How do we talk about knives: names, language and identity

Rebecca Sharp

The following guide is intended to encourage any person to write about their own name from any angle. Contents include prompts for group discussion or solo consideration, with a view to feeding into pieces of writing – poetry or reflective prose.

It derives from the work I did – as co-editor and contributor – on an anthology of new work exploring writers' own names, *How do we talk about knives (Matecznik Press 2023).* Each piece presents a unique viewpoint, while opening a shared space of cultural encounter, considering the experiences and stories that come with a name, as well as name changing and name choosing. My understanding of the anthology was also informed by a number of events where writers read their work, and thoughts and experiences around naming were shared and discussed.

This 'tool' is in three parts:

1. Background and themes (for facilitators or solo participants

2. ACTIVITY for individual or group (a) discussion and (b) writing, with prompts

3. RESOURCES

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1. **Background and themes (for facilitators)**

A few years ago, I thought yet again about changing my surname. I'd been married and divorced and at no time felt the need to change my name. Having been self-employed as a writer and artist for many years, I was used to putting myself out into the world name-first (as indeed we all do) and had been content to use what I'd been given. You never know, the literary link to William Thackeray's Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair* may have been subliminally emboldening, although by choice I never go by 'Becky'. A brief stint using my middle name for musical projects (Rebecca Joy Sharp) also gave me my website URL, which remains unchanged even after I reverted to the Joy-less moniker across all my work. There are worse things by which to be haunted.

Yet this more recent consideration of name-changing had felt different – something about middle age perhaps, a rite of passage. I'll cut to the chase: I *still* didn't change my name. It was the exploration alone that gave me what I was looking for – resulting in a poem, 'How do I talk about knives', which in turn lent its name to the anthology project published by Matecznik Press in 2023. My poem is shown at the end of this document as a resource.

My patronymic surname is *Sharp*, hence the metaphor of the knife. For my own part, I was looking at certain things I felt had been laid at my feet along with this name, whether I'd wanted them or not. And in the exact same breath, all that was excluded. Inside, I'd sensed these dualities, bifurcations and cover-ups, which I explore in my own poem, all the time

accepting that two (or more) things can be true. For these reasons, you'll see my poem is written in couplets (two-line stanzas).

The process of coordinating the anthology project allowed me time to revisit my own poem, finding that my feelings on the subject had somewhat softened and expanded. You'll see the line: 'a branch by consequence of growing, naturally splits'. In an early version of the poem that line ended there. I later removed the full-stop and extended the thought into the next line and verse: '…naturally splits / and meets again'. I was rewriting my feelings as much as the poem itself.

In the patronymic system, every branch of a family tree holds just as many gaps as facts: meaning *and* omission, stories *not* told at every turn. Names lost, branches tangling when two become one. And that's assuming the 'facts' are reliable, which in many cases they aren't. Historically, names could have been misheard or mis-recorded; Anglicised; made up on the spot in the early days of writing things down; forcibly changed in that moment by either party for a myriad of reasons. A name becomes a shape-shifting cipher to which we might feel deeply and meaningfully attached, while also hanging by a thread.

I wanted to hear from others, in particular other writers, where one's name is strongly attached to notions of voice, public and private identity. I initiated the anthology project and invited co-editors **Marcas Mac an Tuairneir** and **Samina Chaudhry** to join me. Contributions were invited from the **lived experiences of women, trans and non-binary people, writers in exile, writers with pen-names, those writing in Gaelic and Scots and others for whom English is not their first language.**

Marcas spearheaded the Gaelic contributions, while Samina stewarded contributions from writers of colour, also representing Scottish PEN's Writers in Exile Committee.

In his Preface Marcas wrote:

'In Gaeldom, there are various naming practices […] Most well-known is the system of patronymics, which has gone on to shape naming practices across Scotland. Here, the element 'Mac' denotes descendance from the person named in the second element. 'Mac' means son, ergo MacLeòid (MacLeod) – son of Leòid […] This system has parity with the Irish system where 'Ó' and 'Ua' refer to relationships between grandfathers and -sons. In Scotland the feminine 'Nic' is used in women's surnames. This is a shortened form of 'Nighean Mhic', 'daughter of the son of'.

Scottish Gaelic has a number of occupation-type surnames, such as my own Mac an Tuairneir, the son of the Turner. […] Christianity also impacts these names, seen in surnames with the elements of 'Gille', shortened to 'Ille' or 'Ill'. Here, followers of religious leaders are denoted […]. Nicknaming remains an intrinsic part of Gaelic-speaking society, particularly in the Hebrides, and these often pass between generations.

[…] Lastly, there is the tradition of the 'Gaelic Baptism', which only impacts New Speakers of the language. Here, students of the language are introduced to cognate forms of their own given names and surnames, if they exist in the language.'

Through other contributions, we wished to explore where possible, experiences of name-changing as a matter of personal safety, as well as instances where names were mis-recorded

or otherwise changed against the will of the bearer. There are contributions that address the matronymic system and traditions from a range of cultures. In her Preface Samina wrote:

'I have come across a diverse range of people and writers who have had personal experiences around naming. From our history to our identity, our names define who we are. But when choice or agency are taken from us, how do we navigate the push and pull between self-expression and what a society implicitly enforces in the guise of assimilation and integration? What remains when our names, born of love, are changed? When we cross borders and arrive in a foreign country, what are the potential harms of name-changing? When translators and writers are caught up in conflict use pseudonyms for the reasons of safety, to write or publish amidst the chaos of war, it is testament to their resilience under extreme duress.'

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2. **Activity**

Shakespeare's 'What's in a name?' is the obvious foothold here, and a fine place to start. The question comes from *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Scene II, in a speech Juliet addresses to her lover:

'Tis but thy name that is my enemy;
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
What's Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!
What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet;
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes
Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name,
And for that name which is no part of thee
Take all myself.

Questions

- Do you agree that 'a rose by any other name would smell as sweet'?
- The quote suggests that freedom can be gained by casting off a name. Do you agree?
- Would you change your name because someone else wanted you to? Have you?

Writing Time

For yourself or for a group

- Consider whether you'd like to explore your feelings about your first name, middle name/s, surname, or all.
- Perhaps **pick one of these** to begin with.

Some prompts for exploring a first name or middle name

This list is not exhaustive – participants should follow whatever themes or ideas occur to them. Otherwise, you might choose from the following:

- Does your name feel 'like you'? In what ways? What does that mean? How do you know? Or, why not? How long have you felt like that?
- Do you know the linguistic roots of your name? What does it mean? What languages does it contain? What imagery does it contain?
- Do you have a different relationship to your name now, compared to as a child or at another time in your life? ***Example***: I know someone who always hated their given name and was never offered any explanation for it within their family. Much later in life they discovered they were named after an ancestor, which in turn connected them to the Inner Hebrides. Their relationship to their name changed completely, as did their relationship to the Inner Hebrides!
- Do you have nicknames or abbreviations of your name? What are they? Who uses them? When or where are they used? How do you feel about them? ***Example***: my name (Rebecca) can be shortened in various ways. In my family I'm 'Bex'; some friends call me 'Becca'; and I never choose 'Becky' for myself. In Liverpool, a city fond of abbreviations where I lived for many years, I was simply 'Bec'.
- Is your name often mispronounced? How does this feel? Do you correct people? If so, how?
- For any other reasons, do people get your name wrong in speaking (eg. dead-naming)? How does this feel? How / do you navigate this or correct them?
- Have you changed your first name? Do you have to navigate other people's expectations when they see a different name in documentation? How does this feel?
- If you have changed your given name, have you done this informally or formally? Are you in the process of having your name changed formally? What has this process been like? How has it felt? How have family members or friends responded to your name change? How / has it affected your relationships?
- Do you go by a *version* of your given name, Anglicised or otherwise? Was this your choice, or was it given to you? How do you feel about this?
- If you were to rename yourself today, what would you choose? Why? How does that feel?

Some prompts for exploring a surname

- Is this your given surname, or have you ever changed it (from marriage/partnership, identity protection, relocation, other reasons)?
- If you have a patronymic surname, what would your matronymic surname be? (Or vice versa). How do you feel about the other name?
- Do you know other surnames that came before this one in your family tree?
- Do you know the linguistic roots of your surname? What does it mean? What languages does it contain?
- How else do you think it came about (eg. occupational surname, descriptive surname)? Do you know? Would you like to guess?
- In what ways does your surname suggest to you a sense of connection or belonging?
- In what ways does your surname suggest to you a sense of separateness or exclusion?
- If you were to rename yourself today, what would you choose? Why? How does that feel? What would you gain? What might you lose?

3. **Resources**

Poem:

How do I talk about knives

There's a line somewhere, waiting to be crossed –
or dreamt again, or mended – time will tell,

this book of breath where two things can be true.
And how do I talk about knives, now? Or lemons,

tongues; an invigorating quickness of thought?
When something also flits – sleekit, sheathed –

mine and not-mine. A sore point, a double-edge –
a branch by consequence of growing, naturally splits

and meets again. A blade to ward the cottage walls
or snick the cord that holds the horse that long since

bolted, pauses at the crossroads. And there a river slices
hot and cold; a silver rail, a shipyard at the weaver's gate,

the turn back north to try again on later waves. A glint
of half-told stories sharpens in the blood, cut ribbons

on a birthday gift. Joy flashes in a hair's breadth.
Reason teeters on an archly balanced shank.

Glances of love's paradox illuminate the night,
for how else can we talk of knives,

when everything is wrong
and everything is right.

Rebecca Sharp

Book:

How do we talk about knives: contemporary writers in Scotland on names, language and identity (Matecznik Press, 2023; edited by Samina Chaudhry, Marcas Mac an Tuairneir, Rebecca Sharp).