

Hunger

By Jennifer Abernathy

In the hospital, you will want to talk about food—imagined, remembered, denied. The wild red fruit of the summer of your seventeenth year; your grandmother’s banana pudding in a milky white dish. Many times—nine times out of ten—it is steak. Rare, medium-rare, filet mignon, tomahawk. Something with chew, something to sink your teeth into, for juice to run down your chin, napkin or not. Sometimes it is what brought you to the hospital in the first place. Red wine, dark and nocturnal, spiced fruit fragrant. A double cheeseburger and fries, glistening with hot oil, sparkling with salt.

When you tell me of your hunger, is it comfort or vice? Some dream of the meals that wait on the outside of the front doors, some of those last few and precious bites as they transition from the here to the there. Some want nothing at all, the plate of their dreams still glistening and bare. But oh, how we all want water, ice. Cold and clean.

One in particular will close her eyes as she describes a simple bowl of perfectly steamed white rice, only conjured into existence by her mother’s own hand. At the peak of your hunger, you will want your homes, your neighborhoods, your tiled kitchens and charcoal barbecues. Your desires are a revelation; what you really want is the everyday. You will come to understand a universal truth, that the tastes of your childhood, your country, your history will bring you home, whether only in your mind’s eye or with that first actual bite days or weeks after entering these doors.

Tell me of your hunger, tell me of your medicine.

Jennifer Abernathy is a Clinical Dietitian working in critical care at Intermountain Medical Center with a particular interest in nutrition support. She has worked in myriad inpatient medical nutrition therapy settings as well as diabetes self-management and education. Most recently she finds herself in the ICU where questions of hunger and food are often examined with a new and different lens.