I am thinking about food as I write this. The lunch bag that I packed for myself this morning is empty after a long day at school and work. The discomfort of hunger steadily grows as my body desires to be filled with a warm, savory something. The soggy leftovers sitting in my refrigerator at this moment sound more enticing as the minutes tick by. Though a vague awareness of a preference for fresh food lingers in my mind, I can physically feel my standards sinking. Hunger lives in my belly until it grows too large to be contained there. Then, it migrates to the tip of my consciousness and begins to crowd out other concerns. It sprawls its aching body over top of worries about work, the memory of a fight with a friend, my mental to-do list.

 I was lucky enough not to have acquainted myself with this focus-narrowing, consciousness-steering sort of hunger until I chose it for myself. I cultivated hunger, welcoming it in with the hope that it would melt away the soft and jiggly parts of my body that I hated. I had determined that, to be small and worthy of affection, I needed to eat less. But each time I reached a certain level of hunger, I would come to an hour later with fried chicken grease on my fingers and an empty milkshake cup on the table. These were the years in which I saw food as no more than a means to engorging my body. I believed that the foods that I craved were bad. You know the ones. Fluffy, crunchy, cheesy pizza. Rich, fresh-baked brownies in perfect gastronomic synchronicity with a glass of milk. Sticky white rice with teriyaki sauce laced with MSG. Hamburgers dripping with bleu cheese and crowned with thick, crispy bacon.

My conflicting thoughts about and desires for food highlighted the complexity of the decision-making process around eating. I realized that, every time I tried to deprive myself of a “bad” food, something more powerful in another part of myself always won over. For many, food is scarce, or is complicated by health conditions. When multiple options are available, however, choosing food can be difficult to do. So many voices weigh in on what we should eat, and why. Which diet should we follow? Should we only eat as many calories as this calorie counter algorithm tells us to based on height and weight? Should we eat to lose weight, gain weight, for pleasure, for sustenance, for connection, to numb, to feel alive, to forget?

These are the thoughts from which this series grew. As I reflected on my own story, I sought out others’ as well. Through conversations I learned of interviewees’ thoughts about the overlapping realms of food, body and this elusive tangle of a concept that we call health. Conversations on sunlit porches, intimate offices, spare classrooms and at home ensued, each offering me the privilege of a glimpse into stories of another’s desires, insecurities, hopes and memories. Many stories emerged: stories of confusion, nostalgia, comparison, self-worth, longing, inner conflict, the spiritual. I learned that we are as much bound to each other by common food experiences as we are individuals with unique relationships with the proteins, lipids and carbohydrates with which we fuel our bodies each day. These drawings explore the complex relationship between what we eat and who we are.

Each drawing is inspired by one of these stories; the sacred act of eating that is beyond words explored through images.