

NAMING THE IMMIGRANTS

Ken Smith

Some old ones, bent by turmoils
I didn't care to imagine,
looked at me and drew a deep breath,
as if to say
they had seen my kind before.
And I had seen their kind before,
and breathed the stale air,
the clothes worn
a second or third day without laundering,
the spices whose names
I will never know. There were forms
to be marked with an "X" or a name,
courtesies to be offered,
a decorum to be maintained:
I sat at a long desk each day
while immigrants walked in front,
spoke what they could speak,
showed their documents,
tried to ask about their baggage
or about a relative
who had arrived the year before.
Generally there was not much to say,
and after a few months
I filled out the forms myself
for those who knew the least English,
because they seemed powerless
to survive without my help.
They spoke their names, I wrote down
how they sounded, and though some
looked over the papers and pointed

to the letters assembled there,
there was nothing to be done—
they needed names for their new lives,
and I gave them.

They walked out of the room
fingering the papers which bore letters—
something like strangers to them—
which stood now in their stead
in the world's affairs.

They were new men and women.
I wrote it and it was done.