

"Nothin' Says Lovin' Like a Poet in the Oven": A History of the Sylvia Plath Bake-Off

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The Sylvia Plath Bake-Off, perhaps the world's first and only combination open mic and baked goods contest, was held annually in New York's Hudson Valley from 1993 to 2003. It started as an informal house party at my old apartment in Kingston on Hone Street, and didn't focus on the literary arts in the beginning. In fact, I was inspired by Richard's legs.

My friend Richard Lewis was an art professor at one of the local colleges, and had recently acquired a pair of mannequin legs to use for still life arrangements in his classes. Jokingly, I suggested that I should have a party in mid-February to honor Plath's memory, and to brighten an otherwise harsh season. Richard mentioned the legs and I immediately pictured them dangling out from my old-fashioned oven. They became the centerpiece of the party, with the addition of a pleated skirt and penny loafers. It was 1989 and a tradition was born.

The annual event began a few years later, while I was a graduate student at the University at Albany. Still deeply rooted in the lower valley, I commuted back and forth monthly to host an open poetry mic at the A.I.R. Studio Gallery in Kingston. To attract an audience, I came up with a new theme every month. Recycling the notion of the Bake-Off was a natural. Upon my full time return to Kingston in the fall of 1993, it was agreed that due to the overwhelmingly positive response to that particular theme, the Sylvia Plath Bake-Off would become a regular event.

Through 1995 the Bake-Off was still part of the monthly reading series at A.I.R., but in 1996, it became the only event I produced there. From the first, attendees were encouraged to bring baked goods to share with others, but it wasn't until 1996 that an actual contest was instituted. Prizes thereafter were awarded not just for the best poem written especially for the event, but for the most unique baked item, too. No baking was done on site but even so, the creativity of the entries was always startling.

Creations over the years included some of the most unusual pastry, cookie and cake concoctions I've ever seen. They included such questionable items as a raisin bread noose, marzipan embryos, and countless ill-fated fashion dolls, heads plunged into various homemade and store bought cakes decorated to look, of course, like ovens. One year's winning entry was a

basket of hand decorated vanilla wafers with faces of varying expressions, accompanied by an altered box promoting the mythical taste treat, "O.D.O.s". Prizes were usually rather practical, such as oven mitts or aprons, but in 2001, the top prize for a poem best fitting the sub-theme (that year, "Bible of Dreams") was an Easy Bake oven, ironically styled like a microwave.

In 1997, shortly after that year's reading, Jim Marzano, director of the A.I.R. Studio, received a letter from Pillsbury Company. It seems that Pillsbury had long before copyrighted the phrase, "bake-off" for its own annual event, and was concerned that the use of it might cause some confusion among Hudson Valley homemakers. The letter stated, in part, that, "The name BAKE-OFF has come to be identified with Pillsbury and Pillsbury enjoys valuable goodwill in connection with that very famous trademark...We believe your use of the mark is likely to cause confusion, mistake or deception of customers or potential customers in view of the long prior use and registration by Pillsbury of its BAKE-OFF mark." An information pamphlet was also enclosed, with this startling heading: "Why calling just any contest a Bake-Off (R) is a half-baked idea."

A local newspaper reporter contacted the company to see if they were familiar with the concept of satire, or Ms. Plath and her work. Neither was the case. Pillsbury had enclosed a letter for Jim to sign, asking him to promise to stop using the phrase. He and I both decided the best response was to ignore the request. No further communication was received from the company.

The subtheme for 1998 was obvious. It became, "Doesn't the Doughboy Read?" Around this time Pillsbury was actively pursuing another legal issue with the Vermont ice cream company Ben & Jerry's. The battle cry, "What's the Doughboy Afraid Of?" With a small tweak to the spelling, the event became known as the "Sylvia Plath Bak-Offff", and underwent several variations over the remaining years.

In 1999, after the recent death of Ted Hughes, the cynical edge was magnified by the subtheme, "Ted Hughes in Hell". Prizes that year included a hardcover copy of Hughes' recently published *Birthday Letters*. In 2000, with the impending doom of a new century looming, the subtheme became a hopeful, "What Would Sylvia Do?" Subthemes for 2001, 2001 and 2003 were, in order: "Bible of Dreams," "Dear Diary," and "Winter Trees."

I mailed out dozens of postcards and press releases in those pre-Facebook days. I rediscovered recently in my bulging file folder dedicated to Bake-Off mementos two honeycomb tissue bells, trimmed to resemble bee hives. There is also a neatly folded apron that I wore as

host for several of the later Bake-Offs, white with gold lettering: KISS THE POET. Counting these incidentals, soda and a few cakes and cookies to supplement donations, the Bake-Off never operated in the black. A suggested donation was collected at the door from those who could afford it, but I knew that many of the poorest poets had trouble scraping up gas money to get there, much less an admission fee. I had a good corporate job then, and was more than happy to cover the expenses.

In return for my small yearly investment, I was the proud organizer of a reading/performance event that could not be duplicated. A few existing videos documented how the Bake-Off provided a spotlight for some of the Hudson Valley's most active poets, some of whom have faded from the scene even now. There was Jim Donnelly reading his poem in praise of the human posterior. By day a parking meter attendant in uptown Kingston, Donnelly was a link to an earlier scene, one that had been dominated by the late George Montgomery, fringe Beat poet and former open mic host. There was Dan Wilcox, alone and with his poetic trio Three Guys from Albany. Still an active force in the Capitol District, Wilcox's poem, "Sylvia Plath Slept Here," has little to do with the poet and more to do with love, life and memory. Mikhail Horowitz, a popular performance poet/comedian, treated the crowd to his own satirical piece, a version of "Twas The Night Before Christmas," as if written by Plath.

Teresa Marta Costa was another disciple of Montgomery's, and has been a force in her own right on the local poetry scene for decades. She was the winner of the Easy Bake microwave. Lei Isaacs is a celebrity in Hudson Valley literary circles. She was born and bred in the old Woodstock arts colony, and therefore comes by her eccentric ways honestly. In her vivid poems, she contemplates an afterlife where she is waited on by Billy Ray Cyrus, and the perfect menopause present, a motorcycle with a purple sidecar.

Mike Jurkovic has been published in literary journals across the country, and described himself at one of the Bake-Offs as a street side Socialist. Recently he has become active in the Occupy Wall Street movement. James Casey, or "Shamus," as he often prefers, was co-creator of the prizewinning O.D.O.s and blessed the Bake-Off on several occasions with his Celtic inspired dreams. Dave Kime, a virulent anti-war environmentalist, was famous for not needing a microphone when he got up to top volume, which was every time he read.

Oddly, the unofficial catchphrase I had liberally employed in much of the publicity I produced for the Bake-Off over the years was never under fire. Coined by my brilliant friend

Mark Aldrich, "Nothin' Says Lovin' Like a Poet in the Oven," perfectly captured the spirit and tone of the event at its inception, and for the years of its run. I was cynical, possessed of that shallow spirit only an American in their thirties can boast about. I had wrenched myself from a bad marriage early on, but I was too proud, had no real awareness of how it would affect my work, my life, my loves. I was probably thinking, with great respect, that I was better than Sylvia. I had survived and she hadn't. And with so little else capable of amusing me, that was something to celebrate. Apparently many others thought so too, judging by the increasing attendance over the years.

The A.I.R Studio Gallery, the front room of a large Victorian house where there once was a florist shop, was filled to capacity each year for the Bake-Off. In 2001, we moved the reading to the Flying Saucer, a short-lived coffeehouse and performance space in uptown Kingston. In 2002, an afternoon edition of the Bake-Off was held in the local Unitarian sanctuary, with some success. I attempted to return it to an evening event in 2003 at the same location, with less than optimal results. On a February night with temperatures well below freezing, over fifty would-be readers and listeners waited patiently outside of the church. Due to some mix-up, no one from the congregation came that night to unlock the doors. All the emergency numbers carefully posted on the doors at the entrance went unanswered. A core group of us, after the numbing cold became intolerable, retreated to a local pizza pub on Broadway, Tony's. A photo of me that night in the local newspaper (because of course that was the night a reporter chose to cover the Bake-Off) shows a shiny faced woman hoisting a beer in cheerful resignation. The Bake-Off was rescheduled for March, and amid profuse apologies. However, the delay predictably caused a drop in attendance. Half the number of people came on the make-up date.

After that incident, I began to lose my enthusiasm entirely. I had finally outgrown the smarmy attitude that had made the Sylvia Plath Bake-Off sound like such a brilliant idea a decade before. I had become deeply involved in a long distance relationship that was quickly proving to be the real thing I'd been looking for. And the one viable venue I'd located to stage the event in, the one that offered total freedom from censorship, comfortable accommodations, and a central location easily accessed by anyone in the entire Hudson Valley area and beyond had, in my estimation, become untrustworthy. The Bake-Off's time had passed. I learned over the years of producing the Sylvia Plath Bake-Off how to effectively organize and publicize a large reading, as well as how to be a gracious, tongue-biting host who for once could

allow guests to be the stars of the show. My own work grew through regular exposure and exchange with other poets at the Bake-Off, and the many readings hosted by others that continue to this day throughout the Hudson Valley. Mainly, though, I grew up because of the reading. I slowly changed from a bitter, smug youngster who didn't know yet her teaching degree would only lead her to a job at Cosmodemonic Communications, who still thought her best work only waited for her fingers to touch a keyboard, to the far humbler, sympathetic creature I have become. I am still quick to judge, and my tongue offstage is quick to express those judgments. But I am decidedly softer, less apt to condemn a person for their mistakes, for their choice to be kind or caring instead of right. I am perhaps a little like the person we hope Sylvia Plath might have become, had she not fallen victim to her personal demons. Perhaps she could have forgiven Ted, herself, the literary community for being what it was in her day. What could her work show us, with that intellect combined with a decade or two of life experience? I am only beginning to explore that part of myself, and it will take another fifty years to report the findings.