

The Origins of Hunger

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The bloody yolk of the sun illuminates the craggy face of *Homo habilis* as flakes of obsidian fall to the savannah floor. Each shiny black flake marks a tiny Eucharistic prayer to rend food from the dead. The horizon of the Olduvai Gorge looms before the first species of man; his stomach rumbles, grip on tool tightens. With each strike of the hammerstone, man fashions his first tool, his first step towards controlling hunger.

When the obsidian is finally reduced to its core, the man thinks of dinner.

Fossil records show that when the hunt went well *Homo habilis* shared his food. He and others ate together at a centralized collection point. Such smorgasbords enhanced cooperation, communication, and lessened starvation. Shared food became much more than sustenance—a celebratory, ritualistic bounty against inevitable famine, a delineation of tribal affiliation, protection from the fates and nature, the lust and fertility of sated stomachs, the wealth of the well-fed, and the caloric comfort provided in an age of subsistence.

Cell by cell, neuron by neuron, the brain transformed humanity from merely “handy” to actually “thinking.” There were, of course, steps in between *Homo habilis* and *Homo sapiens*, and the progression is still somewhat debated, like how to cook a beloved recipe blurred by water, time, and an illegible hand.

The hand that wrote humanity into existence allowed for greater brain capacity fueled by better tools and easier eating.

And now, over two million years later, man is behind the wheel of a complex machine, asking his girlfriend what sounds good for dinner.

The moment before she answers, before she envisions fork to mouth, she thinks about her place in the passenger seat of hunger. What sinewy situation, what marrow of association, brought her from the Serengeti to this life without scarcity?

As she and her companion drive past every third Chinese, barbecue, and Italian restaurant, he also asks her, “Would you ever go to a buffet?”

She senses the ponderous pivot of his question: He, the lean, local and organic food snob, and she, plump, corn-fed farmer’s daughter, junk-food connoisseur.

The right answer, she knows, is to deny the primal default of gluttony. Too many Midwesterners such as she are gathered around the holy trough tonight. They seek what she seeks, too—to feel full, to sublimate desire. Ample food, like ample love, still leaves her wanting more. She knows these hungers have something to do with survival.

The modern-day rectangle of plenty—steaming hotplates of Crab Rangoon, the mechanical hum of a pulled ice cream lever, bowls of spinach nestled in valleys of chipped ice—come to mind as she slowly says: “No.”

In the car, she holds the meat of her boyfriend’s calloused hand and denies the evolutionary pull of the all-you-can-eat buffet. She knows she cannot, will not, stop the ancient craving, want pulsing like orgasm, her appetite deepening—the unrelenting habit of the insatiable.



Michaela A. Thornton's most recent essays and flash prose have been published in *Midwestern Gothic*, *The New Territory Magazine*, *The Southeast Review*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *Paddle Shots: A River Pretty Anthology* (Vol. 2), and a University of Missouri Press anthology, *Words Matter—Writing to Make a Difference* (April 2016). She loves her 9-month-old daughter Lucinda, cannoli, Hall & Oates, and Jo Ann Beard.