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Tread

Joanne L. DeTore

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I count sentences quickly,
then, panic. My heart pounds
so hard, so fast,
I feel it in my head.
Sweat rolls down the center of my back,
soaking into my peter-pan collared shirt,
damp and cold.
I smell starch.
“Thread” would be mine.

My father played cards with his Gumbas,
pitched a “tree of hearts” and picked up a Queen.
My mother made sauce, “tick with pork and beef.”

They would laugh at me,
my classmates who like me
were Italian-American
but they didn’t speak Italian like I did.
Afraid of the government,
Their parents heeded the warnings on WW2 posters,
“DON’T SPEAK THE ENEMY’S LANGUAGE!”
“SPEAK AMERICAN!”
Their parents saw their Californian relatives
trucked off to Montana internment camps,
their houses and businesses confiscated.
They took no chances
unlike my family,
less convinced
it could happen in New York,
their brothers
all veterans.

Mr. Wallace asks me to read the sentence,
“I got out the needle and began to...
tread it.”
Laughter...lots of laughter.

The blood of embarrassment rises hot from my
neck, seeping into my cheeks
like spilled ink blooms.
I shiver with fear.

Say that word again please, Josephine.
Silent, head bowed.
"We're going to wait for you until
you've mastered it.
No one better laugh."

Mr. Wallace tells me to put my tongue,
up near my teeth
to make a "th" sound.
I hate my favorite teacher,
want him to stop,
stop the laughter,
stop the stares.

I say it again and again
until the "tr"
becomes "th-hhh."

1961

Now when I go out with friends,
to meet boys from the city,
I call myself Joanne.
I left Josephine back
in the classroom
back at our old house,
the one we rented,
below the railroad tracks,
that burned to the ground
one night, destroying
everything we owned.
A blessing in disguise,
we got to move
to the Avenues,
into our own house,
near the church,
far from the tracks.

I stash my language,
like a secret,
deep within,
vowing to teach
any children of mine
only English.



Joanne L. DeTore, PhD is a published poet, essayist, and scholar. Her work has appeared 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, Florida.