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Metamorphosis

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Metamorphosis

Jacqui Griffin

She sheds her name like so many clothes
And leaves it in a pile discarded on the floor.
It holds no weight,
at least, not any more.

The name she once had was short and oblong
and made a hissing sound when it escaped her lips.
The memory of that name brings no thoughts of joy or warmth,
But leaves her shaking and cold, wishing for relief.

Her new name now is bold.
Instead of 'errs' it asks 'if' it can be done.
It dares her to stand on the edge of forever and holler,

As if to say,

“Nothing can stop me now.”

Commentary

This poem is an intensely deep personal exploration of my own history, divided into two ‘eras’. The first era, that of my maiden name, feels dominated by self-doubt and a sense of stumbling through life. Much of this is attached to my relationship with my biological father, from whom my maiden name came. I had many times considered changing my name just to rid myself of this invisible burden but never found a name that felt truly representative of ‘me’.

The act of naming—of things, people and phenomena—has immense power. The naming of a person is steeped in significance, with multiple cultures dedicating ceremonies to the act of name-giving.¹ Linguistically, names seem to have strong associations based on sibilance that some claim are near-universal (for instance, when offered two nonsense word such as ‘bouba’ and ‘kiki’ as names for a pair of objects, people from all parts of the world make the same association to a round object and a spiky object, respectively).² The emotional associations with my previous name—Siler—were only strengthened by this. The name felt slimy and slippery; it seemed to hold me back somehow.

When I met my now husband, I began a process of change that I believe is familiar to many. I did not change myself for him, but I was finally able to change myself for me and felt the freedom and safety to express my true self. This, like my maiden name before it, became tied to my ‘new name’—Griffin. Changing this seemingly small thing allowed me to shed my creepy-crawly caterpillar self-image and develop a freer, lighter self-image; this was my metamorphosis. I took the title not from literature, but from nature. Metamorphosis in insects is a long, painstaking process with minimal odds of survival.³ Those that reach the stage complete metamorphosis often find themselves more beautiful and delicate but also more able to escape the troubles that once plagued them.

Some people feel strongly tied to their birth or family names and choose to keep them. For some this is a choice fuelled by gender equality, bucking the longstanding trend of a woman’s identity being

¹ Mandy Ross, *Naming Ceremonies/Rites of Passage* (Chicago: Heinemann Library, 2003).

² Matthew Hutson, ‘The Gender of Names’, *Scientific American Mind*, 27:4, July 2016, p.14.

³ Elizabeth Preston, ‘What’s Wrong with Butterflies Raised in Captivity?’, *The New York Times*, 8 April 2020 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/science/monarch-butterflies-captive.html#:~:text=On%20average%2C%20captive%2Dborn%20monarchs,them%20less%20fit%20for%20migration>> [accessed 24 February 2022].

subsumed by her husband's. Others want to feel connected to a word that symbolises their ancestral line. Our decisions around naming, from what we call ourselves and ask others to call us to what we name our children or pets, are always deeply personal and valid.

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