

“Letter to my *Californio* son”

By, Nick Heitkamp

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My son,

I write to you, barely two years old, as you drag the dining room chair into your preferred spot at the kitchen counter. You look up at me, always smiling, and wait for your instructions. The past two years leading up to this moment you’ve perfected the wringing of your soft hands with sanitizer, and you only know your extended family through that little rectangular screen. I must admit, my son, I can’t change what’s happening beyond our threshold. For now, I can offer you solace in stories, memories, a meal.

In our galley kitchen it’s hot, stuffy but your eager eyes push me forward and closer to the stove. Vapor whirls into the vent above from a simmering pot. Wooden spoon at the ready you play the part of my esteemed *sous* chef. I wonder whether you will know what’s inside this cauldron as *frijoles* or *beans*? Or whether the stickiness from your fingers comes from the *masa* or *dough* as your mom puts the final tortilla on the griddle beside me.

We’ve been stuck inside. Our neighbor’s fence blocks our kitchen window view. But the honeysuckle that sneaks through the slats of the redwood fence become your first wilderness experience. The zesty aroma of the oranges that hang over the backyard fence and bake in the sun are your first intoxicant. The neighbors don’t mind if pick them as long as we stay on our side of *our* fenced-in bubble.

“But what are you exactly?”, they will inevitably ask. You are the cheddar cheese *and* the homemade tortilla that melts together into your favorite quesadilla meal. You haven’t been to church yet, but does splashing in the Russian River count as your Catholic *baptismo*? When you’re older I’ll show you how that river snakes through the spirits of once vast ranchos with deeds signed with names like, Fitch, Carrillo, West, and Padilla. These were *Californios* like you that raised their families against all odds, too. Your baptism was postponed but this will explain part of you for now.

I remember when you were born, a persistent offshoot from that eucalyptus that shades our sidewalk burst through the cracks oblivious to the environment it was thrown into. At what point does this sapling become *native*? What would its birth certificate say? During the past two years I have more questions than I do answers. Just know that, like the eucalyptus, you derive your origins from many places. You have roots in Mexico and the American Midwest but ultimately you are a *Californio*, distinct but not novel.

When you’re older I’ll tease you about how your face used to pucker at the taste of the pungent pickled eggs we used to keep in the back of the fridge, just in case. We’ve been like these eggs, sealed, bouncing around waiting to be released into the fresh air. Your great grandma used to bring me these big jars. The strange interior tinged highlighter yellow from the *pepperoncini* infused brine. They were from her favorite bar (what people call *dive* bars now). She remembers a time when women were not allowed inside. Can you imagine that? Will you be skeptical when I tell you of the past two years of your

lockdown life? Nowadays, your great-great grandma eats her pickled snack slowly. She does this not because of geriatric fragility but out of a little pinch of spite and wellspring of perseverance.

Initially, your mom did not share my side of the family's taste for *pickled* eggs. It's not good first date food. After your mom got the courage (years later) to swim past the vinegar vapor to get to the yellow orbs of doom she took a bite and, to my bafflement, wryly grinned. She then pulled a similar looking jar out of the cupboard. "*Cueritos!*", she shrieked. The mystery jar she kept in the back of the pantry were pickled pork skins. Equally daunting but equally nostalgic. Her dad, your *abuelo*, still eats these with his *cerveza* without blinking. Nothing really is new, my son. Salt, vinegar, protein, water, and memories bind cultures, appetites, countries, and families together. That, I do know.

Love, Dad