I-M-A-N-I

by the 2017 Baton Rouge slam team at Brave New Voices

Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gen02x89dMI>

All of the following is true:

we really love Spongebob,

our favorite color is purple,

we can’t stand reality TV shows,

hands down, *High School Musical* is iconic,

we were born and raised in Baton Rouge,

my mom’s name is Carolyn,

she graduated from Southern University,

we attended Baton Rouge High,

my last name has eight letters,

my middle name has two capital letters and an apostrophe,

my first name is one of the seven principles in Kwanzaa.

Oh! My name’s Imani, I-M-A-N-I.

I grew up learning how to answer to everything *but* my name.

People play *Pin the Name on Imani*, a party game

where they stick me with every wrong name they can think of

and I answer with a closed mouth.

Once, a boy said I had a beautiful smile, right after he called me

by someone else’s name.

After years of friendship my friends finally asked me

how to pronounce my name.

Once, I let a teacher call me Imarri for an entire year

because correcting her was a rerun of a show

I didn’t want to watch.

I was marked absent because I wouldn’t answer

to the lazy remix the teacher made up.

Always hitting me with:

“Please correct me if I don’t say your name right!”

“Okay, so I’m going to try my best to say this correctly, but, uh,

*A*-mani?

*Ar*-mani?

I-MAN-i?

Imarion?

Iw-mani?

Imarri?

Pop culture forced me to learn

long-letter, multisyllabic, overly-complicated names:

Matthew McConaughey, Shia LaBeouf,

Jake Gyllenhaal, Arnold Schwarzenegger.

But they could never learn my five letters.

I wanted to change my name to something easier to swallow.

But what’s more bite-sized than five letters?

Any more bite-sized and my name would be reduced to crumbs.

In Swahili my name means “faith,” but sometimes I lose faith in it.

In Scrabble, my name is worth seven points.

People challenge my name’s value,

attempt to invalidate the beauty behind it

because it can’t be found on the list of approved Scrabble words.

What I mean is, it can’t be found on the tip of America’s tongue.

Four years before he passed, my dad named me an easy melody

in time with my heartbeat. He must have considered this

the best music to ever exist. I don’t think he realized

this would be the first and last song he would write me.

When my momma stumbled onto the name Imani

she just couldn’t let go of it. After 25 years of trying to have a child

she started to give up. But I continued to knock on her soul

and make her regain faith in me.

This poem is for people like us who want their names to be said

with all the beauty that their parents intended.

Is there anyone in here who has never found their name on a keychain?

Has anyone ever stumbled over your name?

Have you ever been jealous because there are 25,000

Tylers, Rebeccas, Jordans?

Has anyone ever called your name “ghetto”?

Have you ever encountered a person who thought your name

wasn’t spelled right, or didn’t sound right?

Because this is your roll call,

to the Tyreses, Sha’kayas, Sorayas, Ombushis, Ogapos,

Chancellors, Jzaquelyns with a Y and a Z,

[…]

There may be some times that your name is a gift

that you wish you could return.

But for every difficult name,

there’s a person worth knowing behind it.