

The only time I drink coffee is when my father makes it. 3/4th's 2% milk one shot pure Cuban coffee. He ditches the milk and drinks it black. I tend to associate food and eating with the happiest and worst times of my life. I also tend to only think of my Mexican heritage when attempting to write prose about nourishment. I think I owe this hegemony to the fact that when I speak of food and my father in the same sentence I want to cry. This is not a poem. He's Cuban. In the name of Communism, the Cuban government monitored the quantities of food families had access to. If they were lucky, my father's family—a single mother, 3 growing boys; got 10 eggs, a bag of white rice and 5 cans of Spam to last for the week. He tells me he eats more than he should because he's making up for the 27 years he was hungry. For as long as I can remember my father has worked in the food industry. This is not a poem. Hard labor. Shit pay. Dishwasher, busser boy, oil burns, scars. In Mexico City, after his first 5 jobs post Canadian deportation my father landed a job at a chicken slaughterhouse. I was 3 and don't remember much except for the pungent scent of the chicken blood, clinging onto the polyester threads of his uniform, wispy feathers still floating on his collar. It was a ruthless job. Early mornings, late nights. Blood, so much of it. "*Hija*, today a headless chicken ran around at work." This headless chicken was later used as a taunt and persuasion tactic to get me to behave better. "If you don't brush your teeth *el pollo loco* will come visit you at night." I think my dad could relate to that crazy chicken—fragmented, displaced, running for its life. Soon after that incident he began working at KFC, as a fry cook, then later, as the manager. Those years didn't feel as empty as others, since employees always got to take home leftovers. I think I know Colonel Sanders' secret recipe by heart. Sometimes, people laugh with vague disgust when I say I enjoy eating coleslaw. You learn to love what keeps you full. But there's just so many family buckets, 2 sides, and a biscuit someone can eat. To this day I can't remember seeing my father eat poultry. The day he left Mexico for Miami in 2004 we were unable to finish our last meal together. I remember his absence. I remember the weekly phone calls. I remember he had three jobs. One of them was as the weekend dishwasher at a seafood joint in East Hialeah. The true glory of '*La Gloria Seafood Restaurant*' was perhaps not the permanent smell of fried fish fingers on your clothing, but the access to end of day morsels and wrong order meals that got to be taken home upon closing. Papi kept that job until we came a year and a half later. I can still taste the tartar-tapatío hot sauce combination in which my grubby hands dipped popcorn shrimp in. For many years my father stopped working with food, around the same time I learned to hate it. Not that the both hold correlation. My disorder took away years of enjoying our Saturday morning rituals. Two fried eggs on white rice, a banana on the side. It made eating his Cuban meals a challenge, it made him stray away from the kitchen. This is not poetic. Soon after I left home for college, he lost his longest lasting job as a forklift operator, where he was arguably the best in all of Dade County. Saddened, and confused, he reminded me to finish school so that I would never have limited choices. He hadn't gone without working for over 20 years. Even then, he would drive for Uber. He had a 5 star rating despite virtually knowing no English or owning the nicest car. A month later I got a call. He was to start his new job as a 'food merchandiser' and sales representative for one of Latin America's largest food production companies. So big, naming it here would be pointless propaganda. Since then he has switched twice to rival brands. He is good at his job, as he has always been, and he seems to learn more as time passes. Though it is physically strenuous, he takes pride in the displays of canned beans, tetra-pack juices,

and cookies he is able to finesse at the front of a supermarket. I've forgotten to mention this man has entered, stocked, and arranged a food display in just about every grocery store chain in all of South Florida. His phone's camera roll is flooded with pictures of his food installation masterpieces, each one larger and more impressive than the last. He seems very proud of them. It makes me proud too. It's my father's birthday next Monday. He is turning 53. When I first began this piece it was meant to be a poem, now it's turned into an indignant ramble, an unwavering praise. A stream of thankfulness. The ending I had in mind is no longer the right one. Today my father risks his life doing exactly what he has been doing for three years now. Stocking the ravished stores, empty storage units, even emptier shelves. Same long hours, not enough gloves, not enough safety. We had to take his temperature today. I am scared, but mostly, I am angry. This is the love I get to experience in the time of pandemic, if he gets sick, I get sick with him. Together. Despite the uncertainty ahead, whenever I ask what he hates most about his job, he responds somewhere along the lines of "When people mess up my damn product displays." He habitually follows up with some grumbling: "Why don't they put stuff back where it belongs, who taught them to clean up after themselves?" He laughs it away, anyway. For this reason, though I am usually 1,000 miles away, and he has never set foot in a New York City grocery, I lovingly go through the Latin Food aisles—and each time make sure his row on the shelves is kept neat and appealing. If the cans or bags of rice are misplaced, I put them back, perfectly angling them so that they are the first item a customer is impulsed to buy. Sometimes I tear up, but always I whisper "I got you *papi*" before walking away.

