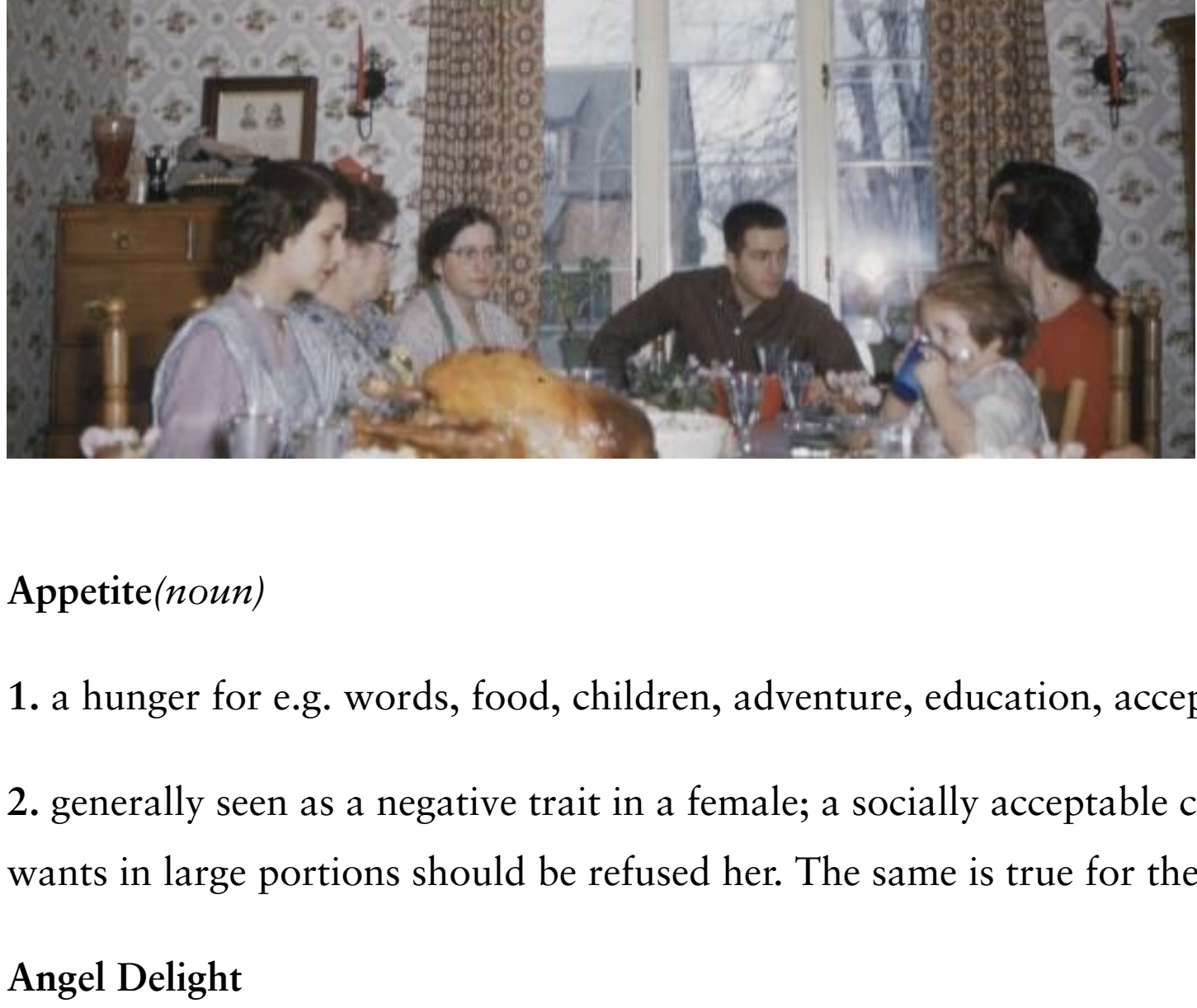




Non-Fiction
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‘Appetite’ by E.R. Murray



Appetite(*noun*)

1. a hunger for e.g. words, food, children, adventure, education, acceptance, money, equality.

2. generally seen as a negative trait in a female; a socially acceptable consensus since ancient times is that whatever a woman wants in large portions should be refused her. The same is true for the poor.

Angel Delight

1. Around the time I returned home from foster care, aged seven, my fifteen-year-old sister moved out. She lived with her best friend and every Saturday, when me and ‘our kid’ (my brother) would visit them, they’d prepare a batch of Angel Delight for us. Anyone born in the 1970s will remember this sugary concoction of preservatives and E-numbers that you mixed with milk and set in the fridge. Butterscotch, strawberry, chocolate and banana. We only had treats on a Sunday back then, so Angel Delight on a Saturday was a huge deal. It was the highlight of our week. But I distinctly remember one Saturday when my mother had continued drinking through the night and decided to forbid our visit. She was wasted and melancholic (probably lonely) but I was livid. I could taste the butterscotch melt, imagine its smooth tang – the injustice burned and scarred much deeper than any of her other hurts. (This is the only childhood memory that my brother and I can agree on 100%.)

2. Years later, as a teenager, I visited my eldest sister who I didn’t really know. She was raised by our father and had just come back into our lives. Her portion sizes at dinner were rather meagre and not wanting to seem unappreciative, I decided to secretly investigate the contents of her fridge late at night. When all the adults had passed out with alcohol, I braved the midnight kitchen and discovered a sizeable bowl of strawberry Angel Delight. I gobbled up a giant spoon of its creamy goodness, only to discover it was sour, fishy and disgusting: taramasalata. To this day, it’s one of the few foods I cannot eat. (On reflection, these two incidents show in perfect detail the contrasting relationships I have with my sisters.)

Bread Queues

A regular occurrence in childhood: we would queue for free bread, with maybe potatoes or butter or cheese added, sometimes tins of spam or corned beef. Whatever the government provided, we waited for. We came armed with child benefit books to prove how many children were in each family so the food could be divvied up accordingly. We’d form a disorderly line and gabble, fight, bicker, play, and wait. Kerby* was a particularly popular game: we had rules about how the queuing system worked and no-one would lose or jump their place. The wait could be long, but we rarely noticed – we were, after all, playing games with our friends and queuing for surprises. We felt important; real life heroes, on quests like those we read about in dog-eared books in our local library. Once we had our spoils, we rushed home, especially if there were extras. The parent(s) would be waiting on the doorstep and we learned to read faces like weather forecasts; sometimes bright with sunny spells, sometimes stormy.

When I speak of the bread queues during the Thatcher years, of the millions below poverty line, many people are surprised that:

1. they existed;
2. I want to talk about it.

But reliance on bread queues in the UK is at an all-time high, and rickets has returned. Keeping quiet about something doesn’t stop it from being real.

(*Kerby: Stand on opposite sides of the road, throw a football at your opponent’s kerb. Hit it at a 45-degree angle so it bounces back towards you to score, then move to the centre of the road for more shots at a higher score. Keep throwing until you miss. The winner is the first to a given number.)

Cream Soda

The pop man would drive his truck into the estate; the tinkle of glass bottles jammed into crates would be heard long before the truck could be spotted. His arrival was as exciting as the ice cream van’s clanging wail – because there were hidden benefits. While the pop man was delivering his gem-coloured bottles of fizz door to door, us kids would be robbing the empties off the back because you received money for returns. My mother would select some pop, ask the man to wait while she collected the empties/her purse, then meet us out back for the stolen goods. She got 10p off for every bottle we robbed. Our reward was a nice big glass of cream soda.

Dripping

Eaten at least three times a week, dripping was spread on toast or cold white bread with salt sprinkled on top. Cold, congealed meat fat, white and pasty: to this day, this is how I believe slugs might taste.

Gravy

Up until the age of about fifteen, I hated gravy mixing with other foods. I would have mine in a cup so I could dip food into it, avoiding the otherwise inevitable slop. A few years before my mother died, I decided to visit her. For the first time since I’d left home, she made us a dinner. She couldn’t believe that I wanted the gravy on my plate and I was surprised that she would think otherwise. I was thirty-four years old. I realised how little we knew each other and also how little we wanted to.

Kedgeriee

On a recent writing residency in Ireland, kedgeriee was served as the evening meal. Many of the artists hadn’t heard of it, never mind tried it, but this was a fairly regular treat in my childhood because the main ingredients – rice, eggs, curry powder – were a staple in every home and kippers were a cheap addition to the weekly shop (our version never included cream). One of the residents asked me where it came from and I explained the colonial origins. Her reply was, ‘I guess it was almost worth it, then.’

Here, the underclass accent meant nothing. I was just another writer taking advantage of the opportunities afforded me – and English. So, once again, the shame, the apologies, trying to explain the division and poverty without going into too much embarrassing detail.

But how do you find the words to explain that you’ve felt ashamed of your heritage since the age of eight when your teacher showed you photos of the famine in India/Ireland/*INSERT TOO MANY COUNTRIES TO NAME* and said, ‘This is what an empire really means’ and your stomach grumbled so loudly he looked like he was angry enough to cry.

Liver

On her playful days, which were often the worst, my mother’s idea of fun was to surprise us with a slap around the face with a slice of raw liver. I included this as a scene in my young adult novel, *Caramel Hearts*. A reader emailed me to say they were disappointed; a mother would never do such a thing and as a result they would have to give me a one star review. I thanked them very much for reading and taking the time to respond.

Mackerel

Mackerel skies and horses tales
Moor your boats and lower your sails.

(local saying, West Cork, borrowed for my first children’s novel, *The Book of Learning: Nine Lives Trilogy 1*)

Fish was expensive, so it wasn’t part of our diet growing up, unless it was from tins (pilchards) or on the school dinner menu (cod), and then it was usually battered (also see kedgeriee). When I met my father in my teens, I tried fresh mackerel for the first time. Many people dislike new food they’re unaccustomed to, but I remember clearly loving that first mouthful of oily fish. In West Cork, where I now live, we fish for mackerel in the Atlantic. There’s nothing better in the summer than a 5 a.m. fishing trip, gutting a catch of mackerel and washing them in the sea, then putting them straight into the pan. It’s like something I’d have read in grubby library copies of *National Geographic* as a child and every trip out, I feel grateful.

Mango

My father was thrifty and refused to buy anything at full price. He’d shop at the market at the end of the day so he could buy the remainders; bruised or spoiling fruit that a tired market stall holder wanted rid of because it wouldn’t sell the following day. On one of my summer visits (there were only ever two), he bought an entire crate of mangoes for £3 and we ate them all in 24 hours, sat in the garden with bantams pecking around our feet, and it felt like heaven. I have a feeling this memory is somewhat rose-tinted, embellished and adorned, but it’s a memory I like all the same.

Milk

Maggie Thatcher, Milk Snatcher Run all you like
She’s gonna catch ya

(playground song circa 1982)

1. When I went into nursery, we would receive a third-pint bottle of milk every day. It was free and, for many, this was our only access to milk. It was one of those essential post-war services that had run successfully for decades and had a hugely negative impact once withdrawn (see bread queues). By the next academic year, the milk was withdrawn from schools. Free milk had already been abolished in secondary schools in 1968 under Harold Wilson (Labour), and for children aged seven and over by Margaret Thatcher (Conservative) in 1971. The under sevens were the tail end of the campaign and although I know nothing about the statistics, I remember really, really wanting that playtime bottle of milk.
2. Before milk floats were replaced by trucks which were then replaced by supermarkets, some of our neighbours had milk delivered to their doorsteps. We lived in terraces and in the mornings, these cold white bottles would sweat on the frosty doorsteps, looking as enticing as the Coca Cola bottles in Christmas adverts. One winter, our street experienced a sudden outbreak of theft, with sparrows or robins pecking through the foil top on the milk and drinking the layer of cream. With milk such a precious commodity, the community decided that the situation had to be dealt with. People were put on watch and, even though no bird was ever spotted in the act, the theft miraculously stopped. (No one ever found out that it was me – I wouldn’t steal the whole thing, just the cream.)

Mushy Peas

My mother believed you had to eat everything you were given and my brother despised mushy peas so she force-fed him them one day and he vomited them onto his plate.

Nougat

After returning home from foster care, my accent had altered. My final placement had been with two teachers who worked with me on my language skills. They explained how, being underclass, my voice would work against me in the education system and they were determined to help. It left my voice forever slightly changed and I was mocked by my family and my peers. This word was the one I dreaded most. You could buy slabs of nougat on the market for next to nothing, so it was common to see kids eating a chunk of it as a treat. Knowing the real pronunciation, I could never bring myself to call it ‘nugget’ like the locals, so I did everything I could to avoid saying the word at all. Even now, the word makes me shudder and the way I say it feels affected.

Shit with Sugar On

If you were a child that ate anything, you would be proudly described as someone who would eat shit with sugar on. If you were a fussy eater, watch out. (See: Mushy Peas)

Tea

1. Many nations believe themselves to be the biggest tea drinkers in the world. Turkey, India, Ireland, Japan, the UK, Morocco, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait. There is little more refreshing than a cup of tea. Or comforting. Making someone tea is a huge kindness. When people say ‘it’s an Irish thing’ or ‘it’s a Japanese thing’ or ‘it’s a Turkish thing’ they mean, this is a ceremony, a ritual we treasure. Within a country, there’s always division over the tea brands used; Yorkshire Tea vs Tetley, Lyons vs Barry’s. When I was little, we used Brooke Bond and I collected the little sets of cards – wild birds, countries, flags, wild flowers, vintage cars. My favourite was a set showing foods you could forage: I nearly made myself sick on raw field mushrooms that year.
2. You could always tell the class of a person through the way they named their mealtimes. If you had breakfast, lunch and dinner you were middle class. And if you ate supper at night, you were virtually royalty. In my hometown, you had breakfast (we never did though), dinner (free dinners at school) and tea was the last meal of the day.

Water

As kids, we called water ‘council pop’. It was one of those terms that made it feel like the ordinary could be extraordinary, and it always made people laugh. Even though it was free (water rates were included in the Housing Benefit allowance), we had to ask my mother’s permission for a drink of water and she would often refuse. It was a pathetic form of control, yet potentially deadly – though as children we didn’t take much notice. We would sneak to our neighbour’s house for water and they would always give it, no questions asked. Over time, people began to offer water whenever they spotted us outside playing. It was this more than anything that eventually showed me that our family was different to the others around us; that my mother had much more than class and poverty issues to worry about. She had lost her appetite.

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About the Author

E.R. Murray writes novels for children/young adults and short fiction. Her award-winning books include the Nine Lives Trilogy (*The Book of Learning*, *The Book of Shadows*, *The Book of Revenge*) and *Caramel Hearts*. Recent anthology publications include *The Elysian: Creative Responses* (New Binary Press), *Reading the Future* (Arlen House) and *Autonomy* (New Binary Press).

E.R. Murray • issue #8

Submissions for issue #11 are open for the month of October ➤