

Dying With The Wrong Name

(Dedicated to all those who came to America and lost their names)

I
these men died with the wrong names,
Na'aim Jazeeney, from the beautiful valley
of Jezzine, died as Nephew Sam.
Eh'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 Ima' 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 uniform at Ellis Island says, with
tiredness and authority, "You only need two
names in America, "and suddenly
as cleanly as air
you've lost
your name. At first, it's hardly
even noticeable - it's easier, you can move about
as an American - but looking back
the loss of your name
cuts away some other part,
something unspeakable is lost.

II
and I know, these were not small men,
each was severe, though part
comic, as we will all be remembered as well - but Nephew Sam ran a cigar store in Michigan City, and in the back
room
ran a poker game with chips and bills often past
\$30,000; in his middle years, I saw Eh'sine Hussin lift the rear end of a '39 Ford so they could
change a tire
and my father who threw men twice his size went
from Lebanon to the packing houses in Sioux Falls and Mother and I in a single room where the windows rattled
every
morning when the trains came by on the EJ and E, in a rented hotel
he and my mother ran as a boarding house, in each drop of movement from
5 a.m. cooking food for the gandy dancers and millworkers to nights working in the Broadway Tavern
selling scotch and bootleg Canadian Whiskey while
B.B. King, T.Bone Walker hustled blues, each
dollar another day mixing names and money, money and
music with Vivian Carter starting VJ records in the corner
behind
his bar ah,
these were men,
men who opened the world with a gesture of their hand,
a nod and things moved, houses were built
for each new Lebanese, apartment buildings were bought and sold,
given as wedding presents, mayors and congressmen
were bought and sold, made and broken-
these men

live now on the edge of myth - each one under a
stone a stone carved in English, the Arabic of
Hussein Hamode Subh, Na'aim Jazeeney, Eh'sine Hussin
lost
each one sealed away
with the wrong
name
except in this poem
but a poem goes out
to so few
but we do what we can
and we trust in what we can

III

Eh'sine Hussin is still sitting in that old
chair, upholstered in brushed maroon wool, he
sits with his back to the window
inward, at an angle, the antique crystal lamp rests
on the ornate mahogany table - Ima'Brahim
sits in the companion chair, crocheting, her legs
full-veined and old, barely managing to
walk, a
short osman of a woman no more than 4'7" 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 settles in toward
evening as you walk in, then
all silence splits into hellos and hugs
while the world comes together
in this small room

IV

Even now, it's hard for me
to fully understand
what this old couple meant
to my father -
his own father 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 at 301 Monroe Street, with Eh'sine Hussin and Ima'Brahim always saying, "No-we don't need
anything," but they always take the groceries and the fresh lamb, but
only after we've eaten some fati'ya and coffee "eat some fruit", talk, talk, talk
(I'm usually impatient to go, and I'm sleepy and full)
then we climb back
into the car and we have a long, kind of lonely ride
back home. You want to leave, but each time, you leave, you
feel a little sense of loneliness, but as a child - you don't know
what it is.
As for my father, he was a man
I came to know
as a secretive, generous, a man
alone- and now I know this old couple
was a part of that other
reality, where his name, that

other language than English, that was more than just
Arabic, Hussein, Hussein Hamode Subh, Eh'Sine Hussin, Ima'Brahim, Assalamu Alaikum, all of these
sounds were part of his
name, this and that other edge
of Lebanon he carried within him, that
home, that same
good food of these rich
smells,
it had to be in these moments,
that these things were not lost, but
were alive and living in this
room,
in this house,
in these people
in this moment.

V

And now, the hotel at the Intersection of 3rd street and Jefferson street
has vanished with
urban renewal
as has the old stucco house at the Intersection of 3rd street and Monroe street, and
I don't remember where Eh'sine Hussin is
buried, and my mother and father rest
next to the Hajj Abbass in a grassy
cemetery in Cedar Rapids, Iowa - far
from the action of Gary and Chicago, far from the
heady days of building businesses, building families, building
Mosques and converting Elijah Muhammad's people to
Islam - it is far from the evening at the intersection of 11th street and Wallace street
when Jamil Diab would bring busloads of Muslims
from Chicago, and the prayers would go on
into the nights, it is far from
the afternoons when we as children
would study Arabic and Islam at the mosques
in Michigan City and Cedar Rapids
when we'd play football for an hour then
study those funny looking lines that our fathers loved
but that we didn't believe in, and we didn't really know
why we were there-the languages belonged to that other
place, that place we'd never seen, but whose presence
filled our homes, filled our
lives-so when we were in the house, we were in old Lebanon,
Pre-French Lebanon, and when we hit the street, we were in Gary,
in Cedar Rapids, in Michigan City, in Toledo and Detroit-
where
our fathers wielded sticks and memory
with ease, though could not write the language, they
knew how to use it, and we understood
from them, that this was how
it was done - so we did,
each of us did those things we
learned, some stayed in the bars and the restaurants and
others ventured forth
and some even wrote a poem-but it all washes
like Tom Sawyer's whitewash - we remember
the best, forget most of the rest-that is the
best way-and those sounds of Mahmoud Hoballah,

Sheikh Muhammad Jawad Chirri and Sheikh Kamal Avdich remain in our ears, as our fathers keep telling us,
"Learn, ya ibn abouk-learn"
and so we learned, and to this day
we remember.

VI

Now our children, strangely enough
have learned the language, learned the
Arabic better than we
it's almost as if they
heard our fathers, or maybe it's that
our father's spirits were so strong
that they refused to stay
in their graves, but came back
and insisted that our children, our boys,
David, Tarik and the rest, learn
Arabic, learn how to do their
prayers, that they held strong
in their sway to keep their
voices alive, to keep their strength
alive, whether it be William, Yehya
Aossey in Iowa or Sam Hussein
Hamod Subh in Gary, Indiana-they
moved our children
in their direction - they gave up
on us, we were too much like
them, we were
stubborn, and just as they ventured
out, lit out on their
own, so too did we, so we
went forth in our directions-away
from our fathers' directions
and made our own
way-but they spoke to our
children, and those same
smells stay alive-for us, in our
memories, in them, on the tables
whether they are in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria or Lebanon, they know
when it is time to pray, and they carry
an odd heritage-we, and they, we are
the original Arabs, we are the original
Muslims, our heads unbowed, because we
we are lucky that our fathers left Lebanon
before the French, so we are free, and
we have never tasted
captivity-so we carry that "old Arab
in my mind" that our fathers fed into
our minds, into our
hearts, that sense of
pride and lack of
fear, that sense that you can do what you want,
without wasting time on
fear-and so did we learn, as I told one man
when he said to me, "You aren't a real Arab
or a real Muslim" -to which I said,
"No, we are the real thing-no one ever conquered
us, no one ever bought us, and we come to our religion not by governance but by choice"

and so we are here today,
carrying within us
those same sounds, those same
smells remembered from our
childhood, the onions and garlic, the
fresh tomatoes and lemons, the parsley,
the smoke of fresh lamb, the deep voice of
the Imam chanting the Qur'an
and the calligraphies and Arabic poems
in a script hard for us to translate, but
that we understand in our hearts.