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Shelf Life

By

Alexa M. DiCecco

A Creative Writing Project  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
through the Department of English and Creative Writing  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts  
at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2020

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Shelf Life

by

Alexa DiCecco

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April 23, 2020

## DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I hereby certify that I am the sole author of this thesis and that no part of this thesis has been published or submitted for publication.

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## ABSTRACT

*Shelf Life* is a poetry manuscript that explores themes of cultural, literary, and self-preservation through the motif of food preservation. From peppers to *prosciutto*, sauces to canned soups, my thesis reflects the versatility of food narratives and cookbooks through its variety of poetic styles and subject matters, each poem a kind of recipe that investigates our relationships between food, memory, and language. *Shelf Life* fully embraces the sensory, evocative language of food preparation, challenging traditional narratives of restraint that often positions women's pleasure as secondary without undermining the domestic sphere. My thesis also uses the familiar language of food to further open dialogues on stigmatized topics such as grief, mental health, and sexuality that may be difficult to address at the dinner table. Through its often playful, teasing language; its use of puns, double-entendres, and parody; and its multiple allusions and literary and historic references, *Shelf Life* ultimately promotes a self-sustaining narrative by providing readers a text that lasts beyond one reading.

*In memory of my mother, Anne,  
the first artist in my life.*

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I will always be grateful to my family for their support during this time of my life. To my father, Joe DiCecco, for all the banana bread baked over the last two years; my brother, Sante DiCecco, for the late Thai takeout and fried eggs; my sister-in-law, Kaila DiCecco, for the iced-capp addiction; my brother, Roberto, for the

pepperettes (and the awkward, “so-uh—what are you going to do after?”); Sarah Billingsley for introducing my family to halloumi; my sister Krista DiCecco for the large mugs of tea and feedback; Thomas Levesque (and his family) for the chocolate chip cookies; and finally, to my twin sister Liza DiCecco and her partner Anthony Gudisey for establishing the “Feed Alexa Fund” which provided an exhausted and overworked graduate student much needed leftovers after a long day.

To my Nonna and Nonno, who have taught me not only about making food, but about taking the time to enjoy it.

I also dedicate this thesis in memory of my mother Anne Eldracher who was the first artist I looked up to; who had a signature chicken and almond dish, coupled with apple crumble; who was a passionate woman, and one I miss dearly.



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## SHELF LIFE

## **A Word with the Reader**

From writer to reader I must confess that these poems with their odd mix of styles and topics are the result of a serious bout of reflective musings and indecisiveness lasting months. Partly, I suppose they were written to avoid the crushing anxiety of job markets and unrealistic diets, and I admit out of nostalgia for days when peaches sat perfectly squished in their jars and chocolate ice-cream dripped on white shoes and orange peel mouths licked up daffodils and lonely clouds for a first time and these moments fed a hungry and exhausted graduate student's drained mind.

Such hunger drove me to dig through entire collections of poetry and recipes, to mouth ingredient lists in aisles, to burn sugar and toast and untwist lids and carve open cans and strip tomatoes from their skins and put bites to pages. I wrote it for myself, but it will be pleasant if the ideas in it, besides surviving an initial perusing of absent minds and listless fingers, managed to cross some vast distance between paper and tongue and managed to feed some hungry part of both of us, if only for a time, if only for now.

A.M.D  
Windsor, ON, 2020

## **PEACHES**

Find Niagara in super-market, twelve rounded ready and teasing. Hold in hand, a thumb rounding fuzzy hairs, my precious and my precious and precious. Eyes peel off, skin sighs, and rinsing slices into pieces, enough for regret, let them drip through your hands, let them sit and simmer until you have had had all you can contain.

## The Apple Carver

*"[...] apples were most commonly sliced in rings, threaded unto strings, and then hung up in the kitchen or dried on the stillroom stove."*

*--Sue Sheppard, *Pickled, Potted, and Canned: How the Art and Science of Food Preserving Changed the World**

Threading apple slices and the feel juices dripping needles ripping and the peel peeling  
heat and sweat sliding down a chin--

*Is there time?*

while melted gold pours past panes past doors tugging children chores while sunlight  
puddles on the floors spilling on her skin--

*Is it enough?*

skirts dragging miles of ice slipping soles freezing tiles buried in her craft the slightest  
hint of draft Winter breathing down her neck

*Will we make it?*

needles still singing snapping then a spark wakes her with a start shakes her to the core  
with fingers gripping at her heart.

*Will I make it?*

only then a chill but hurried by a sense of time her fingers never still always turning to  
her fires turning to her task refusing to waste another moment to ask

*Am I enough?*

## **PEANUT BUTTER**

We say please but utter nonsense. We think it needs another layer, another spread, missing a compliment. Murmur pretty tease but other ends bother other people. Missing a slice. Tongue stuck. Miss taking bites, corner cuts, dabbles in dabbling, gossip eases but mutters bother.

Not a hard sell. Soft as smothering. The bothering must be the missing end. The buttering smooth and steely. Lips and no teeth, dainty dabbles. Dainty darlings.

Could a crunch contain a part. Could a crunch be split. Now in smoke, up in powder. The healthiest options scatter farther, divided by a breath, light bites with lifted touches.

It could be eaten plain. It could wear different coats. It could be prettier in pink. It could be licked concave. It could be dipped in apples. It could be its, little bites with tender bitten.

## Sweet Talk

### (A Recipe for Jam)

1. *Crush strawberries*
  - a. You are speckled pinched bloody pulp colour of a melting sun a rose dripping red and a bitten tongue
2. *Add sugar and lemon juice to crushed berries*
  - a. You are lovely speckled pressure puts the perfect pinch of pulp squish and red raindrops bloody Caesars nothing bloody let's avoid blood let's say you are the sweet colour of juicy poppies melting in the sun the red horizon line morning greetings a valentine hallmark heart a poem about a rose a rosy prose piece a ruby round dripping off red lips and a bitten tongue (*Is it sweet enough? Does it melt or does it stick? Yes, yes, it is sweet, my jamboree*).
3. *Boil, dissolve sugar*

You are lovely perfect red raindrops and blood nothing bloody say sweet juicy poppies melting in the sun horizon greetings a poem about a rose a ruby dripping off red lips and a bitten tongue (*does it flow? Is there heat?*)
4. *Stir, then transfer into jars*

Lovely, you are perfect, a red lipped sun;  
Sweet poppies dripping off a melting tongue.
5. *Kiss to Seal*

### **Dried Fig**

My teeth tear the skin down the stem  
in one long, loving bite;  
and ah, my friends, just know I am  
still nourished from the sight.

### **Last Fig**

Dried and stored in cabinets, a shriveled thing:  
will live to feel the light of spring.



**Pizzella**  
**[pit-Zel-leh]**

1. Snowflakes pressed by iron, pried by a forked tongue, melted lemon exhaling onto a cloth, downward dog to child's pose.
2. She says she used twenty-four eggs, better to make them all at once, better in winter, better together, better I learn.
3. Not for a wedding, so it's okay if there are cracks, if some burn.
4. Better I
5. Twins, we held them in pudgy fingers, asked each other: broken or whole? Judged the depth of a crack, the length of a tear, the look in each other's smiles. Sometimes held together only by a hand which, removed, would show the fortune of a broken cookie.
6. Have so much left to learn.

## **Extracts**

### **I.**

Add vanilla to sugar and spice and you get *Christ is something burning* you forget not all little girls know how to work an oven, some of us were always more scissors and sass and broken glass.

### **II.**

At thirteen we all wore vanilla. Paying for the way it lifted and rolled off our tongues, vanilla-lah. We doused ourselves in off-brand sprays, artificial real to us since we could only really afford fakes. Some of us have graduated to muskier scents, glitter to glass, fumes and per gallon to dollar a drop. Shopping for the real thing, but scared to wear ourselves, eau de moi.

### **III.**

Deep breath contained in a teaspoon, galaxies without stars, eyes of a beautiful stranger who knocks at your door, to kill you or love you or a bit of both.

### **IV.**

Bought vanilla ice-cream and wondered where the ink had gone. Flavor has nothing to do with looks, you only see half the words on a page.

### **VI.**

Curled, wrinkled, burnt tinder and beaded smoke, a knife's sharpening sense of smell, a husk that stays sweet hollowed

### **V.**

How many times do we have to say it? Nothing that exists disappears. Parts of me are still vanilla.

## When We're Sad

I imagined breakups would be  
ice-cream and tears,  
but if my friends cried, they cried without me--  
they ate their ice-cream alone.

&

After the funeral, a cousin came and gave us  
fifty dollars to spend on ice-cream.  
Everything had melted--no rain, no ice, no black umbrellas--  
March is the mildest month,  
and we ate our ice-cream by open windows.  
Only later did my brother confess  
he had spent half our ice-cream money on his girlfriend.

&

Perfect scoop, imperfect sphere with shallow ridges  
licked smooth by flicked tongues.  
Cement garden borders for velcro shoes to teeter on,  
gulls to chase and guess which ones were girls and boys,  
bars to lean against with hot backs,  
and Moms to tell you about the old amusement park,  
a mythic place across the water.  
Chocolate chin, chocolate fingers,  
chocolate stains on new dresses and  
splattering on your feet—the sudden screech is you,  
sobs pouring from your throat  
once you've discovered your chocolate  
has toppled straight to the ground,  
pudding on burnt brick.

&

Our knees sweating, shorts sticking  
to our thighs, hair curling in the heat,  
sandy feet crossed and swaying against the dashboard—  
we stopped to chill, our cups empty,  
spoons hacking at styrofoam.  
I repeat “we have to do this again soon”  
a spell that weakens by the year.  
Summer's finished by July.

&

That some things could survive the winter  
and not make it to spring.

&

I know what brand she liked best,  
but forgot the flavor—you never lose a person all at once,  
but you're always surprised at what you've lost--  
what has melted away when you weren't paying attention.

&

Two spoons skimming from the top, milk, cream, traces of nuts  
and no guarantees that it contains enough to satisfy us both and  
we share it between us anyways, rom coms falling a thousand miles  
in the background.

## **Enough of Hate**

Find cursed treasures hidden chest-deep for special occasions as epiphanies and rude awakenings. Discovering little sayings and such stuck ageless in the ice but tasteless dethawed on warning tongues. Voices semi-submerged between layers of frost, buried and re-buried because I don't have the appetite to feed them. Cold, but never as cool as I want to be, ready to thaw at the offering of a white flag, knowing I've lost. Wicked, boiling to break the ice and melting along with it.

**From What I've Tasted.**

What do I know of desire? Rubbing coal between forefingers, striking for a spark. Strips dangling, hooked on a ceiling. Ashes and cheeks, skin and sleeves melting off the bone. Hours wrapped in haze, cooling blazes in blasé ways. Leftover coals crumbled, a wiped-out smudge of mascara, and the sounds of collapsing lungs, bark peeling, snipping tongues. If I could flicker, couldn't I catch?

## **Prosciutto**

**[pru-shoo-tow]**

- a. Nothing romantic about it, but one of the most committed cuts in the world—during your first date, your first kiss, your first proposal, your first wedding fight, your second first proposal—it’s waiting in a basement somewhere to be served on a wedding platter, the climax to your antipasto course.
- b. No need to huff and puff rough customer because this slice of pig will blow you away.
- c. Curling red ribbons, thick as a knife’s handle and thin as its edge. Folded onto a crusty piece of bread soaked in olive oil and layered with hardened cheese. Sometimes I think it would look more elegant to tear a phonebook with my teeth than bite into a slice of prosciutto, but I’m not here to be elegant--sometimes I really am just here for the food.
- d. The cure to your raw feelings, the meat to your bones.

## Oh Live

Body of water, afloat on an updrift,  
creating the waves crashing against you.  
Watch where your mind wanders  
when you are only  
parts of yourself  
and more whole than wholesome.  
Remember that nothing  
is more splitting than  
keeping it all together.  
Better halved, better to know where  
your kicks fall and your  
breath lands.

To feel the shattering pleasure of  
a moving body in a  
once stilled pool--

Coaxing your echoes to water and  
responding in spits and gasps  
and salty lips.

Not pitted against self or other—  
if there are places where we are empty, they do not  
negate the places we are full

and the difference between a pit and a well  
is only how far we are willing to reach  
and receive.

Oh live among  
Oh live across  
Oh live apart  
Oh live between  
Oh live whole  
Oh live kissed  
Oh live stuffed  
Oh live full  
Oh live loved



Oh live arms stretched,  
belly lifted.

## **Salt Circles**

That everything was trying to kill me slow, but salt had it out for me good. What doesn't kill you keeps coming back to try. Old wounds kept clean with daily salt scrubs, nothing growing except a thirst. No need for salt on the sills salt by the doors when it's oozing out of pores, when you're drinking chicken soup to protect the soul because the Devil's on a diet (he's not making any deals for yours).

## Alphabet Soup

N EW

P AT T E R NS

F LO

A T E<sup>D</sup>

TO

TH E

A ND

SU R E  
FA C

WE

CO N N E C T ED

## **Cabinet Meeting**

Marjoram a dear old, your favourite a niece. Myrtle softened by alcohol; Oregano long gone. Vulgar Fennel, ravishing Lavender, lavishing Cecily, sparsely dressed, sin a min (or two) till it sticks. Don't get carried away, don't press Rosemary, don't err with Tarragon, don't spill on Dill. Thyme hasn't got any, Sage gives poor advice, Mint spying from the windowsill, never leaves things at bay. Savoury Winter has eyes only for Basil who's still glued to Rose's hip. Judge them all you want, but they have more variety than most cabinets (with fewer scandals).

## The Warmest Place

*“As for me, I’ve come out on the other end of women’s liberation—to make my own soup.”*

B. Friedan  
(qtd. Stoval 111)

Words boil and soup writing itself hot, in need of a stir. My fingers melt to rain against the stovetop, warm for the first time today, tapping the keyboard awake, typing the cutting board to pieces. I sing the dishes to sleep, and my stories grow with piles of parsley. Broth thickens and plot thins, and tight curls loosen and rise. The table keeps me company, and so do the chairs, and the tiles. The kitchen stays up with me while the rest of the house sleeps, even the dryer, with its static snaps, burring whirrs, fumbling towards forwards tumbling pummeling umphs and unclicks—a light in the kitchen stays on, sweet onions linger, and it all reminds me to make of myself for myself, and not to overseason a sentence.

## little Big

Ss

Pd

Oo

Oo

Nu

## Cupped Comforts

### I.

Sipped stillness echoes a breath  
sigh before

not in beds not in sheets not  
wrapped in scents of lemons

scents or suds  
no not a thing

but a mouth opening to lips  
hugging hard glaze

little tremors while  
heat melts solid clay, dislodges ravines to

welcoming tongue.

### II.

And when you are little how  
12am blinks wide on a stove  
how close to dawn--  
how much you take for granted  
that somebody is waiting up  
with cold milk and cut apples,  
with squared toast and banana slices,  
to tuck you back into bed  
and remind you it is a school night.

How far away dawn now rises  
alone in my kitchen at midnight  
with a winking stove for company  
and a bruised peel.

## Honey Stings

*"In funeral rites, the dead were often given a supply of honey to enjoy as they set out for the afterlife. Honey denoted immortality"*

--Sue Sheppard, *Pickled, Potted, and Canned: How the Art and Science of Food Preserving Changed the World.*

The afterlife buried itself  
in molars, carved hieroglyphs on pearls:  
heaven and hell, all the gods in between,  
named, fixed, weight of which  
cracked the surface, dug into roots,  
the pain of a universal truth  
rippling across a cheek.

Then gagged by mirrors, prodding fingers,  
latex holding down a tongue--  
my golden ticket to paradise,  
sweet tooth chewing gum,  
exposed under an artificial sun,  
destined to be torn, filed, filled:  
howls silenced and stilled.

*El Dorado Found!* Muffles past  
swollen swelling lips,  
but the white masked faced  
leaning in, swallowed by  
*pleaseopenwide* pit,  
*tskkkkss*, gestures for a scythe,  
scrapes eternity from chicklets,  
and is bit.



## Confetti

[kuhn-feh-tee]

- a. Candy-coated almonds thrown at celebrations of life, tied up in lace.
- b. Chew on this
- c. but only after you have unveiled it.
- d. To daze and days and all of their days till part of death and all of their rings round them and pound them and sound of them ringing in an ear on paper what is it dear Misses and Missed Her.
- e. Unwrapped unfolded unpackaged undone undo do
- f. your hard-coated insides melt? Chewing still, choosing slow, so chances it, the softening shoulders, soft strings strumming, softly sliding silken sashes, Sophocles soothingly: "You're dreaming, girl, lost in a moving dream."

## SYRUP

So says so-so something such somethings some surely sensational sayings some silly sounding somethings. Sometimes sticking sometimes slipping always such slippery scripts always such stories such secrets such sharp bits.

Such sharp spirits show, such wits.

So. So. So. So. Say something. Something soon.

Stay. Say something soon. Something stirring. Something soothing. Something seething. Something is stuck surely. She sings, she has some song, she has stories she knows, stories she keeps herself. Sharing is scaring, she says. She holds close some stories; some she shares. She is slipping otherwise, surely.

Shh. Shush! She's saying--

Somebody said—

Sorry. Sorry. Some sorry business, surely.

## **Uncorked**

Air slips in, lisps in, lips thin, presses rim, impresses him, blesses stresses, trims whims,  
skims presses, messes hymn, spits sin, steps spin, stretches flair, retches air.

## Openings

Devouring jelly light, fingers feeding off glass grooves  
the shape of cherries, raspberries, grapes—  
crystallized in cold in dark, feeding in turn  
from her touch.

The spoon is in her hand—  
she cannot bring herself to unscrew the jar.

Glass case, display dedicated to her  
collected hours, creating new kinds  
of *gold* and *so sweet* and *so cold*,  
catching her in situ, warm amber hardening,  
preserving her, her smile, her fingers, and  
her elbows poised on a tablecloth pressed and smoothed  
as a proverb slipping off a pale tongue:  
*Fill what's full, empty what's empty.*

The knife could crack the surface  
if only she would reach for it--

Forbidding fruits, foreboding felt  
with every step down into the damp  
into the low hum of a furnace, mildew and mould  
eyeing your prize, its subtle growth,  
and promise if you were ever to open it  
and leave it for a moment--

Crackers and cheese and bread all spread out  
before her, and she doesn't take a bite--

She used to devour the looks in their eyes,  
leaning in, watching it slathered  
and asking if you liked it--? Is it good--?  
and to reach now for the same things,  
prepared for others, now just meant for her, and wonder--  
Was hope enough for Pandora?  
Knowledge for Eve?  
Patience for Persephone, trapped in a cold, dark place--

She drops the spoon, ignores the knife,  
twists open the lid--

Out escapes a breath, a *pop*, and  
a laugh that spreads across

a warm, well-lighted space.  
Her pinky dips down, scoops and curls—  
first taste is hers.

## **JELL-O**

Bouncing bones bantering with battering and not a batter a matter only of dissolving and loving licks, of scattering powder, of powdering cheeks. Not a trifle or truffle not to be trifled or ruffled by cheering flutes. How much of it can be glass. To measure measure shattering in cups. Layers all, all layered together, together a layer of laying and time labouring. The same bones but separation is together with colour each to each taste.

Pretty little things pleasing little tastes.

Suppose it stays still suppose it does not sit for stillness but instills in it a way of supposing. Jealousy repeats, the implicit jealousy of these greetings must be in the way it is set, the way it is settling, how the way shapes it.

Nodded not pressed. If a source of impression, if not at first, it must last. So hello to you hello to you too.

## Sweet Release

Nutella staining my lips,  
my oldest brother said

“That will kill you.”

when he saw my hand in the jar.  
I’ve forgiven the lie—nobody wants  
sticky fingers, double dippers,  
drool and spit mixed in their chocolate.

But those were my first wrinkles,  
eating and repeating

“I don’t want to die.”

while tongues melted, cocoa spread,  
sugar lingered and licked,  
eased and filled craving parts of me  
quick to dissolve.

Every taste of sweetness  
now a sacrifice, now a willingness, a mantra of  
“Just one more”

every bite a look into the end,  
every end a biting anticipation.  
Some comfort in wanting in craving  
more, more.

## **Panettone**

[pa-nuh-tow-nuh]

- a. Sponge cake traditionally baked with raisins and dried fruit, served at Christmas. Raisins and dried fruit often exchanged for custard, chocolate, hazelnut, apples, and pumpkin. Also sold at Thanksgiving, comes en masse in November, good for New Year's gifts, as good as any box of Valentine hearts, will last as long as nobody is looking, a gift that keeps.
- b. My boss, who is also my aunt, who is not really my aunt, but who I have always called Zia, lives two seasons ahead, places her orders in July. "Please," I beg, "just a bit more time."
- c. Bright pastel cardboard replaces ornaments, crowds the ceiling, spins suspended on store hooks.
- d. Omniscient, all-knowing, watchful, squats on counters, judges your bites. Forks are swallowed by sponge, feeds a cake that only grows. More you eat, less you've taken. The guilt of throwing it away, the promises made, the creeping sense of being watched by more than your weight: Don't feed the ants.



## Expiry Dates

Le/ts/talk.  
We/re/over  
No/tm/eyou  
Ih/at/ehow  
Wi/sh/Ihad  
Yo/un/ever  
Ju/st/stop  
Wh/en/isit  
Wh/yc/antI  
Ih/at/eyou  
So/so/much  
An/dI/wish  
Th/er/ewas  
Aw/ay/tobe  
Ic/ou/ldbe  
Go/ba/ckin  
Th/is/time  
If/on/lywe  
fi/nd/away  
Ch/an/geit

## **Making Room**

You didn't buy the avocado this time because the last one rotted and they're expensive.

If there is a thing that can last, you haven't found it yet.

Cooking for one is harder than cooking for two.

You can't eat the pasta you just made yesterday, and you say you might eat it tomorrow, but you can't do that either; it sits untouched, congeals and sticks to the side of your favourite container, and each time you open the fridge fills you with remorse. You gag over the garbage can because your mouth fills with the taste of cold, clumped pasta.

You eat with the tv for company, have conversations with your sitcom of the week.

You stole your brother's pepperettes even though he would have given you one, if you asked.

You stop eating at your grandma's so much because you have carried home enough paper plates and need to learn to cook for yourself.

Growing up is learning to eat your leftovers and living with the days you can't.

You ate the strawberries before they went bad.

You think love is sometimes what you can take of something before it must be thrown away.

You make apple sauce with the apples, and turn bananas to bread, learning to make something of the things you left sitting too long.

You recycle through the idea of composting with mixed results.

You scrape mold off cheese but can't scrape the sight of it from your head.

You keep the lemon safe.

You love your spices, enter a long-term relationship with paprika.

You feel better with a clean fridge.

# Ristra

**Clinging** to the only things keeping us together

a i n e l n e o  
t g t w a t w l  
c h o s o d  
h t s  
i e  
n s  
g

we have no perception of how long they will **hold**

a n o e  
n t v a  
g o e r

We **distrust** the voice that says "Just a little longer"

e n o e u r o r  
e s f a s g o e  
p i t s h e t m  
d e s h b  
e s e l  
s i  
n  
g

when every part of us is **burning**

u n a e s o h  
r d i e t o  
i e n d s  
e r i t l  
d n l  
g y

**sometimes** all we can do

o u e v r n y v o  
r s e e t e n  
s n s o n g s  
a p i s  
e g p a n  
s s s e n e  
d

hang on a **bit** longer

e n o  
i u  
n c  
g h

nobody can hold it **against** us

l o l n e o r  
w i w s v o  
a n a i e u  
y g y n r b  
s s s l  
t i n g  
n g

if we let **go**  
on

although **maybe** we'll

i l l o e n  
s l u s t  
s r t r  
i n a  
g n c e  
s

maybe we **make** it

e r e v  
m e p e  
o t r  
r i y  
i w  
e h  
s e  
r  
e

## **Baccala**

[bah-cah-lah]

- a. Referring to a dried, wrung out fish, drowned in a salt bath, a Christmas gift only the old Italians still cook. Implies oil burns, dim basement kitchens, and voices bubbling over into the next room. Snow mounds settling soundless in half-windows.
- b. A form of intimidation. Plopped in front of a cashier, a flattened body wrapped in plastic. The tail hangs off the scales. We do not charge for tails. Still, the unspoken floats bloated between cashier and customer: ah-too-much.
- c. Boneless. Spineless. Difficult to chew.
- d. Related to tired old life saying hummed from wrinkled hands. *Drawn too deep to keep the fishes' company; gone to sleep former wishes, if any.*

## Filling in the Gaps

My grandparents quarter tomatoes by the bushel before the flies rub the sleep from their wings. I float and hover between the baskets, weighing between my knife and tomato while my Nonna seems to peel their skins with a look, slice them with flick. I make my little cuts, but the machine begins to grind, and red paste slides down the funnel.

**A:** I'm not good at cooking, Nonna.

**Nonna:** Nobody taught me.

*She turns the dial for the burner.*

**Nonna:** I watched my mother. You need to watch, you know, to learn.

I drop the baskets of sliced tomatoes on the table in the shed, grab thick handfuls of tomato guts and toss them into the top of the machine where my Nonno pushes them down, curses the machine which sputters in reply, two old friends meeting for an espresso.

**A:** Do you remember anything from WWII?

**Nonno:** A brick—nowhere—

*He gestures to the sky.*

I wear white and leave without a stain. Untwisting the apron double wrapped around my waist, knotted at the back, folded and re-folded it and leave it without a crease on a kitchen chair.

**A:** They're nice people. We're lucky.

**Nonna:** I tell you, good friends never enough,  
but bad friends, *she shakes her head*, too many.

When I come back from school, the bushels are bunched and my nonno sprays the back patio, water seeping over my sandals. Later I will find tomato seeds growing in between my toes. My nonno recites the forecast whenever I see him, relishes in the worst predictions. I give him what he always wants, telling him he's wrong.

**A:** Nonno, it's beautiful outside. It's not going to rain.

**Nonno:** You think so, huh? Wait. Wait.

A wooden spoon almost as tall as I am lies across the edges of the pot. My mouth fills with the taste of acid and basil and gas from a lawnmower. Splashes come over the fence

from next door. Rows of glass jars catch the sunlight, the rims warm, the lids boxed on the side.

**A:** Is there anything else I can help you with?

**Nonna:** Ah, not much now. Come in and eat.

Bring home with you.

It took me years to realize when they talked about me--they never used the vowel at the end of my name, the day a stranger's name became mine.

**A:** Hey Boss, I saw you today at the store.

**Nonno:** You see me?

*He points to his chest.* No, I see you.

**flipped.**

Awake

and

always

aware

that

something

is

settling

to

the

bottom

of a bottom

shelf jar waiting to be

## Pickled

**p.s.** Hey, eyes down here. Fallacious to think phallic and we're both thinking it anyway. We have pickles, but don't forget about the eggs.

**p.p.s.** I didn't even ask for pickles and somebody's always throwing them on my plate anyways. I'm told I'm picky but scraping them off the bun doesn't change that they were there.



## Sharp Pin List

Nap kings  
Cut leary  
Pay per plays

Gnashed poor taste toes  
Sweet Iamb  
Scuffing, gray V.,  
cram bury saws  
Tore key

Lip tongues  
New do suit  
Chic thin  
Brought e. coli swoops  
Ciao dur

Pick colds  
Must err  
Steins catch up

Chalk lick ache  
Brown knees  
Chock lit cook eases

May bee  
Jus tie feud?

**The Girl and the Pea  
(or the Princess and the Pulse)**

**I.**

Pulses swerve  
out of out of  
erupted curves.

Dips and dives,  
a rippling ache,  
and a back bent  
and breaking  
breaks.

**II.**

She worries the kind of stories  
she leaves behind.

An aching echo, pulsing eyes,  
drown in curving lullabies.

She sings to smooth the knot  
buried beneath her.

**III.**

Cheap mat rest lump ing  
her in A pull shhh stir ring  
her aw ake.  
T he end of sleep, and  
no ing it now nnn ow it mmm us  
be real.

*Dedicated to K. a southern Ontarian midwife*

## Stacking Cans

Can  
Can I Can  
Can I help Can  
Can I help you Can  
Can I help you I Can  
Can I help you help you I Can  
Can I help you I can help you Can  
Can I help you I help you and if I Can't  
Can I help you try to find somebody who Can  
Can help you and Can I hope that if I find help that I Can  
Can I trust you love you hear you help you reach you support you I Can

## Now We Know

*"It is often a delicate point, now, to decide when common sense ends, and hoarding begins."*

--M.F.K. Fisher, *How to Cook a Wolf*

### Chapter I: Wolf in Disguise

You know you won't go hungry, but you've never lived in a world where stores ran out of potatoes. You play your part, shaking your head at the carts filled with cases of dried goods, but you don't know

The stores run out  
What should I do  
If  
this will pass  
Prices go up I get sick it doesn't  
I run out It's just me

Reaching for empty racks, leaving without even a fingerprint to say *I was here*, a touch that doesn't take. Easier to trust a person in a mask. I use debit because I don't want to cough up the change.

*It's too much.* Gnawing at chapped lips, a wolf nipping at its paws. *It's not enough*, it yaps. My wolf could be a hyena. I keep my mouth shut to hold back its laugh, but it lives in an echo, rises and falls with my chest, and I catch it when I can into the crook of my elbow. Even muffled, it barks *You have all the food you need and nothing to sustain you.*

## Chapter II: The Survey

Living in bomb shelters, playing guess who to find who's got the bomb in their chest:

**Q1:** Have you left the house recently?

**A:** I've barely gotten out of bed.

**Q2:** Did you travel abroad?

**A:** Only on my pinterest board.

**Q3:** Have you been exposed to anybody who is sick?

**A:** I've eliminated no suspects.

**Q4:** Any pain in your chest? Any ticking?

**A:** Just the usual ticks.

**Q5:** Have you left the house recently? Be honest.

**A:** Pass.

**Q6:** There's no passing.

**A:** Once a week for grocery shopping.

**Q7:** Good. Try to stay home as much as possible. Unless you're essential. Are you essential?

**A:** No.

**Q8:** Make sure you remember that. Now, how would rate this survey?

**A:** Non-essential.

**Chapter III:**  
**Every game has its rules**

1. While shopping, tag rules apply, and anybody could be it. Run away from people getting too close to avoid getting it.
2. Wash your hands like you have just conspired to murder a Scottish King.
3. Cough into your elbow like you are violently rejecting a lover's proposal.
4. Don't visit grandma's house in the woods unless you want to lead the wolf straight to her door.
5. Need to pass the time? Have you tried hiding away in attics, creeping into your family's bedrooms at night, scraping against the wall with your nails—if so, it might be time to get air.

## Chapter IV: Making Up for Lost Time

Head on my arms, arms on my knees, knees tucked to my chest, feet on the seat, hair on the chair, and fingers pressed to the glass. Stayed in my caves so long that even my shadows left me pale as a Victorian ghost too stubborn to leave her old haunts. Only when I moved did I remember I was tangible, that I became reacquainted with myself. Going outside had always meant going to see other people.

I worried about my dad for the first time in my life—my indestructible, stubborn, ready to bring me soup, begging me to stop while I stepped on his freshly cemented tile trying to bring him a bucket of water dad.

I crawled into corners, bunched into myself, forced my words onto a page and left them stranded without connections. When did I get stuck when I wrote with my fingers and not my tongue. I came to poetry not because I liked the look of it, the sound of it, but the taste.

No Proustian slip—the food I had been making myself brought no memories, so I started again, simple, I started with a cup of tea. Stir and stir, layer in honey, drizzle milk, and take a sip when hands are feverish

*Leaning on a patio chair, cooling plastic unpeeling from the skin of your back, glasses clinking, heated argument between two smokers, eyes closed, daylight fades in the same softening way as butter on a counter, heat brushing your chin.*

Rinse an apple and rub with a thumb, juggle between your hands, press the knife without shattering the plate, and bite it wholeheartedly, bite until it cedes to you.

*Sifting sand, fingers burying into the cold, picking seaweed off sticky backs, toes crunching and curling, seagulls snapping, suctioning swimsuits, creamed shoulders, waves rushing over you, picking up shells and putting them back, bruised apples and chips and pop in glass bottles tumbling from a tote.*

Grab the toast by the edge, skim the butter in curls, scrape and sand it down until it softens, it should crunch without crumbling in your hands, it should pair with the apples and tea.

*Picking splinters, glass doors sliding in and out, sandals slapping steps, sunglass frames brushing eyebrows, shish kabobs skewering each other, hands slapping yours away, the bun crushed to your mouth, chubby cheeked grins.*

Hands pressed to my stomach, reaching for air. My hyena growls, but I'm the one laughing, a plate balanced on my knees.



## **Last Thing**

One moment—pantries no longer  
follow the cycle of seasons. Still,  
we haven't lost the parts of us that  
worried once, the parts of us that starved.

Don't we still wake to frost before  
pulling back the blinds?

The greatest luxury of our time:  
welcoming the cold, saluting it  
with steamed milk, coffee, tea--  
calling it an inconvenience.

Just a sec—oranges taste better at Christmas,  
and so do chestnuts and apples; pomegranates  
remain a miracle. I could compare them  
to rubies, or any other precious red jewel—  
but the miracle, now, is not that they are rare,  
but that they are common.

Hang on—opening cupboards in  
other people's houses, finding the  
sugar while they set the tea—  
you are no longer a stranger here.  
Family, then, is not blood, but the intuition,  
the deep knowledge of each other's  
shelves, where a brother keeps his cereal,  
where a sister hides her chocolate.

Don't forget—the pleasure of making lists  
and forgetting them; of writing milk  
and eggs on sticky notes at the same time seeing  
their spot in the fridge at the same time  
serving breakfast at the same time the yolk  
slides down the white. Haven't you tasted  
a thing before you've eaten it?

One last thing—when we least expected it,  
the ice broke from the river,  
and our empty cans of jams and peaches

filled with dirt, feeding new life on old sills--  
the bell jar broken, the experiment over,  
and we filtered through.

## ARTIST'S STATEMENT

*“It seems to me that our three basic needs, for food and security and love, are so mixed and mingled and intertwined that we cannot straightly think of one without the others. So it happens that when I write of hunger, I am really writing about love and the hunger for it, and warmth and the love of it and the hunger for it...and it is all one...”*

M.F.K. Fisher—*The Art of Eating*  
(qtd. Rosofsky 48)

In Susan Leonardi's article "Recipes for Reading," she explores recipes as embedded discourses: "Even the root of *recipe*—the Latin *recipere*—implies an exchange, a giver and a receiver. Like a story, a recipe needs a recommendation, a context, a point, a reason to be" (340). Inspired by their historical importance to human survival and their often-undervalued place in popular food culture, my thesis uses the motif of preservatives with a specific agenda to promote ideas of self-preservation, with each poem acting as kind of "recipe" in this way. This motif of self-preservation expands to include cultural preservation, exploring my Italian Canadian roots through food, as well as literary preservation. Recipes, Leonardi further notes, exist within specific frames, are often introduced anecdotally, and evolve as they are shared: "Like a narrative, a recipe is reproducible, and, further, its hearers-readers-receivers are encouraged to reproduce it and, in reproducing it, to revise it and make it their own. Folktales, ghost stories, jokes, and recipes willingly undergo such repetition and re-vision" (344). My thesis incorporates a significant number of literary references and styles as part of this process of "repetition and revision" and as a means of preserving and acknowledging the language that shaped my own poetic style.

## Literary Preservation

My thesis was inspired by several food poems and narratives, most notably the “Food” section of Gertrude Stein’s 1914 collection of poetry *Tender Buttons* and Harryette Mullen’s *S\*PeRM\*K\*T* published in 1992. I was interested in the subversive ways each poet used the language of food, with Stein commenting on the domestic sphere while Mullen takes to the supermarket and the language of advertising and consumerism. Margueritte Murphy, one of Stein’s most referenced critics, reads *Tender Buttons* as a means of subverting “conventional feminine prose and talk while intimating her own new language and ways of seeing” (385). Lisa Ruddick in her article “A Rosy Charm: Gertrude Stein and the Repressed Feminine” notes ways in which Stein recreates “innocence in the reader” by syntactical rearrangements:

[undoing] the symbolic order by using words noninstrumentally; even where we can identify discursive content, there is an element of verbal play that distracts us . . . we experience words as sources of pleasure rather than only as ways of referring to other things . . . we cannot emphasize certain words and slight others without knowing we are missing something. Everything strikes us as important, so we attend to all impressions equally. (236)

Stein’s reworking of the domestic creates intimate and personal readings that allow for multiple interpretations. Stein uses a process of defamiliarization, taking familiar objects such as “Butter” or “Apple” and presenting them in unfamiliar ways:

APPLE.

Apple plum, carpet steak, seed clam, colored wine, calm seen, cold  
cream, best shake, potato, potato and no no gold work with pet, a green  
seen is called bake and change sweet is bready, a little piece a little  
piece please. (Bartleby)

“Apple” was one of the first poems where I began to recognize the conversational elements of the dining room and to pay attention to the phonetic qualities of language, such as the connection between “seen” and the “sheen” of an apple. Stein’s poetry forced me to pay attention to language in a new way and I wanted to create my own Steinian poems to better understand my relationship to both food and language.

Harryette Mullen’s *S\*PeRM\*K\*T* is a contemporary response to Stein’s “Food” section of *Tender Buttons*, Mullen’s subversive use of the language of advertising and the supermarket “makes visible again the realities of consumption, particularly in their racialized and gendered implications” (Mix 53). Mullen’s poetry is more explicit than Stein’s and written with a more political agenda: “My own prose poems depart from [Stein’s] cryptic code to recycle and reconfigure language from a public sphere that includes mass media and political discourse as well as literature and folklore” (x). Her use of puns, double-entendres, and parody also work effectively to reveal problematic elements of consumer culture in a compelling way which simultaneously rejects the blandness and commercialized language of mass consumerism: “the playful, witty, and sometimes caustic recycling of these materials enables Mullen and her readers to revel in an excess of linguistic *jouissance* that locates pleasure in the unceasing manipulating of language or the fugitive tongue” (Tremblay-McGraw 84). For example, the following

line plays with commercialized depictions of food, stressing their physical qualities rather than their taste and drawing attention to the artificial quality of supermarket foods: “Slow ketchup, slower. Dark coffee, darker. Nice white rice. Meat is real. Clean meat. Trimmed, not bloody” (90). Mullen’s recycling of language and forgotten histories in her poems work further as a means of preserving them: “She takes debased, erased, and forgotten histories and found discourses and runs with and recycles them; she invites the reader to participate in this educative process of conservation and production, enclosure and fugitive run” (Tremblay-McGraw 72).

While Mullen’s and Stein’s poetry have had the most significant influence on my style, *Shelf Life* is filled with literary allusions and shaped by a variety of poetic styles and forms, from concrete to confessional. In my poem “Openings” (DiCecco 27), the line “so sweet and so cold” is taken from William Carlos Williams poem “This is Just to Say” which recounts an insincere apology for stealing a friend’s plum. The line takes an additional meaning in that any reader familiar with the poem will appreciate the irony in the theft of the line, as well as the connection between preservatives and the plum taken from the icebox. “Dried Fig” and “Last Fig” (7) directly allude to Edna St. Vincent Millay’s “First Fig” and “Second Fig,” which become important in a collection of poetry about preserving the self rather than “burning out at both ends.” The titles of “From What I’ve Tasted” (12) and “Enough of Hate” (13) are both lines taken from Robert Frost’s poem “Fire and Ice” and respectively tied to poems dedicated to smoking and freezing as forms of preservation. Rather than the world ending in fire or ice, the poems conclude with the remains of the smoking process and the thawing of the freezer, thus marking the end of fire and ice. There are several more allusions buried within *Shelf Life*

but to reveal them all would eliminate part of the pleasure of the discovery; moreover, the motif of preservatives extends to the preservation of the volume itself, and part of the nuanced wording of the poems, the variety of styles, and the references embedded within the collection work as a means of encouraging multiple re-readings of the volume, of drawing readers back subtly as their literary relationships expand and develop.

Furthermore, Leonardi also points to the trend in cookbooks in creating authorial personas through the conversational way that recipes are introduced, often with humorous anecdotes, to create a persona that “readers could identify and trust” (347). Although anecdotes form only a small part of *Shelf Life*, my thesis uses literary allusions as a means of generating my own more subtle persona to readers, building trust by sharing not just elements of my own personal life, but my literary life as well.

### **Cultural Preservation**

Food is an important element of cultural and ethnic identity, reaffirmed time and again in food narratives and in contemporary documentaries and cooking shows. Laura Esquivel’s *Like Water for Chocolate* is a novel that begins each chapter with a traditional Mexican recipe which is at the center of each family event. The story of the de le Garza family is told retrospectively by the descendant of the main character, Tita, who inherits her book of recipes which Oana Ursache explains acts as “a family album that instead of pictures has stories combined with secrets for preparing exquisite sauces, or meals, or bread, or tears and dreams” (1006). Having never been able to reproduce the recipes that my Italian grandmother or my “nonna” shared with us, lacking the instinctual understanding of the kitchen possessed by my twin sister, the best thing seemed to be to share the written experience of them. In this way, while I could not reproduce them, I

could at least preserve their meaning in text. The poems which primarily explore my relationship with Italian food objects are formatted as dictionary entries and relate some of my personal experiences of growing up in a small but tight-knit Canadian Italian community in Southern Ontario. The definitions work to provide readers an intimate experience of each food object, such as in “Baccala” whose first entry begins in a logical manner before expanding to outline the memories most associated with it:

- a. Referring to a dried, wrung out fish, drowned in a salt bath, a Christmas gift only the old Italians still cook. Implies oil burns, dim basement kitchens, and voices bubbling over into the next room. Snow mounds settling soundless in half-windows. (DiCecco 35)

The shift in tone and the dream-like qualities of the description are based in part on Proust’s famous madeleine scene in his novel *In Search of Lost Time (À la recherche du temps perdu)* where the narrator is drawn back to his past through the act of consumption. James Gilroy summarizes the narrator’s explanation of the event as being invoked by the “memory of the senses, or ‘involuntary’ memory, which is responsible for [the narrator’s] revelation, and not the ‘voluntary’ memory of the intelligence . . . Memories are preserved in our bodily senses long after the intelligence has lost of them” (100-101). The first entry in “Baccala” begins in the familiar manner of dictionaries like the *Oxford English Dictionary* before the memory of the fish takes over the narrative, a memory of senses which invokes touch and smell simultaneously through “oil burns,” sound in “voices bubbling,” and also sight in “snow mounds settling.” Significantly, the taste of the fish is missing because I have never tasted baccala, a way of admitting my awareness that there are “gaps” in my knowledge and expressing some of my own personal



insecurities: I do not look Italian, I cannot speak Italian but, most importantly, I cannot cook like an Italian. The definitions then work doubly as a way of both explaining the meaning of cultural food objects to readers possibly unfamiliar with them and navigating my own personal relationship to Italian culture.

While there are “gaps” in my experiences of Italian culture, part of the incentive of my thesis was to learn more about my grandparents and their recipes, which is best exemplified in my poem “Filling in the Gaps” (36-37). The poem touches on my experience making sauce with my “nonna” and my grandfather, or “nonno”, in early September. More than describing the scene, the poem incorporates conversations repeated verbatim between me and my grandparents, preserving not just their tradition of sauce-making, but also their voices and colloquialisms. The full recipe or instructions for the sauce making are missing because I am missing during parts of the process, an acknowledgement of some of the sacrifices of balancing familial life with work life.

The line “the day a stranger’s name became mine” (DiCecco 37) in this poem refers to the way that similar recipes may take different names in different cultures. For example, in *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook*, Toklas recounts a humorous story where her attempt to find a good Spanish *gazpacho* leads to several similar recipes for cold soup from different cultures:

Upon the return from Spain my host at Cannes, a distinguished Polish American composer, a fine gourmet and experienced cook, listened to the story of the futile chase for gazpacho recipes, for their possible ingredients. Ah, said he, but you are describing a *chlodnik*, the Polish iced soup. Before he has had time to prepare it for us a Turkish guest

arrived and he hearing about the *gazpachos* and the *chlodnik* said, You are describing a Turkish *cacik*. Perhaps, said I. It was confusing. (54)

For years during my childhood, my grandparents called me by a different name, and it was only in listening and watching their gestures that I realized that I was the subject of their conversation. In this recognition of a new part of my identity, my translated name, coupled with the oral qualities of the text, the end of this poem suggests a growing awareness of my grandparent's language and traditions and a sense that, even if I am still learning, I am at least beginning to listen.

Other than my parents, each member of my immediate family also make subtle appearances in my work, such as in "The Girl and the Pea (or the Princess and the Pulse)" which is "*Dedicated to K. a southern Ontarian midwife*" (DiCecco 41) who is my oldest sister. Just as the recipes produced from cookbooks such as *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook* are collected from a wide range of sources (her narrative peopled with close acquaintances as well as what seems to be half the French Countryside), my thesis recognizes the influence of my family in the development of my personal tastes as well as their influence in shaping the person I am today.

### **Self-Preservation**

Aside from the focus on literary and cultural preservation, my thesis investigates and presents more obvious forms of self-preservation. The importance of making personal connections is exemplified in poems such as "Alphabet Soup," which also comments on the relationships established between poet and reader, which depends on the reader both making connections in meaning and connecting with the poet through language: "And we connected" (DiCecco 18). The two pepper poems in my thesis both

celebrate persistence or “hanging on” while my poem “Oh Live” (15-16) explores my own personal method of coping with the winter through swimming by humorously blending the experience with that of an olive. Although I wanted to write poems with positive messages, my thesis also explores methods of self-preservation that are less sustainable, such as in “Uncorked” which details an experience of drinking that ultimately ends in a moment of “retching air” (26), while other poems explore themes of expiration, such as in “Expiry Dates” which plays with the clichés of breakups by breaking up the lines using slashes to mimic the way expiration dates are written on food products: “No/tm/eyou” (32).

Two of the cookbooks on my reading list also explored cooking and relationships to food during times of crisis. For example, during WWI, Toklas recalls the recipes they undertook during times of rationing “We threw nothing, but absolutely nothing away, living through a war in an occupied country” (32). M.F.K. Fisher’s *How to Cook a Wolf* is a book of recipes that promises its readers practical tips during times of rationing in WWII in a humorous, tongue-in-cheek style. As I neared the completion of my thesis, the Covid-19 pandemic began to drastically alter shopping habits, leading to hoarding and changes in the ways that businesses operated, as well as increased pressures for people to self-isolate and mandatory quarantine laws for anybody with a travel history or testing positive for the virus. In a period when every morning began by checking the confirmed daily cases and death toll and the shelves in local grocery stores became empty for the first time in my life of leisure consumerism, the topic of self-preservation felt more significant than ever. My poem “Now We Know” explores life during a pandemic, delving into my own personal anxieties and their effect on my writing and food habits,

while also drawing attention to the sense of privilege revealed by the unexpected loss of food objects that had been constants: “You know you won’t go hungry, but you’ve never lived in a world where stores ran out of potatoes” (DiCecco 43). The poem makes multiple references to Fisher’s *How to Cook a Wolf*, through the quote which introduces the poem and the title “Wolf in Disguise” in the first section. The ending itself is inspired by the conclusion to Fisher’s *How to Cook a Wolf*: in a book about conservative cooking, Fisher dedicates the final chapter to her favourite recipes, acknowledging that “you can cope with economy only so long” (191) and that eating is more than just feeding the body:

Let the cupboard of your thoughts fill itself with a hundred ghosts that long ago, in 1939, used to be easy to buy and easy to forget . . . close your eyes to the headlines and your ears to sirens and the threatening of high explosives, and read instead the sweet nostalgic measures of these recipes, impossible yet fond. (Fisher 192)

Meryl Rosofsky comments on the impact of Fisher’s cookbook and its conclusion: “Resistance and humor may both be hallmarks of her food voice, but it is comfort that sounds the final note. She’s gentle coach and cheerleader to those dispirited by grief and wartime shortages, reminding them (and us today) that sustenance is about more than what is on a plate” (50). While “Now we Know” begins bleakly, the poem ends by addressing the impact of bad habits formed while self-isolating: “Stayed in my caves so long that even my shadows left me pale as a Victorian ghost too stubborn to leave her old haunts . . . I had crawled into corners, bunched into myself, forced my words onto a page and left them stranded without connections” (DiCecco 46). By addressing my worries

openly, by recognizing that I needed to find better coping methods, the poem ends by focusing on some of my favourite and simplest foods—tea, apples, bread and butter—in sensory ways as a means of suggesting a new commitment to feeding myself, body and spirit, following Fisher’s suggestion. In between these moments of preparation are also moments which purposefully describe summer events--barbeques, beach days, patio nights—in a vague manner so that they might be interpreted as memories of times before social-distancing or, more hopefully, memories that might be made in the future.

*Shelf Life* works to open dialogues on stigmatized topics, using food to paradoxically explore subjects that may be difficult to address at the dinner table such as grief, mental health, and sex as part of its agenda to promote self-preservation. Grief is explored in poems such as “When We’re Sad” (60) which exemplifies how specific foods such as “ice-cream” become intertwined with emotional responses. The repetition of the traditional grocery store clerk’s “Can I help you?” in “Stacking Cans” (42) expresses some of the desperation of trying to reach out to loved ones during times of crisis. Cans and dried goods have socioeconomic associations, regularly associated with can drives and food banks, and the poem addresses concerns involving mental health and stress that arise from financial disparity and the threat of homelessness (Munn Rivard 1-2). The missing cans in the pyramid act as implicit suggestions of need, and while the gaps seem to imply instability, the last lines of stacking cans are also the most supportive: “Can I trust you love you help you help you reach you support you I Can” (DiCecco 42).

Explicit references to sexual activity in my thesis are used primarily to counter the ideology which consistently positions women’s pleasure as secondary to men’s. In their article titled “Let’s (Not) Talk about Sex” B. Montemurro et. al. note a reluctance in

young women to publicly discuss sexual desire due to social stigma “reserved for girls who have casual sex or are purported to be sexually active” (142). They further note consequences of avoiding sexual discourse: “When women convey a belief that they should not even talk about sex, they tacitly give into ideologies which label their sexual desires as secondary or inconsequential” (ibid). Many of my poems incorporate playful double-entendres and sensual language with a focus on taste and touch to reinforce narratives that encourage readers to explore and embrace their sexuality. My poem “Sweet Release” begins with a lie told by an older brother that eating directly from a jar of Nutella “will kill you,” (DiCecco 30) establishing a connection between pleasure and death that subtly plays on moral stories where a heroine’s illicit affair leads to her death (as familiar in Victorian novels and classic horror film where anybody who engages in sexual intercourse is slated for death). The spaces between the spoken word and the narrator’s internal thoughts represent the disjunction between what is said and what she feels, the gaps narrowing as the narrator begins to embrace her cravings:

But those were my first wrinkles,  
eating and repeating

“I don’t want to die.”

while tongues melted, cocoa spread,  
sugar lingered and licked,  
eased and filled craving parts of me  
quick to dissolve.

Every taste of sweetness

now a sacrifice, now a willingness, a mantra of

“Just one more”

every bite a look into the end,

every end a biting anticipation.

Some comfort in wanting in craving

more, more. (30)

The irony in the idea of sacrifice is that the narrative voice ultimately chooses to indulge in her sweet tooth, choosing not to sacrifice her own pleasures. My thesis thus also works to interrogate the presumed shelf-life of myths and codes of etiquette that continue to exist today.

The ideology which positions women’s sexual pleasure as secondary seems to align with the pervading stereotype that also consistently positions women in the role of provider. In *Food and Cultural Studies*, studies conducted in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century “note the strong relationship between the practice of mothering, self-sacrifice and caring for others” (Ashley 133). Although these studies were conducted nearly thirty years ago, contemporary scholarship continues to note a “disproportionate division of labour [which] is rationalized through implicit gendered assumptions, such as women’s apparently natural proclivity for maintaining family health (Beagan et. al. 2008)” (593 Cairns et. al.).

My poem “Openings” highlights the challenge of overcoming persistent gendered divisions within the domestic and negotiations for pleasure against “[historic] associations between femininity and restraint” (ibid). The title of “Openings” references the action at the root of the poem’s conflict—the opening of a jar of jelly—and its

purpose, which is to initiate or open conversations which investigate narratives of restraint. The first line of the poem “Devouring jelly light, fingers feeding off glass grooves the shape of cherries, raspberries, grapes—” (DiCecco 27) emphasizes an awakening of the senses, inspired by Stein’s “tactile erotics” as explored by Rebecca Scherr: “By focusing on hearing and touch and excising the image, the reader is never allowed a detached position outside the frame of the text but is constantly (and consciously) implicated in the process of signification” (Scherr 204). The opening line works to draw readers in through a tactile reading, but while this focus on the senses can be construed positively, there is also an implicit suggestion that the woman in this poem may be feeding off insubstantial things: the light filtered through the jars of jelly rather than the jelly itself. This reference to “light” also plays on gender stereotypes formulated from eating habits, with ‘light foods’ such as salads typically associated with femininity (Ashley 71). This question of sustenance is touched on again in the line, “She used to devour the looks in their eyes,” (DiCecco 27) which further highlights a dependence on a second-hand enjoyment. There is, moreover, a suggestion of the woman being devoured in turn, the jar “feeding in turn from her touch” a reminder of the efforts and time it has taken to create these food objects; and there is even a sense of the readers devouring the woman, the poem told in second-person and the woman’s internal and external struggles on display with the jars: “Crackers and cheese and bread all spread out/before her, and she doesn’t take a bite” (27).

The tone of “Openings” begins to shift, however, near its conclusion, referencing classical examples where women are punished for eating or opening what is forbidden to them and reinterpreting them in ways that celebrate women’s curiosity and persistence:



“Was hope enough for Pandora?/ Knowledge for Eve?/ Patience for Persephone, trapped in a cold, dark place—” (27). That these stories are framed as questions and the narrative voice falters in its reinterpretation at the words “trapped in a cold, dark place” (27) works to heighten the conflict between self-pleasure and restraint. “Openings” also borrows more subtly from classic Greek stories: underscoring the poem is the narrative of the descent into the underworld, a play on the myth of Orpheus which sees the retrieval of a beloved thing under the threat of looking backwards. The poem concludes with the motif of the “cold, dark place” replaced with a “warm, well-lighted space” (27), the moment thawing as the woman finally reaches for the jar. Importantly, the poem ends without describing the moment of consumption since the “first taste is hers” (28) and hers alone.

“Openings” was initially inspired by the work of Canadian artist Mary Pratt, particularly her painting “Jelly Shelf” which depicts hyper-realistic jars of jelly, the profusion of vibrant and warm colours highlighting the beauty of everyday domestic objects. In an interview conducted by Cathy Boaks titled “A Conversation with Mary Pratt,” Pratt explains how she began her career as a professional artist:

I was married, I had two children, it wasn't long until I had four children, and really it did seem quite impossible, and until I began to understand something about something, in this case it was housework, because that's what I had to, I began to really understand how one did housework, and what things were valuable in housework, and as I understood that, it became quite beautiful to me, the things around me became beautiful, and gradually I began to take myself seriously

because I could understand what beauty was all about. [0:03:59-  
0:04:39]

The above excerpt expresses some of the conflict between managing the household and Pratt's initial pursuit as a professional painter, but it is important to note that the domestic sphere was also a source of inspiration. This aligns with Stein's view of the household, with Murphy reading *Tender Buttons* as a way of reworking the traditional language of the domestic in a way that also recognizes its importance: "I find that Stein's text works, rather, to reinvest domestic labor with value, to make household tasks into code words for stability in her new domestic arrangement for erotic lesbian love. Stein does defy Victorian precepts of order and decorum, but not to debase the domestic sphere, the intimate sphere of women" (388). Although my thesis works to reverse myths that position women's desire as secondary, it does not attempt to do so by devaluing the domestic; rather, my thesis celebrates the efforts that it takes to create these food objects. For example, the rushed and irregular rhythm of my poem "The Apple Carver," which was prompted by Sue Sheppard's historical account of methods of preservation, emphasizes the stressful nature of the scene from the perspective of the provider, who is divided by the present task and future threats which momentarily overwhelm her:

Threading apple slices and the feel juices dripping needles ripping and the peel  
peeling heat and sweat sliding down a chin--

*Is there time?*

while melted gold pours past panes past doors tugging children chores while  
sunlight puddles on the floors spilling on her skin--

*Is it enough?*

skirts dragging miles of ice slipping soles freezing tiles buried in her craft the  
slightest hint of draft Winter breathing down her neck. (DiCecco 4)

While the scene is chaotic, the long chain of words mimics the strings of apples that the woman is threading by hand, stressing her creativity and ingenuity by overlapping her role as carver with the role of poet. The use of assonance, alliteration, and internal rhymes in this poem further reinforces a kind of narrative threading, a back and forth that mimics the action of the needle slicing through the apple peels.

### **Conclusion**

Unlike traditional cookbooks or food narratives, which often organize recipes by meals or in specific sections (ex: by ingredient), my thesis is not divided in any specific way, representing the disorder of the pantry cabinets in the houses I grew up in where the only way to find anything was to become intimately acquainted with the patterns of the household. This apparent disorder does not imply that the poems follow each other in a completely haphazard manner, but that any connections in the ordering are subtle: for example, “Honey Stings” (DiCecco 23) follows directly after “Cupped Comforts” (22) because tea and honey are familiar combinations in my cabinets. While *Shelf Life* does not follow any clear patterns, the first poem “A Word with the Reader” and the last poem “Last Thing” were the only ones written as specifically the first and last poems respectively. “A Word with the Reader” (1) mimics the introduction to *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook* and provides readers with the purpose of the text which is to reinforce a self-sustaining narrative.

The title of the final poem of my thesis, “Last Thing,” is a play on the word “lasting” and begins each stanza with familiar parting words following shoppers leaving

the house: “One moment,” “Just a sec,” “Hang on,” “Don’t forget,” and “One last thing” (48). It is my way of saying “goodbye” to readers, each stanza marking brief and nonsequential reflections on our current relationships to food and cooking. The third stanza reflects on the experience of the reader after completing their reading, gaining a better understanding of the arrangement of my thesis collection or the location of certain poems or “food objects” in the same way that one becomes familiar with the cabinets of close friends and family: “You are no longer a stranger here.” My thesis concludes with the beginning of spring, and themes of transformation:

One last thing—when we least expected it,  
the ice broke from the river,  
and our empty cans of jams and peaches  
filled with dirt, feeding new life on old sills--  
the bell jar broken, the experiment over,  
and we filtered through. (48-49)

My thesis ends with one final literary allusion, the bell jar a reference to Sylvia Plath’s novel *The Bell Jar*, where it alludes to feelings of containment: that the jar is broken here, then, is not a sign of waste, but of liberation from confinement from one of the few jars listed in my thesis whose purpose is not to provide sustenance. Although the leftover cans have been emptied, I wanted to emphasize that these objects gain new purposes, are recycled or transformed into objects which continue to feed life, albeit on different shelves. My thesis then concludes by suggesting that the purpose in life is not to find a thing that lasts, but to embrace ways of lasting.

Relationships between identity and food are complex, and constantly changing and evolving. Further literary analysis of food narratives, along with the creation of more food narratives, will be helpful in exploring our growing understanding of the impact of consumption and the language surrounding it. Just as Harryette Mullen's *S\*PeRM\*\*K\*T* is a response to Gertrude Stein's "Food" section of *Tender Buttons*, my thesis continues the conversation, reconciling both the pantry and the supermarket, public and private spheres; and with its variety of poetic styles, themes, topics, and tactile and erotic language, my thesis not only encourages a readerly response, but eagerly anticipates it.

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