

Lori Vermaas

THE CONVERSATION I ALWAYS HAVE

My mother's family has told me
that I remind them of their mother, Maria.
I was too young to know her,
although I witnessed her funeral
in a dusty backroads
cemetery in Mercedes, TX

She seems far, very far away now
but my family tells stories
she once danced with the governor of Nuevo León
and belonged to La Sociedad;
during the violent swirl that was the Revolution
she fled with my family from Cerralvo
and left behind her eldest brother,
as it turned out, forever
it was his choice—they didn't just desert him

my aunt blows the dust off
her mother's old out of tune
Blue Comet mandolin
 eight strings
now resting on her living room piano
then my mother remembers Maria's spirited version
of the song, "Mi Capitán,"
which she often played for her husband of thirty plus years,
the toughest man my mother says she ever knew,
never mentioning the physical toll
of bearing nine children in America
the years the Valley thinned out her body
costing her a lung
costing her a singing voice

I wonder what they see in me
when they show me her photographs
I see our resemblance
across the dust and sepia,
and wonder if I'm just mocking myself
with the visual comparison

I mean,
we may be blood,
but these are just images
and old photographs seem empty conversation.