

Capacity



lehua M. Taitano

Capacity

I have trouble swallowing:

rice	rutabens on rye	shrimp tempura
chicken breast	bucatini puttanesca	lumpia
Dutch crunch rolls	lamb burger, onions & swiss	red rice
shaved pork	combination bún	mochi
kelagun bindadu	lemon butter asparagus	vanilla bread pudding
coconut cake	medium rare kibbee	cornbread and butterbeans
bahn mi	buttermilk pancakes	calamari
bi bim bap	chicken fried steak	mustard greens
tostadas de carnitas	BBQ pork and slaw	catfish
curly fries	bunuelos	ton katsu
mushroom kebabs	potu	pilaf
beef pot pie	bangers	pot brownies
lätke	brats	brownie brownies
kartoffeln salat	kielbasa	mousaka
chuletas	cabbage	dim sum
lasagna	tri tip	cobb salad
vermicelli	linguini	clams casino
		horchata.



Well—not horchata.

Or anything liquid, smooth, smoothy-esque,
slick or oily, slippery, slidey,
esophageal glide-y.

I have a condition.

In which all the foods I love inflame my guttural lining,
puff up my smooth muscle membranes, make
the otherwise unfeel-able an
unavoidably painful stricture—
a bulging bolus punch
to the thorax,
a digestive impasse only water and gravity
can attempt to make lax.

Swallow upon swallow, I make
a river of my gullet, hope the rapids
will burst the dam of home cooking



bottle-necked above my stomach.

And it has gotten so pronounced—
my occluded condition—
that I sought out a specialist
to investigate my painful indigestion.

Which brings me to the medical office
counter and the ensuing intake questions:

Can you verify your name?

Can you verify your date of birth?

Do you have a religious preference?

Tell me, what is your ethnicity?

And this. This is the location.

Where the throat spasms a twitch
in preparation for a stalling. A piling
up of what I've been swallowing.



My name is Lehuanani Marie Taitano.

I would prefer no religions at all.

I am Chamoru.

C-H-A-M-O-R-U

C-H-A-M

C-H-

But the assistant shakes

her head, scrolls through a drop-down

list of pre-existing ethnic

conditions.

She shakes her head,

brow furrowed, pointer finger

clicking, tapping, wagging *no*.

That's not an option.





I am told that my ethnicity is not
an option.

Being Chamoru is not an option.

But before I get to the sucker punch, the
great, curled fist of *Other*,
let me tell you a story.

I could issue a litany of other scenarios,
regurgitate a pile of questions I've swallowed ,
little fishbone fragments of others' doubt.

But I will tell you a story of belonging. Of when and
where and to whom and what. Of identification.
Of unavoidable collision. Of transplantation. Of the sea.

My first memory, the sea. Swallowing a mouthful
of saltwater in Tumon Bay. My siblings catching sea
cucumbers in the surf. My first memory of belonging.

Evening light, grip of sand, the quiet tug of tide
and the moon rising.

My siblings splashing, rejoicing in their brown bodies,
brown, like mine,
which is to say
half-some-hey-grel-why-your-dagun-so-white-brown.
Island-mama/
airforce-father
brown.

Coconut husks scooped
up and flown off to the “mainland” brown.
And once there, too-too brown.

Word bank brown, a puzzle for
every introduction, like
where-you-from-
are-you-
ain't-you

or ain't you
where-
where-where-
my-great-white-eyes-
don't-recognize
can't-categorize
please-explain-yourself
to me, brown.

School, church, downtown, uptown, all around the same,
and home was no refuge because my father was
ashamed and drunk tried to kill my mother
in front of me and shot our puppies when they whined to be
let in and finally cast me off when he said my life
was nothing but sin because somehow God hates
fags and the only good brains I have come from the
white side of our family, which is to say, unslyly, *him*.

And what I have,
besides these big ass ears
and the way I sometimes place my hand
on my thigh
when I'm relaxed or listening
is this painting.

This painting, a seastory sailing across
a canvas, masts puffed against clouds gathering
a pink-orange evening.

All the rigging taut, white foam kissing an
oaken keel. No land in sight, an unmanned
ship, just
sailing.

I remember when the canvas
had a frame.

I remember the day he crashed
and raged and tore it from their bedroom wall,
fists and a jug of wine together
reeling and him, disgusted perhaps
with gazing at a reminder of wanting, once,
to be something like an empty vessel
cutting a path across an evening sea.

This painting, forgotten in a mice attic
until last year, when my sister sent it to me.

**

What do you do with memories
you don't want to keep?

Where can you store them that they won't come
creeping back on a scent or melody?

**

At the medical office counter,
I tell the assistant I AM an option,
I am my *only* option,

I am the daughter of my mother, sister to four sisters and
a brother,
an auntie, great auntie, great-great auntie to
nieces, nephews—"kindling" I call them—
because fuck assumption of gender.

I tell her the flaw is not me,
and yes, it's the whole goddamned system,
and no, I won't be quiet until they sedate me,
which they do.

**

Inside:
the endoscopy.
My doctor guides a camera into the guts of me,
finds I'm suffering the same digestive side-effects
of monoculture
as I had suspected.

Home from the hospital, in the house filled with

boxes from my most recent migration,
the painting .

Unframed. Leaning against a shelf.
Reminding me.

That at least once, my father
had the capacity to create. To sit and
imagine a scene filled with wind and cloud
and light. That some version of himself
was compelled
to make art
and love and children,
before he filled himself up, instead,
to the brim, with toxicity.

I will not replace the frame,
but hang the canvas raw and ragged,
let art and poetry frame it how I choose.

It will remind me that poetry is my home,
a place of belonging
that can house memories, choices,
the best versions of
ourselves.

Author Bio

Lehua Taitano | Leahua M. Taitano, a native Chamoru from Yigo, Guåhan (Guam), is a queer writer and interdisciplinary artist. She is the author of two volumes of poetry—*Inside Me an Island* (June 2018) and *A Bell Made of Stones*. Her chapbook, *appalachiapacific*, won the 2010 Merriam-Frontier Award for short fiction, and her most recent chapbook, *Sonoma*, was published by Dropleaf Press in 2017. She hustles her way through the capitalist labyrinth as a bike mechanic who sometimes gets paid to make art.