“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
Valdés
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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