

12-2017

Food Transitions: How Food Symbolizes Another Chapter

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Josiah J. Peralta

Senior Capstone
Social Action & Creative Writing
Creative Project
Dr. Mridula Mascarenhas
Division of Humanities and Communication
Fall 2017

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Name: Josiah Peralta

Concentration: Creative Writing & Social Action

Title: Food Transitions: How Food Symbolizes Another Chapter

**HCOM 475: SENIOR CAPSTONE
FINAL PROJECT PROPOSAL
CREATIVE PROJECT OPTION**

- 1. PROJECT DESCRIPTION:** The project utilizes five creative nonfiction short stories with a poem in the beginning to frame the story. Along with the main theme of life transitions with food, I am using the sub-themes of religion, culture, choice, financial class, tradition, and identity. Each sub-theme ties into how food has affected my transition into a better life from Mississippi to California.
- 2. ALIGNMENT WITH CAPSTONE THEME:** Each piece views, interacts with, or identifies food associations from one moment of life to another to address food politics. In Mississippi, I was in a lower class, Christian, Southern family until I moved to California and married into a middle class, Atheistic, Latino family. I experienced transitions in financial status, culture, religion, identity, and the ability to be given free choice that were reflected in food.
- 3. PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT:** Through critical self-analysis of my life, I intend to answer the question, “How does food help us transition from one chapter of our life to another?” My purpose is to provide a personal viewpoint about various political related topics associated with food. Through this viewpoint, I will demonstrate how food associations can encapsulate our past, memories, and identity in a way that moves us from the past to the present, and, hopefully, the future.
- 4. FORMAT RATIONALE:** I came to CSUMB to improve my writing with the dream goal of publishing. I will continue that objective by using the format of written stories.
- 5. WORKING SUMMARY:** There are five stories that have a small poem in the beginning, highlighting the meaning of the story. Those five are the following:

 1. A story about the transition of class. I would visit my childhood best friend, Stewart, every other weekend. I was low class and he was middle class. I began to realize the difference in our lives every time I’d open his fridge through the years.
 2. A story about my transition of understanding where food comes from. It depicts my first job where I worked on a chicken farm. It focuses on thinking about animal rights, poverty, debt, Southern culture, health, and religion. I go to my first day of work, continue to work over time until I’m run over by a tractor, go to church, and then sit at Easter dinner where I’m served chicken.

3. A story about the transition of religious beliefs. I was originally Christian and became an Atheist. I had no connection to the Sacramento's crackers and juice, but had a more religious experience baking for my deceased cat during Dia de los Muertos.
4. A story about the transition of culture and tradition. I shift from a Southern white family to a Latino family. I reflect on my mother-in-law's pozole con pollo and my two families.
5. A story about the transition of choice. I reflect on the years of being overweight in Mississippi to choosing to move to California, lose the weight, and enjoy the world. This is reflected at a restaurant called Biscuit Bitch in Seattle, where I had a not-so-great-for-you meal: biscuits and gravy.

6. EXPECTATIONS/DELIVERABLES: I expect to deliver a selection of five finalized nonfiction stories or essays with five poems. Also included in the portfolio will be my resume/CV, project documentation (the processing of the stories), final proposal, reflective essay, and final synthesis essay.

7. SPECIFIC SKILLS REQUIRED/EVIDENCE OF SKILLS ACQUIRED: I'm utilizing my creative writing skills with characterization, narration, diction, tone, point of view, editing, organization, plot, nonfiction/fiction style, poetry, and critical self-reflection. Each skill was learned and/or improved through the following CSUMB courses: HCOM 322 Asian American Literature, HCOM 339S Creative Writing & Service, HCOM 332 Poetry Writing Workshop, HCOM 334 Fiction/Creative Nonfiction Writing Workshop, HCOM 344 Chicana/Latina Experiences, and HCOM 432 Social Action Writing. Time management is a key skill to this project as I use my skill set through the Microsoft Word medium.

8. NEXT STEPS: I plan to take the following steps: Set aside the appropriate amount of time (either daily or weekly) to work on my project, outline each short stories' plot and theme, draft each, create an aligning poem with food imagery, edit the short stories, have them be reviewed/critiqued by (at least) two peers, finalize drafts, organize into appropriate orders of short story, and document my actions for other assignments with the creative project, such as the synthesis essay.

9. TIMELINE:

First Story Draft	9/16
First Story Second Draft	9/30
Final Senior Project Proposals	10/4
Second Story Draft	10/7
Second Story Second Draft	10/14
Project Titles and Draft Reports	10/16
Third Story Draft	10/21
Third Story Second Draft	10/28
Progress Reports for creative projects	10/30
Resume/CV for Professional Development Plan	11/1
Fourth Story Draft	11/4
Fourth Story Second Draft	11/11
Progress Reports for creative projects	11/15
Fifth Story Draft	11/18
Fifth Story Second Draft	11/25
Send Stories for Review/Comments	11/29
Discuss capstone project updates in class	11/29
Collect Story Reviews/Comments	12/2

Draft Poster/Presentation Text	12/4
Workshop portfolios in class	12/6
Final Bound Portfolios, with Synthesis Paper	12/11

Only Child's

#4 out of 5 Kids

Stainless Steel

Creamy Plastic

Fridge,

Bright with white lights,
Full to the brim,
With food choices,

Dark,
Scarcity aplenty,
Filled with donations

Washed down our throats with-

"Sweet" Tea.

Sweet Tea.

Stay-at-home

Working

Mom(ma)

cooking for-

Pleasure.

Survival.

We all need food.

Stew's Fridge

The phone rang frantically in the kitchen. I heard Momma step towards the phone, but I beat her to it. "Hello?"

A voice squeaked, "Is that you, Jojo?"

"Uh-huh. Can I come over today, Stew?" It was Saturday and I knew Stewart's Dad was working on his oil rig in the Gulf. Although we went to the same school and were both in second grade, we hardly got to see one another, especially when his dad was on shore. I looked at the calendar where each weekend marked a chance to leave for Stew's house.

"That's why I was calling!"

I covered the phone with my hand. "Can I go to Stew's house, Momma?"

Momma was stirring another soup made from leftovers. She sighed, but smiled, "If Mrs. Anita is willing to come pick you up, sure."

I uncovered the phone and said, "I can come if your Mom picks me up."

"Great," he said excitedly. "We'll be over right quick."

I hung up the phone as Momma said, rolling her eyes, "I guess that means you're not eating with us." She turned from her leftover soup and peered at me, "Or do I need to save you some?" She forced a smile.

"No, thank you, Momma." I gave her a hug, knowing she didn't want to waste any food for her five children. "Mrs. Anita usually orders us something. Last time she got us a plate from Coon's Country Kitchen."

Her belly jiggled as she nodded her head, stirring her soup, until she hugged me back. "And what did you have?"

“She ordered us some fried catfish, fries, coleslaw, and hushpuppies. We all shared it. I think it was Stew’s Grandma Eudora who wanted it.”

“Mrs. Eudora’s still living with them?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Hmm,” hummed Momma, “Funny.” She covered the soup. “Well, you know that we don’t go out often. So, if you do, get something nice that Mrs. Anita doesn’t mind paying for. Meanwhile, I’ll leave you a bowl in the fridge, just in case.” We hugged again. “Have fun, alright?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I ran to my shared bedroom with my brother, Elisha.

He was belly-down on his bed playing some video game. Toys in hand, I began stuffing my pillow case full, preparing for the awesome adventure. As I grabbed my memory cards from what video games we had, I heard Elisha say, “Going to Stewart’s?”

I nodded my head as I grabbed an extra Nintendo 64 controller. “Since his dad isn’t home, I get to go over. I thought to bring some of my stuff this time.”

“Why? Doesn’t Stewart have everything?”

My hand in mid-pillow-stuffing, I glared, “He doesn’t have *everything*. He only has a few game systems, a camera, and a computer.”

“Oh, pardon me.” Elisha rolled his eyes, returning to his game. “Why can’t Stew come over here, instead?”

“You know he’s deadly allergic to our three cats.”

Elisha nodded and paused his game.

“Besides,” I added, “It’s better I bring stuff I have, since he’d make me watch him play by himself if I didn’t bring my own controller and memory card.”

“Gotcha. Just as long as you don’t forget to bring it back this time.” He turned off his game console. “We couldn’t play Super Smash Bros. together for two weeks last time.”

“I won’t forget!”

I ignored him, like I always do, stuffing all of my best toys, including my legos, into my pillow case. He was always jealous that I got to go to Stew’s house, that I had a friend with money. His friends were feeling the same financial strain as our family. That’s why it was so nice to stay at Stew’s house. I didn’t have to worry for a day or two, but I never wanted to look like I needed things when visiting Stew. I thought, *Better check how I look.*

I ran to our seventies’ green-themed bathroom. I stood on our green toilet and saw myself in the mirror. My baggy shirt had a small stain. *Need to change, then.* I grabbed a black shirt, knowing that wouldn’t show any possible stains. I brushed my dark brown curls and dashed outside to the carport. The dogs were barking, which meant someone was coming up the dirt driveway. Sure enough, I saw Mrs. Anita’s immaculate black jeep pull up, dirt swirling behind. She parked by Momma’s white van, the dust cloud only adding more dinge to Momma’s car. I said, “Bye, Momma,” closing the door behind me before hearing her reply. I climbed into the backseat where Stew waited with his Digimon figurines.

“Hey, Jojo!” Stew was pale with dirty blond hair. His bowl cut framed his blue eyes. His cheeks, ears, and lips vibrant pink compared to my darker exterior.

“Hey, Stew!”

Mrs. Anita, in her thick accent, asked, “Got everything, hun?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, already distracted by Stew’s newer figurines.

“Buckle in, then.”

Ever since meeting Stew for the first time, I looked forward to visiting him every other weekend. He had more than we did. He had all the game consoles that were so important in keeping us occupied: Nintendo 64, PlayStation, Dreamcast, Gameboy Color, and even a computer. With all the latest technology, my biggest envy was that he didn't have to share anything. He had his own room, his own bed, his own mother. He didn't have to share with four other siblings. I blamed my siblings for everything, including our financial hardship. I'd hear Momma grumble at grocery stores, like Piggly Wiggly, how we're so expensive or how we couldn't afford this or that. I don't think Mrs. Anita ever said that to Stew.

I once heard Stew say he was envious I had siblings, that he wished he had someone else close to his age. "You don't want that," I said. "You wouldn't have your room or your stuff to yourself!" Being a larger child, I'd think to myself, *...or your own food.*

If he had siblings, Mrs. Anita, like Momma, would have to use every sliver of food possible to feed her kids. She'd have to use all of the chicken. She'd scrape the meat from the bones for her children, boil the bones for her soup lunches, and break the bones into smaller pieces for her dogs. Stew would have to survive off milk with instant breakfast powders mixed-in on school mornings, catching the bus since Mrs. Anita already left for work. He'd have to make his own meal with ramen noodles and hot dogs, guzzling sweet tea to fill the void before Mrs. Anita could cook on her second shift at home. They'd have to remember to take food home to others whenever there was a chance, or they'd feel guilt. No, Stew and Mrs. Anita were lucky.

Mrs. Anita turned onto their concrete driveway, ascended up her hill, past her sister Sue's house. She clicked a button to open her garage as I stared at the manicured lawn, flower beds, and forest trails around their ten acres of land. My family only owned two and a half acres, and that was our yard. Our overgrown lawn was patchy. Our flower beds were only bushes. Our

forest trails were lined with broken furniture, glass, and tires, though it wasn't our land. I bet Mrs. Anita watched her grass grow from her surveillance cameras. If they grew an inch too long, she'd ride her lawnmower. We'd have to borrow our neighbor's.

Inside was even cleaner. All the furniture matched the pristine, white carpets, which didn't resemble our grey-once-white carpet. Her kitchen and dining room mahogany wood floor matched her table, chairs, and hutch, only her electric piano in the corner was a darker color. Our home was mismatched with whatever we could get, including a paint-chipped wooden bench and a yellow couch from the sixties. Even Stew's furniture in his room matched the wooden theme amongst his lighthouse themed wallpaper. Mrs. Anita decorated it all since she had the time and money. She didn't have to work like Momma did every day. Mrs. Anita's job was to keep everything tidy and make sure Stewart didn't go hungry. My dad helped sometimes with child support, but Momma sometimes would fume about late payments. Whenever I was at Stew's house, I didn't have to think about any of that.

"Make sure you take your shoes off at the door, Josiah," said Mrs. Anita.

"Yes, ma'am." I did as she said, though I thought it was strange. I thought, *The floor is going to get dirty anyways, why not keep your shoes on?* Course, her floors were so clean. She swept, mopped, and vacuumed her uncarpeted floors.

"Y'all hungry," asked Mrs. Anita.

I thought about snack cakes, chips, or even a sandwich, since my belly began to tremble.

"No, Mom," Stew snapped. "Maybe later." Both Stew and I ran to his bedroom treasure trove of toys, games, and gadgets. An hour later, though, my round stomach growled. Stew commented, "You're already hungry?"

I nodded. "I didn't get to eat Momma's leftover pot."

“Leftovers? Why would you eat leftovers?”

“Well,” I looked down. “Momma says that we can’t waste any food. Sometimes she makes this weird soupy dish. She jokes and says it’s goulash, but I don’t think goulash is a bunch of old leftovers put together.”

“Huh, weird.” Stew got up from the only chair in his room. I was resting on his bed, the blue lighthouse comforter neatly tucked underneath. “I’ll go tell Mom we’re ready to eat.”

He’s lucky that he doesn’t have to make food for himself, I thought. At least Mrs. Anita is fast. She had our plates of dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets, fries, and mini-yogurts neatly placed on the kitchen island table. Momma’s own concoctions took a while to make like her Cheeseburger casserole, corn-flake green bean casserole, or ramen noodle spaghetti. I was happy to have the chicken-filled dinosaurs. Stew slapped the bottom of his Tabasco bottle that sat next to his plate, which he put on everything, squirting the red sauce onto the extinct animals. I preferred ketchup mixed with mayo. I’d sometimes have just that as a sandwich, when we ran out of sliced cheese and deli meat. Either way, it was fun to imagine the ketchup as blood, or so I told Stew.

“Alright, boys,” said Mrs. Anita. “Stop playing with your food and pick a bag of chips out of the closet.”

I opened the closet, seeing the stacks of assorted chips in boxes. Doritos, Fritos, Lay’s, and Cheetos sat atop more boxes of prepackaged snacks like dehydrated apples, banana chips, nuts, and other “healthy” options we couldn’t afford. They even had more snack cakes than we did, even the dangerous Moon pies I loved. I reached into the box to pull out Lay’s sour cream and onion. Stew picked the flaming Cheetos.

Mrs. Anita asked, “Josiah, what would you like to drink?”

“What do you have?”

“We have juice, milk, Cokes, and tea.”

I shivered. Their “sweet” tea wasn’t as sweet as ours. We put a cup of sugar per gallon into our tea, the color matching apple juice. Theirs was so dark, less sweet, and stored in a tiny pitcher. They must know it taste bad if they only make half a gallon. I relied, “Can I take a look?”

“Sure, just don’t pick my Diet Cokes.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I looked into their steel fridge, the light illuminating so many choices. Our refrigerator lost its light years ago. You’d have to memorize where to grab the tea, which was the only choice. Water tasted gross and milk was saved for only breakfast. I looked into the clear drawers where her Diet Cokes were and picked a Dr. Pepper, my favorite.

As my friendship with Stewart grew well over a decade, I would see the same steel fridge highlighting what my family considered luxuries. Our refrigerator didn’t hold instant meals like pizzas or assortments of ice cream. Our refrigerator didn’t cool to-go plates from restaurants. Our refrigerator didn’t have filtered water or ice in the door.

No, our refrigerator came with the house from the 1970s with its cream-colored exterior. It held two-gallon pickle jars repurposed to hold tea. It held frozen veggies from our garden, friends’ gardens, or, the last resort, from the Pig. It held opened can foods covered with Saran wrap. My afternoon snacks were ramen noodles, moon pies, and pizza toast, using tomato paste and cheap parmesan. Sometimes, we were treated to deer meat from my Uncle who only hunted for fun. We’d reap the benefits of his luxury leading to my favorite meal: fried venison in buttermilk, garden greens, and mashed potatoes with gravy from the residual frying. Having fried deer meat was the only pleasure I knew Stew didn’t have, since his parents didn’t hunt. That was

our difference, Stew and I, my family only treated themselves when others gave them food. Stew's family didn't have to rely on others.

Sixteen years later, I opened Stew's fridge, the same as ever, even though we're twenty-four now. This was the first time I came to visit him after moving to California, but little has changed in Mississippi, including Stew and his home. Their "sweet" tea still sat untouched, the chicken nuggets still eager to be nuked in the microwave, and stacks of to-go plates sat in neat towers. The only change was the intensity of Spicy sauces in the door. There was Tabasco, Sriracha, salsas, peppers of all kinds, wasabi, and even "spicy" ketchup. I shook my head knowing only Stew consumed them. I said to Stew, sitting behind me on the same stool from when we were eight, "Have you ever tried Thai food and their spiciness level?"

"No, what's that like? Have you had it in Los Angeles?"

"Yeah, I think it's the best food. Plus, you could probably handle their 'very spicy' level." I closed the fridge, taking out some nuggets to put in the microwave. "Out of all the different ethnic food and different cultures I've tasted, I think Thai food is the best. Plus, you know it's good when they have a whole area of L.A. called Thai Town!"

"That's amazing! Did your—um..." Stew paused for a moment, trying to gather his thoughts. "...partner introduce you to that?" He took out the ketchup, its logo on fire. Stew was still getting used to the idea of his childhood friend being gay and married. However, when I did come out to him, his only question was if I was attracted to him.

Back then, I said, "No...but I do like your cousin Phillip."

His only reply was, "That explains why you encouraged him to take off his shirt when we were camping in the same tent." We laughed throughout that night.

Thinking back to L.A. and Stew's question, I answered, "Yeah, he did. Miguel has said that Southern California has the largest population of Thai outside of Thailand."

"Why does that matter?" asked Stewart.

"That means it's authentic." The microwave beeped. I took out the steaming nuggets and placed them on the table. We both chose Coke Zero's to drink.

"Well, why does the mall's Chinese food run by the Filipinos taste better than the actual Chinese-run restaurant?"

I shrug. "Don't know, but I do know that living in L.A. has broadened my palate. There's so many good foods to try." My eyes glanced sideways as I watched Stew pick his spice of choice. "And you don't need hot sauce."

He laughed. "I just like spice, is all." Stew doused the morsels of meat with a combination of Sriracha Mayo and tabasco. "Wish I could go visit you, but I'm stuck here looking for a welding job."

"You don't have to be stuck here." I took a bite from a plain nugget. It did need something. "I took a chance and stayed in California when I went to visit Miguel." I dipped my nuggets into Stew's concoction. We both chewed our portions, both immune to the spiciness having lived on the Louisiana border. "It's been the best decision, but it wasn't easy."

"Nothing ever is," said the man who started with everything and never changed.

“ FARM FRESH ”

“ NO ARTIFICIAL INGREDIENTS* ”

“100% NATURAL”

“*minimally processed”

The sun rises behind the words,

Floating in the air,

Above the red barn.

Concealing how

The product

Came to be

Weighed

Reaped

Wrapped

Inside
the
barn,

On the plastic package

You now hold.

Red's Farm

One February morning in Mississippi, Momma and I drove uphill on an orange-tinted dirt road past a brick house. I saw a tilled field, ready for planting, surrounding four closed off, ventilated tunnels, gleaming silver in the cold morning light. We stopped at the first house where a short woman jumped off her tractor to meet us. We climbed out of our car to greet her in the cold.

“Hi, there, Ginny. Is this one of yer boys?”

“Yep, this is Josiah.” She nudged me to shake the woman’s hand. I did and noticed her skin resembled a strawberry, red and freckled, which matched her short copper hair. “Josiah, this is Mrs. Beverly.”

“Call me, Bev, or Red, if you like.”

I replied, “Nice to meet you, Red.”

“Ready to get started, Josiah?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Red quipped, “Don’t call me, ma’am. I’m not that old.”

“Yes, ma’--er, Red. Yes, Red.”

“Good.” Red turned to Momma. “I’m glad y’all decided to come help me. At this point, the chickens are dying off more than I can carry by myself.” She turned to me. “Let’s get going.”

Momma asked, “What time should I come back?”

“Two hours, be fine,” said Red.

“Alright, then. Bye, Si. Do what she says.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

With a plume of orange dust, Momma left me to work my first job at thirteen. I followed Red into the first of the four chicken houses. The door unleashed a smelly heat and clouds of dust.

The first room was small with machinery measuring how much water dripped into the house and the food pouring. The ceiling was tangled with cobwebs sagging with heavy dust and occasional feathers. By the exit, there was a ledge with two clipboards and a few pencils. “This is where you’ll note the number on the water and food gauge. I need to know how much they’re drinking, just in case there’s a leak somewhere. Happens a lot.” Red tapped the gauges and noted them on the paper, already yellow from the dust.

“What’s that smell?” I asked.

“That stuff burning your nose?”

“Yeah.”

“Ammonia. It’s in the bird’s poop. It’s strong now because they’re older. Here,” Red pulled a gas mask, the ones I remembered from World War II photos, from the wall. “If you’re having trouble breathing, whether it’s dust or not, use this. It helps some.” She helped me tie off the mask onto my face. “Now, let me warn you. Don’t scare my chickens. That’ll make their hearts stop and kill them quicker. We don’t need that, especially since you’ll be picking up the dead bodies. It’ll make your job that much harder.” I nodded my head, which contradicted my thoughts of not being here. “Grab that bucket from over there. Now, all you have to do is walk along the path and be on the lookout for any chickens that have died. Put them into your bucket and we’ll count them in the end, too.” She pointed to a red box on the ground nearby holding some white powder. “Make sure you clean your feet before entering in that there powder. It’ll make sure we don’t get them sick.” After dusting my shoes in the kitty litter-like box, Red

motioned for me to get behind her. “Once I open this door, be quick. I don’t want to chase one of them down.”

Red opened the squeaky door. A mini stampede moved out of the way and there was a sea of white, dingy feathers, red wattles, and blank stares watching as we stepped onto black soil. The ammonia was much stronger in here and I was grateful for my mask. The chicken house’s high ceiling had orange lights casting shadows from more cobwebs above. There were two pipes hanging horizontally just above the ground. I noticed that one pipe dripped water into red spoons underneath. The other pipe occasionally sprinkled yellow feed onto the ground where chickens pecked to eat. The chickens themselves were just over the size of basketballs. Whenever I would get close, they fluttered their wings. Unfortunately for them, they were too heavy to lift themselves into the air.

“They’re pretty big. Are they almost finished growing?” I asked.

“No,” said Red. “They’re about fifteen weeks. We’ll ship them when they’re twenty weeks, right before they mature sexually at twenty-four.”

“Will their feathers change color?”

“Nuh-uh. They’ll stay white before they’re sent off to the factory off River Ridge Road. Let’s get to walking.” We walked along the walls. Giant fans spun slowly, barely letting sunlight and air enter. I couldn’t breathe. My eyes watered.

I watched the chickens move out of Red’s way, creating a circle around us, until we saw one not moving on the ground. “See here?” she pointed out. “Here’s one.” She picked it up and tossed it into my bucket. We continued finding more bodies. The bucket felt so heavy as the numbers grew. It was bad enough picking up dead chickens, but it was worse when they died recently. You could still feel their body heat emanating from their feet.

I dropped the warm body the first time. I was disturbing realizing that this is where we got our meat, that these were the conditions they lived in, and that this was my dinner. The fried chicken on my plate were the successful chickens. The successful ones that briefly saw daylight and green landscapes on a truck driving to the chicken factory. Meanwhile, the warm, recently-dead chicken in my hand died in the dark, suffocating on stale, stinging air.

Red called for me out of my trance. She waved me over with one hand while holding a live chicken in her other. Once I reached her, she asked, “See this one?”

I nodded. This chicken was wispy, its feathers shabby. Even worse, there was an extra leg growing out of its side.

“This, we can’t sell. He’s not supposed to grow an extra limb.”

“Why not?” I laughed. “Doesn’t that mean an extra chicken leg for someone?”

Red guffawed. “Maybe, but the company doesn’t want them. It’ll get them in trouble.”

“Then what do you do with them?”

Red grabbed its neck and said, “We kill them.” She spun the bird violently. There was a crack, its wings flapped more slowly, and then... limp. The chicken house was quiet with infrequent clucks coming from the other chickens, as if they knew the taller beasts committed murder.

Shocked, I said, “Red, I can’t do that. I can’t-”

“Look, I don’t like it, either. But think of this, I can’t sell them. That means that all the water and food they eat doesn’t help me pay off the ten-year-debt I owe to the company or add to my check I need for my daughter. Plus, that means more resources for the other birds. In those senses, I have to do it. If you can’t, I won’t force you, but keep that in mind.” Red put her kill into a bucket and moved on, it’s feet twitching.

We came back to the entrance of the first chicken house covered in dust and feathers and counted the dead. Red wrote forty-six on the yellowed paper by the door. We dumped our buckets into the tractor pail and moved on. We finished the second house without having to snap another neck, thankfully. Red climbed her tractor. "Hop on," she commanded.

"But, there's nowhere to sit."

"That's ok. Just hold on tight. It'll save us time going to the pit."

"The pit?"

She mhm'd. "That's where all these bodies are going."

We rode over a nearby hill where there was a square concrete slab. As if the slab was poured around them, there were two other plastic buckets, black and white. "Alrighty," huffed Red, "This is the real test. You know what to do in a house. Now, you need to know what to do with them." Red jumped off the tractor to lift the black bucket. Steam released flies into the chill air. Inside, corpses undulated under waves of maggots, fat on the birds. I turned away, nauseated, but able to keep my breakfast down. I turned back and met Red's eyes. She smiled, "Yep, we need to throw them down into the pit until it's full."

"Then what do we do?"

"We chunk them-," she said as she grabbed a body from the tractor, "Over the hill." She then threw the body past the pit into a grove of trees, where I swore I saw the pit's flies follow. "Your turn," she said.

We quickly disposed the corpses and rode to the other houses. An hour had already passed before we entered the third house. Red exclaimed, "Wait a minute! Aren't you related to the Busby's?"

"Yeah, they're my second cousins."

“Huh, that’s funny. The Busby boys were always my helping hands. Lance was great, but that Ross boy...he couldn’t handle the job.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, he kept retching and gagging throughout the houses, but, by the time he came to the pit, he lost anything left in his stomach. Funny, he was more macho than you.”

Ross bullied me for not being a macho, hunter type throughout our school years. I couldn’t help but smile. “How ‘bout that?”

Red laughed, “Plus, I always thought he was a rude one. I’d rather have you working for me.”

I worked every weekend for Red. I worked through the months until the chickens were ready to be shipped. Most reached a foot and half feet tall. The chickens put on so much weight, a pound per week, that their legs broke, which made it easier to wrangle for the shippers. Once put into steel boxes on freight trucks, the birds witness their first and last exposure to sunlight, riding the highway until arriving at the chicken factory. Then the process started over. The black manure crusted ground was covered in fresh wood chips, the doors closed, and the tiny chicks were released, peeping in their new house. I’d feel the chickens’ eyes each weekend as I collected their dead. I returned home to stare at my plate, fried buttermilk chicken with sides of green beans and mashed potatoes.

Each weekend, I dreaded waking up, though I needed the job. My family needed money. I couldn’t work legally in Mississippi until I was fifteen. Even then, I needed a connection to a local business before I could assume I had a chance. For now, working for Red, under the table, was fine. It only lasted a few hours twice a weekend. I continued working for her until Easter morning that next year.

That foggy morning, I saw Red waiting for me at the chicken houses with her tractor. *Uh oh, there must be a lot dead this time.* And there was.

We put on my mask, my rubber gloves, and walked the houses. I did one side and she the other. We picked up a range from recently dead, their warmth radiating from their scaly legs, to the disintegrated soup-chickens, which we used a shovel to move. The soup-chickens always left my plastic gloves slick from their organs. We counted and placed the dead into our plastic buckets, then into the tractor's pail. Together, we picked up over sixty dead chickens from one house. The same happened in the second house. It was a sign that the recent heat was affecting the birds. There was a mountain of over a hundred dead birds in her tractor's bucket. We climbed onto the tractor to ride to the other houses.

Red listens to me tell her a dream I had the night before. The fog reminded me of how the dream clinged to my memory. She replied, "That sounds crazy-"

The tractor hit a bump. My grip slipped. I hit the ground, stunned. I watched without feeling as the tractor's massive wheels rolled past, over my legs. My pants were caught by the tilling equipment in the back and dragged me. My skin scraped against rocks. The tractor stopped. My head was ringing and my body on fire.

Red jumped off the tractor. She exclaimed, "Josi, you alright?" She lifted me off the ground. That's when I screamed, my legs swollen with purple tire marks.

We rode back to my house where Momma looked me over. Momma asked the same question, "You alright?"

"Yeah, I-I don't hurt too much."

"It was my fault," Red said. "I shouldn't have had him with me on the tractor."

I said, "It's fine, Red. It was my choice to be on it. It was an accident."

Red teared up, “But it was my responsibility and I-”

“It’s not your fault. You’re alright with me, Red.”

We all paused. Momma looked between us, “Well, if you’re good to go, we need to get to church. Thank you for bringing him back, Red.”

In the Easter service, we sang and greeted one another in fellowship until the preacher exclaimed, “We have a miracle this morning! Ginny’s son, Josiah, came out without a scratch after being run over by a tractor.” The congregation clapped, suspicious if it were true, since Brother Clint didn’t get to walk away from his tractor accident. The moment passed briefly and the service ended with the Sacrament.

Afterward, we gathered in the church’s gymnasium with white tables set up, miniature eggs and flowers decorating them. A long procession began with our plates where people chose from the buffet-style lineup of piled high meats, sauces, casseroles, and desserts. I told Momma while in line, “I don’t think I want to work for Red anymore.”

“Why not?” She picked up a deviled egg.

I placed a biscuit on my plate. “Well, I haven’t really liked working for her, especially after this morning. Throughout the winter, I kept getting sick. It’s stressful seeing these animals get stuck in their own feces and I can’t reach them. The ground is like quicksand. The worst part was when I found that little chick in the pit living among other dead chickens.”

“Oh, Josi! I don’t want to hear about that. We’re here to eat, not talk about where it came from!”

“But-”

“I hear you. You won’t work for her anymore.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I sat at our family’s table. I watched others spear their forks into their chicken breasts lathered in a myriad of sauces, its aromas making my tongue water. My plate in front of me hosted plenty of other meats, but I stared at the poultry. My stomach growled, my mouth salivated, but my mind remained nauseated. *Again, caught in this situation.* I ate, guilty.

Warm bread

is like love.

Messy.

Even sticky.

Yet, with patience --

Love rises,

Burns,

Satisfies

Our craving

To belong.

Remembering Love

A white sheet covered the stacks of silver plates, where flowers normally adorned, on the altar at Momma's church in Mississippi. It was the fifth Sunday of the month and the pastor called the deacons, a group of older men running the church, to come forward to pass the plates contents. The Pastor announced, unfolding the sheets, "The Apostle Paul has said in 1 Corinthians 11:26, 'For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.' We're here to honor our Lord and Savior. Join us and proclaim His hold over you."

The deacons, ceremoniously, lifted the tops of the plates to reveal crackers. Apparently, there wasn't enough people tithing to cover the coveted, blessed, square Communion wafers made specifically as the Lord's Body. The older men turned to the congregation and passed the plates from one side of the pews to the next, each person grabbing their own cracker, cupping the bread in their hands better than their crying babies. There wasn't enough money for the nursery, either. As the last of the crackers were dispersed, the pastor said, "Before we partake, reassure yourself that your heart of hearts is ready, those of you who were baptized. For 1 Corinthians 10:21 says, 'You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot share in the Lord's table and the table of demons.'" Once everyone held their own cracker and the deacons returned to the altar to receive the Body of Christ. The pastor announced, "This is my Body..." I stared at my cracker, its perfect square representing rigid Christianity. He bit into his cracker, then the deacons, then the congregation. The cracker had a better taste than the other Communion wafers, which reminded me of dust. Dust to dust, right?

The ceremony repeated but more carefully for the Blood of Christ. The Blood jostled in its cups as an elderly deacon passed me the silver plate. This was always the trickier part, since I

have dropped our Savior's blood on the floor before. The tiny plastic shot glass of grape juice, dark with red bubbles, reflected my face. The church was silent, aside from the organist squinting at her music, one eye bigger than the other one. Without ruining the pink carpet, the deacons returned and the pastor announced, "This is my Blood..." We drank together, drowning the dry crackers in our throat.

I see other members look renewed, that they reaffirmed their faith. I felt nothing.

After our samples, the pastor announced there was a better feast prepared by the deacon's wives in the church's gymnasium. However, beforehand, we need to bless the meal. I was happy to have had something in my gullet since the most long-winded deacon led us in prayer. I couldn't wait for this experience to be over. I could envision the buffet waiting for me.

Years later, I find myself staring at the same crackers floating in my soup I made tonight. Though the October days in Santa Clarita were hot, I thought to make an autumn-themed soup, butternut squash with ginger and crackers. I tell my husband, Miguel, what I remembered from my Christian days and he echoed his experience in the Mormon church. We laughed at how we both didn't feel anything special during the ceremonies, only that it took too much time away from the better meal afterwards. I joked, "They should've used biscuits and sparkling grape juice to get more people for the Lord's Supper." We laughed more.

"Glad we're Atheists," remarked Miguel.

I nodded. "Hey, so, I was thinking of making some pan de muerto tonight."

"Why," he asked, having another spoonful of his soup. "We can just buy it, if you want it so bad. Besides, it's only really used for ofrendas."

"Yeah, I know. I was thinking of doing it for Lovey." My heart sank saying her name.

Miguel looked at me. "You mean your cat that died this summer?"

“Yeah.” I had my own spoonful, its nutty flavor clinging to my breath.

He nodded, “Would you need space? Do you have your ingredients?”

“I’d prefer it, if possible. And yes, I do.”

“OK, then I’ll go visit my parents. Let me know when you’re done.”

When the hot sunshine traded with the cooler stars, I set out my flour, sugar, salt, eggs, milk, butter, and anise seeds on the kitchen counter. I dimmed the lights, lit some candles, and cut out paper cat figures. I lined them against the wall and stared at the shadows they casted. I inhaled deeply, still feeling the wound of losing my calico kitty. She was the first living entity I told that I was gay. She didn’t care. And that was beautiful. “This is for you, Lovey.”

I mixed my dry ingredients together, without the anise seeds. Then the wet ingredients. I kneaded the dough, squeezing, tearing, pounding at my grief. I smoothed out the lumps that reminded me of the tumors she had in her last days, eradicating them from the bread. I let Lovey’s dough rest to rise, to breathe in a corner she would have liked. I then warmed the oven and swiped through photos of my cat as I waited. Her green eyes were so bright contrasted to her runny black mascara design. She’d only follow me around the house until I left for college. She stayed with Momma until her last days where she couldn’t walk. She fought her body until it won over her in seizures. A tear fell, but I laughed at the memories of her sass keeping me sane during my depressing high school days.

As if my memories inflated it, the dough doubled in size, pouring over the small bowl I had left it in. I cut out a few balls to shape and form into what I needed to resemble her, nose, ears, her tail, and the traditional Dia de los Muertos bones across her body. I kneaded the dough, assembled her form, and put anise seeds where her eyes and nose were supposed to be. Gently, I

brushed her body as if I was petting her goodbye for the last time, then dusted her with sugar. She was ready to bake.

Left to myself again, I thought about how much joy she brought me when I was in Mississippi with her. She understood me, but never said a word. She gave me the reassurance I needed to keep going in life, to not end what could have been. Here I was, in California, married, safe, and happy.

“There were numerous times I wanted to bring you over here, Lovey,” I said directed at the baking pan de muerto. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you when you died.”

The timer I set earlier alerted me, though the smell of anise, fresh bread, and warm sugar brought me to the oven first. She was beautiful. The loaf resembled her, aside from her face melting a little. She was wrapped, nice and warm, into a ball asleep. Just like I remembered her on my bed on those cold October nights in southwest Mississippi as I read my books.

I placed bread Lovey on an altar, poured some water for her, positioned the candles just right, and cried. It had only been four months since her death, but I had known her for fifteen years. I wept until my nose blocked the smell of the bread. I blew my nose and messaged Miguel: I’m finished. I need you back with me.

On my way, he texted.

When Miguel saw my ofrenda, he hugged me. “I know you loved her.”

I could only nod as I sniffled into his chest. “She was special to me.”

“Aw, baby.” He held me tighter. “You have such a tender heart. I bet that’s what she saw in you.”

“I think so,” I said, “especially after visiting her every day when she was sick as a kitten. I felt like I was the only one nursing her back to health.”

“Well, I hope tonight has helped you move to a better place with her.”

I stared at my ofrenda, the orange candlelight reflecting off of Lovey’s pan de muerto. I said, “I think so, but...I want to share this with you, too.” Miguel let go of me as I walked to the ofrenda. I grabbed the loaf and cut a slice of it with a knife from the kitchen. I gave a slice of her thigh to Miguel and I had her tail. “Without her helping me accept myself, I wouldn’t be here. In a way, she led me to you.” I touched my piece to his. “So, thank you, Lovey Dove. You were the best cat and I’m happy you’re not suffering anymore.” We took a bite, the flavor of the anise and sweet bread filling our senses.

In that moment, I felt something. I felt whole. I felt love.

Leonor's Pozole

Leonor, mi suegra, scuttled through my kitchen in her white slippers and blue nightgown. Her wide hips swayed as she gathered our dinner's ingredients. Her dainty hands diced onions, avocados, limes, and boiled eggs. She shredded roasted chicken and picked cilantro leaves off their stems. Each ingredient neatly bundled onto plates on our table by the window. Her famous pozole made the stewpot top dance, filling the air with the smell of garlic, marjoram, oregano, and hominy.

As she finished gathering other necessary ingredients, she taught me the way she makes her pozole, which isn't typical. In Spanish, she says, "Other Mexicanos make red pozole with pork and plenty of chile. Leaves it too greasy. Too salty." She placed the oregano bottle and chile powder on the table. "I don't add any salt. The masa left from the hominy works fine as a broth."

I helped her serve our portions of the white stew, bowls instantly hot on this chilly autumn night. I said to her, "Your pozole is so good. I feel like it heals." And it has. The vapors filled my nostrils, a new experience, new culture. My own mother's chicken soup could never compare to my accepting in-laws' prized stew.

"Smells good," called Miguel, who appeared from our apartment's office.

"It's almost ready, babe," I called. I placed his bowl on the table and served myself.

Both Miguel and Leonor sat at the table, their feet touching the table's carved lion-paws.

"Oh," Leonor bounced. "I forgot the napkins."

"Hubby, can you get them," asked Miguel. He grabbed a lime slice and squeezed its juices into the stew.

“Yeah, babe.”

We all added our ingredients one by one, bulking the hominy stew. A dash of cilantro, a pinch of onion, plenty of roasted chicken, and boiled eggs sank among the alkalized white maize. Every time I have this stew, I think about how the Peralta’s added me to their family, their stew, as another ingredient. When I didn’t fit into my family’s homogenous recipe, I fit into this eclectic mix of Catholics, Mormons, and the not so religious. They only cared I was a good person for their son, not that I was a gay man or an Atheist.

Leonor passed a bowl of chicharones.

“Ma, you know we don’t eat pork or pork rinds.”

“Oh, sorry, mijo. I did think of that in the store. I got some wheat one’s for you and Josiah.” She pointed to the microwave. I followed her finger to find the bag on top.

“Chicharrones de harina con chile y limón,” I read. That was sweet and accommodating of her. It was more evidence that she accepted us and our choices. My mother wouldn’t have done the same. In fact, she’d tell me as a child. *“Be grateful that you have food at all. Just think of the homeless who aren’t going to eat tonight,”* which sounded similar to how religious Southern culture preferred our heads to be downcast and accept our situations. Be grateful and don’t change.

I sit back down and open the bag. Miguel and I added the wheat-rinds to our pozole, hearing them crackle and pop in our elixir. My heart warmed as I see both Miguel and Leonor smile saying, “Provecho!” We didn’t make everyone wait until the meal was “blessed”. We didn’t pray giving thanks to a higher power. We simply gave thanks to the cook, to the moment we could be together. I felt like our eyes weren’t to the ground, but at one another.

Considering Miguel and Leonor's brown eyes, I felt welcomed, loved. My new family always made me feel like I belonged. They knew what it was like leaving the familiar for love, for dreams. Miguel's parents left their little, dusty town in Morelos, Mexico for New York City in the seventies, then Los Angeles soon after. I recognized, as my pozole warmed my stomach, that I did the same moving from Mississippi to Los Angeles to be with their son. They chose to leave their family behind, too.

I had to start anew. I don't think I could have stayed in Mississippi.

The last time I felt loved and welcomed within my own family was Thanksgiving 2012. On that Thursday, we sat around the table eating fried turkey, homegrown vegetables, Momma's cornbread stuffing, and drinking sweet tea. We bowed our heads, held hands, and prayed over what they thought was important. We laughed at crude jokes. We worried over money and our jobs. We avoided politics. Most of all, we enjoyed one another at the table.

Yet, the next day, I told Momma that I was bisexual, a lie to soften the blow of being gay. I watched Momma's reaction crack into a cauldron of mixed emotions. She didn't believe me. I added I had a boyfriend. She recognized that I was serious. She yelled, "You never had Jesus in your heart, then! You're not my son. You're possessed!" But the worst came when she cried. "Josi, I'll always love you, and I'll never abandon you, but what you're doing is wrong. I'd rather see you alone for the rest of your life." That's the day where my family began to slowly tear away. There were sparse phone calls, a few messages online, but then silence came over my four siblings.

Nowadays, I call Momma every other weekend giving her updates, always reminding her, "I'm happy."

Momma was right in a way. I was possessed, by love. It was a love that gave me a new family. A new family that invited me to birthdays, holiday celebrations, and simple vacations. A family that called, texted simple emojis, and shared silly videos off Facebook. A family that didn't add the word "but" after I love you. A family that even helped fund our dreams, including my Bachelor's degree. Their support has been invaluable, even the simplest gestures of literally sharing a piece of culture in a bowl at our college apartment.

I dipped my spoon for the last portion of pozole in my bowl. Knowing my stomach was full, I still had more. "Miggi," I called, "Do you want any more? ¿Leonor, quieres más?"

"No, no gracias, Josiah," said Leonor. "La sopa se sienta un poco pesada. ¿Verdad?"

Miguel responded, "I'm alright. You can have some more, though."

I happily had a second portion, garnishing more lime, cilantro, onion, and chicken. "I just love your Mom's cooking. ¡Está rica!"

"Que bueno," laughed Leonor.

Miguel poured more Sprite into my glass. "Good! I'd hope you'd still like it after five years."

"Josiah, porque sé que te gusta mucho mi pozole," said Leonor, "Escribí la receta para ti."

In a blur of words, I understood: *You like my pozole. I write the recipe for you.* "Gracias, Leonor." I looked to Miguel for help, again. "Did she say she will write the recipe for me?"

Miguel rolled his eyes. "No, she said because you like the recipe, *she wrote it,*" he emphasized.

“Oh!” I turned to her, mouth open. “¡Muchas gracias!”

Her eyes crinkled as she smiled, laughing. “Sí, tal vez la próxima vez, puedas hacerlo para nosotros.”

Miguel translated, “She wants you to make it next time.”

“Of course, I would do anything for her.”

My husband smiled, “Yeah?”

“Mhmm, because I love our family.”

I could tell his heart was filled with warmth, since I heard those special words, “Te queremos, Ma.”

“Que les vaya bien Dios mediante, Dios los Bendiga y los cuide. Los quiero mucho, mis hijos.” We basked in the love. I heard her say in Spanish, “Want to watch a movie?”

I nodded, slurping more stew.

“Sure,” said Miguel. “Which one?”

“Zombies.”

Miguel and I looked at one another. We rolled our eyes. Miguel said to me, “You did say you’d do anything for her. It’s your turn to watch.”

“How about The Mist,” I asked her.

She hissed her S’s, “Ss-sí.” She scuttled towards the living room to prepare the show.

I finished my pozole and placed my hand on Miguel's lap. A tear welled up in my eye, thinking of how far we've all come to be here. I said, "Y'all mean so much to me."

"Babycakes," he pouted. "You're not only loved. You're wanted."

There you are
Telling me
“Lose the weight.”
Yet You are
The first Person
To ever add,
“I want you healthy.”
Love can trim
Unnecessaries,
Like Cutting Butter
Cutting portions
Cutting fat.
Doing so-
Gives me Wings,
Ones I didn't know
I have,
Lifting Me
To Choose
My Destination.
I make My Choice,
I
Fly
To
You.

Choosing Miggi

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see. It’s a surprise,” said Miguel, smiling.

Today was our last day in Seattle, the midpoint of our Pacific Northwest road trip from Vancouver to Portland. Our stomachs growled as we crossed from Virginia Street onto 1st Avenue in downtown. I thought we were going to Pike Place Market, since we were so close. I was assured that we’d visit that place later for lunch. “No,” corrected Miguel, “We’re going to a special place I think you’ll like.”

“You know I love surprises, but I’m too hungry to have enough patience.” Again, my stomach growled in agreement.

“Look,” he pointed at the end of the block. “It’s over there, by the Pride flags.” In the display window were two Pride flags on either side with a drowsy face on the glass saying, BISCUIT BITCH, Southern-inspired fixins.

With a smirk, I said, “What’s this?”

“A little bit of home,” he joked. I followed Miguel inside to see the line start at a sign saying BITCH, PLEASE! ORDER BACK YONDER! I was tickled. Their signature word was everywhere with Pride flags and Southern memorabilia donning the walls. The restaurant smelled of salty, seared sausage and bacon. There were customers pointing to different artwork, giggling. They were probably laughing at the elegant design that said, Skinny Bitch ~ please ~ eat a biscuit. There was a picture frame holding a plastic baby with a sign saying, Feed me, Bitch. Above was a rainbow-colored foam head with piercings hovering over a tin sign painted to say, Trailer Park to Table. A pyramid of Spam supported a tip jar on top reminding everyone, Every time you don’t tip...a baby unicorn dies, complete with the saddest unicorn crying. A

shoddy, white wooden fence said, Good Gravy. There was merchandise like t-shirts, mugs, premixed biscuit bags, and bags of coffee and tea that said, This here is for sniffing on. Best of all, dotted around, there were pride flags in every possible place, even inside the Bitch Kitchen.

The Southern atmosphere was recognizable. Its queerness was, too. Yet, I found myself muddled in a place combining the two. This restaurant exuded my identity of both being Southern and Queer that I never saw growing up. As I took it all in, Miguel stared at the menu on the black chalk “bitch” board where I heard a woman shyly order her food, then cover her mouth.

“No shame in saying it,” said the cook. “They’re just words and they don’t hurt our feelings.”

I could see why she might be shy since each order contained a curse word. I whispered to Miguel, “Which looks good to you?”

“Well, I think I want to try the...the Gritty Scrambled Cheesy Bitch. Wait,” he squinted, “Is that the one with the full biscuits and gravy?”

“Yeah,” I confirmed.

“You?”

“I was thinking of the Bitchwich with sausage.” I could see he was enjoying this environment, a safe introduction to a culture normally homophobic.

“Ooo, that looks good, too.” Miguel laughed. He admitted, “I love the names.”

I laughed at his laughter. “Only because of the irreverence. You’ve always enjoyed that.” We laughed together.

We placed our order, got some water from their camping water jug, and sat outside at the patio furniture. People walked by either snickering at the place's name or completely ignoring the restaurant. I said to Miguel, "I never thought I'd be having Southern food in the Northwest."

"Well, surprise!" He knew this was an uncommon thing searching for Southern food, since we typically tried to avoid "Southernisms," as I called them. It brought back painful memories of a time where my family was accepting, of a time I wasn't Josiah the pariah. Miguel said, "I thought it would be a nice change, especially since you won't make anything for me. I've never had biscuits and gravy!"

"There's a reason for that," I said rolling my eyes. "Southern food will make you fat, but it sure is tasty." I didn't cook Southern food because I didn't want to return to my former obese self. It was a justified fear, since the source of Southern food's magic was bacon grease, lard, and/or butter. Those magical ingredients will keep you addicted and that wasn't going to be a part of my life anymore, or his.

"There was that one time you tried making gumbo," he reminisced. "Pretty bad."

"I didn't have the patience to make a good roux. Besides, I swore off using butter, which is what that roux needed." I heard our order called out. "Well," I said getting up, "Now you get to try authentic Southern food." I brought back our order on a tray, Miguel's order tipping the scale. "Yours is heavy, babe."

His order had garlic grits at the bottom, peppered scrambled eggs, two sausage patties, and a biscuit all layered into a paper boat with gravy. My Bitchwich dripped with cheese and grease onto the kitschy checkered paper. In the cool morning, we could see the steam rise. I stabbed two forks into Miguel's order. His eyes were wide, "That's a lot."

“And that’s why we always share. Let’s see if it matches with what I remember.” I took a bite of his combo. I could taste the butter oozing from the scrambled eggs, light and fluffy. The saltiness of the smoky sausage came in waves as the creamy grits acted as a balm, saving me from drowning in the sausage’s full strength. Nostalgia hit as the past resurrected out from the trinity. I nodded, “Yeah, it takes me back.”

“To what?” He took a bite. I envisioned he had the same reaction but without the Southern guilt of yearning for this kind of food daily. Miguel nodded. “It’s good.”

“Always is.” I sighed, slumping my shoulders. “I just remembered how Momma would make this kind of stuff in the morning or for breakfast-for-dinner, especially for Christmas breakfast. We didn’t have garlic grits, though. Momma’d melt a block of cheese into it, making it look bright orange.” We both took another bite. I kept nodding, agreeing with both its authenticity and the rare flood of positive memories. “It’s really good, but-”

“-but it’s too rich. Greasy.”

“Exactly,” I agreed, though I wanted to say it was too hot.

Miguel chuckled. “It’s no wonder you were so chubby when we met.”

I pulled out my phone and found the photo I always use to prove how big I was in the past. “Can you believe I was 310 pounds my senior year of high school?” In the photo, I side-hugged a Norwegian exchange student. I had chunky curls that matched my round face, my eyes lost in my cheeks. My belly and love handles were pronounced underneath my XXL shirt. This time, I was shaking my head. “Southern food is rich. Once you finish eating, there isn’t much incentive to work it off. That’s why I lost so much weight with you.”

“Among other things, like switching to a Mediterranean diet, forcing you to the gym, and sharing portions with you.” Miguel took another bite. “Sex helped, too.”

“Yeah, it sure did.” I blushed, he was my first positive experience with sex. He was also my first boyfriend, which resulted from me taking a chance to compliment a guy out of my league on a gay dating app called Growlr, the bear version of Grindr. I thought he’d either move on, say thanks, or both.

I texted. *You’re very cute, sir.*

Miguel texted back. *You’re cute yourself, mister.*

Our relationship flourished, even as we sat eating our meal. Over the time we got to know each other while long distance, he’d keep encouraging me to lose weight, not for vanity’s sake but for my health. He’d say over our daily phone calls, *I want you healthy. I want to see you live a long time.* With his encouragement, I started going to the gym. When we met for the first time on Christmas that same year, I was down to 280 pounds. After moving to California in May 2013, I committed to losing more weight. I committed to being healthy. After taking a bite of my sandwich, its sausage just as salty and biscuits soft as pillows lathered in deliciousness, I said, “I can’t believe I lost 110 pounds within a year after meeting you.”

“I can.” He wiped his mouth with a napkin. “It helps banning butter in the house, butterball.”

“Blasphemy to Momma.” We laughed. Momma would go so far as to not cook if there weren’t any butter or bacon grease in the house. That’s why we bought the 45 oz. Country Crock Butter tub at Piggly Wiggly. Thinking out loud, I said, “It was such a strange thing learning you could cook with olive oil and not just use it for ‘holy anointing’ on people’s foreheads.”

“I can’t believe she taught her children that.” A lot of my Mississippi stories Miguel couldn’t believe.

I raised a finger and said in a mocked, marketing voice, “It’ll cure demonic possession, too!” Miguel rolled his eyes with a groan. I laughed because it was too silly to think of now. I laughed at how embarrassing it was that I once believed in those superstitions, in religion. I said, “Anyways, what do you think of your Southern breakfast?”

“It’s good, but,” paused Miguel, “This white porridge stuff is a little strange.”

“You mean the grits? It’s just corn,” I explained.

“No wonder I’m not thrilled about it. But the rest is good.” Miguel stirred his food, letting the steam wisp into the wind. “Did your Mom make this often?”

“Not really. We mostly had bubbled eggs, or fried eggs, in the morning. You know, pop the yolk as the fun popped up. Soak its golden sunshine with toast.”

Miguel shook his head. “I can only eat scrambled. Can’t stand the egg white flavor.”

I nodded. “If it wasn’t eggs, it was biscuits and gravy. In the summer, though, we had a lot of tomato gravy, since we had a surplus from the garden. We used tomatoes for everything, especially tomato sandwiches.”

“Just tomatoes?”

“No,” I said, “You put mayo and pepper with it, too. If the tomato is good enough, you don’t need anything else.”

Miguel puffed his lips in suspicion. “That’s what you said about your family’s weird banana sandwiches.”

“Hey, mayo and banana is pretty good!”

“Yeah, but a fatty choice. I know there wasn’t many options for you guys, but, come on, there are better things to put in a sandwich than a fruit full of sugar. Try some lettuce.”

“She tried,” I retorted, “but it was only iceberg lettuce.” We both grimaced.

Momma did what she could as a single mother with five kids. My Uncle Donald, her boss and actual brother, tried to help with bonuses. Looking back, having the bonuses go to snack cakes, ramen noodles, random moments of fruit, and gallons and gallons of sweet tea kept us fat. Yet, those were the choices with what we could afford and Momma was too proud to sign up for food stamps. In her words, she didn't want to be a welfare queen.

"I'm making better choices with you, though," I added. "California has so many options compared to Mississippi. Other than some local grocery stores, like the Pig, you only have the super stores like Walmart."

Miguel shook his head, "You would think that a farming community would have a farmer's market."

I shrugged my shoulders, "Not sure if there was any there. Momma was only concerned with work and church."

"Clearly," he snarked, rolling his eyes.

"Well, I made the best choice coming to visit you that summer." I smiled, a shine to my eyes. "I never wanted to leave, especially after marrying you." We gushed over each other, holding hands and stuffing our faces. Having finished our last bites, I said, "You know, by choosing you, I've chosen a better life that I couldn't have imagined would bring me to so many places."

He nodded, "My little country bumpkin's been to Europe, New York City, Chicago, Canada, and the whole West coast, now!"

"And that's all because of you."

He shook his head and had that look of sympathy, from those gorgeous honey eyes. "You don't give yourself enough credit, babe. You had enough courage to leave your hill, in the

Mississippi woods, to come be with me in Los Angeles.” He smiled and took my hand, watching me blush. “You started your life over, Mr. Peralta.”

“*Clearly,*” I squeezed his hand and leaned in for a kiss. I’ve told him many times how changing my “maiden” name, Andrews, to his last name, Peralta, was symbolic of that choice. I created a new life with him where I could leave my family’s religious guilt, poverty, and Southernisms behind. “Being with you, Miggi, has made my life more than I could have ever imagined.”

Reflective Essay

I saw this project as the ultimate display of what I've could learn at CSUMB. My goal, other than attaining a Bachelor's, was to improve my writing in the hopes of publishing one day. For my creative project, it made sense to choose the medium of short stories and poetry.

With our learned materials and discussions, I wanted to highlight sections that had a personal impact. As I've been taught through creative writing workshops, I wanted to dive into my personal identity to reflect the class theme and self-reflect how I've come to finish my schooling. I chose to write on five lessons dealing with class, food origin, religion, culture and tradition, and the nature of choice when it comes to food. Each story tends to intertwine with one another, yet each story's goal heavily highlights each lesson.

The short stories were based on nonfiction events that have happened from my life in Mississippi, when I moved to California, and until this year in 2017. Since these were personal stories, I wanted to utilize a first-person point of view. The stories are told through myself as a character. The cast of secondary characters act as foils to help my character reflect on various aspects within their life, or to highlight the class theme. An example can be seen within *Stew's Fridge* where Stewart is a foil character showing class disparity between himself and my character.

With my aesthetics, I aim to show much of the characters through their dialogue lining the page. I believe we truly reveal ourselves as we speak with one another, allowing shining moments of mannerisms to reflect our current state of mind. In fact, the character Momma, speaks more volumes with her nonverbal reactions than she does verbally. My Momma has that tendency to only reveal her mind in split second reactions, an honest under layer that was often masked when she spoke. I think that was due to a hospitality culture that respected others in

person. However, they probably talked behind one another's backs. Yet, I would watch my family talk and would see more honesty in their bodies than their words, though those were important, too. As I wove through dialogue, I only wanted to use the most important imagery to help the audience paint a foundation in their mind, focus on the characters, and fill in the rest. I've enjoyed this technique the most throughout my fiction reading. Why not use it for my nonfiction pieces? I utilized a similar technique with character development. I will introduce a character with dialogue, then paint them more when other characters speak, which helps with pacing the movement of the story. My own character was the only exception where his thoughts added to the character development. Also, I noticed a familiar pattern within my sentence structures. I used a rhythm that had central strong sentences, yet I modified them with phrases at the end the most. Sometimes, I would add a beginning modifier. Most of the time, I would leave my longer sentences with both front and ending modifiers, since varying sentence structure helps the audience breathe and understand the piece. Lastly, I'd check such rhythm and structuring by speaking the pieces out loud, critically asking if it's pleasing to the ear. Since they are stories, that's important.

I framed each short story with a one page poem. I wanted to play with the regular format of poetry. I didn't want the dangling left side paragraphs rhyming with every line or every other line. Instead, I wanted to evoke how life isn't stable, that it can create beautiful moments in time, which is why I don't rhyme. I only write in the present with my poetry, since it needs to exist for the memories of the past actions and current actions. Poetry is active, provocative imagery that resonates with the human spirit. I use alliteration to simulate certain sounds in the kitchen, such as *Leonor's Pozole* poem: "Simple dishes, surface, strong, sensations." Using the "s" sounds was to help others envision a stew boiling, the hot water sizzling on the side of the pot.

Each poem uses the white space of the page to its advantage. The white is to symbolize what other possibilities could've happened, but didn't. It's the unknown we experience in daily life. Also, I use it to craft a literal image. *Stew's Fridge* poem has Stewart's class on one side in red and my own class in blue, with our shared experience in purple, and I use the construction of the words/white space to form a fridge. In *Red's Farm*, the poem is supposed to look like a barn, with the words, "Inside the barn," to be the door of the barn, literally inviting you in or shutting you out. In *Remembering Love*, I didn't want many words. I wanted the sparseness to reflect mourning and reverence of a life that gave love. I leave the page very open to let it breathe, to depict how I've needed to breathe many days since my cat Lovey died to cope. Plus, I've learned from Prof. Sipin and Prof. Escamilla, that poetry needs space for it to function properly on a page. Sometimes, though, the space doesn't matter as much as the literal image. Both *Leonor's Pozole* and *Choosing Miggi* are literal images of a bowl of soup and a feather, to represent the stories. Although the feather is a little obscure within the context of the story, it is supposed to represent my flight from Mississippi to California.

I wanted to welcome my intended audience with a shared experience that poetry can offer, but also introduce a potential new world known as the South. As I wrote my pieces, I had two audiences in mind: (1) my inner self, reflecting a diary of sorts and (2) my college peers. I wanted to inform others of the experience I had as a Southern, gay guy who is now an Atheist. I wanted to portray what it is like for me reflecting back to those memories. Ultimately, I do want to entertain, but I hope it inspires others to be appreciative of their lives. I want others to self-reflect in a way that highlights their own life transitions. Have them wonder what food is a catalyst for a different moment in time.

To process how to craft this creative project, I chose the five strongest memories I had during the semesters. I expanded on them through interviews with family members, validating correct memories. For example, I needed to call Momma to ask her what she thought about me constantly jabbering on about Stew's home. She told me that she was sad she couldn't provide for me those nice things, yet happy I was able to experience them. Knowing this, I tried to infuse my Momma character with the same realism and reaction. I coupled my interviews with online research, which was done the most for *Red's Farm*. I researched the original chicken farm company I worked for and used their information to help Red's dialogue and understanding of the story. Plus, the three quotes at the beginning of that piece's poem are direct quotes from the company's chicken packaging: "Farm fresh, no artificial ingredients, 100% natural, and *minimally processed".

I focused on each story for two weeks at a time. The first weekend, I'd write the first rough draft. Then I'd edit it to become the second draft. Then I'd move on to the other stories and so on. I planned on my timeline these goals from September 16th until November 25th. Afterwards, I sent them for peer review to another creative writing student, a creative writing graduate, a creative writing professor (Prof. Deb Busman), and my Capstone professor, Prof. Mascarenhas. I also relied heavily on two other peers who were keener on poetry. I received the feedback after Fall Break, on December 2nd, and edited my stories with their suggestions. To summarize one example, Prof. Busman and Prof. Mascarenhas said that the character representing myself in two of the stories lacked true responses to other characters and events. I realized that I wrote them in my head, not on paper. That was quickly fixed with editing. Throughout this process, I saved and edited my work with Google Drive and Google Docs, but I did need to reformat my pieces through Microsoft Word later.

My Capstone project was placed within a Southern Mississippi culture, LGBTQ+ culture, Latino culture, and California culture that have helped craft my identity between the years of 1991 until 2017. The way I depict these areas within social, historical, and cultural aspects involved research, self-reflection, and reading other artists' works. I'm influenced by the poetry of my husband, Miguel Peralta, Prof. Escamilla, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Baldwin, Emily Dickinson, and Gloria E. Anzaldúa. To help improve my awareness of reality, I read the nonfiction writings of Stephanie Elizondo Griest, Gloria E. Anzaldúa, and Amy Tan, who've all depict the importance of food, culture, feminism, queerness, and creative descriptions of memories. I'm also influenced by fiction writers such as Karen Miller, Lloyd Alexander, Clive Barker, Martha Wells, Jim Butcher, and Octavia Butler. Not only in format, but these artists creative writing have a realistic feeling to their work, even if it is a fantasy world. I've also taken pointers in dialogue from comic artists and animators such as Cheez Hayama, Joanne Kwan, Bryan & Simon Steel, K. M. Claude, Hamish Steele, Harry Bogosian, Rebecca Sugar, Genndy Tartakovsky, Michael Dante DiMartino, Bryan Konietzko, and Guillermo del Toro. Comics and animation, I feel, can utilize both art and storytelling to give the best experience for an artist to give others. I study them to craft new mental images and ways of moving my characters through stories.

Ultimately, I compile all my experiences into words on a page, flowing from my mind. I tell stories and do my best to depict what I'm envisioning with honesty, clarity, and with hopes of commentary. I hope you've enjoyed reading my Capstone and understand how I've come to write it with these methods.

Final Synthesis Essay

With HCOM 475-02, I've contributed several perspectives that align with my intersectionality's. I contributed to food commentary through the perspectives of poverty, being Southern, being a California migrant, being an Atheist and former Christian, being queer, being married into a Latino family, and being a former obese person. I have shifted various identities, traveled through foreign countries, and understand several mindsets that has allowed me to contribute to our class discussions in a productive way that other students may not have been able to do. There are several topics in our section where I added personal experiences.

As with my first Capstone story on class disparity, I could add what it was like growing up relatively poor. I helped those who haven't experienced to understand the conditions in which I was raised. I grew up with four other siblings and a single mother. We gladly accepted any food given to us, never wasted anything, and kept attempting to grow our own gardens. I'd comment to others that our economic situation contributed to my family's weight gain, since we could only afford cheaper foods. In tandem, there weren't any farmers markets, organic stores, or food programs (aside from food stamps, which my mother was too prideful to sign up for) to help assist a better diet. I reflected on obesity, class, and poverty throughout my short stories (like *Stew's Fridge*), as it shaped me as a person to think on my feet and be creative with what you have.

I contributed the perspectives of farm workers and where our food is grown. My first job was to work on a chicken farm, where I learned that the living conditions of the animals aren't the best. I reflected heavily on this section in my second story, *Red's Farm*. Not only did I help contextualize living conditions for the animals, but also how the farmers who raise them are

tricked into indentured servitude. Farmers took out loans from companies to build their chicken houses, which gave them a job, but created debt for many years.

I could laugh at the article “Trash Food”, by Mr. C. Offut, and help others within the class understand the culture behind these working-class foods. Also, I communicated directly with the article writer and built a camaraderie that I shared with the class. Mr. Offut said some interesting things, such as:

“...Travel is so crucial, especially for those of us who grew up in a relatively isolated area. (My hometown in Kentucky was 200 people.) I live outside of Oxford, MS now...The ‘old south’ has very distinct class differences that are evident in Oxford. I lived in a few western states. One of the things I liked was the relative absence of class distinctions--at least overtly, or that I was familiar with...If you ever get back to Mississippi, give a holler.”

Throughout the semester, I could share my personal experiences in group discussions and writings to help broaden my peers’ perspectives on food that they might not have known. I added random trivia of food science and food history to the class to give more context, deepening our understanding of our food topics. Collaboratively, I’ve facilitated discussions in large and small groups, helped reframe misunderstood questions or articles, and assured other students within the class of project objectives. Outside of class, I’ve met with other peers to work on our Capstones together, including critiquing our written work. Independently, I’ve written short stories that depict our class discussions and articles on our shared topic of food ethics and politics.

By following my Capstone schedule from my proposal, I could complete my final project in a timely manner. For example, I completed all five short story second drafts by Fall Break and have them peer reviewed in time. I updated my Capstone professor on these proceedings with

reports neatly outlined on days they were assigned, which allowed extensive feedback and consultations to improve the project with both Prof. Deb Busman and Prof. Mridula Mascarenhas. I was told that I have been competent with the material, knowing how to deliver specific skills and methodologies to clearly represent our theme on food through short stories and my life's transitions. Each piece was informed by a theme discussed in class that allowed me to create a deeper understanding of class, food origin, culture, religion, obesity, adversity, identity, and food choice. By examining these various topics, I asked a humanitarian question, "How does food help us transition from one point in our life to another?" Such a question was appropriate from a Human Communication major in a way that demonstrated my creative voice. Through these stories, I effectively communicated our theme and the ethics surrounding it for an external audience that demonstrated solid evidence of critical self-reflection and associations with the topic of food.

Writing food creatively was difficult, but a new experience I have not had within academia. By discussing these associations of food, we peel the layers of how we thrive with an act necessary for our survival. Looking at food critically builds an appreciation and awareness of the transformative ritual of eating, of searching for sustenance, of its worth within our societies. I once thought that food was a common diversity segmenting us all that we choose daily. I've come to see its importance in how it connects us all. I enjoyed my experience writing my Capstone on our shared theme of food and hope others enjoy our class' work, too.