

“My Name”

by Sandra Cisneros

excerpted from The House on Mango Street

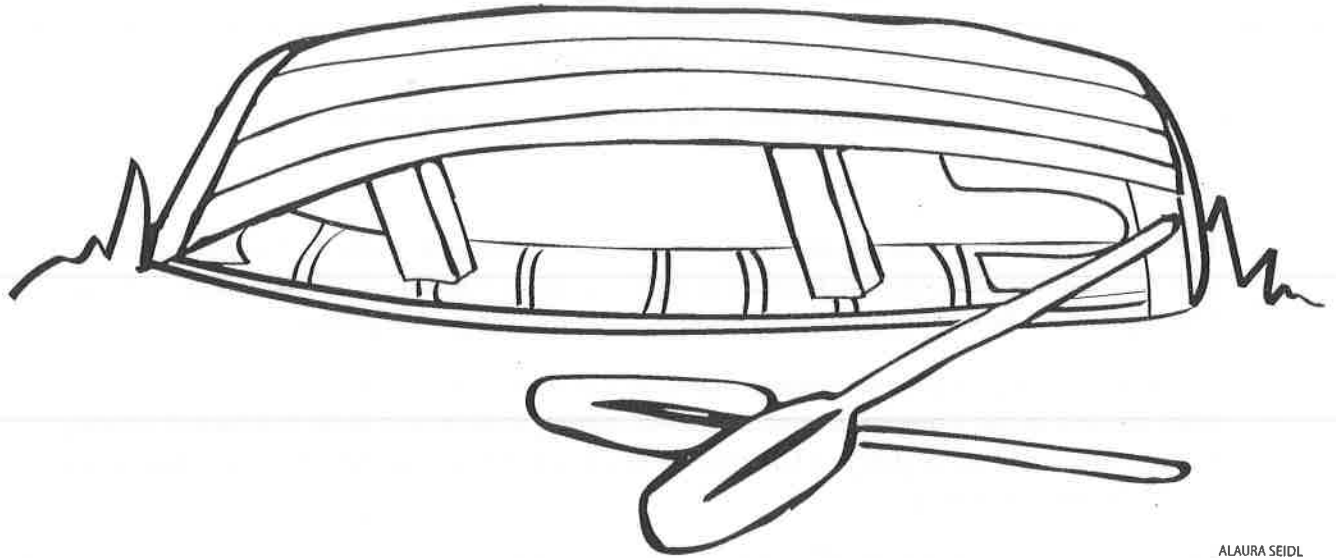
In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting. It is like the number nine. A muddy color. It is the Mexican records my father plays on Sunday mornings when he is shaving, songs like sobbing.

It was my great-grandmother's name and now it is mine. She was a horse woman too, born like me in the Chinese year of the horse--which is supposed to be bad luck if you're born female-but I think this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong.

My great-grandmother. I would've liked to have known her, a wild, horse of a woman, so wild she wouldn't marry. Until my great-grandfather threw a sack over her head and carried her off. Just like that, as if she were a fancy chandelier. That's the way he did it.

And the story goes she never forgave him. She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow. I wonder if she made the best with what she got or was she sorry because she couldn't be all the things she wanted to be. Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window.

At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth. But in Spanish my name is made out of a softer something, like silver, not quite as thick as sister's name Magdalena--which is uglier than mine. Magdalena who at least- -can come home and become Nenny. But I am always Esperanza. would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X. Yes. Something like Zeze the X will do.



ALaura Seidl

Linda Mae

by Linda Christensen

My name sounds like a country-western singer
wrangling cows and cowboy hearts
out on the range.

Linda Mae is my intimate name,
the name my family calls me when we're laughing,
when there's blackberry pie on the table,
and we spent the day swimming
at Grizzly Creek or Swimmer's Delight.

My name is full of pinochle on summer nights,
lit by stars and firelight.

My name sounds like the jukebox
at the Vista Del Mar
where Dad poured Jack Daniels
for fishermen
while Mom served clam burgers
and chicken fried steak.

Linda Mae is the lonely child
I became when my father died,
the Linda
who crawled beneath the overturned skiff
in the backyard,
and lit candles in the dark curve
of death.

Linda Mae is the name
Bill calls me when we're happy,
when we hike Tamanawas Falls
or watch salmon leap,
silver acrobats
climbing the white water
of the narrow Klickitat canyons.

Linda Mae sounds like home.

A Hand-Me-Down Name

by Mary Blalock

Mary
Mary was a hand-me-down
from Grandma.
I was
the "Little Mary"
on holiday packages.
Merry Christmas.
Mary, mother of God,
who is a strong woman
in a male-dominated religion.
Me,
a lone girl,
in a world of testosterone.
Because of her,
it means sorrow and grief—
I am very sad about this.
"How does your garden grow?" they often ask.
With colorful fruit like the pictures
I attempt to paint,
and beautiful flowers like the poems
I try to write.
They had
three little kids in a row,
and the middle one's me.
Mary, Mary, not always contrary.

My Name Means Something

by Sekou Crawford

I have a very unusual name. Not as unusual as I used to think, because just last year I came face to face with another Sekou. He didn't look much like me, and we probably had very little in common, but when I stood in front of him and shook his hand, I felt we had some kind of secret bond. I could tell he felt the same way.

One day I asked my mom about my name, "How did you come to name me Sekou?"

"Well," she said, "I used to work with convicts, tutoring them, and one day as I walked across the prison courtyard, I heard someone yell, 'Hey, Sekou!' I thought to myself, 'Wow. What a great name.' And I remembered it."

I didn't know how I felt being named after some inmate, but I've always been thankful for having it. I couldn't imagine hearing my name and wondering if they were talking to me or the other guy with the same name. I wouldn't like walking into a little gift shop and seeing my name carved onto a key chain. I've heard that somewhere in Northern Africa my name is quite common.

My name has a special meaning. Sekou Shaka, my first and middle name, together mean learned "warrior". That's the way I'd like to see myself: Fighting the battle of life with the weapon of knowledge.

Bakari Chavanu's Story

by Bakari Chavanu

I changed my name to Bakari Chavanu six years ago and my mom still won't pronounce it. The mail she sends me is still addressed to Johnnie McCowan. I was named after my father. When I brought up the subject with her of changing my name, she said my father would turn over in his grave, and "Besides," she said, "how could you be my son if you changed your name?"

I knew she was responding emotionally to what I decided to do. I knew and respected also that she was, of course, the giver of my life and my first identity, but how do I make her understand the larger picture? That the lives of people are more than their families and their birth names, that my identity was taken from me, from her, from my father, from my sister, from countless generations of my people enslaved for the benefit of others? How do I make her understand what it means for a kidnapped people to reclaim their identity? How do I help her understand the need for people of African descent to reclaim themselves?

