

An Immigrant’s Daughter

I was born the daughter
of European immigrants,
smack in middle of baby boomer years—
a first generation American,
trauma—part of our identity.

First foot on Ellis Island
learning a second tongue
ushered from one life to another—
that’s what immigrants do.

Grandma, orphaned in Poland—
World War I, trekked to Brooklyn
Working fifteen hours a day for a buck.

In her found journal
thirty years after suicide,
I read her struggles--
the quest of belonging
after witnessing war
erupting on childhood streets.
Her trauma is her identity.

My father, Holocaust survivor,
watches evening news, always
chanting, ‘live and let live.’

Many challenges growing up
in an immigrant home:
the intolerance of waste,
being punished if even a scrap
left on dinner plate.
Dinner conversations
laden with survival stories:
packed belongings
into small worn leather suitcases,
crossing worldly oceans,
like I now pack my words
onto the pages of my journal.

My parents and grandparents
spoke of ship-laden illnesses—
dead bodies, and now eat
meat only well-done.
Their trauma
their identity.

In school someone sneezes and I
lean over and say, 'gesundheit,'
I'm glanced at as an alien, "oh,
that's German for 'bless you,'
I respond to the silence.

Wishing they'd bless me,
always "the other" --
saddle shoes, and same outfit
every day. but nobody blesses me,
I am from an immigrant family.
Their trauma, their identity.

As a hippie protester I draped
the American flag on my shoulders,
like wearing apparel, not cool
says this government...and I'm still
protesting their ways.

Parents grateful until death,
proud to be American,
excited about their new chapter,
but I now sit in my garden
and ponder
what it was like
to be a proud American,
it feels so foreign today,
as my life continues as an
immigrant daughter,
but now instead of being
prayed for, I pray
for immigrants,
documented and undocumented.
Their trauma, their identity.

Hard-working, eager seekers
from another world, wanting peace,
wanting a new life, is that so hard?