Special Poem About Myself

Patrick Raneses
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This isn’t really about me, nor is this really a poem. This is just a bunch of spam: a bulk of unwanted messages, sent and unread.

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Filipinos love to eat. Even when we don’t love to.

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I was made out of: Pork Shoulder, Ham, Salt, Water, Potato Starch, Sugar, Sodium Nitrate.

Slick, shiny flesh, like the sole of a wet foot. Stretch mark patterns over pink.

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I used to get red-faced when my white roommates would ask me what I’m cooking. I would hide the rectangular tin underneath the top layer of garbage in the bin.

“Smells salty in here,” one of them might remark. It would be strange if my kitchen at home didn’t smell that way.

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“Give that to me,” Mom scolded as I tilted the contents of my plate toward the trash. She ate the rest of my breakfast, more than her fill, reminding me: “Do not waste food.”

Every once in a while, Mom will still remind me how, at dinner in their little Metro Manila apartment, Grandpa would leave the meat for her and her siblings, while he would eat with his hands some bagoong (little pieces of fermented fish or krill in some sauce) over whatever rice was leftover. Later in the night, after singing for the family, the strings of his guitar shined sour and greasy.
I tried working it out in my head. An American food that became Filipino that I now eat in America—as a Filipino American. Spam is more Filipino American than I could ever hope to be.

Special Processed American Meat: Introduced to the world by the Hormel Food Corporation in 1937, Spam was a ration for Pacific-stationed Americans during World War II. There was a couple million blocks of Spam scattered across the Philippine islands when the Americans left in 1946. Extra rations.

Is SPAM Good for You?

“The short answer: no. Spam is not a healthy thing to eat. A 12-ounce can contains six servings. A single serving holds 16 grams of fat, including six grams of saturated fat. One serving also holds 33 percent of your daily recommended allowance of sodium and a pretty hefty dose of cholesterol. While the reduced sodium and lite versions obviously contain less of the bad stuff, a Spam-heavy diet wouldn’t be a good idea.”

When I went back home for vacation, I saw a photo of my parents in front of the Golden Gate Bridge and I was struck by how different they looked. I wondered if this was a phenomena that occurred to all Filipino Americans when they prosper and have kids in this country. Or maybe it was simply a Filipino thing, our love for carbs and fatty meat, of which my parents didn’t hold themselves back from. My parents had gained so much weight since moving here.

I stared at my shirtless body in the mirror and noticed that my sides were sagging. I envisioned the outlines of my father’s bowed stomach on my torso and I quickly turned off the lights, shuddering and shamed by the thought.
I recall the first time I tried making something with Spam. I peeled off the flimsy tin cover. The stuff seemed elusive. Meat? It defied even gravity: I vigorously shook the upside-down can, violently pounding the bottom a dozen times before the pale pink block slid onto the cutting board. It was slick—a little glob of gelatin hung off the lip of the can. It never looks appetizing.

I wanted more white boy meals while growing up. I have since then realized the remarkable similarities between Spam and foods like chicken nuggets, Cheetos, and the like. I’ll admit that I still like all of those things.

Spamsilog recipe (Spam, sinangag, itlog):

It’s easy. Dice a few cloves of garlic, maybe the whites of a scallion if you have one. Cut your Spam into patty-thin slices and fry on the pan, rendering out the fat content until a crispy, colored, scablike surface forms on both sides. Remove Spam; put in a little cooking oil and toss in the garlic and onion.

When garlic has begun to brown and onion looks transparent, mix in some dry, day-old white rice until most grains are coated in oil and matches the color of the garlic (try adding some soy sauce for that extra brown). The Spam is salty enough, but season the rice with salt, anyways. Lay rice next to Spam, on top of it, wherever.

On the hot pan, add some more oil and crack in an egg. Tilt the pan and baste the hot oil over the snotty part until it turns white, then salt and pepper the top. Slide the egg on top of the rice. Chop up the scallion greens and sprinkle over the dish. Squirt some banana ketchup on the side if you like.

Despite how easy the recipe is, Mom was surprised that I knew how to cook the Spamsilog for myself. She took the stay-at-home parent role very seriously while raising her kids, and thus she was more or less the only person who would handle things in the kitchen. She always made more food than we needed. As an
adolescent, I got annoyed by this—it seemed like an iteration of the wastefulness she always told me to avoid. Later, I thought she did so to make up for all the meals she missed while growing up. Now, I realize she simply just wanted us to eat, a lot, because regardless of how you feel about yourself, eating your fill is good.

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“Make a mix of incongruous ingredients until—”

“Feign exoticism, epicureanism and pawn it off—”

“Take the refuse, you refashion—”

Just don’t waste it.

You fry it until it’s poetry.

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I made a half-serving extra and I ate that, too.

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RUNNER-UP for the 2020 BARRY HANNAH PRIZE

Patrick is a senior at Fordham University Rose Hill as an English major and Theology/Creative Writing double minor, enthusiastic about discovering, appreciating, and promoting writers and artists of color. He is interested in the cross section of literature, ethics, and art’s role in contemporary culture as a whole. He has interned at Kundiman, is currently working at the Rose Hill Writing Center and is now interested in pursuing a career in the publishing industry.