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Time and Tomato Salads

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Joanne L. DeTore

TIME AND TOMATO SALADS

No one ate like Papa.

He had a way of making everything
seem delicious.

He'd sit at the head of the cherry wood table,
in his small dining room,
framed by the olive green floral and fruit border.

He'd just come in from the backyard shed,
hot and sweaty from fixing his lawn mowers and bikes,
only to sell them for a few bucks
or to give them away for free.

He loved fixing things,
always had and now could,
in his retirement.

After he washed the grease from his nails,
he'd sit down and push his paper napkin inside
the collar of his crisp white t-shirt, bib-style.

Elbows on the table,
he clasped his hands together,
as in prayer or a handshake,
rubbing the bottoms of his calloused palms together
back and forth in anticipation

until Grandma brought his salad and bread.
He ate every bite like it would be his last.
Pulling apart crusty, fresh Italian bread,
he'd dunk the tender center into the leftover olive oil,
mixed with dark red Balsamic vinegar and spices
from his tomato, basil and onion salad,
all grown fresh from his garden out back.
He took time to smell each spice.
Like a sommelier with wine,
he inhaled the bright, fresh notes of basil,
the earthy undertones of thyme,
and the top notes of pungent garlic finely minced.
He took time to savor every bite
of the juicy ripe tomatoes,
still warm from the sun,
twisted free minutes before
from thick, downy vines.
Papa always took his time.
He always had time
to give pony rides on his back,
to play a game of checkers,
to fix a broken bike chain,
to cry on his shoulder after a heartbreak.
He knew that time could run out.
When he was only 10
his father's heart stopped beating,
without warning in the backyard shed,
stopping time and breaking his heart that day.
His mother never stopped wearing black
and he would never wear black again,
never would forget his father's face frozen still in the casket,

never would want his children or grandchildren
to see him like that when his time came.
In the spring of 1999, I didn't expect that
we'd run out of time,
to take my baby to meet you,
to share more time and tomato salads
but you were gone before I could.
My sister and I tried to attend your funeral,
but a sudden snowstorm stopped us in Washington.
You never wanted us to see you that way,
and we never did.

Joanne L. DeTore, Ph.D. is a 3rd-generation Italian American from the mostly Italian American village of Frankfort, NY and is a published poet, essayist, and scholar. Her work has been published in a variety of journals including Reed Magazine, Voices in Italian Americana, Italian Americana, Review Americana: A Literary Journal, The Apple Valley Review, Slow Trains Literary Journal, The Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering, Art Ciencia: Revista de Arte, Cincia e Comunicacao, And/Or Literary Journal, and Florida English and in the books, Anti-Italianism: Essays on Prejudice, Fractured Feminisms: Rhetoric, Context, and Contestation, Joy, Interrupted, and Sweet Lemons: Writing with a Sicilian Accent. She is an Associate Professor of Humanities and Communication at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach and has two children. She is currently preparing a collection of poems focused on her Italian American experience titled, The Color of Olives.