I stopped asking for treats. Now, as an adult who can buy chips or cookies whenever I like, I find it hard to imagine craving such foods, just as I find it hard to imagine, even as I remember, feeling as awful as I did two years ago. How could one be so hungry, so needlessly? How could such small, petty hungers matter?

But also: how does one manage, if maturity means denying them? Psychologists right now are interested in "grit," a MacArthur-worthy finding meaning persistence and willpower. Grit is the difference between children who succeed and those who do not; it assures us that achievement is not limited by one's material circumstances in childhood (since nearly every other statistical finding makes these directly related). Essential to grit is self-control, measured by the now-iconic marshmallow test, in which researchers give young children the choice of one marshmallow

right away or two marshmallows later; years after, those who were able to wait have on average better grades and SAT scores. Articles can report on this study without pausing over the fact that it measures virtue in the ability to resist food. Or at least, the certainty that if someone promised you food later—sweet, unhealthy food, like a marshmallow—it would come. And not everyone may have that certainty.

In February of 2014 Congress passed and Obama signed legislation to cut supplemental nutrition benefits by \$8.7 billion over the next decade. SNAP—food stamps—is one of the most successful and efficient programs the government runs; it reduces food insecurity, which in turn reduces health and educational problems; it reduces even obesity, paradoxical as that is. Food insecurity is a growing problem—one in six people in America is food insecure—and it is also, in particular, a woman's problem: the USDA's other major program, besides SNAP, is WIC, Women, Infants, and Children. Women are still responsible, most often, for managing groceries and meals. For keeping the kids fed. For keeping the kids healthy. For teaching the kids grit.

Soon after reading *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, I spent a month eating perfectly: nothing but sustainable, local, organic, and ethical food—but on a budget that was the maximum food stamps allotment for two people in the state where my husband and I lived. I had just graduated with my doctorate, the end of the line in schooling. I thought I was making a knockout argument. I thought I was talking back to the elitist voices of the food movement, Pollan among them, who asked people to pay more for less. I thought I was making a political, economic point. Only after those four labored weeks, a more-worried-than-usual round of the worried round my mother had always managed—and I had always managed—after all the hauling and figuring and soaking and list-making and simmering and budgeting and portioning, all the canvas bags full of veined, muscleish greens and dirty bulbs, all the scribbled schedules of dinners and leftovers, all the refrigerator shelves full of mismatched jar lids and masking-tape labels, the freezer cave full of stale bread heels and scraped cheese rinds—only then did I realize that I was not. I was making a personal, gendered argument. I was showing how much labor was required to follow the rules. I was showing how much I would do.

And then, when I started this essay, I learned that my mother, once, had performed the same experiment—figure out menus and plans for a food-stamps household. She had done it for hire. I had been repeating her trials, for free, over and over.

When I was a child we set traps for mice, which terrified me, because sometimes the animals screamed, or attempted escape—which meant that they might crawl out of their own skin. Later I learned a better way. Construct a sort of bridge from one counter, with a broom handle or a cardboard tube leading to a garbage bag or a large can and beckoning at the far end with a lump of cheese or a peanut butter cracker. The animal's weight as he moves toward the treat tips him into the container. Take the sated, terrified thing somewhere far off and let it go. This is the method to use if you don't want to destroy a thing for being hungry.

TWO QUOTATIONS. In "Self-Reliance," Emerson praises "[t]he nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner" as "the healthy attitude of human nature." This is just before the famous passage in which he writes about society as a joint-stock company. I have always loved this phrase, and I still do, despite the slide from boys to humans in this definition of health, despite the elision of hands outside of the frame—female hands, almost certainly—who make nonchalance possible.

And then, of course, in "Professions for Women," Virginia Woolf defines the "Angel in the House," she who "excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg. . . ." It was this figure "who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing reviews," Woolf writes. "It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her. You who come of a younger and happier generation may not have heard of her. . . ."

I have always loved this quotation, too. Because every generation has heard of her; she is part of the culture. Part of the shifts from generation to generation, movement to movement, health to health, the difficult passage of which means that we cannot—should not, even—always kill the angel. Feed her, perhaps, instead. Make her sure of a dinner. This is one of the things I ventured to think about when I began to gain weight. When I discovered that once you eat enough to stop thinking so much about food you can think more about it.

My mother, too, spends much less time on food now. She has other things to do. She's working for a movement in the Catholic church advocating female power. She's glad that I'm healthy. (The first meal at which I ate freely—at which I decided to eat whatever I wanted—was a meal out with my parents). My mother's last two e-mails were to tell me she had read a poem I just published about my illness and to wonder if I

had any suggestions for a good summer main dish she could make for a church supper. Pasta salad, I suggested. Because it's easy and tasty. She wasn't sure she understood the poem, she said. But she liked it all the same.

I learned to read and write in the kitchen of my childhood. At least, my memory of learning to read is a memory of reading aloud to my mother as she works in the kitchen. I make my way through a large-type book while she puts dinner together. She's leaning over the counter. I'm bent over the pages. She's cooking. I'm sounding out words.