H. S. (Sam) Hamod

DYING WITH THE WRONG NAME
Three parts of an unfinished poem

(*Dedicated to all the immigrants who lost their names at Ellis Island*)

I.

These men died with the wrong names,
Na'aim Jazeeny, from the beautiful valley
of Jezzine, died as Nephew Sam,
Sine Hussin died without relatives and
because they cut away his last name
at Ellis Island, there was no way to trace
him back even to Lebanon, and Im'a Brahim
had no other name than mother of Brahim,
even my own father lost his, went from
Hussein Hamode Subh' to Sam Hamod.
There is something lost in the blood,
something lost down to the bone
in these small changes. A man in a
dark blue suit at Ellis Island says, with
tiredness and authority, "You only need two
names in America" and suddenly—as cleanly
as the air, you've lost
your name. At first, it's hardly
even noticeable—and it's easier, you move
about as an American—but looking back
the loss of your name
cuts away some other part,
something unspeakable is lost.

And you know, these were not small
men, each was severe, though part
comic, as we will be remembered as well—but
Nephew Sam ran a cigar store in Michigan City, and
in the back room a poker game with chips and
bills often past 30,000; in his middle years,
Sine Hussin lifted the rear end of a 1939 Ford
so they could change a tire, and my father went
from Lebanon to the packinghouses in Sioux Falls
and Sioux City to the steel mills in Gary, from
nothing to houses and apartments worth more than
a million—in each sweaty day in Sioux City, down
to the boarding houses and small stores, in each drop
of movement at 5:30 and 5 a.m. cooking food for gandy
dancers and millworkers to nights working in the tavern
selling scotch while B. B. King and T. Bone Walker hustled
blues, each dollar another day mixing names and money.
And these were men who opened the world
with a gesture of the hand,
a nod and things moved, houses were built
for each new immigrant, apartment buildings bought
and sold—given as wedding presents
mayors and congressmen were made and broken—these men live
now on the edge of myth—each other under
a stone carved in English, the Arabic of Hussein Hamod Subh,
Na'aim Jazeeny, Sine Hussin
lost
each one sealed away
with the wrong name
except in this poem, and a poem
goes out to so few
but we trust as we can

II

Sine Hussin is still sitting in that
old chair, upholstered in brushed maroon wool,
he sits with his back to the window
at an angle, an old crystal lamp rests
on the ornate mahogany table, Im'a Brahim
sits in the companion chair, crocheting, her
legs full, veined and old, managing to walk, a
short osman of no more than 4'8" or so,
but obviously before her first child
the cameo shape of her face was more delicate, and
you know the smell of this room, meat and fried onions,
fresh garlic on the salad, tartness of lemon
twists into the air, and an ease toward evening
as you walk in
all the silence splits into hellos and hugs
while the world comes together
in the small room

III

Even now, it's hard for me to
fully understand what this old couple meant
to my father—
his own father had died before my father came
to America in 1914, his mother still in Lebanon,
unseen for decades. My father is 39 or 40 now, I
am 4 or 5, we are constantly carrying groceries
to this old house, the old couple always says "no"
but then they take them, but only after we have
some *fatiyah* and coffee, eat some fruit, talk
(I'm usually impatient to go), then we climb back
into the car and go home. My father, a man I came to know
as so secretive, yet so generous, a man alone; now I know
this was part of that other reality, where his name, that
language, Hussein, Sine Hussin, Im'a Brahim, *Asalamu Aleikum*,
all of these sounds were part of his name, this was that other
edge of Lebanon he carried with him, that home, that same
good food of the rich smells, it had to be in these moments,
these things
were not lost, but were alive and living in this room,
in this house, in these people, in this moment.

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