

Bread and Bologna



The last time I saw her as she was—not the very last time, for that would come later, when her mind had long abandoned her—she fixed me a bologna sandwich, nothing else inside.

The bread and meat were fresh, and she so thin I wondered when she'd last fed herself.

When Grandpa was still alive—this was well after his final sortie in the Cessna, whose scraps I dream are strewn from Mexico to Mount Rushmore in the shape of Our Lady of Guadalupe—we used to say his stomach—his pansa—resembled a gigantic elephant's. Our family was the kind to deploy redundant adjectives.

"This is delicious," I said one bite in, a small white lie.

"Did I ever tell you about my father, a brilliant businessman and orator?" my grandmother asked.

"Not really," I answered, a huge white lie.

"He'd do people's taxes for free. He taught them how to speak English. He was a good, smart man. All the brains you have, you get it from my side.

"Don't you ever forget it," my grandmother said, before ten minutes passed and she asked me again about her father, the man to whom I owe my intelligence.

The patience I retain in memory recall, in writing poetry—for I squandered my late-twenties studying for an English literature degree—I severely lack in real life.

A little girl once approached me in a café and asked what I was reading. I looked up, spotted her beautiful mother smiling at me, and with a shaky knee I answered the child, "Just a tiny book."

Some days—especially under bright, clear skies—I find the sound of acoustic guitar emotionally exhausting. Not detestable but draining. I can't say how. I don't know why.

"It's like my life happens only to become somebody else's story," my best friend from high school had said, months before he enlisted in the Marines and got blown up in Afghanistan.

"Yep," was all I could muster in reply.

It's sad, this whole enterprise. Maddening. But also, quite often, drop-dead gorgeous.

Face it. Fucking admit it.

There's no story here. Eighteen months as of this scribbling embroiled in a global pandemic—there's no story here.

What I feel, I feel mostly for myself. What I write, I write mostly for myself, so that death may compress me into a flashing thought, a stranger's briefest interest.

My name, my words, learn and understand them—or I am a war machine trapped in this period condensed by the laws of physics, the logic of grammar. And this one.

Kiss them. Release me.

If I could go back, I'd lie to my grandmother so much better. Instead of "delicious," I'd call her last bologna sandwich "scrumptious." "The best sandwich ever." Something ridiculous. Then I'd pick up all the crumpled tissues of Kleenex she'd tossed behind her sofa, along with her wedding band. And gently place the ring back on her slender finger.

"Did I ever tell you about my father?" she would ask.

"Not really," I would lie.

But this exercise, we know, is tampering with evidence. Disrespectful. And I like to believe I behave respectfully toward the dead.