

# My Latin Last Name

“Where  
Did you get  
Your last name?”  
People ask me.

“I can see  
That you are not Latina,  
Mrs. Vazquez,”  
They always say.

“So,  
*¿Habla usted el español/Do you speak Spanish?*”  
They wonder.

*“Sí, pero una vida entera/Yes, but my whole life  
No es suficiente tiempo/ Is not enough time  
Para aprender todo/To learn it all,”*  
I answer.

I offer both my medical background and the personal history that  
Explains me, an increasingly ordinary bilingual *gringa*/Yankee anomaly  
Who only occasionally  
Confuses *por*/one form of for  
With *para*/another form of for.

This  
Is Genesis, how it all  
Began.

I  
Am patient with people,  
But impatient with things.

All I ever  
Wanted was to write Santos a letter *en español* so that it  
Could fly to Honduras with its college-ruled wings and  
Land in his hands without  
Perching on the desk of a translator for an indefinite time  
Like a baking brick or a wounded duck.

Yes, I  
Wrote many letters.

*Querido Santos*/Dear Santos,

*Espero que estés bien*/ I hope you are well...

I never stopped reading,  
Writing,  
And speaking the language and that  
Is how my living and my last name  
Found me.

Say my last name.

[vás.kes]

The United States of America  
Struggles with my Latin last name even though I  
Mispronounce it for the convenience of English speakers.

This is how I  
Butcher my last name  
Into convenient deli meat to  
Fit the American mouth.

[vaz.kwez]

“How  
Do you  
Spell that?”  
Wonders the clerk.

I  
Spell it to her four times and she  
Misspells it to me four times.

“Here,  
Let me  
Write it down for you,”  
I offer.

Even when I  
Write Vazquez on the paper, its letters still  
Confound everyone.

Vasquez and Vasques  
Are noble efforts on letters from family and friends.

Zazquez, the name on the hungry envelopes of my bills,  
Is a nonexistent incongruity,  
A phonetic impossibility that  
Puzzles me more than it  
Annoys me.

Although the worst offenders easily  
Can pronounce Messerschmidt, my maternal grandmother’s last name,  
they  
Panic upon seeing my Latin last name and  
Do not even attempt to read it.

That is why I  
Answer to Velázquez and  
Villa and  
Vargas and  
Vega and  
Valdéz  
And Valencia.

I  
Am so many different people that I  
Forget my true identity.

One day, I  
Find a letter, a miniscule white cat curled up in the mailbox to  
Conceal a fluffy tail of script that  
Reveals that I  
Am the recipient of this feline correspondence.

It  
Is addressed to me, Mrs. Vázquez.

The accent that  
Floats over the A truly  
Is a halo over a saintly head that  
Promises my martyred last name some kind of blessing.

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## Poem Review

Much of Michel Foucault's work (*The Order of Things* jumps to mind) is a critique of History's "scientific" process of classification and categorization as a mode of discipline and control. In "My Latin Last Name," the reader meets a poetic voice/protagonist who is, in essence, frustrated by the compartmentalization that struggles to engineer her into a box she rejects.

The devil is in the details, and the devil rears its ugly head here in the form of seemingly innocent questions of spelling and pronunciation that make up a life time of frustration for this protagonist. In fact, much of the action of the poem takes place at the level of representation: letters and envelopes. Foucault's exploration of linguistics or general grammar as a primary site for formulating categories rushes in. In this poem, characters rely on the default litmus tests of "authenticity" to figure out how to classify the protagonist: appearance and language. When these don't check out, logic seems to break down as exemplified in the lines "Although the worst offenders easily/Can pronounce Messerschmidt, my maternal grandmother's last name, they /Panic upon seeing my Latin last name and /Do not even attempt to read it."

The protagonist's frustration upon the difficulty of communicating her unruly--perhaps even subversive-- identity is beautifully captured with imagery that compares a letter that she writes in Spanish to a brick or a wounded duck: awkward, ungraceful, difficult to handle. In this poem, even a cliché is summoned and built upon successfully in the name of exorcizing a heavy yoke: "This is how I / Butcher my last name / Into convenient deli meat to / Fit the American mouth." The terrible imagery of butchering, deli meat and the American mouth all crammed into one gooey sentence is enough to give anyone the chills, and is hopefully enough to beg the question: are identitarian politics your friend or your foe?

Ironically perhaps, the hopeful last note of the poem comes from the protagonist's final "success" upon being treated with "proper grammar" when someone sends her an envelope where her name is not only finally spelled correctly, but even includes the accent mark in the correct place: "The accent that / Floats over the A truly / Is a halo over a saintly head that/ Promises my martyred last name some kind of blessing." In a catch 22, the satisfaction of having the protagonist's complex identity recognized implies a "correct grammar;" more bricks with which to engineer yet another box?

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