

A DAY TO LISTEN - REBECCA THOMAS

My name is Rebecca Thomas. I live in Halifax, Nova Scotia. I am Mi'kmaq of Mi'kmaq Nation and I am the daughter of a residential school survivor. I wrote this poem because the discovery of these children are being used to mark a moment in history, and it's stripping away the fact that these were little kids, little kids that got excited over butterflies, little kids that had a favorite doll or a favorite pair of shoes and had friends, had birthdays and all of that got stripped away to just mark a moment in time. And so I really wanted to focus in and turn this historical marker back into children again.

This poem is called "What are their Names?" A little boy drags his feet on the sidewalk. He's got braids and he's walking a dog with a spot. He looks like he's completing a chore that I'm certain is a total bore. He would rather be playing video games when a friend calls his name. There's a little girl riding her bike, followed by a younger sibling on a trike. The littlest one looks ready for a fight. Watch by Gran, who keeps them in sight. The breeze blows through their curly manes with helmets, bejeweled with their names. On her first day of school, she wears her best shoes. She clings to her mother's hand like glue. The school bell rings and her best friends sing. She's nervous and excited all the same.

On the edge of her desk is a sign where she writes down her name. He falls on the playground and scrapes his knee. He's scared because it starts to bleed. He's scooped up in loving arms, ones designed to save him from harm. His father comforts him. You're okay, he proclaims. He holds his boy tight as he calls his name. My friend's belly grows so big. Inside is a tiny little gift worth every morning of sick. Snacking all day is the doctors prescribed trick. While her favorite song plays, she and her husband fuss over names. They don't have any choice. Their parents urge. They want to avoid the knock of red serge. They stitch maps in their clothes so they can find their way home. It's in your language, they say. Just remember your names. She's silent when spoken to. She's confused what to do. She opens her mouth to speak, when a nun slaps her cheek, she holds her face in pain. All she was doing was saying her name.

His words feel clumsy in his mouth. It's been months since he's gone down south for an education, though he doubts he's home for the holidays. But he doesn't sound the same. His parents call him over, but he's forgotten his name. There's whispering in the halls and diaries are snatched, office doors are locked and windows are latched for assurance. All the ledgers are burned, but the church is unconcerned. After all, every Indian is the same. Parents couldn't even give them good Christian names. They wrote down a lie. Said the kids were to blame. Too weak, their lungs were inflamed.

They buried them cold and unmarked mass graves, didn't even have the decency to write down their names. I sit here alone with nothing to say. A writer gone, wordless on a mourning day, powerless and angry. We know who's to blame. And yet the law protects the killer's names. I call my father just trying to check in as survivor's memories are what's haunting him. I offer kind words to try and comfort, attempting to put in the smallest of efforts. So deep in his age and his pain, he couldn't even

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remember my name. Collectively, the nation decrees this is a mass act of savagery. We'll lower flags and don orange shirts, but never move to return the earth. A Catholic apology abstains. And yet no one has bothered to ask, "What are their names?"