

WHERE THE NEXT POEM IS

On the barest pantry shelf, where preserves crowd
before summer jams heavy on us.

At the core of the question Mother asks each July:
Little girl, when did it get so bad?

Inside three years in which I watched your body
mean things outside of speech.

Second floor of the once-house where the sweetest
blackest wine is stored in jugs near

bathub below half roof, filled up half-clear
with rainwater and ash, with light.

Near the (now collapsed) kilns where William
Burrell lost both legs in a rockslide

and bled fourteen minutes on the road to C&O
Hospital in Clifton Forge, 1941.

At the moment Rodney Jones wrote *and this is*
when it's not language; how I

remember you standing apart from me across
the white yard grown impossible.

MORGAN BLALOCK

THE POETRY OF PEPPERONI ROLLS

COURTNEY BALESTIER

I need to tell you about pepperoni rolls.
But I understand that, as a native West
Virginian, I probably have enthusiasm
for this dish disproportionate to your
knowledge of it, so first I need to explain.

A classic pepperoni roll, one from
a place like Home Industry Bakery in
Clarksburg, West Virginia, can help us

understand the Platonic ideal of the form: yeast bread dough (my grandmother used the same recipe that she used to bake her bread buns) stuffed with satisfying fistfuls of sliced pepperoni or small batons of stick pepperoni and baked. I should also be clear, though, not just about what we're talking about, but about how we're talking about it.

There are words we use when we want to minimize things. We may call something simple or DIY, makeshift or humble or modest. But perhaps the word that minimizes the most, the maximal minimizer, is just. We might say "I just have a question," or, "She's just a stay-at-home mom," or, "It was just a kiss." And it was the just that was on my mind when I was thinking about this piece. Because, for all of the thinking and writing and reading and talking that I've done about Appalachian foodways and about this food in particular, I kept thinking about this eighteen-year-old woman I interviewed once at West Virginia University. When I asked her about this dish—something, now, that's baked in kitchens all over West Virginia, that's sold in cellophane-wrapped six packs in gas stations and grocery stores and dished out at little league fields—when I asked her why we care so much, her answer, basically, was that she didn't.

"It's just bread, pepperoni, and cheese," she said. Now, there is the small matter of her being right. It is just bread and pepperoni. (The cheese is contested; I'm anti, but this is a decision everyone needs to make for herself.) It wasn't a matter of facts, the bone I had to pick with this young lady, but of interpretation. When it comes to the pepperoni roll, as with so much of the food we talk about in Appalachia, the just is the point.

n n n

The accepted origin story of the pepperoni roll begins in the 1920s with an Italian immigrant named Giuseppe Argiro in Fairmont, West Virginia. There are actually a lot of Italians (or, as they might say, *I-talians*) in West Virginia—so many, in fact, that for a time Italy ran a consulate office in the northern part of the state. Like so many of his countrymen, Giuseppe had come to West Virginia to work in the mines. He was no longer a miner when he invented the pepperoni roll, but the problem that he was solving was a miner's problem: the need for a hearty lunch that could sustain a man underground but that he could eat one-handed—a working lunch. Pepperoni and bread was already a popular lunch with Italian miners, and Giuseppe put them together. The pepperoni roll caught on, it grew, it became, as the kids say, a thing, and we still have it today. We have, in West Virginia, declared it our official state food.

*The pepperoni roll, really, is a poem:
self-contained, complete, economical in every
sense of the word.*

I continue to find this series of events amazing. Yes, the pepperoni roll is simple, but in the way that an egg looks simple or that a circle looks simple. The pepperoni roll, really, is a poem: self-contained, complete, economical in every sense of the word. And that such a simple food, such bare bones, stone soup, quick-fix food, still thrives today—in restaurants and cook-offs and home kitchens—is extraordinary. Because we glorify a lot of things in American culture, things worthy and unworthy of that attention, but we do not tend to glorify the poor, and we do not tend to glorify the working class. These are concepts very much tied, through reality and

rhetoric, to Appalachia, but in general, we Americans do not tend to lavish respect on those who make something out of nothing or on the satisfying meal they've managed to stretch from limited ingredients. If we do, it's usually because we figured out a way to make that meal fancier and get Millennials and food journalists (guilty on both counts) to pay for it. The American dream is about aspiration; it is not about making do. But our man Giuseppe, and the men he was cooking for, they're about both.

Those people all wanted better lives, they wanted good jobs, they wanted to provide for their families, but to achieve all that, they needed lunch. And so Giuseppe, he just figured out how to give it to them.

And now we talk about it. We debate the merits of stick pepperoni versus slice. (Stick.) We talk about Italian bread, French bread, hot pepper cheese, provolone cheese, no cheese. (I've made my feelings clear.) We have, in West Virginia, an entire food economy built around it. My personal favorite actor in this economy, long since gone, was Ray's Bakery, a small storefront near my childhood home. In the summer, on the way to the nerd summer camp that I went to for kids who just wanted to keep reading books, my mom would take me to Ray's, and I would get a donut for breakfast and a pepperoni roll for lunch. We worship this odd food in West Virginia, twinned as it is to our very existence.

n n n

There's one more story I want to tell you. It's about a gas station chain, called Sheetz, that operates in West Virginia, Pennsylvania and Maryland. Sheetz sells a lot of pepperoni rolls in West Virginia, which it used to source locally from different bakeries around the state. Then, a couple years back,

Sheetz decided to just switch to one central bakery—which, as it happened, was located in North Carolina. People flipped out. They took to Facebook with their anger. The local news covered it. The outcry was so instant and so full-throated that Sheetz actually backed off. It did pick a single supplier, but it was a West Virginian bakery, Home Industry. But my definition of success was not this outcome, great though it was, but a comment left on Sheetz' Facebook page:

You are taking our cultural heritage, making an inauthentic version, and selling it back to us. This is unacceptable.

I thought about this statement a lot. Eventually, it detached itself from food and clung, in my mind, to the word extraction. I thought about all the things that word means in the place I'm from, about all the ways it can and has taken form there. About what extracting this food—just about the only truly unique, idiosyncratic West Virginian food—and reproducing it to West Virginians from the outside, what that can represent to people. What it represented to me.

And then, this simple food became a symbol of something much bigger, especially, for me, at this moment in the region's history and in my history with it. It became a thing that we were ready to stand up for, to fight for. It became something that acknowledged our heritage—without extraction, no pepperoni roll—but that also demanded the right to our own agency in telling that story. It demanded authorship over the chapters of the story yet to be written. It is, perhaps, a lot of pressure to put on a piece of bread, but I choose to believe it can support the weight.

Of course, you probably didn't hear about any of this. The pepperoni roll, it doesn't really travel. Most people outside the state don't know about it. Someone from my hometown married a woman from Memphis who volunteered to make these pepperoni rolls he kept talking about: She bought a

huge stick of pepperoni, wrapped it in bread dough and baked what I imagine is the densest pepperoni roll ever pulled from an oven. People have apparently left the state and opened pepperoni roll bakeries elsewhere, but they've tanked. It doesn't translate.

And on this point, I do have to hand it to the young lady who started us off, Ms. Just Bread, Pepperoni and (maybe) Cheese. Because part of the reason is that the pepperoni roll is too "just." It is so simple that it's actually a bit confusing. Anyone who hasn't grown up with it would surely wonder, *Well, why can't I get a sandwich? Why can't I get a slice of pizza? Isn't this just a lesser version of both of those things?* And, in a sense, that person would have a point. I would struggle to explain it to her, this indivisible kernel that is always is at the core of our relationship with food.

It became a thing that we were ready to stand up for, to fight for. It became something that acknowledged our heritage...

I am a West Virginian, but, by fluke of geography and lineage, I am the only West Virginian in my family. My family comes from Appalachia—my grandmother grew up in a coal camp in southwestern Pennsylvania—but I did not grow up in its vernacular of greasy beans and leather britches and cornbread. Which means that, sometimes, I feel as if I snuck into this idea of Appalachia through an open window. But the pepperoni roll. My grandmother made them for me, my mother bought them for me. They're mine.

How does a piece of bread and a stick of meat communicate that message? I have a lot of love for food's

ability for metaphor, but they can't. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Anyone who does not have the same history of a West Virginian—that same spiritual topography that informs a decision as ridiculous and as vital as a food that we grow up eating and then choose to keep eating—would ultimately come to a place, like a secret door, that they don't even know to understand. What worried me about that young woman at WVU was the fear that we didn't even understand, that we didn't respect it. But those words, *this is unacceptable*. Yes, we do. And honestly, when I was eighteen, I didn't care, either. n