

Your Name is a Song

By Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow

"I'm not coming back ever again!" The girl stomped.

"Please don't stomp unless we're stepping in a drill team," Momma said.

"Was your first day of school so bad?"

The girl looked down. "No one could say my name."

"No one? Not even your teacher?" Mommy asked.

"She tried. It got stuck in her mouth."

A street musician swayed and played.

Momma closed her eyes until she swayed too.

"Tell your teacher that your name is a song."

The girl wrinkled her brows. "I can't say that! Names aren't songs!"

"Sure they are! Take the name, Olumide (O-loo-muh-DAY). Olumide is a melody, girl! And so is Kotone (KOH-tow-neh)."

The girl whispered the names. *TAP-ta-TAP* went her feet.

"Mamadou (MAW-muh-DOO) is a beat! Thandolwethu (TAHN-dol-WEH-tooh) stretches out like a love song!"

"Yes, girl! Names are songs. Sing your name. Your teacher will learn to sing it too."

The girl did a jig as they walked on.

But then, her feet slowed.

"Umami (OOM-mee)," she called to her momma. "During snack, some girls pretended to choke on my name."

At the red light, a car boomed hip-hop beside them. The bass pounded from their heads to their toes - even in their chests. *Pat! Pat! Pat!* Momma patted her chest. "Tell those girls some names must be said from here, not the throat."

"Names come from your heart?" the girl asked.

"Say the name Ha (HA) from there. You got to go deeper to say Ahlam (AH-Hlam)."

As they crossed, the girl touched her chest.

"Juana (HWAH-nah) is here. Ngozi (INN-GO-zee) goes deeper - it pokes me in the stomach!"

"Yes, girl! From your heart, say your name. Those girls will learn to use their hearts too."

The girl bopped to the beat as they walked on.

"In art, one boy's eyes got all wide when I said my name! Is my name scary?"

Wires sparked above a streetcar, and Momma and the girl jumped back, startled. Momma put a calming hand on the girl's shoulder.

"Tell that boy some names have fire."

"You can put fire in a name?"

"Kwaku (KWAY-koo) storms in on a Wednesday, and fire dances in Sagnika (sag-NEE-kah)!" Momma said.

"Names are that strong?" the girl asked.

"Xiomara (see-oh-MARR-ah) fights a battle in your mouth. Tongues bow to say Bilqis (bil-cKee-SS). Ju-long (JOO-longk) lunges like a dragon and OUdom (oo-DOM)... Oudom is..."

"Magnificent!" The girl's lips trembled.

"Yes, girl! Just like you!"

On her toes, the girl rose and kicked as they walked on.

"What about the kids at recess who said my name sounds made up?"

Momma pointed up. "Tell them that made-up names come from there."

"From the sky?" the girl asked.

"Made-up names come from dreamers. Their real names were stolen long ago so they dream up new ones. They make a way out of no way, make names out of no names - pull them from the sky!"

The girl reached up to pull names too. "Ta'jae (TAH-jay)... and Trayvon (trah-VAHN)... they sit on clouds with Jalonte (juh-LAHN-tay)!"

Momma nodded. "And Laquan (LAA-KWAHN) and Lamika (luh-MEE-kuh) are the twinkle in stars, the glimmer in minds that think and tinker."

"Are these names new songs?" the girl asked.

"Yes, girl! Tell everybody to learn new songs too!"

The girl twirled and leapt to the sky and they walked on.

The next day, the girl didn't want to go to school, but she had songs to teach.

"Line up!" Ms. Anderson (Mizzz AN-der-son) hollered.

The girl looked to the sky. She saw dreams and fire there.

Ms. Anderson hollered names:

"Benjamin (BEN-juh-men)!"

TAP-ta-tap went the girl's feet.

"Here!"

"Siobhan (shih-VAHN)!" *ta-TAP*

"Here!"

"Olivia (o-LIV-ee-uh)!" *ta-TAP-ta-tap*

"Here!"

The girl stopped tapping.

Her name was getting stuck in Ms. Anderson's mouth again.

The girl sang.

The whole class stared.

"What are you doing?" Ms. Anderson asked.

"I'm singing my name so you'll learn it."

"Names are not songs," Ms. Anderson huffed.

"Mizzz ANNN-der-sonnn," sang the girl.

Ms. Anderson frowned.

"Your name is a pretty song," said the girl.

Ms. Anderson's frown slowly turned into a smile.

"Why... thank you."

"What about me?" Bob (BAWB) asked. "What's my song?"

The girl belted out, "BAW-AW-AW-AWBB!"

Other kids asked for songs too. She sang and sang their names.

Ms. Anderson asked, "Could we hear your song again?"

The girl sang her name.

The teacher sang it back. One kid sang it. Then another. And another. Everyone sang her name: "KO-rah DJAAAA-lee-MOOOO-so!"

It was music to her ears.