

# The Food of Love

Angela Qian

*Eating is touch carried to the bitter end.*  
—Samuel Butler

There is a fragment of Sappho's poetry which describes, in a few short, elliptical lines, a scene in which a few apple pickers reach for an apple that dangles overhead, too high for them to grasp. The lines read:

*As a sweet apple turns red on a high branch,  
high on the highest branch and the applepickers forgot—  
well, no, they didn't forget—were not able to reach...<sup>1</sup>*

Anne Carson, discussing the fragment in *Eros the Bittersweet*, observes that the poem is essentially a poem about desire that operates on two levels. On the surface level of content, the apple pickers are suspended in a moment of longing; the fruit remains perpetually out of their reach. At the same time the poem is, like all of Sappho's poems, incomplete: the sentence never reaches its conclusion and so it, too, is suspended. The reader hunts for an ending, an object, which will never be attained.

Probably everyone in the world is familiar with this sensation of longing and uncertainty, painful but nevertheless delightful. It is a feeling which most often manifests itself in the pangs of love. As a metaphor, therefore, Sappho's fragment poignantly conveys the ache

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1. Anne Carson. *Eros the Bittersweet*. Princeton: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998.

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of desire, of wanting something which lies just out of reach, outside of one's possession, and which may, perhaps, never be possessed.

But if the poem is a metaphor for desire, what should we make of the metaphor itself? The poem describes an apple. The apple is the object of one's desire. We may say, perhaps, that the apple is a stand-in for the loved one. We, along with the apple-pickers, reach for it, straining. We desire it, can almost taste it; the fruit is red and ripe, sweet and tempting. And what would we do with the apple, once we had it? Well, the answer is obvious: we would eat it.

"Oh, I do  
love parties,  
don't  
you?"



One winter not too long ago when the snow was piled all around the sidewalks, I sat in the basement of the library and wrote a short story. Without getting too maudlin, I will admit that I was, at the time, frustrated in love. With this in mind, I

produced something like a love story, about a girl whose boyfriend is drifting further and further away from her. Unable to bear this, she grows desperate, distraught; she'll do anything to get him back. She begs, pleads, does everything she can think of. Finally, she murders him—and eats his flesh.

Why do we use the language of food to talk about love? We find the comparison in literature of all ages and cultures, not just with Sappho, but in Shakespeare, Chekhov, Kabir—whose poem “Chewing slowly” shows the seemingly endless appetite one has in the search for a loved one:

*Chewing slowly,  
Only after I'd eaten  
My grandmother,  
Mother,  
Son-in-law,*

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Two brothers-in-law,  
And father-in-law  
(His big family included)  
In that order,  
And had for dessert  
The town's inhabitants,

Did I find, says Kabir,  
The beloved that I've become  
One with.<sup>2</sup>

2. Kabir. Trans. Arvind Krishna Mehrota. "Chewing slowly." *Poetry*, March 2011.

And we find this comparison in Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Anne Carson, the ideas behind the Eucharist, and contemporary poets galore. Darcie Dennigan, for instance, spins a fantastical surreal narrative in her poem "In the Bakery" about a woman who makes her bread by cutting up flowers. The language becomes violent, colorful, riotous, as the unhappy narrator's frenzy mounts until the last scene, when her ex-lover makes his entrance, and she cuts open her veins and finds them to be filled with flour.<sup>3</sup> In his endearingly-titled piece "The Amorous Cannibal," Chris Wallace-Crabbe connects eating, love, and the written word in his description of how "someone slides out his heart / and offers it on a spoon, / garnished with adjectives."<sup>4</sup> The metaphor is so commonplace it is even used as a cliché, "Poetry is the food of love."

3. Darcie Dennigan. "In the Bakery." *Madame X*. Ann Arbor: Canarium Books, 2012.

4. Chris Wallace-Crabbe. "The Amorous Cannibal." *The Amorous Cannibal*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Drawing a comparison between eating and love seems intuitive, natural. It is worth attempting to deconstruct why this is so. What does this say about love?

**R**obert Creeley once wrote a poem called "For Love":

Yesterday I wanted to  
speak of it, that sense above  
the others to me  
important because all

that I know derives  
from what it teaches me.  
Today, what is it that

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is finally so helpless,

different, despairs of its own  
statement, wants to  
turn away, endlessly  
to turn away.

[...]

That is love yesterday  
or tomorrow, not

now. Can I eat  
what you give me. I  
have not earned it. Must  
I think of everything

as earned. Now love also  
becomes a reward so  
remote from me I have  
only made it with my mind.<sup>5</sup>

5. Robert Creeley.  
"For Love." Poetry,  
May 1961.

In Creeley's poem, love is described twice: once as a sense "above the others," the other as a helpless, even cowardly sensation that "despairs" and wants to "turn away." Yet in both senses, love is distant—in the first case it is untouchable and unreachable for its glorified height, and in the second, it is withdrawn and distant.

Here, love and eating are equated: the satisfaction of love, like the satisfaction of hunger, is a reward of which the speaker feels undeserving. The poem's speaker asks, hopelessly, it seems, "Can I eat / what you give me"—not even bothering to use a question mark. He has already decided he doesn't deserve the nourishment. Because he is not loved, he cannot eat.

"For Love" is a neat example of the comparison between eating and love. Both love and its satisfaction are equated with an offering of food, of something to be eaten. The distance between the speaker and the loved one parallels the sense of lack the speaker feels, his hunger.

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The desire for fulfillment in the form of something edible becomes, by the end of the poem, the same as the desire for fulfillment in love.

Creeley's speaker not only feels distant from the reward of love, but also feels incapable of satisfying his hunger. In an oblique way, then, love is represented here as something desirable and given only to the deserving. Certainly we can relate to this: when we love someone, we want to be "good enough" for them, and strive to improve ourselves so that we will be loved in return.

When we are hungry, then, we want something to fill us up. That's simple enough. But when we love someone, what is it that we want out of them?

Carson writes that the word *eros* denotes, in ancient Greek, notions such as "want" and "desire for that which is missing"; she says there is something "pure and indubitable about the notion that *eros* is lack." Lacan, too, argues that desire is "an element necessarily lacking, unsatisfied, impossible, misconstrued."<sup>6</sup> It is a sensation of missing something that cannot be ignored—an innate instinct, unavoidable. It causes pangs, like those of hunger. We think its satisfaction will bring a gasp of relief, even a sense of fullness.



The metaphor, however, runs even deeper than that. When we eat something, we are physically taking it into our bodies. We make it a part of our bodies and beings in a way unlike anything else. In a sense, the act of consumption is an act in which all boundaries are broken, the most intimate act possible.

6. Jacques Lacan. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Four Fundamental Types of Psychoanalysis (Book XI)*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1998.

Similarly, when we love someone, our desire for the other person is so intense that we want to possess them entirely. As Carson writes

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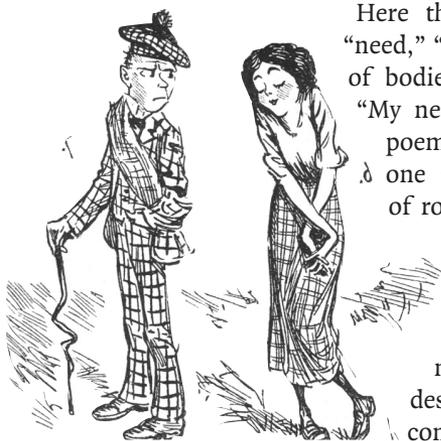
in “The Albertine Workout”: “The jealous lover cannot rest until he is able to touch all the points in space and time ever occupied by the beloved.”<sup>7</sup> Desire stretched to its extreme is so desperate, grasping, and hungry that, like in Kabir’s poem, its appetite seeks almost everything, constantly wants more.

7. Anne Carson.  
The Albertine Workout. New York:  
New Directions,  
2014.

However, when we examine the equation of the appetites of hunger and those of love, we notice a crucial difference. Take, for instance, Anne Sexton’s “Loving the Killer”:

And tonight our skin, our bones,  
that have survived our fathers,  
will meet, delicate in the hold,  
fastened together in an intricate lock.  
Then one of us will shout,  
“My need is more desperate!” and  
I will eat you slowly with kisses  
even though the killer in you  
has gotten out.<sup>8</sup>

8. Anne Sexton.  
“Loving the  
Killer.” Love  
Poems. New York:  
Mariner, 1999.



Here there are several telling words: “need,” “desperate,” the physical meeting of bodies. It is after one lover shouts “My need is more desperate” that the poem’s speaker “eats” the other with one of the most symbolic gestures of romantic union there is: the kiss.

Yet far from seeming sweet, the kiss is at once used for the consumption of the other. Like Kabir, Sexton makes romantic love a kind of destruction. Both lovers race to consume the other (“the killer in you / has gotten out”). Love is portrayed as a violent, physical need for connection and union with the loved one.

The extension of this insatiable appetite is, therefore, not a union, but annihilation. In Sexton’s poem, both lovers are killers—it is

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merely a question of which one consumes the other first. When we are in love, we are never satisfied; we always want more from the other person. No matter how much time or attention we get from him or her, it is never enough. “If we look carefully at a lover in the midst of desire,” Carson writes, “union would be annihilating.”

So once again, the question is: When we compare eating and love, what are we saying about love?

In Chekhov’s play “Uncle Vanya,”<sup>9</sup> Dr. Astroff, tormented by his love for the beautiful Yelena, makes a speech wholly surrendering himself to her. “[You] must have your victims!” he cries to her, “Here you have me—now, eat me.” This is a poignant example of the predatory nature of romantic desire. Dr. Astroff calls himself a “victim,” and certainly he may consider himself one of Yelena’s victims, but he is also, by extension, a victim of a bigger beast: love itself. And once Yelena “has” Astroff in her possession, he asks to be destroyed. The mere “having” is not enough.

9. Anton Chekhov. *Plays By Anton Chekov*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1916.

But Yelena does not, of course, eat Astroff, and the two ultimately part from one another. The metaphor which compares possessing the loved one to physical consumption, then, suggests that the perfect union we may fantasize about does not in fact exist. When confronted with the prospect of “assimilating” the person we love, of taking them into ourselves so that there are no barriers or boundaries left, we quail—because the end result is destruction. Thus in serious relationships, in adapting one’s tastes, habits, activities, or personality, each lover may feel as though he or she is losing autonomy, his or her identity being slowly subsumed into that of the other. But if such a relationship involves a change of identity, how can the person we desire be the same at the end of it as is in the beginning? In this sense, the reach of desire is asymptotic: it strives for a point of perfect, close contact with the loved one, similar to the desire for satisfaction of hunger—but which it ultimately, though it gets close, never quite reaches.

In Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Edible Woman*, Marian, growing increasingly distraught and uncomfortable after her engagement, bakes a cake in the shape of a woman and presents it to her fiancé,

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Peter:

“You’ve been trying to destroy me, haven’t you,” she said.  
“You’ve been trying to assimilate me. But I’ve made you a substitute, something you’ll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along, isn’t it?”<sup>10</sup>

10. Margaret Atwood. *The Edible Woman*. New York: Anchor, 1998.

Peter, disturbed, runs away. His reaction in the face of Marian’s offering shows a key and even paradoxical element of the nature of desire, the paradox that the love as hunger metaphor reveals: that if we were to fully possess what we love, it would be gone. As Carson writes in *Eros the Bittersweet*: “A space must be maintained or desire ends.”