



# Unspoken Southern Hospitality: Poetry of Love's love/hate Relationship

*Chalecha Cunningham*

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I sat in the pantry holding my knees tightly as I tried to fight back the tears. I didn't know what to do. I wasn't even old enough to fully understand what was going on. All I could hear was my younger sister, who was already older even though she was four years younger asking where I was. I stayed there, held prisoner by fear. My mother's voice followed but it did not sound like her own voice. I couldn't speak. I was afraid. Afraid of the person whom I loved the most but was starting to realize I knew the least about. All of this because my mother was going to lie in the bed with me, something she had never done. Affection. My mother was never an overly affectionate person so when she became affectionate I knew something was wrong. I ran to the pantry and hid there because I knew my mother wasn't there. She was but she wasn't her normal self. So I hid and I cried. She found me. My release became writing at a very early age. Things that my parents had taught us stuck with me. Things like saying please, thank you and common courtesy was a big deal growing up being raised in Oak Cliff, Texas. The South. My father would tell us that children are to be seen and not heard. We were told to speak when spoken to when being addressed by adults, never to lie and look a person in the eyes when you are talking to them. Those things stuck with me as I began to allow my pen to do the talking for me especially since we lived with our mother and she was also quiet, non-chalant and who didn't show too much emotion. Living with a mother battling a mental illness which no one ever knew about until 10 years later gave me strength that I never knew I had. Although, she had many episodes, my mother was never diagnosed with bipolar, schizophrenia until around 2007. There were countless times where I went to school crying on the inside but no one ever knew. Not even my closet friends. My pen knew and my notebook knew. They knew about the pain and fear that I had of losing my mother and her losing herself mentally. They knew that I was born a lesbian and trying to fit in my "Christian" family. My pen and my notebook knew how sad I was being someone I was not and not being able to speak about it. My pen and my notebook gave birth to my release. Here I am. "Unspoken Southern Hospitality", is my first book of poetry. It is about love. It is about pain. It is about the fear of being loved for who you truly are. It is about acceptance from friends, family, God and the world. I take my pain, my fears, my sorrows and my joy and use it to speak to anyone who may not have found their voice yet. For those who somehow just cannot find the words. I speak for those who don't have the courage yet to stand up for themselves or to tell someone I love you. I speak for those who feel that they are not good enough for family, friends or bullies. I say thank you to those who work every day without any reward other than their own knowing that they did what they must to survive and provide for their families. This is my first attempt at writing professionally and definitely not my last. I have been writing for more than 20 years as a way of self-expression. When my mother didn't feel like talking I talked to her through my poetry and it has led me here. I hope that you read my work and give me an opportunity to touch someone else's life through my ink.

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