



2022

MY MARIANAS

Writing Contest

Collection of the
1st, 2nd, and 3rd Place Winning
Personal Narrative Essays

2022

MY MARIANAS

Writing Contest

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The Northern Marianas Humanities Council is a private, non-profit organization established in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands in 1991. Its mission is to navigate and explore the human experiences of the indigenous and diverse peoples of the Commonwealth by enriching their lives through research, publications, dialogue, and programs.

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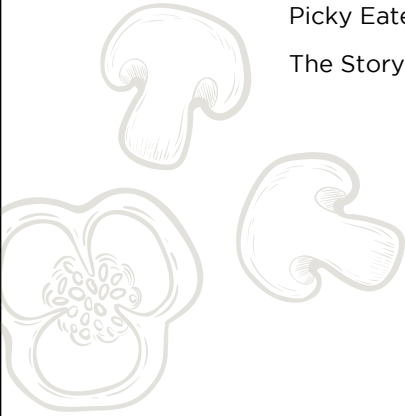
**Northern Marianas
Humanities Council**

Navigating the Human Experience

Contents

TABLE OF CONTENTS

My Marianas Writing Contest	4
Acknowledgements	4
My First Love	5
Picky Eater	8
The Story of an Egg	12



Writing Contest

The My Marianas Writing Contest is a project conducted by the Northern Marianas Humanities Council to promote literacy and the diverse backgrounds and experiences of high school students and their respective families and communities.

The contents of this publication feature the winning essays of the My Marianas Writing Contest conducted in 2022. The Contest launched on March 4, 2022 with a submission deadline of April 1, 2022. All CNMI high school students were invited to participate in the Contest for the chance to win cash prizes and an opportunity to have their work published.

Theme: Food and Family

The Council received 63 personal narrative essays that addressed the theme of food and family. Food serves different functions in life, and one such function is to bring loved ones together around a nourishing meal. To help students express the way they bond with their families through food, the Council provided the following guide:

- Write a double-spaced, 3-5 page personal narrative essay which skillfully uses imagery to describe the dish or food celebration that best Represents how you bond over food in your family.
- Precisely describe why/how the dish brings your family together.
- Describe the experience of cooking this dish from start to finish.
- Make efforts to write with as personable a voice as possible.
- Refrain many instances of academic and/or dry writing devoid of personality.
- Present an authentic and honest essay which demonstrates intentional organization and attention to imagery.

Acknowledgements

The Council wishes to acknowledge and thank all student contestants for making the effort to write an essay for this purpose and displaying the courage to share their personal experiences and stories. This would not have been possible without their teachers, friends, and family members who took time to encourage and support their work. To ensure a disciplined approach to identifying top essays, we enlisted the help of volunteer judges: Dr. Lawrence F. Camacho, Dr. Bobby Cruz, Michael White, Gretchen Smith, Jayvee Vallejera, Zaldy Dandan, Adam Walsh, and Ajani Burrell. We are grateful for their participation and commitment to ensuring that all eligible essays were carefully read and scored at least twice.

My First Love

by Aleia Hofschneider Santos

I was born on January 15, 2004, and was raised on the island of Tinian until I was about four years old. My family relocated to the US in June 2008 to wait out my Dad's second deployment, this time to Kuwait. My Dad, however, returned from active duty due to injuries he'd incurred on his 1st deployment to Iraq that ended in January 2006. The shift between sunshine soaked days spent splashing in the waters of Tachokña to the unforgiving precipitation of the Pacific Northwest was abrupt and confusing to my barely developed brain- but there was one thing that kept my freshly doknos head above the cloud cover: my first love.

Before the dawn of preheated, processed, and packaged school food, my Grandma Andresina was the backbone of the school breakfast and lunch program on Tinian. I like to think that her years of scavenging for food for her family on Yap during World War II as an eleven year old is what sparked her passion for feeding and caring for others. She eventually went on to love, feed, and care for her own family with my grandpa and their thirteen kids. Eventually, her family grew to include all the families on Tinian. Everyday, she and the other women working put their skills, experience, and hearts together to feed the children of Tinian, with dishes like beef stir fry, Chamorro style curry, and fish filet, all complete with heaping servings of rice and fresh vegetables. Aside from her work in the cafeteria, she ran a snack mobile that filled the tummies of not just children, but parents and other familia as well. Homemade donuts, ice cup, and titiyas were just a few of the goodies that kept her customers coming back for more everyday- but she could not do it all on her own. Her right hand woman happened to be my Tita Jovie, who helped my mom care for my siblings and I while my dad served in Iraq. By the time my dad came back, she was no longer an employee, but a member of our family.

It all began around the time my Dad came back. I woke up one morning alone in my parents' bed. I rubbed my eyes with my little fingers as I listened to the clucks of our chickens outside and the erratic pitter patter of their feet. I could hear my parents laughing with Tita Jovie as they always did every morning. I crept out of the room and into the kitchen to see my parents sitting at our wooden table and my Tita Jovie pouring coffee into their mugs. I could hear my parents discussing something in Chamorro, but my eyes were now fixated on what was on the table rather than those sitting around it. A yellow serving bowl filled with the remnants of my Dad's famous fried rice. A plate with sunny side up eggs with crispy, brown edges.

A smaller dish with scrambled egg whites with sharp tasting onions and lots of green spinach for my mom. An empty plate that most likely once had freshly cooked spam, bacon, or sausage on it. Small cups of orange juice and apple juice left behind by my siblings who didn't have the privilege of sleeping in like I did because of school. As I looked at the bounty on the table, my heart sank.



“What do you want to eat, Princess?” asked Tita Jovie. I turned and faced her, watching her carefully sort through the various glass *donne* jars gifted to my mom. Then, I saw it. In the glow of the refrigerator light was my gateway to flavor heaven: a green plastic bowl used for party food. My four year old mind had determined that this bowl was always used for my favorite dish made by my Grandma. My tita, not needing me to say a word, grabbed a spoon, peeled the saran wrap off the top of the bowl, and lifted up a heaping amount. She guided the spoon to my mouth, cupping her other hand below it to prevent any loss of the precious dish. It was the perfect blend of chopped barbecue chicken, the slight sweetness of grated coconut, the sharpness of minced green onions, the sourness of lemon, and of course, the irreplaceable sprinkles of salt, and just a bit of Tinian hot pepper. After just a bite, I erupted into my first lyrical masterpiece. Chicken kelaguen, I lo-o-ove you! Chicken kelaguen, I ne-e-ed you! Chicken kelaguen, I want you! Chicken kelaguen, I lo-o-o-ve you! At the time, I remember receiving a roaring applause from my parents and Tita, but as this tale has been told to my other relatives, I’ve learned that they actually erupted in laughter- just as those who hear the story do.

As the years went by in the states, my family found solace and joy in making and eating traditional Chamorro dishes like red rice and *titiyas*, but my Grandma’s chicken kelaguen will always be my first love. It was hard to find the best ingredients for our meals in stores like Walmart or Fred Meyer, but we eventually found havens like Ocean King Market or Uwajimaya hidden throughout Washington and Oregon. We shared our *kamyu* and grill with my aunties and uncles and rationed our *donne* as much as we could to ensure that we could enjoy our favorite Chamorro dishes together. After my original performance as a four year old, I was naturally made the executive taste tester of the chicken kelaguen made by my family for parties. I devoured a plate of chicken kelaguen every chance I could get at family gatherings, weddings, and birthday parties. As I entered my teen years, I eventually inherited the role of making it with their help. The soreness in my legs that I feel after crouching on the *kamyu* and grinding the coconut- the tears in my eyes from the smoke of the chicken barbecued by my Dad- the burning of my nostrils as I handle the hot pepper expertly selected by my Mom- are all tests that I withstand by imagining the immaculate taste of the final product. There is no sound as joyous as the laughter of my siblings and I share as we simultaneously chat, debone, and chop the chicken expertly barbecued by my Dad. There is no feeling more satisfying than successfully grinding the coconut and mincing the green onions. There is no opportunity that I am more grateful for than adding the lemon, hot pepper, and sprinkle of salt as we mix the ingredients together with my Mom by side. As the years have gone by, I’ve realized that there is no dish without having my family members there with me. Whether we’re chilling in the Pacific Northwest, or tanning in the CNMI- when we make

and eat chicken kelaguen together- we’re home. Chicken kelaguen, I love you!



Picky Eater

by Lemusu Kit A. To'omata

I often think about how life catches up to us without much warning or hesitation. One moment we're with our families, catching up on the latest news we read on the Saipan Tribune or Marianas Variety; telling stories about the chisms we heard from a friend of a friend, and even playing cards like Crazy 8 and Guts. Ironic how the next moment, we're busy with school, work, catching up on sleep, extra-curricular activities and whatnot and go days without a genuine conversation. And these moments, honestly, can drag out much longer than the first. Admittedly, my family and I are a part of this instance. Life just... happens, y'know? Sometimes we don't think about spending time together because we're so busy living our lives--outside of the family. But what is a life to live without your family?

Ever since I was young, the cultural values and beliefs instilled in me by my mom, indiginous to the island of Saipan, and my dad, indiginous to the island of Samoa, have shaped my views on family. They're traditional. For example, one of the views I have is that regardless of the differences we all have, we are one; regardless of the distance that separates us, we are one. Family is family, always and do not forget that. One of the ways that we connect together is by cooking and eating the delicious food that we sit down and share together as a family. Cooking is a team effort, but in my household, a family effort, that bears the fruits of our labor. It's the simplest task one can do to contribute to the family, even if it means just washing the dishes or lowering the stove temperature. It's about being together, helping each other, and sharing the blessing of the meal with one another.

Now, one of the biggest struggles any islander can have is called, in Chamorro, being chacha. This translates to being "picky" or selective. Now... guess who's the chacha one in my family, that unintentionally decides to make life a little bit more restricted? Yeah, you're listening to her right now. Guilty as charged. Unfortunately, my biggest curse is being the pickiest eater probably in the entire Saipan. As an 18-year old high student, I still love what my parents called "western" food such as chicken nuggets, french fries, cheeseburgers, fried chicken and pizza. I think I'm the only person who would go to a Japanese restaurant and look for a cheeseburger option. So, can you imagine my home life as a picky eater? Most local dishes I don't eat, but I appreciate it nonetheless. I've been a part of making many of these dishes at home, such as chicken kelaguen, kadun pika, tinaktak and the effort and time put into making these dishes deserve a standing ovation.

As for me and my family, we love making simple foods that both accommodate my chacha-ness, and that also allow each of us to have a task. This food is simply called: kangkong with gisa tuna. Just the title itself makes my mouth watery. It's not your typical dish that one may think brings a family together, but this just pushes the right buttons for ours. It's an automatic response, with our roles already embedded. When my older sister comes home from work and asks "what's for dinner?", I would jokingly respond "kangkong, again." Boom, that's the catalyst. My parents would then share a glance and roll their eyes as we all know that, in fact, it will be our dinner again. Cue the automatic roles. My dad goes out to the garden, right outside our kitchen window, and begins to pick the kangkong plants along the marsh. I grab the pot in the kitchen and follow closely behind him. He tosses the vegetable into the pot as we catch up about our day: his about work and how, at the strong age of 62, he's still able to do laborious tasks, and mine about school, upcoming graduation plans and my clubs that I join. Cut to my mom and sister, who are in the kitchen preparing the spices, the tuna and the complementary vegetables. From the window, we hear my sister talk about her new job and my mom about the newest movie she just watched on Netflix.

I find myself smiling because of how easily we slipped into our roles, meaning that we easily found the time to talk to each other and spend it together.

The process of making this deliciously simple dish is not too complicated for one to follow. After my dad and I return from picking the kangkong, we sit down at the kitchen table and start to “refine” our picks: meaning that we thoroughly inspect and clean it from any dead or dry leaves and extra long stems, with a satisfying tsk sound at every snap of the stem. Sometimes my dad and I compete to see who can make the most tsk sounds from the stems. I glance over and see my sister straining the oil from the canned tuna and hear her load ugh as she examines the still extremely oily bowl of tuna. I shake my head and think to myself: maybe next time, sis. My mom is at the counter cutting the onions into thin slices, with the cloves of garlic up next to the chopping block. She chops them into small cubes, so small that ants may be able to pick it up and have it as a meal. I appreciate the conversations we have together during this preparation. It’s the family time that I miss the most and that often gets cut short on a daily basis when we’re not cooking together. I cherish these moments of hearing my dad’s booming laughter, my mom’s sarcastic humor and my sister’s loud mouth. Oftentimes, I’m quiet, observing these moments, wishing that they could extend longer and longer.

Now, comes the best part of making the dish: cooking it. My mom takes the refined pot of kangkong and begins to wash it out while my dad preps our good ol’ frying pan and lights the gas stove on medium heat. He takes a little bit of vegetable oil and lightly dizzles it on the pan, which meets together with a light hss-ing sound. Music to my ears. I, being deathly afraid of hot cooking oil, observe from an extremely obnoxious distance as my dad dumps the onions and garlic into the pan, increasing the volume of the hss-ing sound. The aroma of caramelized onions and garlic fill the kitchen and my stomach begins to rumble. Soon, I tell myself. Here comes my sister, still unsatisfied with her attempt of cleaning the tuna, scooping the mashed tuna into the hot sizzling pan. My mom swoops in and does a similar dunk of the kangkong into the pan and immediately covers it with a glass lid. We see the kangkong shrivel up in about a minute and that’s the cue to remove the lid.

My mom grabs the giant big silver spoon and starts to mix and saute the kangkong together with the tuna, onions and garlic. This is the gisa part of the dish. Now that the hot cooking oil isn’t as threatening, my part comes in (and in my opinion, the best part). I grab the Kikoman soy sauce and go to town with it. I pour the soy sauce around the kangkong mix and once again, hear a lighter tone of the hss-ing sound. The smell in the kitchen is immaculate: the sizzling caramelized onions, the hint of garlic, the cooked tuna and fresh kangkong fill my lungs. My mom turns off the stove and puts the lid back on once more. My dad, sister and I all start taking out the rice pot, plates and utensils and drinks to the outside porch and eating area. As we await the grand entrance of the kangkong with gisa tuna, our mouths are watering and stomachs rumbling. Our mom comes out, with the holy grail in hand. I swear, I can hear a choir in the distance as she gently puts the pan on table cloth in front of us. We put our plates: hot rice, soy sauce, kangkong with gisa tuna on top. Bam! That’s the meal.

It’s amazing what influence food has on your family. Even more so the influence it has on a picky eater. I’m grateful that the one it has on ours is a positive one, full of quality time spent together. This dish, kangkong with gisa tuna, in particular is a nostalgic dish that our family shares an instant bond with. I’d say that it brings us together because of how simple it is: made from five ingredients that we usually already have in our home, and with a preparation and cooking time that both doesn’t feel like we’re “cheating” ourselves from making a good home-made meal, and doesn’t take too long to the point where we’re “hangry” (hungry and angry) with each other. It’s also a dish that provides us comfort; we all have our unspoken roles and ease into it, with no problem. There’s no competition as to who’s doing what, where and why. It’s a familiar feeling for us, and that’s what family is: familiar. Even though our lives often catch up to us, we are always reminded that there can never be enough time in this world to spend with your family. Food is that reminder for us. It brings us back down to earth. Simple tasks, completed with great intentions, often bear the best rewards. This reward is spending quality time with my family. What is a life to live without family?

The Story of an Egg

by Honey June Satur

The pavement feels hot on my tsinelas, the hot sun burns through my skin. As I cross the streets of Manila, the loud shouts of titas and ates fill the air, enticing you to come buy from their tindahan. I hid behind Papa, my small, delicate hand enclosed in his big, rough ones. The death of my aunt was the reason for my visit to the Philippines. This was the first time I had been exposed to my native home, language, and culture. When I was told about the trip, my 5 year old self didn't expect this. The smell of sweat, gasoline, and street food filled my nose while my brain debated whether I should look around. Letting my curiosity take over me, I peek out from my Papa's back, and that moment marks the first time I had ever been curious about my heritage. This was the moment when my brain finally understood the reason why my parents miss their home country so much.

Seeing jeepneys and tricycles, feeling the warm breeze and hot sun, hearing the shouts of people calling me over to try their paninda, it felt comforting. However, what stood out to me the most was the voice of the man selling balut, it was loud, but not overwhelming, and it had a friendly tone. Turning my eyes towards the vendor, a line as long as a snake is seen. The line is filled with a diverse number of people: old, young, short, tall, girls, boys. Confused as to why there's such a long line, I pull on my Papa's hand. He bends down to match my height, and I ask, "What is balut Pa? Why are there so many people there?" A laugh erupts from his mouth, he explains that balut is a fertilized duck egg. My mouth opens in shock, a duck egg? Papa continues on, saying that it's an embryo that's a week short of hatching. I was immediately repulsed at the idea, my face contorting into an expression of distaste. While my small brain tries to process everything, I notice my dad has left my side. Panic fills my body and suddenly my blood runs cold. Anxiety rises to my stomach and I feel sick, where did he go? I turn and look around in concern, on the verge of tears. My name is called, and there is Papa, lining up at the balut stand. I exhale in relief and wipe away at my teary eyes. I allow myself to calm down for a few seconds as the warm breeze comes back and my blood warms once again. Wind hits my face as I run to Papa. As I inch closer, the smell of salt and vinegar infiltrates my nose, in which I cover in order to try and stop any more odor from coming through my nostrils. Papa exchanges smiles and friendly conversation with the vendor, and it clicks. Although my thought process wasn't detail-oriented at the time, the feeling of my heart warming at the sight is engraved in my mind. Even with my limited mental capacity, I came to the conclusion that balut isn't just a food. It's a staple of Philippine cuisine, a symbol of strength and resilience for people.



Balut means “wrapped” when translated into English. It appears as a regular egg, but don’t let its appearance deceive you. When its shell is peeled, the contents usually surprise those who are not familiar with the dish. Inside, you will find a yellow yolk and a duck fetus. The yolk is what the fetus eats during its developing period. The perfect balut is usually fermented for 17-18 days and has a white-ish covering around it. Is your face scrunching with concern yet? For those who haven’t been exposed to the dish, it may seem like a nightmare to consume, however, this unique delicacy has brought families and friends together for many centuries. Since its original introduction by the Chinese in 1885, the dish has weaved through history and is now a signature snack. I used to hate seeing Papa eat balut, when he described it to me during that day, I was confused. Why would people eat this? And for a long time, it stayed that way. Until one day, the sight of smiles and laughter being shared over this unique treat changed my perspective.

Picture this, you’re at a Filipino family reunion. The smell of barbeque being grilled and the sound of laughter fill the area. You stick to one corner, wanting to head home and fall into your soft bed. As you look around to observe your surroundings, the view of men holding beers in one hand and balut in the other, women chatting in another area, and kids running around are all overwhelming your senses. The breeze hits your skin as you try at another attempt to find peace, however, that attempt quickly fails due to an interruption. Your tito, who you haven’t seen in years, walks up to you, holding a balut in one hand accompanied by a smile on his face. He offers the food to you, and your head shakes in refusal. A sigh erupts from his mouth and the seat beside you is now his. A look is shared between you both, and an awkward silence follows. The corners of your tito’s mouth lifts and you brace yourself, thinking that this will be another “when I was your age” discussion, like it usually is. Except for this occasion. The words that are about to leave him will forever follow me in life.

“I know what you kids think about balut. It doesn’t sound nor look appealing at all. However, this very egg has a great history behind it. Do you ever wonder why it’s named balut? Because translated, it means wrapped, and this simple egg has wrapped millions of Filipinos together in a way that nothing else could.” I look at my tito in confusion, but he continues on, “Philippines isn’t exactly a place where people have never experienced poverty. Actually, a lot of the people have had to adapt and create food out of what they already have. Our ancestors learned to make use of every single part of a chicken and to turn common food into their dinner. They were poor, yes, but their inventions were so innovative that it still has an impact on our society today. This balut isn’t just a snack to be paired with beer, it is a symbol of strength and resilience of our culture. It’s a symbol of how tough we Filipinos are. Look around Honey, don’t you see the smiles of the people around you?” I turned around to look, and there it was, the precious grins of my relatives.



Just then, it felt like a revelation. My brain clicked all the puzzle pieces together, and I could imagine it; I could imagine the hardships, struggles, and days of starvation that my ancestors went through. My body turned to my dad, who didn't have the privilege of wealth in his childhood, and I see him consume the food he learned to eat. On that day, I learned that balut isn't just a mere food, it's a comfort, a reminder, and an act of patriarchy to the people of the Philippines.


Now, whenever I hear foreigners become disgusted at my culture's food, my heart twists. Whenever I hear my friends laughing at their parents for consuming such a dish, I tell them the same story that my tito did many years ago. The knowledge weighs heavy on my shoulders, just like the weight of the world that Atlas carries on his, and at any chance given, I remind those who lack the understanding that balut is a comfort and a taste of nostalgia. A taste of family and is one of the many beauties from the Philippines. And how it "baluts" the hearts of people together.





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