

The Meal · Sharon Olds

Mama, I never stop seeing you there
at the breakfast table when I'd come home from school—
sitting with your excellent skeletal posture
facing that plate with the one scoop of cottage cheese on it,
forcing yourself to eat, though you did not want to live,
feeding yourself, small spoonful by
small spoonful, so you would not die and
leave us without a mother as you were
left without a mother. You'd sit
in front of that mound rounded as a breast and
giving off a cold moony light,
light of the life you did not want, you would
hold yourself there and stare down at it,
an orphan forty years old staring at the breast,
a freshly divorced woman down to 82 pounds
staring at the cock runny with milk gone sour,
a daughter who had always said
the best thing her mother ever did for her
was to die. I came home every day to
find you there, dry-eyed, unbent, that
hot control in the breakfast nook, your
delicate savage bones over the cheese
curdled like the breast of the mother twenty years in the
porous earth,

and yet what I remember is your
spoon moving like the cock moving in the
body of the girl waking to the power of her pleasure,
your spoon rising in courage, bite after bite, you
tilted rigid over that plate until you
polished it for my life.