

# Food Chain

written by Carrie Helms Tippen | September 28, 2015



My sister took a picture and called it  
"The Food Chain."

A dry earthworm, thick with road dust,  
clamped in the bright jaw of a mockingbird  
trapped in the chrome maw of her SUV.  
We fasten it to the refrigerator  
with an apple-shaped magnet.

This morning we picked a watermelon,  
reading the signs of ripeness:  
the green curl at the stem had yellowed, dried,  
crumbled from the melon at the slightest pressure.  
"When they're ready, they pick themselves,"  
my father says, sounding the melon with his knuckle.  
He splits the watermelon in halves,  
the black rind laying open the still warm middle.

We sit at the table, scooping  
the salted meat with our spoons,  
the cold metal making perfect circles in the red skin.  
We argue over who has eaten  
more than her share of the heart,  
spitting the seeds on a striped beach towel  
drawn across the table to soak up the juice.

My father sits shirtless in the summer heat.  
I can see the faded scar halfway across his abdomen.  
I know it turns the corner and reaches almost to his spine.  
When I was a child, he couldn't eat watermelon  
or peanut butter or banana pudding.  
Some thing, some tumor, they said,  
had shriveled his kidneys  
until both were useless,  
until his skin was yellowed and dried,  
crumbling like a leaf and stem under my fingers,  
until his eyes were closed all the time,  
and I could not sit with him in his chair.  
This thing that did not like to eat watermelon  
dined ten years on my father.

Ten years dying, ten years healed,  
my father spits a seed, brandishes his spoon,  
excises another circle of meat.