During a conversation in Siena with Mary Melfi we followed her journey to the land her mother had left behind to seek a New Life across the Ocean. Our springboard was the kitchen table at which mother and daughter would sit, retrieving their immigrant story. Listening to Mary Melfi’s reading of her “conversations” with her mother, as recorded in her memoir *Italy Revisited*, we observed how the ‘food’ prepared at that table in a Montreal kitchen nourished a complex intricacy of the real and the imagined; and we had a sense of the contradictory, entangled feelings with which memory paves the return to the past while promoting the advance to self-discovery.

In her mother’s kitchen Mary Melfi was doing what Joe Fiorito did (or imagined having done) at his father’s deathbed. In the memoir *The Closer We Are to Dying* Joe Fiorito recalls how he “asked [his father] for the old stories” because he wanted to know who he was, who his father was, and where his family had come from. “These old stories,” he claimed, “were the foundation on which the family had been built, they were the very material of which each of us […] were made.” (70)

Similarly, in her mother's kitchen, Melfi was looking for her roots and constructing her identity—a common game or quest for the immigrant psyche, troubled as it so often is by the discomfort of hyphenation, of being neither this nor that, and complicated by conflicting feelings of self-indulgence, excruciating angst or ineradicable shame. This discomforting experience of hyphenation is recounted by Fiorito in his perhaps fictional memoir: “My playground pals were English and Irish and Slovack, all Canadian kids; I was one of the gang, but I wasn’t […]. I was not like my cousins, and not like the neighbourhood tough, neither was I like the other Canadian kids;” (280) a similar malaise is described in the biotext *Diamond Grill* by Chinese-Canadian Fred Wah, who recollects his school-day interactions with kids of many other racial identities –Italian, Doukhobor, or British: “There's a whole bunch of us who've grown up as resident aliens, living in the hyphen.”

For many immigrants and their children, living in the hyphen, straddling the Old World, with its clutching roots, and the New World of pressing expectations, has sharpened the quest for home. For, as Vladimir Janělévitch says, quoting Victor Hugo: “one cannot live without bread, but one cannot live without one’s homeland either.” (cfr Prete 123)

For the author of *Italy Revisited*, as for many others, this quest is performed with a familiar accomplice: Nostalgia. Melfi writes“Why, why, why …? Why am I in my mother’s kitchen on the
hunt for my roots? Am I just playing a game here? The name of the game is Nostalgia.” (142) A composite of nostos (return) and algia (ache), nostalgia inflects Heimweh, the mal du pays, the desiderium patriae, a feeling proper to exile, whose only remedy can be the urgent return to the site of one’s infancy, or to one’s own primary home. But once it has entered the domain of literature, as in Baudelaire, Antonio Prete reminds us, (17) the malady known as nostalgia becomes emptied of its pathological meaning; the desire for the distant homeland turns into “nostalgie des pays et des bonheurs inconnus,” “angoisse de la curiosité.” While there is no implied return, what does emerge is memory as a game with the past, as Melfi clearly states:

One plays the game by recreating the past. I didn’t say creating because part of the game includes changing the past to please oneself. One plays to have fun, to be happy, but happiness is elusive. Like playing Snakes and Ladders, one goes up, down - one never knows if one is winning or losing. One can be on a winning streak and then, go back down. Playing with the past is no different.” (142)

In this game memory proves to be a “tricky business,” as historian Margaret MacMillan puts it in The Uses and Abuses of History,(47) something of which Margaret Atwood is well aware:

Individual memory, history and the novel are all selective: no one remembers everything, each historian picks out the facts he or she chooses to find significant and every novel, whether historical or not, must limit its own scope. No one can tell the stories there are. (175)

No wonder, then, if Melfi claims to be re-creating the past her own way, hunting for her roots in the kitchen where her mother is busy cooking biscotti and offering her daughter recipes, reminding her that the past she wants to recreate in her Memory Book is “make-believe.”

In her memoir The Guthrie Road, Rosemary Sullivan reminds us:

We need to locate ourselves on the ladder of our own ancestry to give a meaning to time. But then, in spite of the illusion of objectivity that documents seem to offer, the past is not stationery or fixed. Everything depends on how the narrative of the past gets told.(60)

Documents, photographs, audio recordings may hide more than they reveal; the past, as fabricated by nostalgia - the malady of things lost, as well as angst over one’s own future - remains unapproachable. A healing return is impossible, because, as Dionne Brand argues, for the people of the Diaspora, “flight is as strong as return.” (Brand 27)

Here is how Mary Melfi describes her return to and flight from her Italian homeland:

The first time I returned to Italy I wasn’t interested in my home town. I spent a day and a half there. Like others of my generation I was eager to take a look at my old town, meet with my grandparents but it wasn’t on the top of my agenda. I wasn’t interested in my roots back then. My roots were entangled in la miseria, and if anything I had to disentangle from them. (316)
On her return to Casacalenda, Mary quickly kissed her grandparents goodbye and escaped from their town to Rome, Florence and Venice. Dazzled by its art, she let herself think that Italy, “the tourist Mecca,” rather than Casacalenda, was her home town; her teachers had tricked her into believing that Italy was a poor country and in these fabled cities she learned otherwise, and felt cured:

“Actually, Italy was more than its art, it was itself a master Sculptor –she placed her hand on me and I was cured of my deformity (my shame).” (316)

But that was not the cure for her nostalgia, nor was tourist Italy the goal of her intimate journey, of her quest for home, the first place looked for in order to feel at ease even when running away from it. In 1977 she did not know that she needn't rely on Michelangelo to feel proud of her heritage. Back then she was young and her direction was centrifugal. But, as we get older, Rosemary Sullivan points out in *The Guthrie Road*, we discover:

"we are mostly all prodigals. Acceding to the centripetal pull, we return. I remember DH Lawrence saying that we are a 'mystery to which the mind can gain no access.' We eventually have to admit that we cannot grasp or say, finally, what anything means. We can only live the mystery of ourselves in relation to others." (59)

The primary “other” Mary Melfi had to come to terms with was her mother; to re-visit her own childhood, to meet the girl she once was, to make the mirror reflect who she really is she must return to her mother’s kitchen. That is a destination in which the burden and shame of the poverty her mother fled are lightened, and moments of reconciliation become possible. Her angst over her identity assuaged, she finally finds the food for her *Memory Book*, however tricky memory may be:

In the kitchen there are no family secrets. In the kitchen there is no place for shame […]. In the kitchen miracles are commonplace. […] when you are in the kitchen your search stops. […]-your survival assured, your body reaffirmed, reappraised, you can relax and seize the day. (332)

It is an ideal kitchen, of course, and thus the ideal place to defeat discomfort, to recognize that it is worth to do biography and autobiography- that dance between the remembering and forgetting of the awful things that were done to us and the awful things we did to others, as Atwood puts it. It is also one of the best places for (auto)biographers like Mary Melfi to come as close to truth as is
humanly possible, and to carry out what Rosemary Sullivan calls “a rebellion against the impossible fact that a life can so easily disappear” (Confessions 69) – that all the energy, passion, individuality that constitutes each one of us can one day, brutally or casually, stop.

It is also the best place, in the case of an Italian Canadian daughter who feels the distress of being in an unaccustomed land where writers from different origins have found themselves to become aware that as N Hauhorne said in The Custom-House:

> Human nature will not flourish, anymore than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth. (Jumpa Lahiri’s epigraph to Unaccustomed Earth)

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Mary Melfi’s Answers to Annalisa Coppolaro's Questions in December 2012 in Siena.

Annalisa Coppolaro: Mary, reading your book has been not only a wonderful surprise because I like the style very much, but for me it has also been a trip down the memory lane. It has taken me back to the stories my late father used to tell me, and now I wish I had written down his memories. He came
from a small village near Benevento, in Campania. How has the book been accepted and read by the people living now in Molise and in the town where you were born?

Mary Melfi: As far as I can tell the book is quite popular, both with those who like a good read, and with those who are interested in history. This August there was a book launch in Casacalenda during the town's annual film festival and it appears those present responded to the book warmly. Still, a few readers, younger ones, those born after World War II, questioned whether there was as much poverty in the town as detailed in my book; on the other hand, older readers, those of my mother's generation, did not see any untruths in what I had written, in fact, quite a few noted that while the individuals I describe in the book are poor, they themselves knew of others whose living conditions in the town were much worse. Recently, the Town of Casacalenda, presented me with an award, suggesting, in part, that *Italy Revisited* resonated with the town's people.

A.C.: Of all the characters we meet in the book, apart from your mother, is there one special character you feel very close to and why?

M.M.: That's an easy question to answer because it is one I asked myself. Of all the individuals my mother spoke to me about, my great grandfather, Francesco DiTullio, interested me the most. He had an event-filled life, but unfortunately, most of the events were quite sad. Both his parents died when he was 12. Just a boy himself, he managed not only to take care of his younger siblings, cooking and cleaning for them, but he also took care of the family farm, tilling the fields and looking after the animals. Later, after his brothers and sisters grew up, he married and had children. He came to Canada in 1910 and here found a job with CN Railways. He worked in Ontario for over a year, but then one day under increasing pressure to work faster, he was in a terrible accident -- his arm was amputated. CN refused to compensate him, dismissing him as yet another Italian illiterate. He went to court, and won his case. He used the money he got from CN to buy more farmland in his native Molise. This helped his family, even benefiting my mother, who inherited the olive grove he bought. Things went well for awhile, but in the early 1930s he, along with 60 other individuals from Casacalenda, was imprisoned for the murder of a local guardsman. While most of the 60 townsmen were quickly let go, he was kept in prison for over 3 months and brutally tortured. In the end the local police chief figured out who the real culprit was and my great grandfather was set free. After that experience, the man had to deal with the horrors of World War II. When the war was over, his sons, daughters and grandchildren all immigrated to other lands -- Canada, Australia and South America. Did he complain? Not much. Like most men of his generation he accepted hardship, and rose above it.
A.C.: Anthropologically your book is very, very valuable. Some Italians say "si stava meglio quando si stava peggio," meaning that people were happier when there was less money around and life was genuine and not sophisticated. Could you comment on that, and tell us your thoughts on the subject?

M.M.: This sounds like a tricky question. There is no right answer. One can argue for both points of view -- no, the people were not happier - they had less of everything, including food. Infectious diseases like malaria were rampant. Many children died. On the other hand one can argue that because they had fewer needs, fewer gadgets, and fewer moral distractions, they had a better time of making sense out of life. Most scientific studies have shown that the rich are generally happier -- for one thing they live longer than poor people. Still, studies have also shown, that after individuals reach a certain level of comfort, money cannot buy you happiness. So money can buy you peace and joy when you're poor, but if you're not poor, it does nothing for you. On top of that, studies have also shown that the more choices you have, the unhappier you are. Also, the higher your expectations, the unhappier you'll be. Apparently, those in arranged marriages, have the same satisfaction rate, as those who married for love. Obviously, happiness has less to do with wealth, but more to do with needs. And needs can be changed, manipulated and controlled. Religion used to be called the opiate of the people. Nowadays, religion doesn't have the same hold. Nowadays television helps individuals cope. It's the new opiate. Hope is also an opiate of a kind. When there is hope in the air -- as there was in the 1950s -- then everyone has a better time of it. 50 million Italians left their motherland in the last century in the hope of improving their lot. Many did. They were the lucky ones - they put an end to the cycle of poverty in their families, and by so doing, they realized a beautiful destiny. They changed history. Nothing in life feels as good as having a sense of purpose. It's better than a big fat pay check. Those who have money, a sense of purpose, and a bit of love in their lives have it all.

A.C.: You have said that writing is a lonely job, and as a writer and translator I can well share that thought. But if you could change two things in the way you approach writing, what would they be?

M.M.: To change my approach [...] my writing I would have to undergo a brain transplant, meaning I would have to be someone else. I wish I could be someone else but it does not seem to be in the realm of possibilities (except when writing fiction). The reason I write, I guess, is because it gives
me a sense of self, or the illusion thereof. When I am out in the real world, when I am not at my desk, writing, I don't feel I have such a thing I can call a "self." I am a real scatterbrain - literally. When I am out on the street, or in a shop, I feel as if I were made up of a thousand little selves, all flying about, unable to successfully bind together and be one. I feel chopped up, broken up, damaged, call it what you will, but I don't feel whole. Only when I am writing I have the illusion that these thousand little selves come together, and work in unison. The sad fact is that when I become someone else in a work of fiction, it is then that I feel most like myself. That's a paradox, I guess. Becoming oneself by becoming someone else. In the lie: truth. If I could suddenly have a sense of self, without the bother of writing, that would be the first step towards mental health. I guess what I am saying is that for me writing is a form of self-creation.

**A.C.:** In England we have a radio program called "Desert island books." If you had landed on a desert island, what are the books you would have wished to take with you? And what three objects?

**M.M.:** My favourite three books change every year. This year if I were stranded on a dessert island I would hope to have Tolstoy's Anna Karenina with me, along with Chekhov's plays. But I would give up both Tolstoy and Chekhov for the book of poems my late husband, George Nemeth, wrote for me. I cherish this book more than any other I have had the pleasure to read in my long life.

If my survival needs were taken care of and I would not need things like knives and matches, then I would opt for a coffee maker and an unlimited amount of coffee beans (My favourite drink), I would also like to have paper and pencil around to jot down my thoughts. Why I would need a paper and pencil when I would be all alone on a dessert island I don't know. All I do know is that looking at something I wrote makes me feel a lot better than looking at a mirror. The last thing I would want on a dessert island is a mirror.

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*Annalisa Coppolaro is an Italian writer, journalist and translator from Siena, Italy. Her book How to Live like an Italian is now translated into several languages. She writes for Repubblica, Corriere della Sera, Archeologia viva, The Guardian and contributes to BBC Radio and other programmes and online papers. She has a Language degree and she has translated several books from Italian into English and English into Italian. After living in London for 15 years, she has now gone back to Siena where she lives with her husband and their children.*