

Ada Cat's Elbows

after staring down the rats for eight
despairing days in the fish-laden
belly of a coal-fired tramp steamer
no hand of Noah to soothe her
my great-grandmother came to
the golden gates of Ellis Island

at seventeen, the stench of death
began to subside at last

Katzenellenbogen was her name
no shame in that, she thought
to be known by the articulation
of a feline foreleg, but Cat's Elbows
did not do well in English so they
lopped it off at Katz

she never understood the jokes
they made about the Katz meow
or even her pajamas—her memory
possessed by Cossacks marching
through the house and brothers
beaten, sisters raped for the shape
of their noses or the funny
hats they wore

she never could remove the sickly
smell of food she ate beyond its time
the reeking darkness, the rocking
hulk of the ship's dyspeptic hold
the clanking rhythm of brass buckles
on a soldier's gleaming boots
or the spreading blush
of bloodstains on the wall

but somehow

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she found herself an American
dream of a house paid off, five
children—the other four still-
born—with a husband who left her
only fading photographs when he fell
a flight of stairs at forty-two

and when the pieces were picked up
she had learned the ways of stewing
Friday chicken with onions, prunes
and carrots, how to make dumplings
that landed lightly on the plate
how to run a retail store alone
and what it takes to comfort whiny
grandchildren in the dark

she became the one the others
talked about in loving tones
for knitted socks and afghans
lullabies in minor keys and woven
stories in the glow of flickering fires

but she never quite accustomed
to the feel of the catbird seat
or the quietude of a cat asleep
nestled in the angle of her soft
and steady arm

James K. Zimmerman

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