

Two Writers We Know Win Awards

By Dan Sapone



Last month, two writers whose work has appeared on *ConVivio* were awarded “Honorable Mention” in the 2018 Writer’s Digest Annual writing contest. They were selected from among 5,300 submissions.

In this year’s Writer’s Digest annual competition:

- One poem by Lauren de Vore was selected in the “Rhyming Poetry” category.
- One short story by Dan Sapone was selected in the “Literary Short Story” category.

These two winning pieces are reproduced below.

I Wish That It Had Snowed Last Night

I wish that it had snowed last night,
That I had waked to endless white,
Perhaps a soft and muted quilt
Or shimmering like diamonds spilt,
That hides the daily muck and mess,
The faults and flaws and ugliness,
And for a fleeting hour or two
The world is virginal and new.

And if there’s like to be no snow,
I’ll wish to live where trade winds blow,
Close by the shore and crescent beach
O’erwhich the tides twice daily reach.
I’ll leave my footprints in the sand
’Midst flotsam cast upon the strand,
Knowing the sea will wash all clean
And leave behind a beach pristine.

I wish there were somehow a way
To live again a certain day,
An hour, an instant, and undo
Those wrongs of mine, those deeds I rue.
As winter snow hides last year’s sin
And spring makes all brand new again,
I wish there were such grace for me,
Some way to set my conscience free.

But lives are more than fields and hills
O’er which fate blows where’er it wills,
And conscience can’t of its debris
Be swept clean by a foaming sea.
So sins and secrets I must bear
Till all that’s left of me is air,
And snow falls soft and white upon
An unspoiled beach at just past dawn.

— Lauren de Vore (January 22, 2018)
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Lauren's previous contributions on *ConVivio* can be found at:
<https://convivio-online.net/kristof-poetry-contest/>
<https://convivio-online.net/guest-poet-lauren-de-vore/>
<https://convivio-online.net/celebrating-national-poetry-month/>

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Below is "A Different Kind of September" by PapaDan

A Different Kind of September

September 15, 2015, Savelli, Calabria, Italia

The end of summer was hard to take for Giovanni. Something was missing and he knew what it was. Since he was six years old, September had always meant the summer was over and school was about to start. For years, he and his friends could conduct their September ritual of moaning about how short the vacation had been and the unfairness of being forced to return to school when it still felt like summer. In spite of that unpleasantness, at least they were returning to familiar surroundings and the same collection of friends. In those days, at least they knew what to expect from September.

Of course, by the time they all graduated from high school in 2010 and went their separate ways, everything changed. For Giovanni —everyone called him Gio— the next five Septembers had meant packing up the contents of his room in his parents' home in Savelli and heading north for the Fall semester at the University of Salerno, about two hundred miles from home. Once he became comfortable with his life as a college student, September became familiar once again. But today, after graduating in June from Salerno's class of 2015, all of the familiarity and certainty of September had evaporated. This was unfamiliar territory for him and he wasn't sure how to feel about it.

Looking back, his college career had started well enough. His father had been pleased that Gio would be the first member of the Zappia family to be educated beyond high school. The general pattern for boys who grew up in this part of Calabria, near the bottom of the 'boot' of Italy, was to follow their fathers into one of the local factories — ironwork, stonework, heating, metal fabrication — and work their way as far up in the company as their diligence and skill would take them. But his father often reminded his son of his different vision: that Gio would come back to Savelli with a degree from the Business Studies Department at the university and rise to the upper echelon of his company's management. It was a fairly large company and, with a degree in business, there was money to be made.

However, once Gio showed up at the university, his eyes were opened to a broader vision. It turned out that right next to the low, brick building that housed the *Dipartimento di Scienze Aziendali e Ricerca* (Department of Business Studies and Research) was another building that seemed more interesting on the outside and, much later, turned out to be much more interesting on the inside as well. This venerable red-tiled marble structure had a blue sign that said:

<i>Dipartimento di Scienze Umane: Filologia, Letteratura, Lingue, Storia</i>	Department of Humanities: Philosophy, Literature, Languages, History
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Showing up for his first appointment with Professor Tommasetti, the Dean of the Business Studies Department, he paused to admire the renaissance-era structure next door, looked at his watch, and hurried into the brick building to do his duty.

Professor Tommasetti was pleasant enough; his impeccable Italian had the flowing and precise lilt of a *Milanése* dialect, as distinct from the more casual *Calabrése* sounds that Gio had grown up with. “*Benvenuto, Señoré Zappia. Non ti chiamano Giovanni?*”

“*Mi chiamano Gio, mon Professoré,*” he answered, trying to match his formality.

“*Così, Giovanni, perché pensa di studiare Aziendali?*”

Gio was immediately surprised by two things — he didn’t expect to be asked WHY he intended to study business and he noticed that the professor called him Giovanni even though he had just told him he was called Gio. He answered Professor Tommasetti’s question honestly: “*Mio padre si auspetta che io diventi un managiatoia nella fabrica del ferro, in Savelli.*” [My father expects me to become a manager in the iron factory in Savelli.”]

After looking at him awhile, the professor corrected him that he hadn’t asked why HIS FATHER wanted him to study business; he wanted to know why HE planned to do that. Gio quickly decided that the interview wasn’t going well and hoped some enthusiasm would salvage it. “*Io sono il primo della mia famiglia ad andare all università.*” He was proud to be the first in his family to go to the university. He thought that might help.

Professor Tommasetti changed the subject and told Gio that he would begin with introductory courses in accounting and business theory, both of which were taught in “his” building. He would also fulfill a general-education requirement in world literature — with an indifferent wave of his hand – in the building next door. He stood up and dismissed him with a gesture toward the door. “*Buona giornata, Giovanni.*” “*Molte grazie, professoré.*” And he was, indeed, thankful to be out the door. And so, it began.

By the end of his second year at Salerno, Gio had a decision to make. During his first two years he had taken the required lower-division business courses and had filled the general education and elective slots in his schedule with courses in World Literature, Philosophy, and English as a Second Language. He enjoyed these courses and had become quite proficient in English.

Preparing for the required Spring interview with the Department Head, Gio made three observations. First, he realized that he actually dreaded his required business courses and, whether it was the cause or the effect, he did not do well in those courses.

Second, it had not taken long for him to realize that he derived the greatest enjoyment from his English language, composition, and literature courses. He admired writers, especially the playwrights and novelists, who could make characters come to life on the page. He especially loved the characters of Shakespeare who sometimes spoke directly to the audience. Works of fiction, he was learning, were vehicles for



shining light on the truth of what was going on between — and within — human beings. He hoped to write such stories and wanted to learn the techniques writers used to connect with audiences.

His third realization had come after a meeting with his English literature professor. He had gone to Professor Martelli's office to discuss a paper he was writing about two of the plays of William Shakespeare. He knocked on the office door and found it open. "Buon Giorno, professoré, posso entrare?" | "Good day, professor. May I come in?" "Yes, come in, but remember my rule — in my class we are studying English literature, so we must speak in English. Let us follow my rule here in my office as well. *Capicé?*" "Yes, sir, Thank you. My name is Gio Zappia. I am in your Shakespeare class." "Yes, I remember your work. Please sit down."

Gio began, "I noticed in "Romeo and Juliet" and "Two Gentlemen of Verona" that the writer seemed to know a lot about that Italian city and the history of the two famous, feuding *Veronése* families — the Montecchi and Cappelletti. In your lecture you mentioned that Shakespeare was born in Stratford and lived in London and there was no evidence that he ever traveled outside of his own country. I am wondering how this man who never left England in the early 16th century could know so much about a small town in northern Italy."

Professor Martelli looked at him for a long moment and said, "Gio, you have stumbled on a controversy that scholars have debated for a long time. Some have suggested that the William Shakespeare we know from Stratford could not have written these plays. A Sicilian professor, Martino Iuvara, has written that this playwright was in fact not English at all, but Italian. He claimed to have evidence that the plays were written by a man from Messina named Crollanza. According to Iuvara, Crollanza fell in love with a 16-year-old named Giulietta, her parents opposed their marriage, she committed suicide, he fled to England, changed his name to its English equivalent (*crolla* = shaken; *lancia* = spear), and wrote a play about her. Professor Iuvara's evidence includes a play Crollanza left behind in Sicily called *Tanto Traffico Per Niente.*"

"Much traffic for nothing?"

"Crollanza's father was said to have owned a home built by a stonemason named Otelo who murdered his wife in a jealous rage. It's all in Iuvara's published work."

"Then it's true?"

Professor Martelli's smile was kind. "It's the most ridiculous story I have ever heard. Nobody takes it seriously. Apparently, they allowed just anybody to publish in Sicilian literary journals back in the 1950s."

"Professor, is there a better answer?"

"I'm sorry that I can't explain Shakespeare's knowledge of Italy; but Senoré Zappia, you are the first student I have known here at Salerno, who has attempted to do any serious study of Shakespeare. Most of your fellow *Calabresi* find Shakespeare to be a challenge, so they do their best to avoid him. Your paper last month about his use of language in



the history plays was remarkable. So, I have a serious question for you. Why are you pursuing your degree in the Business Department?"

After a moment Gio replied, "Professor Tommasetti asked me the same question at the beginning of my freshman year. I didn't have a good answer for him then and I don't have a better one for you now."

"So, *cosa pensa di fare, Giovanni?*"

"I'm not sure what to do about it, *professoré*. My father expects me to return to Savelli with a degree in business. I suppose I have some thinking to do."

"Yes, think about it -- right after you write your paper. It is due on Monday."

"Yes, right after. Thank you for your time. *Molte grazie, professoré.*"

This time, he meant it.

A month later, when the Spring term ended, the train ride home seemed longer than it had after previous semesters. It was the usual three hours with a stopover at *Lamezia*; the same yellow colza blossoms typical of late spring in *Calabria* punctuated the broad expanse of green grass along the tracks; but none of it held his attention. All he could think about was his father's likely reaction when he told him that a degree in Business would be a waste of time for him. Staring out the window, he rehearsed how he would introduce his idea to change his degree program to the Department of Humanities. He considered starting with his interest in English literature. Or maybe he should admit to his distaste for business. Either way, he assumed his father would be angry and disappointed. Or maybe he should try a more practical approach – he could become a teacher, and maybe, someday he could be a writer ... maybe travel.

All of the conversations he imagined during the long train ride went badly. Then, on top of it all, he reminded himself that his father had arranged for a summer job at the metalworks plant; he would start on Monday. This was going to be a bad day.

His father was waiting in the car at the Catanzaro train station when Gio climbed down the steps from the platform. He put his bags in the back and settled into the front seat for the thirty-minute ride home to Savelli. Gio had finally decided that his father had never been thoughtless or harsh. He had spoken often of the life as a factory manager that he wanted for his son; but he was not stupid. Gio figured he'd just tell him the blunt truth and hope for the best. So, he set aside his fear and began, "*Papa ...*"; but his father interrupted by handing him a letter. It was addressed to him, *Senoré Giovanni Zappia*, but the envelope had been opened. His father said it was from "*Profesoré Martelli*," and gestured for him to read it. Gio studied his father's expression as Giuseppe turned the steering wheel away from the curb, trying to read his mood; but there were no visible hints. Finally, he unfolded the two separate pages. The first was a scholarship application from *Il Dipartimento di Scienze Umane* — the Humanities Department, the second was an offer of a part-time job working in the Department Office as a writing tutor for first-year students.

"*Scienze Umane, Gio?*"



"Si, Papa 'Humanities' en Inglese." The professor had violated his own "rule" and both pages were written in Italian. Gio was pretty sure that he knew what Professor Martelli had intended. The letters were addressed to Gio but they were sent home three weeks ago, virtually ensuring that his father would open them. The letter suggested that Gio could have a bright future if he began preparing now for a career as a teacher, that his writing skills were exceptional. It also explained that, between the job and the scholarship, his college expenses would be fully covered. It was apparently intended to persuade Giuseppe that this was a good idea. Gio read the pages slowly, afraid to look up at his father, not sure how much trouble he was in.

Finally, he father said only, *"Non è necessario decidere ancora. Dobbiamo pensare."* "No need to decide now. We will think about it."

Gio's reply was quick, *"Si, Papa. Dobbiamo pensare."* Yes, Papa, we will think about it.

September, Once Again

The summer passed well enough; his job at the factory was all physical labor, not much thinking. It confirmed for him how much he preferred books and ideas to machines and metal; and there was free time after work for walking in the park near the *Museo dell'Arte Contadina*. It was a small museum with a library that focused on ancestry research and the history of the surrounding region of *Calabria*. The lawns and benches in the park were comfortable places to read and think about the coming school year. With the coming of September, his summer job ended and it was time to prepare to travel north to begin his third year at Salerno.

On the appointed day, in the car on the way to the train station, his father asked the question Gio had been bracing himself for: *"Avete deciso?"* Have you decided? He had prepared his reasons and counter arguments, if they were necessary. He began *"Si, Papa ..."* but again he was interrupted. Giuseppe had been thinking about it as well. He told his son that it didn't make sense that the first member of the family to get a university education should end up working in the same factory where his father and grandfather had worked. He told Gio that he was named after his great grandfather Giovanni Ernesto Zappia. *"Era analfabeta."* "He was illiterate." He couldn't write his own name. Giuseppe told him that if his great grandfather were alive today he would be PROUD to know that MY son might become a teacher or a writer. *"FIERA!"* PROUD! *"Così, è deciso."* "So, it is decided."

Gio tried not to look stunned and promised that he would do well, knowing that he was accepting a big challenge. And with the optimism of youth, he was grateful for it.

The next three years at Salerno were hard work. Changing his major to English Literature and Composition after two years put him behind in his degree requirements; so, it would take him longer to graduate. The association of other students with similar interests was worth it, and he finally felt like he was getting somewhere. He joined a group of students like himself who had an interest in writing family stories and genealogy. At the Christmas break, he came home to Savelli with his new project.



With the help of his father, his aunt Isabella, and the *Museo dell' Arte* library, he was able to begin to piece together a partial family tree going back six generations of Zappias back to a Giovanna Zappia who was born in 1850. He learned that Giovanna had two children — a son, Mario, born in 1871 and a daughter named Giovanna Maria, born in 1874. Records showed that Giovanna Maria, called Maria, had two sons in Savelli before moving to Reggio, Giuseppe born in 1900 and Giovanni in 1906; but strangely, Gio found no record of them anywhere after that, and no death certificates and no record of them living in Calabria after 1910.

The Zappia lineage continued through Maria's brother, Ernesto, and his sons — Gio's great-grandfather Giovanni born in 1922 and Salvatore Zappia born in 1931. Gio's own father, Giuseppe, born in 1960, was Salvatore's youngest son.

In trying to draw the family tree, Gio was struck by two things. First, the family was a textbook case of the longstanding Italian practice of re-using first names roughly alternating through the generations. Going back the 165 years he was able to trace, he found several males named Giovanni, Giuseppe, and Mario and females named Giovanna, Isabella, Maria, and Caterina. Second, Gio's eye kept returning to the branch of the family tree where Maria and Antonio Sapone married, had two sons, and then seemed to disappear. As Giovanni boarded the train to return to Savelli after his graduation, he was determined — there was a story to write and he was going to write it.

Back to the Present: September 2015

By the beginning of September, the summer was showing the clear signs of running out of steam. The grass in the park was dry; leaves on the trees were turning yellow; and most of his goals had been met — he had been the first to graduate from the university, he had moved beyond the family pattern of factory life in Savelli, and he found himself applying for two kinds of jobs: at the local schools and at the regional newspapers. He had been told that most job openings were expected in September. Since the summer job ended in mid-August, Gio filled his days in the park and in the ancestry section of the library with his notebook, pursuing his family-history project. Sitting at a desk in the library, Gio thought about how fortunate he was that his father was not pressuring him about his job search; but now, the pressure came from inside. He did his best to push aside his own doubts.

On one of these afternoons, he pulled out the family tree he had been working on and stared at the incomplete branches. He went to the ancestry reference desk and asked the assistant to help him look up some shot-in-the-dark relatives of his great grandmother — Giovanna Maria Zappia and her husband Antonio Sapone. He asked to search census and property records, death records, ship passenger lists, whatever she could find. Once she began the search, she asked an odd question. She noticed that the query he had asked for had been bookmarked. "Have we done this search for you before . . . about Saponos and Zappias?" Then her face widened as she remembered — "oh yes. It was an older gentleman, an American. Right! There is a note here that he left something behind — let me look." She disappeared into the back office and returned



with a notebook in her hand and a puzzled look on her face. “An American was here some time ago doing research on his family. His grandparents were born in Calabria and emigrated to America a little more than a hundred years ago. He was asking about Saponi and Zappia. He apparently didn’t find what he was looking for and went back to California. Unfortunately, that last day he left this notebook on the desk. We have kept it in the office in case he returned for it. It seems to contain a lot of work.” She handed him the notebook. “Do you know him?” Gio turned some of the pages and was shocked to find some familiar names. “I think we might be related.”

“If you think you might be in touch with him, perhaps you should take the notebook and return it to him. It is not doing him any good here.”

Gio placed it in his backpack and headed for home. His uncle was bringing over some clams, mussels, and calamari and his mother had promised *penne alla fruita di mare*. There was no way he was going to be late for that.

After dinner, when his father and uncle started arguing about politics, Gio escaped to his room and opened his backpack for a closer inspection of the notebook. It had a brown leather cover embossed with an image of some dramatic mountains and the word “Yosemite.” What he found inside was much more than he expected.

Whose Story?

The pages of Gio's 'lost-and-found' notebook were nearly full, but resembled a puzzle with some pieces missing. The first page had a name, “D. Sapone,” and “Yosemite, April 4, 2000.” The scribbling was in English and charts appeared to be pieces of a family tree with some names Gio recognized. Skimming the titles at the top of some of the pages, most of it appeared to consist of short stand-alone chapters. Three described visits to “Yosemite”; another told a story about a hike to a spectacular waterfall. Two chapters were about a restaurant in San Francisco California called The Flying Pig, owned by two brothers named Sapone. Some chapters focused on the writer’s search for details about his family going back several generations. Gio decided to read these chapters first.

Reading through the pages, he learned that the writer grew up in California — a place Gio had learned about in his American Literature courses — a region quite like southern Italy. The second thing that caught Gio’s attention was that this Californian had come to Italy in an attempt to “fill in the blanks” of his family history. And then there was a stunner: this Californian’s grandmother sailed from the port of Naples to Ellis Island in New York on August 18, 1910. She was from right here in Savelli, and her name was Maria Zappia! The owner of this notebook had come from the San Francisco Bay Area to “fill in the blanks” of unanswered questions about Maria’s family and the family of her husband Antonio Sapone, also from Savelli.

A family tree was sketched on one of the pages, showing the gaps that the writer wanted to fill, annotated with questions he wanted to answer:

Why did they leave Italy in 1910?

Who was on the family tree before Maria and Antonio?



He finally came to realize that the story this visitor from California was trying to write was the story of Gio's own relatives going back more than 100 years. With some research, and by asking questions of some older family members right here in Savelli, Gio was convinced that he could complete the story this Sapone had failed to write. And what about this mystery of Antonio?

Gio turned the page from this family tree to a hand-written story that appeared to be a summary of what he had learned. This visitor from California had learned a lot; but had run into some roadblocks. And, it seems, at the end of his visit to Savelli, he had lost his notebook. As he stared at that notebook, in his imagination he could see himself retracing his ancestor's voyage to America, meeting the American branch of his family, returning the notebook, and filling in the blanks of the story that belonged in it. He thought of the Sapone brothers who owned the Flying Pig Bistro in San Francisco. He imagined a day when he would walk into the Flying Pig, introduce himself to his relatives – HIS relatives – and saying to them:

"I have a story. It started out as someone else's story; but it turns out to be my story. I think it is your story, too. So, would you like to hear it?"

He closed the notebook, placed it in his backpack, and stared awhile at nothing in particular. What would his father say about this? He had work to do. He had a purpose. This story had been a long time coming and he was the only one who could finish it. It was time to begin.

– *Dan Sapone (2018)*
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This story is intended as a chapter in a longer work.

The next chapter of the story of Gio ... to be continued ...