

Segue

online literary journal

REBECCA BALCÁRCEL



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By Any Other Name

“Like the **ball** in the **car** you're going to **sell**.” This is how I explain the pronunciation of my last name, Balcárcel, to bank tellers and airline representatives, my self-defense instructor and my students. My mother invented this phrase after hearing her married name mispronounced as Bar-carcel, Ban-carcel, and Balcar-kell almost daily. I think her trick works pretty well at demystifying the name. The phrase jingles on the tongue, and most people appreciate a hand. In fact, when I graduated from high school, I tried to help the announcer by writing out Ball-car-sell. I thought Mom's stratagem would work as perfectly on paper as it did in person. I printed my name, accent and all, then wrote Ball-car-sell underneath in parenthesis. I imagined the syllables ringing through the auditorium in pure pronunciation tones. It backfired, and I was almost off-stage before my parents realized, “That's our daughter up there shaking hands with the principal.” The announcer had mumbled something unintelligible; Dad snapped a photo just in time to hear Barker, the name of the next student. We laughed about it later, but I admit to some disappointment. I didn't gasp—no surprise that the predictable happened—but I did sigh. Practiced as I was at not letting mispronunciation bother me, it pinched a little. It reminded me that even the progressive educators who loved having a Latina in class, and even the announcer-speech teacher who prided himself on crisp consonants and a broadcast-worthy baritone couldn't step into another language easily. And though I had attended school in this district from fifth grade on, no one had quite figured out Balcárcel.

Every first day of school had been a name nightmare for me. The teacher would start calling role at the front of the room. When a long pause followed a name like Anderson, Scott, I knew the teacher's brain was stalling out on mine. Added to her distress at seeing Balcárcel, my nickname Bequi appeared next to it. Bequi is pronounced “Becky,” as people with some knowledge of Spanish might guess, but the combination—Bequi Balcárcel—stumped every teacher I had.

As a girl, I coped by disassociating myself from my name. I couldn't afford to take every mispronunciation personally, so I pushed my name out of myself into its own realm. There it could be stepped on, twisted, or ignored without me feeling stepped on, twisted, or ignored. I didn't want to impose on people by coaching them on my name. It took too much time, and yielded flawed results. The wrong syllable stressed, the hard c pronounced soft, the soft c pronounced hard. I waved away the sounds and took this approach: people could fumble with my name like a doorknob, and I'd let them in just to hear the rattling stop.

I don't blame folks for stumbling over three syllables and an accent mark. I agree: Balcárcel looks intimidating. The accent, especially, seems to snuff out most people's will to even hazard a guess. But if someone does try, I now applaud the effort no matter what comes out. The knob-rattling bothers me less than it used to. My local grocery store wants its employees to greet every customer by name. Every week I say, “Close enough” with a smile. My own children don't have the pronunciation mastered, so I'm not expecting the grocery staff to catch on anytime soon. Maybe I'm mellow because I'm letting my name creep closer. I've brought it in from the back shed and given it a place in the living room. Instead of distancing myself from my name, I see it as a fun facet

of who I really am. It's no longer painful to hear Bancursel. The complexity of my name reflects the complexity of my identity, and no one can know me or my name fully on a first encounter.

Despite the difficulties, or maybe because of them and the attention they stirred, I kept my name when I married. My Guatemalan father always joked that I'd marry an American named Smith and lose my heritage. In fact, I married a man named Stith. I could have changed my name and stopped chanting "like the ball in the car you're going to sell," but I couldn't face going from three syllables to one; just listen to that monosyllabic thud after the three-syllable "Rebecca." Besides, I liked my name. And maybe Dad has a point. My name might be the most Latin thing about me.

Growing up monolingual in Iowa did not instill much fiesta flavor. My Spanish was spotty, and though I knew some lullabies and phrases like "I am ten years old," I couldn't hold a conversation with my grandparents. When they visited one year, flying all the way from Central America, I sang for them and smiled a lot, but I couldn't tell them about my teddy bear collection or read them a story I'd written. For a week, the adults volleyed words over my head. It felt like verbal keep-away. Later, equipped with four years of high school Spanish, I visited Guatemala. My grandmother was no longer with us, but I was able to tell my *abuelo* about college plans and my hope of learning guitar. For two weeks I played Latina, but I'm still more salt than cilantro.

As much as I love my Balcárcel family, the music, the food, and the all-night dancing, I'm a visitor, not a native. My bi-lingual cousins live in the States -- kids whose parents both immigrated. Priests conduct their weddings in Spanish, and they make homemade tamales. They include me, but I stand on the other side of a border. Instead of tamales, I make a green bean casserole that appears in church cook books across the Midwest. Their homes feel foreign. My name is a valid passport, but the country isn't home.

I used to be comfortable staying on my side of that border. With an Anglo mother, I grew up able to pass for white. Further, people rewarded my whiteness. My perfect English, my punctuality, and my way of telling a story directly rather than taking a long, winding ramp marked me as Americanized. Perfectly assimilated. In school and on the job, this works beautifully. I blend into the dominant culture like a top-level spy. Except I'm a double-agent. I truly am white in most ways. When my parents first tried to teach me Spanish, I wouldn't speak it. Embarrassed by the too-colorful dresses and the trumpety mariachi music, I ran from my heritage. When I wanted to rediscover it, I found it difficult. Balcárcel is a slim link to a world that I, for the most part, lost.

A few years ago, I learned something else about my name. The byline that goes with this essay shows my first name as Rebecca, but it was supposed to be "Rebeca." My parents wanted the Spanish spelling. My father laughs at English's use of doubled letters. "Two c's?" he asks. "Why not three?" My middle name, too, is misspelled on my birth certificate. Lee should read "Li." Again, the English version won out. According to family legend, this is an family friend's unintentional doing. Somehow the paperwork went through her hands rather than my parents'. So I'm Rebecca Lee instead of Rebeca Li.

Sometimes people ask why I don't correct my legal name. A Latino poet recently wanted to know how to spell Rebecca before autographing his book for me. When I explained the mistake, he looked over his glasses and said, "What are you going to do about that?" He's a big man, with a commanding presence; I told him to inscribe the book to "Rebeca." However, at home the name looked odd, like a pair of shoes that seem to fit in the store, but turn out to be the wrong size. I am so used to the misspelled version that it feels more appropriate. Maybe "Rebecca" *is* more

appropriate. The poet wanted me to embrace my heritage by changing my name, but my full name, as is, reflects my heritage pretty well. My English name first, my Latin name last.

My perfect name would be Rebecca Li Balcárcel, combining the two languages. Actually, this is what I thought my name *was* until I received my social security card at age sixteen. “Lee” looked awkward then and still does. It also pricks my heart because Li comes from my father's nickname, Lico, pronounced Lee-coe. With this tie to my father accidentally cut, I feel even more unmoored. I wince when I sign legal documents that require my full name. I found myself telling the Li-Lee story to the mortgage broker. She simply handed me the pen. The names should sound the same in the ear, but they don't to me. I imagine that I can hear the correct spelling when I say my full name, and that the written version is wrong. It's only one letter, a single line of ink and a dot, but it makes me my father's daughter. I might speak Spanish only in present tense, and I might never learn the love songs my grandfather wrote, but Li is my rightful middle name. Still, to change it would cost more money than I can justify, so I'm letting that layer of Anglo lie on my name for now, a dusting of bleached flour on a browned pastry.

These days I go by a few other names, such as Mom and Professor. These spare me hearing the mispronunciation of Balcárcel. In fact, I tend to be on a first-name basis with the world, asking folks to call me Rebecca as soon as I meet them. I don't want to get rid of my last name, though. As long as people can imagine a ball in the car they want to sell, I'll keep letting folks give it a try. Maybe I agree with Shakespeare; a rose would smell as sweet even if called a rosse. I can live with an extra c in my first name and the floundering over my last name. Even the Lee. I've learned to embrace the mess, the beautiful bang that resulted from my parents' collision. I'm picking up the pieces I like and making collage that suits me. When people ask my name, it leads to conversations about Guatemala, my mom's Peace Corps service, the Northern regions of Spain, and my father's immigrant story. Then I hear about their ancestors or their love of soccer. My name gives us a kick-off, and an exciting get-to-know-you game begins.

Author Notes

Rebecca Balcárcel's work has appeared in over 30 journals and magazines, including North American Review, Mothering Magazine, 5AM, Concho River Review, and South Dakota Review. Her first book of poems, Palabras in Each Fist, is due out from Pecan Grove Press in Fall 2009. Trilobite Press published Ferry Crossing, a chapbook of her poems in 2002. She took her MFA from Bennington Writing Seminars in 2002 and received their Jane Kenyon Poetry Prize. Rebecca teaches creative writing at Tarrant County College where she is an Associate Professor of English. Daughter of a Guatemalan father and Anglo mother, Rebecca often writes of her bi-cultural upbringing. She lives in Texas with her three sons, aged 14, 12, and 12 (yes, identical twins). Fun facts: Rebecca has jumped out of a plane, nursed twins, and biked 1,300 miles while pregnant.

About the Work

I first wrote “By Any Other Name” to be a light, humorous piece about my unusual name. My first draft was a short homage to all the mutations of Balcárcel I'd seen on mail and heard on the phone. However, this light version didn't address deeper issues about my name and its connection to my identity. It contained some clever lines, but skirted the topic of my bi-cultural heritage. It failed the “So what?” test.

My biggest challenge in writing the full version was to do the inner, psychological work of exploring these issues before coming back to the page. Philip Lopate says that the personal essay's plot is not the events that take place in the essay, but seeing how far the author can “drop past her psychic defenses.” It's that journey towards deeper self-knowledge that engages the reader. My first version followed the usual good writing recipe of strong verbs, use of metaphor, and a catchy voice. But it was raw dough, uncooked by the fires of honest disclosure. It did not offer a journey towards self-knowledge. To turn my dough into bread, I called friends and talked through my experiences. I asked my mother to explain again how my legal name came to be misspelled. I relived scenes from my elementary classrooms, and I tried to keep in touch with how I felt about it all. When I returned to the keyboard, I'd generated enough heat to do some baking.

As I wrote the new version, I kept a mental mirror handy. After each story or anecdote, I'd look into the mirror and ask, “What's the real issue here?” I took a lesson from Vivian Gornick who says that every personal essay conveys both a situation and a story. Situation refers to the outer goings-on in the essay – George Orwell shooting an elephant, for example. Story refers to the underlying issues that the speaker explores—the underbelly of Imperialism and Orwell's crisis of conscience. Gornick would say that my first version was all situation, just events and scenes, whereas my full version added story, the issue of bi-cultural identity. By interrogating myself, I deepened the piece and fashioned an answer to “So what?”

My experience reminds me that the lofty goal of connecting with another person through language cannot be achieved through craft alone. No matter how well one writes, one must also say something. And that something must be authentic. It must be real. Otherwise we are wasting the reader's time. If I speak beautifully about a lifetime of events, but forget to explore what they mean; if I write cleverly about every incident of my life, but fail to find the lessons learned; if I

compose lovely descriptions of the places I've lived, but forego the chance to discover their significance, then I've missed an opportunity to add to our understanding of this life. Michel de Montaigne asserts that every man has within himself the entire human condition. In writing personal essays, we must strive to speak to that condition, trusting honest self-inquiry to yield world-worthy answers.

Rebecca Balcárcel on the Web

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