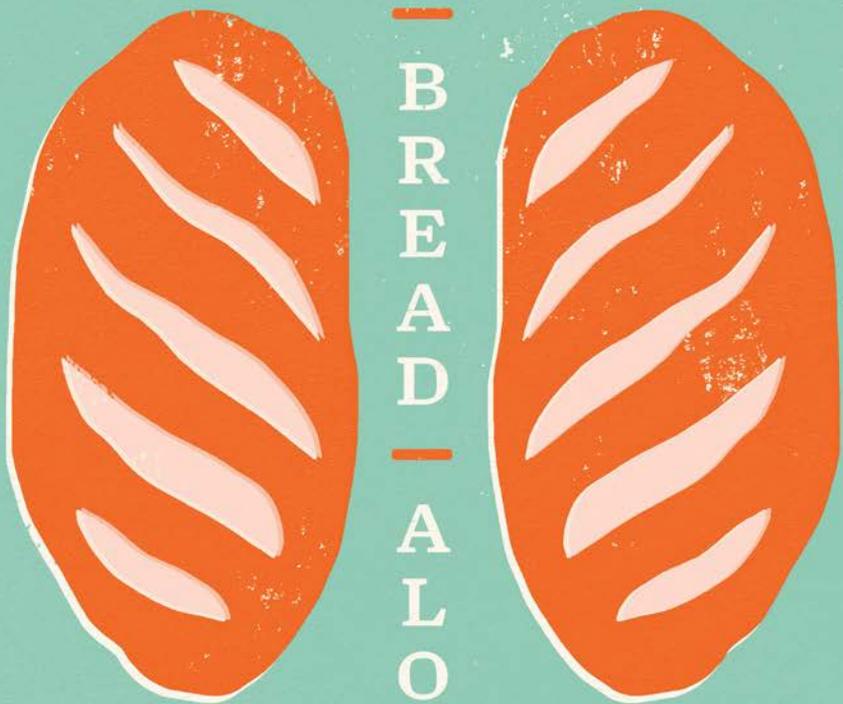


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*A Baker's Reflections on
Hunger, Longing, and the Goodness of God*

KENDALL VANDERSLICE

Foreword by Peter Reinhart

PRAISE FOR *BY BREAD ALONE*

By Bread Alone is a soulful, searching glimpse into trusting the goodness of God when it seems most opaque. Kendall Vanderslice trades toxic positivity for the promise of sustenance, and the result is deeply honest and curiously comforting. These pages are dusted with the flour of daily bread. If you are lost, longing, hope-weary, or barely hanging on (aren't we all?), read this and be nourished.

SHANNAN MARTIN

Author of *Start with Hello* and *The Ministry of Ordinary Places*

I am grateful for Kendall Vanderslice's *By Bread Alone*—a sustenance of hope, a needed nourishment for us hungering to create beauty faced with the bitter gaps of our divided cultures. Her words give rise to our tenderness, and her memorable chapters fill our hearts with compassion. Every page of this book (full of recipes) is brimming with refractive colors shining through the broken prisms of her life, a communion journey of service in tears, as a sojourner baker, a fellow maker into the aroma of the new.

MAKOTO FUJIMURA

Artist and author of *Art + Faith: A Theology of Making*

In this deeply personal account, baker-theologian Kendall Vanderslice explores how baking bread can become a lens through which we understand the Eucharist anew and what it means to allow God to form our lives into a living sacrifice for the life of the world. Be moved, touched, and inspired as you journey with Kendall into the world of artisan bread, embodiment, and what it means to fully embrace your vocation.

GISELA KREGLINGER, PHD

Author of *The Spirituality of Wine* and *The Soul of Wine*

By Bread Alone provides a refreshing perspective on the intersection between faith and food. Kendall eloquently uses her baking expertise and experience to poignantly remind us that the simple acts of making, breaking, and eating bread have profound theological implications.

ADRIAN MILLER

James Beard Award winner and executive director of the Colorado Council of Churches

By Bread Alone is a powerful invitation into the rhythms of baking and the rhythms of faith. As Kendall explains, these are complex journeys of nuance and transformation that mirror each other. Through a robust exploration of breadmaking and her own story, Kendall vulnerably and insightfully offers an alternative to the “Wonder Bread theology” that often plagues the church. This book nourishes and satisfies our deepest longings for the Bread of Life.

KAT ARMAS

Author of *Abuelita Faith* and host of *The Protagonistas* podcast

By Bread Alone is a tender and vulnerable story of Kendall’s search to be satisfied by God’s provision for her given life. A memoir about what it means to be hungry, what it means to be filled, and what it means to not always get what you desire. I loved this book and needed it myself. Every woman who has struggled to love and learn and lean into their body while still looking with hope toward their resurrected body needs this book.

LORE FERGUSON WILBERT

Author of *A Curious Faith* and *Handle with Care*

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*A Baker's Reflections on
Hunger, Longing, and the Goodness of God*

KENDALL VANDERSLICE

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*In memory of Rev. Dr. Charles “Big Daddy” Vanderslice,
who modeled deep love for God, passion for education,
and abounding grace for everyone. I only wish you
could have read this book before you went home.*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is the story of a baker who can only understand her vocation in light of the story of God's Church through history and around the world. It contains my own perspective on events that intersect with the stories of many others. While I seek to tell my journey with dignity and truth, turning it over and over again to see fractals of God's work throughout, I am limited by the bounds of my own experience and memory. I do not seek to paint any church or community as perfect, nor any community as void of good. I hope that as I share my story, both the places of healing and the places of pain, you find the tools necessary to see God's presence in your own story too.

This book contains discussions of disordered eating, depression, and death. Reader discretion is advised. Some names have been changed and characters merged for privacy and ease of storytelling.

FOREWORD

In her preface to this superb book, Kendall Vanderslice wrote a very simple sentence that triggered an epiphany for me: “As soon as flour hits water, a series of transformations begins.” And there it is, the essence of this book, the answer to the question I get asked more than any other: “Why bread?” The answer, if one may be so bold as to say there actually is a definitive answer, begins with that crucial word *transformation*. It is a word, like bread itself, worth peeling back to explore in its many layers, which is what Kendall does. In that sense, this book is a revelation, I would say, of why bread is the most iconic transformational food. Bread, as you will soon see, is a portal that can take us into the depths of what transformation means, what it actually is.

I’ve been obsessed with this notion of bread as the ultimate transformational food for many years now, so when I talk or write about it, I start with a basic, self-coined definition: transformation means a radical change from one thing into something totally other. I hadn’t even looked the word up in the dictionary—my definition just seemed so intuitively obvious. But for the sake of this foreword, I opened my Webster’s to *transformation*. Nestled between a number of useless, redundant definitions (“the state of being transformed”), I found this gem: “A change in

form, appearance, condition, nature, or character.” One word directly above it on the dictionary page, I saw listed *transform*, which included the following: “to change into another substance; to transmute.” Full disclosure: I like my definition better, but any and all of these Webster’s versions will do for what I’m about to say.

As a baker, teacher, and author of ten bread books, I always frame the process in terms of another definition I coined: the baker’s mission is to evoke the full potential of flavor trapped in the grain. It is as simple as that—the baker who evokes the best flavor wins. To accomplish this, one must employ all the tools of his or her craft in order to transform flour, water, salt, and yeast into something totally other; to change it in form, appearance, condition, nature, and character; to change it into another substance; to effect a transmutation.

But here’s the twist, as Edward Espe Brown put it when he contributed to the jacket of my first book back in 1991. At the time, he was a baker and already the author of *The Tassajara Bread Book*. He put it with perfect symmetry and elegance: “The baker makes the bread, the making of the bread transforms the baker.”

Which brings us back to Kendall Vanderslice and her aha-inducing insight that “as soon as flour hits water, a series of transformations begins.” This book, which is both a series of meditations and a collection of touching stories about her own journey of self-discovery, perfectly captures the symbiotic back-and-forth of how the baker and the making of the bread transform each other. Her unique confluence of life experiences, including her literary and theological training, has inspired Kendall to invoke beautifully crafted words that evoke this fascinating mystery. How does transformation occur? Read on to find out.

Peter Reinhart
Charlotte, North Carolina

PREFACE

I was five years old when I stole my first Communion.

Our church, Richardson Heights Baptist, was celebrating its fortieth anniversary. We were meeting in a local high school auditorium to accommodate all the members and guests who had come to mark the occasion. For us, it was a family celebration as much as a church party—marking forty years since my grandparents had married just a month before planting the church.

At the service, attendees overflowed the seating in the auditorium. As a result, my siblings and cousins and I sat in the aisle, next to a box of “Communion to go” cups—shots of grape juice with a cracker attached at the top, all sealed together with plastic. This wasn’t the usual manner by which our church remembered Jesus’ death and resurrection—it was just a convenient method for this celebration.

I’d watched my parents take Communion dozens of times before, each month when the elders passed silver platters of oyster crackers and tiny cups of grape juice down each pew. They’d eat their share discreetly before bowing in prayer.

“We’re thanking God for sending his Son to die for our sins,” they

whispered to my brother, Davis; my sister, Alyssa; and me, encouraging us to mirror their solemn posture.

Our tradition allowed children to take part in Communion once they could articulate its meaning. Every so often, during our family prayer time on Sunday nights, we'd talk about the forgiveness of sins, about asking Jesus into our hearts, about baptism—an outward expression of inward cleansing. My parents prayed that God would prompt us to utter the words of the Sinner's Prayer whenever our hearts were ready.

At five, I hadn't asked Jesus into my heart yet, and I'd never eaten the cracker or the juice either. But that day the box of Jesus' Body and Blood beckoned. I couldn't pay attention to the sermon, my gaze bouncing between the cardboard container and the preacher onstage.

The low lighting masked my movements, and everyone else's eyes were fixed on the pastor. So I slipped my hand through a slit at the top of the box of Communion cups, and I stole a portion for myself. I peeled back the packaging, careful not to make any noise that might alert my parents to my theft, and I placed the cracker on my tongue. The salty Body stung at first, before it softened inside my mouth. I feared chewing might be too loud, so I savored the taste until Jesus disintegrated on his own. Then I looked at the juice, the cup of forgiveness, and couldn't bear to go on, filled with guilt over the hunger I could not control.

Later that afternoon, I brought the juice container to my parents' room. Sitting on the bench at the end of their bed, I sobbed as I confessed what I'd done.

"I wanted to taste it," I said. "But I didn't drink the juice."

"Do you remember why we take Communion?" Dad asked, kneeling in front of me. Mom sat to my right, holding my trembling hand.

I nodded, then whispered, "Because Jesus died for our sins."

Dad took the cup and looked into my eyes. "Jesus loves you very much," he said. "And he's proud of you for being honest with us."

I smiled, my cheeks stained with tears.

“Can we pray together?” he asked.

The three of us bowed our heads and closed our eyes.

“Jesus, thank you for Kendall’s tender heart,” Dad said. “For her honesty and her desire to please you. Help her to know how much you love her. Amen.”

As we opened our eyes, he pulled the lid off of the juice. “Would you like to drink it?” he asked. My puffy eyes grew wide before I nodded, taking the cup and sipping down the syrupy-sweet Blood.

Two more years passed before I prayed the prayer and was baptized, dunked by my dad in the baptismal pool behind the church stage.

More than two decades have gone by now, but I’m still learning what that meal—the Bread, the Body—means.

Bread is central to the story of God’s work in the world.

Since the dawn of agriculture, writes bread historian William Rubel, bread has served as a simultaneous blessing and curse.¹ The labor required to plant, harvest, thresh, grind, knead, shape, and bake a loaf reflects the Curse spoken over the soil in Genesis 3. At the same time, bread has served as the core of the human diet in almost all cultures throughout history.

In Scripture, bread functions as a sign of God’s presence: the twelve loaves of showbread placed in the Tabernacle (Leviticus 24:5-9) and the bread broken with the disciples on the path to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-33). Bread also exemplifies God’s provision, from the manna in the desert (Exodus 16) to the miraculous multiplication of the five loaves (Mark 6:34-44). It serves as a reminder of God’s promise of deliverance from the oppression and brokenness of this world: the unleavened bread at Passover (Exodus 12:1-28) and the bread offered by Jesus in the Last Supper (Matthew 26:17-29).

Throughout the history of the Church, Christians have told the story of Christ’s death and resurrection through the breaking of bread. While

the type of bread used in Communion has been contested (Should it be leavened or unleavened? Must it be made of wheat?), the belief that the element must be recognized as bread has held steady. But the significance of bread goes beyond church walls; it has also been the primary food in the diet of most humans throughout history. Bread is magnificent in both its mundane nature and its absolute necessity.

At the cusp of the twentieth century, new technology emerged in the United States that promised to transform the process of baking bread. For generations, bread making had been the purview of home cooks, typically women, made through unstandardized techniques passed down from generation to generation. But through the concerted effort of marketers and business owners, bread became the domain of professional bakeries that operated with scientific precision.²

Until that point, middle-class American consumers had been wary of bread sold in bakeries and stores, where they feared the loaves might be filled with sawdust or chalk to stretch the flour further.³ Whether or not these fears were warranted, they were amplified during the turn of the century, as changing racial and class demographics threatened to upset the white middle-class status quo.

Thanks to a growing awareness of bacteria—and a pandemic that spread rapidly in urban areas—white consumers masked their fear of change behind a fear of contagion, a convenient shield against immigrants, whom they perceived as dirty and poor. Since most bakeries were run by immigrants, many white consumers decided the only way to ensure a safe diet was to bake bread oneself, at home.⁴

With the invention of industrial baking equipment, commercial bakeries were able to exponentially increase the amount of bread that could be produced in a day. Unlike homemade bread, which was subject to the whims of yeast and the weather, these commercial loaves were soft, uniform, sliced, and white. After taming the living organisms that turn flour into bread, these mechanized bakeries could produce a loaf never touched by human hands.

To convince housewives to let go of the practice of making homemade

bread, commercial bakers preyed on their anxieties, advertising the whiteness, cleanliness, and purity of their loaves. They sanitized wild microbes and yeasts to promise consumers a safe, clean loaf.⁵

In reality, the reactions that allow for a bleached-white bread degrade the texture of dough, limit the nutritional value, and hinder the development of flavor. As scientists have discovered in the years since these mass-marketed loaves flooded our grocery aisles, the process impacts the digestibility of bread as well. This “Wonder Bread” offered uniformity and the illusion of safety while transforming consumers’ expectations of what bread should be.

Fears of contamination proliferated in sacramental practice as well. Until the discovery of germ theory, Christians of all traditions practiced Communion using a common cup and, for many, a common loaf. Although Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christians clung to different convictions about how the element ought to be prepared and received, they were united in their use of a shared chalice.⁶ With increasing scientific understanding about the spread of disease came pressure for clergy to reform these liturgical norms, whether by restricting the cup to the clergy alone, as Catholics had done for centuries, or by offering individual portions to church members in small plastic cups.

Some pastors and congregants kept the dialogue limited to matters of hygiene, but others voiced their anxieties over mingling germs with those labeled as social outcasts. “Physical and moral uncleanness are unseparable,” states an 1895 newspaper of the United Brethren. “The first steps on the ladder of moral purity are clean faces, clean bodies, clean clothes, clean food.”⁷

The diversity of the church, they believed, constituted an inherent danger—“a rich opportunity for transmitting disease.”⁸ Looking to defend their fears theologically, some pastors argued that Communion is less about the relationship of an individual to the corporate body and more about the relationship between an individual and God.

Others feared that a focus on sanitation as the mode of purity in the church would turn worshippers away from the communion of believers

and create class and racial divisions within the church.⁹ “The Holy Communion is ordained to symbolize the union of the believer with Christ, and the union of all believers in One Body,” argued one of the staunchest advocates for maintaining the common cup.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the individualized Communion practice took root in many Protestant churches. “It’s more important that you do it than how you do it,” said Jim Johnson, the pastor who designed the prepackaged portions of my first Communion, a century after the arguments about individual Communion began.¹¹

Over the latter half of the twentieth century, evangelical churches continued to emphasize a shift in focus from corporate and corporal worship to that of an individual, spiritual experience of God. The content of sermons and songs, and their application to the Christian’s life, took precedence over the rhythms and liturgies that once guided communities of faith. Biblical literacy took precedence over Church history, revealing a focus on individual salvation over and above communal worship.

At the same time, wariness about Christian practices that connect worshippers to their bodies grew. Movements like genuflections and signs of the cross were viewed by evangelical Protestants as rituals void of spiritual value. As these practices faded, they were replaced by anxieties about how to ensure the purity of the body, nutritionally and sexually.

The eighties and nineties saw a proliferation of books and sermons about Christian dieting as well as the rise of the sexual purity movement, both of which revealed an aspiration to use the body to honor God, alongside a fear of the body and its pleasure. These movements downplayed the body’s physical needs and desires, and they minimized physical delight as a means of drawing into fellowship with God and with God’s people. The goal was, as with the twentieth-century baking industry’s relationship to yeast, to be free from “contamination.” Or, put more simply, to maintain control.

I write this book a century after the introduction of industrialized bread altered the landscape of American baked goods, in the wake of another pandemic that has changed the ways we live and eat and worship. The waves of COVID-19 continue to ebb and flow, illuminating fears and fissures within churches, families, and neighborhoods. Questions proliferate about how to care for our own bodies and the bodies of our neighbors. What is our moral responsibility to limit the spread of disease? What impact does worshipping online have on our spiritual well-being? And how do we reckon with the necessities and harms of extended isolation?

Many adults who grew up in evangelical churches of the eighties and nineties find themselves in spiritual turmoil, grappling with the fruit of the disembodied theology of their upbringing. They are angered by the proliferation of spiritual and sexual abuse in the communities that raised them. They are grieving the absence of the fruitful marriages they were promised, if only they followed the purity rules. They are shocked over the blatant racism and sexism exhibited by the leaders who taught them to love as Jesus loved.

It was in this context, when the world's collective stress was at its peak, that men and women across the United States turned to bread for peace. The spring of 2020 saw grocery store shelves emptied of flour and yeast, while Google searches for bread recipes rose to all-time highs.¹² In seven months, King Arthur Baking Company sold twice as many five-pound bags of flour as they'd sold the entire previous year—not to mention the consumers who purchased fifty-pound bags when they couldn't find the smaller size.¹³ The feel of dough brought grounding amid the loss of community and the loss of control.

God meets us in the baking and breaking of bread. In the same way, God communes with us through the broken but beautiful rhythms of the church—despite the church's bickering and division, despite the

pain it inflicts. God is present with us in tangible ways in our hunger and our loneliness, our hurts and our longings—especially in the form of bread, broken and shared among God’s people. In this sharing, we are taught to hunger all the more for the fullness of healing yet to come.

We continue to live in the tension of bread as blessing and bread as curse. While most of us don’t experience the labor of growing and harvesting wheat, wheat allergies and the fear of carbohydrates abound. But bread still offers us a way forward, a way to heal our relationship to the body of Christ and to our own bodies—and to find delight in each. A robust understanding of bread makes plain to us the reasons that poor teaching on community and the body, born of Wonder Bread theology, failed to nourish a generation of Christians well.

As both a professional baker and a student of theology, I am grieved that decades of eaters (myself included) have feared bread and its ill effects on their bodies due to the reputation of industrialized loaves. Similarly, it grieves me that a generation of people who grew up in a Christian culture formed by the pursuit of sanitation and control dismiss their faith without knowledge of the tradition’s rich capacity to meet them in their pain and fear.

Our relationship to theology and the church can be much like Wonder Bread: cheap, industrialized, lacking nourishment and flavor. We gravitate toward Wonder Bread not because we think it’s the best, but because it’s convenient and affordable. Sometimes we choose it because it tastes like home, and sometimes because we have no idea there’s something better. But the life of Jesus and the story of Scripture, as well as the substance of bread itself, show us there is more.

“One does not live by bread alone,” Jesus said to the tempter in the desert, “but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4, NAB).

Jesus himself is both the Bread of life and the Word who was with God in the beginning. He is the Word that proceeds from the mouth of God, as well as the Bread we place in our own mouths. We can know

God on our tongues and in our bellies when hunger and loneliness and disappointment are too deep for words.

The beauty of this communion with God can't be adequately captured in theological terms. It resists being pinned down by words at all, though story, poetry, and recipe get us closer. The very point of God meeting us in this way is to remind us that the materiality of our lives and of God's world matters. The Bread of Life is not just a metaphor for spiritual truth: when we bake bread and break bread, both individually and in community, we know God in a rich, creative, and intimate way.

As soon as water hits flour, a series of transformations begins: amino acids uncoil, forming bonds to create a strong, sticky dough. The journey from flour to dough to bread depends on a succession of conversions—small deaths that make way for new life. The baker's task is not to follow a proper formula to ensure an exact end result but to read the environment, pull the ingredients together, and gently nudge the dough in the proper direction, all while trusting water and time to do most of the transforming.

In this way, bread mirrors the journey of faith.

Bread, like God, is not a mystery to be mastered or solved. It is at once simple—a mix of flour, water, yeast, and salt—and infinitely complex. Thousands of years after our ancestors made their first loaf, bakers are still learning new ways to pull flavor and texture from grain. We can commit our entire lives to the rhythms of baking, of drawing out the nuances of wheat, and still have more to learn. The goal should not be mastery in and of itself, but curiosity and joy. Breadmaking, like faith, is a craft to hone over the course of a lifetime, a truth that is at once exciting and liberating.

This book is about bread, and about *the* Bread, and about the muddled space between the two. It's the story of how God has met me in my baking and eating—as an insatiable child and a timid teen, as a

world-traveling student and an underpaid pastry cook. It's the story of hunger and family, of friendship and unmet longing.

It's the story of a God who meets us in both sacred and mundane ways.

In the mixing and kneading, in the waiting and partaking, may God also meet you.



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Flour is the backbone of any loaf of bread.

Corn.

Rice.

Barley.

Wheat.

Each piece a creation of culture and agriculture:

the people who mix it,

the places that raise it,

the environment where it ferments and grows.



1

ON HUNGER

Give us this day our daily bread.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

RICHARDSON, TEXAS

Every day around the world, Christians mutter the Lord's Prayer.

Give us this day our daily bread.

Danos hoy el pan de este día.

Donne-nous aujourd'hui notre pain de ce jour.

When I was in high school, my French teacher opened each class with a group recitation of this prayer. While I'd read the words before, they weren't a regular part of my upbringing. In my church and in my family, the emphasis was on extemporaneous prayer, which was viewed as the most authentic form.

But something about this ritual ingrained the French words of the prayer into the rhythms of my body. Even now, as I sit curled in my red chair, sipping coffee and praying to start my day, I slip back into French for the final phrase: "For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, *aux siècles des siècles*. Amen."

In this prayer, one simple substance functions as a metaphor for all our basic needs. In my own life, though, bread has served as far more than a symbol of God's presence. Actual bread, made of flour and water—and my own hunger for it—has been an ongoing reminder of the brokenness of my body, of relationships, and of this world, as well as Christ's presence in it all.

The way my hunger shapes me, the way it shapes my desires and my experience of the world, brings me both shame and joy.

In first grade, my class took a field trip to Great Harvest Bread Company. Clad in navy houndstooth jumpers and saddle oxfords, a dozen of us walked in a uniform line through the back of the bakery. We gaped at the fifty-pound bags of flour and the industrial mixers mashing all the ingredients together into a giant blob.

Hypnotized by the baker's movements, I felt as though I were watching a choreographed ballet: slice, weigh, shape; slice, weigh, shape; slice, weigh, shape. The baking crew laughed and chatted around the wooden workbench, their faces dusted with flour. As they filled trays and transferred them to racks alongside the oven, neither their hands nor their conversation slowed.

After the tour I described every detail of the bakery's operations to my mother—the bags of flour stacked taller than my three-and-a-half-foot frame, the mixing bowls deep enough to bathe in, the pile of dough that grew as the bakers divvied it up.

The next time Mom brought my older sister, Alyssa, and me to the bakery for a treat, I showed off what I'd learned. "That's the classic bread," I told her, pointing to the board of samples. "It's the base they use for everything. The nut-and-spice bread is made with the same dough. And that cheese one, too."

While Mom smeared our samples with the softened butter the store

kept on hand, I babbled on about the bread. Our Great Harvest was small, with one children's table, one adult table, and only enough room for a short line, which meant that everyone behind us heard my recounting of the field trip too. Alyssa rolled her eyes at my incessant talking until at last it was time for us to pick out cinnamon rolls—each one as big as our face—to share with the family on Saturday morning.

As humans, we make the connection between hunger and communication in the first hours of life, wailing anytime we want to eat. We learn to make our hunger known long before we're capable of comprehending or articulating the need for our bellies to be full. As our caretakers feed us and cuddle us and nurture us, our affections for them are formed. In this way, our experience of the world is shaped through an interweaving of hunger and language and love, through our guttural longing for intimacy and food, out of which we eventually learn to speak.

While most children start communicating with words like *Mama* or *Dada*, announcing their affection for the ones who feed them, I was driven to speak by my sweet tooth. My first word, I am told, was *cookie*. It came out sounding a bit like “googie,” but I was so adamant and so dynamic with my bodily gestures, toddling into the kitchen with hands and mouth open wide, that my parents understood. My second word, I am told, was *candy*.

As we gain independence, the link between our need for food and our need for companionship becomes less clear, apart from the vague recognition that the table can forge community. It's tempting to see food as nothing more than fuel, parceled out in calories and nutrient contents. In a world where prepackaged meals and drive-through lanes reign, where eating is something we fit in between work and exercise and caring for children, we often overlook the ways our daily hunger forms us.

Like language, though, the foods we eat, the ones we avoid, and the ones that connect us to family or to home shape our sense of who we are.

Soon after the fortieth-anniversary celebration at Richardson Heights, my family left the church in search of a smaller congregation—one where we could be known as more than the founding pastor’s family. We were the first of the Vanderslices to defect from Baptist tradition, settling into a nondenominational Bible church a few miles away.

One morning, Pastor Charlie, the overall-wearing children’s minister at North Highlands Bible, walked around the room handing out slips of bright green paper with a question on each one.

“Each Sunday I’ll give you a question about the Bible,” he told us, explaining the rules of his latest game. “The first person to leave a message on my answering machine with the right answer gets a prize: two McDollars.”

My eyes bugged at the possibility of a McDonald’s gift certificate. The one catch? We couldn’t call before Monday.

As we drove home in our maroon minivan, I bombarded Mom with details from the backseat. “I’m going to call before I leave for school,” I told her. “I bet no one else will call as early as 6:30!”

Alyssa and I spent the afternoon flipping through our Bibles, trying to find the name of the river where Naaman washed his leprosy away. We didn’t have the Internet at our house yet, which meant we were on our own to find the answers.

The next morning before leaving for school, we dialed Pastor Charlie’s office number and left a message: “Hi, Pastor Charlie,” Alyssa opened. “This is Alyssa and Kendall Vanderslice, and we’re calling with the answer to the Bible quiz.”

“The River Jordan!” I shouted into the receiver when she passed the phone to me. “We found it in 2 Kings 5:14.”

“We hope we’re the first ones to call,” Alyssa said in closing. Then we hung up and giggled, sure we’d won.

The next Sunday I skipped into Sunday school, passing over the box

of donuts to find a seat near the front, where Pastor Charlie held the prized certificates.

“The winning call,” he announced, “came in at 12:01 a.m.”

My heart sank; our answer was more than six hours late. Pastor Charlie passed out a new set of question slips, peach colored this time. “What was Jesus’ first temptation?” the paper read.

“Mom, we need to call at midnight!” Alyssa announced on the ride home. “We have to be the first.”

We set our alarms for 11:57 so we could wake up and make the call. My alarm, however, did not go off.

At 2:15 I woke up in a panic and scrambled to the phone. “Hi, um, this is Kendall,” I said in a groggy voice. “The answer is turning stones to bread.”

Pastor Charlie soon amended the rules, no doubt thanks to the complaints of the parents of sleepless kids: no calls allowed before 7:00 on Monday morning. Instead of competing to win each Monday, those who called with the right answer every week could attend a dinner at the Magic Time Machine—a restaurant where servers dressed up like characters from TV shows and movies. With the promise of this meal in mind, I spent each Sunday afternoon scouring the Scriptures for trivia answers.

By May, my hours of study paid off. Only a handful of kids had earned the meal, and I was proud to be among them. One Monday evening, at the start of summer break, we piled into the church van. As Pastor Charlie drove us across town, the other kids chattered on about their favorite characters, wondering aloud who our server would be. I sat in silence, thinking about the menu. Mom had given me permission to order whatever I wanted.

At the time my family practiced a Christianized version of the hippie health movement. Much like the natural-food advocates in the 1970s, the “Hallelujah Diet” promised wellness and spiritual fulfillment to those who ate a diet of simple foods, who cared for their bodies and for the earth. Unlike the hippies, Hallelujah eaters attuned themselves to

the nutritional wisdom hidden in the pages of Scripture—for instance, Adam and Eve’s raw food habits in the Garden or Daniel’s vegetarian restrictions in Nebuchadnezzar’s kingdom. Meat and dairy were distinctly off limits. Bread was whole grain and preferably homemade, though the diet had little to say about the presence or absence of leaven. Our Great Harvest excursions (and my Magic Time Machine meal) were exceptions to the rules.

“Get back to the health you were created to have,” the diet literature claimed, citing success at curing cancer and chronic pain. “When you get back to the Garden, you can live life fully, the way that God intended.”

When Shaggy, the mystery-solving teen from the Scooby-Doo series, arrived at the table to take our orders, I asked for a cheeseburger, fries, and a Dr Pepper. I clapped with excitement when the food arrived, practically dancing in my seat. Juice from the patty dripped down my arms as I took the first bite, ketchup smearing my cheek.

When I was in elementary school, I often suffered from chronic stomach-aches that sent me home early. My parents scraped by to provide us with a classical Christian education at a school that met in an Episcopal church (which, to my mother’s elation, I pronounced Eh-PEE-scoh-pal) in the wealthy part of town.

Every morning we carpooled with two neighbors for the half-hour commute, driving from the small ranch-style neighborhoods of Richardson to the mansions of Highland Park. We’d arrive just in time to place our backpacks in the classroom and run a math drill before sauntering to the chapel to sing hymns. I excelled at the math drills, and I loved the hymns, but by the time we returned to the classroom afterward, my stomach cramps began.

“Can I please be excused to go to the bathroom?” I whispered to my teacher before sitting at my desk. I hid in the bathroom that connected our classroom to the one next door, blinking back tears.

“Are you okay in there, Kendall?” Mrs. Chester would ask when I was slow to emerge.

“I think I need to go home,” I replied.

Skeptical of Western medicine, my mom took me to a series of naturopathic doctors who attempted to diagnose my digestion woes. After losing her biological mother to lung cancer at the age of five, Mom was fastidious about both health and prayer. She, too, experienced ongoing stomach troubles, and she sought to keep the pain away with a mix of supplements and dietary alterations.

“Give her digestive enzymes,” one practitioner recommended after examining my blood work, which revealed nothing. “That should do the trick.”

We shopped at Whole Foods back when it was a quirky Texas health chain, and we were the only patrons free from tattoos, piercings, and artificial hair colors. Every morning I washed a five-pound bag of carrots for Mom to juice and chugged powdered barley mixed with cranberry juice and flaxseed oil. In music class, our teacher would start the day with a game that involved singing out what we ate for breakfast. While my classmates identified Pop-Tarts and bagels and English muffins as their morning fuel, I had to tell them, every day, about my vegetable juice.

“That smells nasty,” a boy in my class said one day as I choked down a salad smothered in green goddess dressing. My cheeks burned as I held my own nose, trying to mask the flavor of alfalfa sprouts and raw squash. I looked over at his Wonder Bread peanut butter and jelly, imagining how it must taste. Sometimes Mom would pack me a sandwich, too—cashew butter, honey, and a handful of shredded carrots tucked between two slices of homemade bread—but most often I went to school with a salad. I closed the container and placed it back inside my lunch box before running off to play four square with a friend.

“I’m hungry,” I told my mom on the way from school to church choir practice. “Can I have a slice of pizza after choir?”

“What happened to your lunch?” she asked.

“I didn’t eat it,” I whispered.

“Then you need to eat it now,” she replied.

I opened the container to find the lettuce wilted from the weight of the dressing and the warmth of my bag. I gagged as I choked it down.

By the time I was in third grade, my family’s dietary habits had come in handy. The school had switched campuses, now meeting at Congregation Shearith Israel, a conservative synagogue five miles from the Episcopal church. While students weren’t required to keep kosher at lunch, we did have strict limitations on the foods we could bring. Among the most important rules: no pork, and no mixing of meat and dairy. The Vanderslice children were well practiced in this regard. Though I hated telling my classmates about my vegetable juice and flaxseed oil, our diet meant I never once brought a lunch that broke the rules. This, at least, brought my mind a bit of ease.

During Passover, the synagogue provided food for us, ensuring that we didn’t bring wheat or legumes into the building. We’d carry our plates along a buffet of platters, served by smiling women wearing lace kippahs. Their dietary rhythms told the story of God’s presence throughout history, year after year. It connected them to generations of Jews who remembered God’s deliverance through both their abstinence and their feasts. Their eating habits were an act of submission to God, who in turn offered identity and belonging through these shared meals.

Hallelujah eaters, on the other hand, had about as many rules but none of the traditions. We considered this to be a good thing. Our diet wasn’t mandated by religion; rather, we chose it out of a desire to care for our bodies, and we believed God had given us the blueprint for how to care for them well. Our eating got straight to the point: to rid ourselves of the pain endemic to being human in a fallen world. We would eat our way to wellness—to God’s best for us. We would prove our faithfulness not through communal identity but through the quest for health.

Eating has the power to forge community and shape our identity.

At best food fosters a sense of belonging among those who eat in similar ways, a reminder that our longing for community and our need for food go hand in hand. For most of history, eating has been tied to cultural or religious identity, but even without those underpinnings, we manage to create our own new dietary identities. Paleo. Keto. Vegan. The list goes on.

At worst, though, food can mark a form of social isolation. Whether the family diet sparks criticism from classmates or allergies prevent us from sharing a meal with others, food is also a reminder that God's good creation has been marred.

The temptation to pine for Eden is about as strong as the temptation whispered to Eve by the snake. We look back and long for a time before hunger, before pain, before eating became the site of our cosmic undoing. We wonder how we can approximate a blissful existence here and now, creating our own lists of forbidden foods and trying to enforce extreme levels of self-control.

But the story of Scripture is not one of returning to a life before the Fall. To pine for Eden is to overlook the ways God is at work in the world now. Scripture tells a story of God's ongoing redemption and God's promise of what's to come: a renewed creation, where the scars of our present brokenness are crafted into something new—something more beautiful than the Garden where it all began. A city where the tree of life yields its fruit all year round,¹ where there will be no more death and no more mourning, no crying and no more pain.

For now, though, we live in between these two realities, where our bodies ache and hunger, where we feel shame and regret. We can't avoid the world we live in, where the emergence of new life, whether out of the womb or out of the soil, demands our sweat and tears. It's a reality where parents pass down their allergies and their anxieties, along with their unique methods of cooking and feeding and showing they care. The history of humanity is a history of learning how to contend with our need for food and for love in the reality of this present brokenness.

“Everyone gets to choose one book,” Gramma said, pulling her gold sedan into a parking spot in front of Sam’s Club. “And stay with me while we walk through the samples.”

“What kind of cake will we get?” I asked from the backseat.

“Whatever kind you want,” she replied. “Just make sure Alyssa stays away!”

School breaks spent with my mom’s parents in Houston were our dietary jubilee. We baked cakes from box mixes for Gramma’s Bible study meetings, and we made broccoli corn bread to accompany Dedaddy’s favorite vegetable beef soup.

On one visit, Alyssa assured us she knew how to operate the oven, preheating it while we mixed the batter. We came to check on the finished product forty-five minutes later, only to find it burned on top and raw in the middle.

“Oh, Alyssa!” Gramma hollered. “You broiled the thing!”

Though we had harbored a mix of disappointment and anger on the day of the baking flop, with time the memory became a joke. I was now the designated baker, making treats for the women of First Baptist Humble. While the cake was fun to make and serve, the true taste of the promised land came in the scoops of Blue Bell ice cream we would heap on top—a ritual we undertook every night before bed.

Upon our return home from Houston, Mom would roll her eyes at the new fullness in our cheeks. She’d tell us about her visits to her own grandparents when she and her sister were girls—waking up to the sound of bacon sizzling on the other side of the trailer, watching Mamaw roll out biscuits every morning. She’d tell us how Gramma called them butterballs when they arrived back home.

At the end of each break, when it came time to go back to school, my stomachaches returned.

I was anxious about the timed math drills and the weekly vocabulary tests, not to mention the social interactions in class and on the

playground. I couldn't handle the stress of striving for both perfection and belonging.

"You always ace the practice tests," a kid in our carpool whined one day when I told my mom about my grade. Every week I was nervous before the test began and then embarrassed over my excitement when I did well. "It isn't fair," my carpool friend added.

Another day I got in trouble because a seatmate was talking to me. As punishment, he and I had to sit out during the first half of recess.

"Do you understand why you're sitting out today?" the recess monitor asked me when my time-out was up.

I wept as I recounted the story to her. "He kept talking to me, even though I tried to tell him to stop! Then we both got into trouble, but I didn't do anything!"

I begged my parents to homeschool me like my friends at dance and at church. The summer before fourth grade, they relented.

Determined to offer me an education equivalent to what I was leaving behind, Mom pored over textbooks and creative-writing curriculum. Most important, she arranged field trips for my other homeschooled friends and me. After our Great Harvest excursion, we toured the back of Mrs Baird's, the famous Texas bread manufactory.

At Mrs Baird's, there were no fifty-pound bags of flour or laughter around the baker's bench. Instead, the grain was contained in giant drums, and the dough was divvied up along a conveyor belt. Still, my eyes gaped at the rows of deck ovens while the scent of melted butter and caramelized starches enveloped me.

Although we never purchased Mrs Baird's offerings at the grocery store, there was no doubt about her iconic status in Texas history. Launching her business just before the start of the Great Depression—when industrial bakers recommended that women leave the professional bread to men—Ninnie Baird delivered loaves around town on foot, then by bike and by carriage, and eventually by fleets of trucks. After her death in 1961, the Texas State Senate declared her "a living example for mothers, wives, business executives, Christians, and good people the

world over.”² In the decades since, bags of her buns have graced fellowship hall tables at churches across the state. From feeding rambunctious children at Sunday potlucks to satiating mourners at funerals, her bread is present in every phase of the Texas churchgoer’s communal life.

At the factory, there were no bakers slicing or shaping the growing dough by hand. While the movements between each human and machine still followed a distinct choreography, the joviality was missing. The manufactory didn’t grip me the same way Great Harvest had, but the trip still lodged itself in my memory. Mrs Baird’s buns weren’t the weekend cinnamon rolls or the special-occasion treats; they were the ever-present blue bag. Nutritionally lacking, perhaps, but constant. And, as such, a comfort, too.