



2020 Detroit Youth Performance Troupe

The pandemic of 2020 has been full of unexpected surprises.

I had no idea what to expect when I was asked to coach this incredible group of poets solely from a digital platform. I'm an artist that thrives in communal spaces. How would it be possible to create brilliant work without being face-to-face? How could we *feel* each other when we could never *be* in the same space together?

Magic and Intention.

Symone, Tianna, Katja and Jae'lah came to our first meeting as acquaintances. Today, their bond as artists and friends has all of the ingredients for a lifelong sisterhood. I find myself suspended in gratefulness and disbelief that I played any part in their development. I am ever humbled that these women have so easily made an impact on my life and take up so much residency in my heart.

In the spirit of InsideOut Literary Arts, these young women have created bravely in some of the most unpredictable and difficult circumstances. There were times when we couldn't wait to get to the screen to see each other. There were other moments when one more digital login was going to be our undoing. There was Jae'lah sending us often into fits of laughter and Katja sowing the seeds of kindness and unmatched consideration. There was Symone outshining the darkest moments with her bubbly spice and Tianna – a newly vulnerable woman – reminding us often how much she loved and valued us.

There was a phoenix – one who needed her own reminders of how mythical she was. A coach in awe that these seasoned hands could still hold the spark of magic. Hands that once trembled unconfidently, were now showing these brilliant women how to build worlds with words. What's more beautiful, is that they taught me fresh new magic as well.

This chapbook is a labor of intense love. Love and creativity that lives beyond being in physical spaces together. Love that's strong enough to crumble the invisible walls of this pandemic.

Love that is close enough to touch – even though we're waiting with masked faces for the day we can hug each other in real life.

I hope Symone, Tianna, Katja and Jae'lah touch your soul with their work.

La Shaun phoenix Moore
Coach. Mentor. Fangirl.
Quarantine 2020



Close Enough To Touch: Musings From Quarantine
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InsideOut Literary Arts teaches young people to **“think broadly, create bravely and share their voices with the wider world.”**

Citywide Poets is a writing community that meets weekly at various sites across the city of Detroit, and offers a number of open mic and slam opportunities. The Detroit Youth Performance Troupe are the official youth community ambassadors for InsideOut Literary Arts.

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Symone Jones

Symone Jones is an Inkster-based poet. Her work is typically inspired by current events and personal life experiences.

Symone began writing in high school when she was 14. She competed in the Louder Than a Bomb Festival with her high school team before joining InsideOut Literary Arts' Citywide Poets program.

Through InsideOut Literary Arts, she's had the honor of being a part of the 2020 Detroit Youth Performance Troupe where she's been featured in a number of individual and team performances.

In her free time, Symone likes to try her hand at other artforms – namely painting and learning new instruments.

The Water

Since October 2019
I've been afraid to drink from my tap
because at least 13% of Inkster is infected with lead.

The city passes out complimentary water filters
like face masks in a pandemic
to account for the lack of tests.

They know the filters are ineffective when used too often –
nothing ever really stays clean without the upkeep.

The upkeep is just as expensive as the things we already can't have.

Officials say “take them just in case you need them”
though they never actually get around to checking
the quality of everyone else's water.

We go broke buying
bottles of water.
We break like cactuses
wondering how long we'll be pricked with worry about
an essential necessity.

I can't even begin to imagine how Flint feels.

Clean water was never a problem when I lived in the rich white suburbs.
We never worried about drinking water the color of our skin.

It's August 2020.
Flint has been afraid to drink from their taps
since April 2014.
There are Flints all over this country.
Inequity loves the hood.

This can't be a coincidence.

I get it.

I guess.

Why remove the poison when you can just pump it into black bodies?

Kill two birds with one stone.

Get us out of your neighborhoods,
out of your minds,

out of the world.

We know y'all don't care.
Racism is only now being declared
a public health crisis in Michigan.
Our voices have been drowned out for decades.

It's a good thing
we're resilient, though.
We know the power of filtering out madness

of purifying ourselves

like water.

On Blending In

In groups,
say NOTHING.

Let the words bubble up in your stomach.
Leave them there.

It doesn't matter if you open your mouth.
They won't hear you.

Better to let them disintegrate.
Better to nod your head quietly.

Disagreements don't make friends.

Black Enough

If Instagram has taught me anything about black bodies
and black music and black art
it is that black is synonymous with beautiful

beautiful looks a lot like full lips
and luxurious hair and thick hips

beautiful sounds a lot like soul
and gospel music on Saturdays and 90s R&B

beautiful is good. black is beautiful.
black
is
good

but my black

my black
is questionable

It is one that's three shades too light
to successfully claim melanin status
too sick thin to be bootylicious,
too relaxed for the mane everyone loves

my black is
"what are you mixed with?"
and
"are you sure?"

Nothing
I'm positive

This light skin
still carries a beautiful black woman inside of it.

Lisp

When the time comes for introductions,
I say it slowly.

Symone Jones.

Try not to focus on the
S's being dragged up my throat,
knocking teeth out as they come up
wrong.

A sober slur,
an introduction in itself.
A conversation starter of misplaced tongues and "can you say this?"

Friends turn to my fifth grade speech teacher,
Say "your tongue should go here"
"How are you making that sound?"
"Look in the mirror, now try."

As if I can't hear my own mistakes
without watching them laugh back at me.

Trophy

In the eighth grade,
my first boyfriend shoved his tongue in my mouth
10 seconds after I told him not to –
laughed about it with his boys.

Said
if I didn't want it,
I shouldn't have kissed him.
So, I stopped kissing him.

Prude became my nickname until I hit high school.
Ironically, when I got there,
I became guys favorite thing to stare at.
Something shiny,
distracting –
like glitter to a child or
a trophy to an NFL player.

Something to rub on, grab for good luck.
Something to kiss on
and throw in the air for the world to see.

You call this trophy your baby
because you worked so hard for it
and somehow
forget about it a week later.

Put me on your shelf forgotten
dusty
until someone comes along and caresses me again.
The winner is always pining for another one.

No one ever asks how the trophy feels.
Exposed,
stiff under all those aggressive fingers.
The prints never leave my body.
I am dirty.

I can still feel his hands grasping at my base.
His lips kissing my rim,
gripping my handles until they bend.

I am not a trophy
for you to engrave with your name
and leave in your bedroom proudly on your shelf
until you want to undress my dust again.

For you to scratch and scuff
with every well intentioned peck
and bite and cradle and clutch.

Gripping anything hard enough will eventually crack it.
What good is a cracked trophy?
What good is one that doesn't shine anymore?

How do I show myself off when you've stolen all I have to show?



Tianna Jones

Tianna Yvonne Jones is a young woman who grew up in Redford, Michigan. She is a fiction writer, activist, and spoken word artist.

Tianna's work takes on an introspective feel of the world around her – as she finds inspiration in the grays of being human and experiencing that darkness. Tianna started writing at the young age of 10 years old and hasn't put her pen down since.

Her work has been published in the InsideOut Literary Arts Louder Than A Bomb: Essential Words 2020 Anthology: Dispatches From Home.

Tianna is also a proud member of the 2020 Detroit Youth Performance Troupe.

My Dad Taught Me How To Be Human

My dad taught me how to ride a bike
and to be tough and soft at the same time.

He showed me the right way to peel an onion.
Taught me how to use my fists.
Smile and cry.

Break apart and give to others more than myself.

My dad taught me how to breathe underwater.
He taught me how to raise my palms to the sky and be loud –
For holding me.

I think we are human now.

18 Means Nothing For Us

I am not a full woman yet
not whole or half

until I work a job so hard it builds calluses on my palms.

Not whole until a man breaks my heart
and in the validity of heartache
comes "*womanhood*"
Comes the "*strong black woman*"
comes a call from the back of my throat –
a song that I instinctively know to sing.

Not whole or half yet
until I know what it's like
to bleed, and bear, and lose.
Because the act of childbirth and losing
is just the beginning of this hazing ritual.

Until my grandmothers stop clicking their tongues at me
Here, girl.

Here.

Until I am allowed to bake a pie for the cookout
maybe even the potato salad if my hips spread wide enough
if I am *womanly* enough.

Until I be *humble*
and stop telling my family's business in these poems
maybe I'll actually be invited to the cookout.

Sit at the grown up table and talk about grown folk business.

I am not woman

until I split.

Of Joy

How to find joy in the middle of a pandemic and write about it?

I don't.

I'm a poet, not a magician.

I can't conjure pretty words you want to hear
and make them sound happy together.

I don't know why people keep asking this of me.
Even now, we are expected to smile
and say fake positive words.
Crack open my skull and spill out a rainbow.

Gloss over your selfish prompt
and be a more cheery, empty version of myself.

I don't know how we'll get through this.
I am going through it just like you.
Talking about overcoming when we haven't even come out yet.

When things are shitty,
why are we encouraged to NOT talk
about how shitty they are?
Can we just feel what life is actually like first?

But, you think that this is what poets do.

I don't.

I'm not a poetry machine,
something you can poke when you feel sad.

You can't pimp my creativity.

I don't write about things I cannot give.

as·phyx·i·a·tion

Outside there is a rattling of buzzes
and the commotion of flapping wings.
The beetles, the moths, the butterflies and the bees.

I dreamt of a black sea.
I crushed a white moth under my knee.
Then screamed *hallelujah*.
I think that is what privilege feels like.
A stinging on the brain, maybe freedom.

I don't think saying a name is enough.
Enough to stop the buzzing, the chants
of a thousand black bugs or the blood.

I don't want to lose my hands
or my life to a force of moths.
The moths put on their white hoods
burn our neighborhoods down.
Years later, they rip through our throats,
knees on our necks, dressed in blue
they call us thugs.
A soft word for nigger.

Saying a name is not enough.

Cargo

Almost 18.

My palms are still soft.
My wisdom teeth half in.
My feet have stopped growing already.

My fingers swift along the spines of boys that have hugged me wrong.

Lost more hair in these years than I've had boyfriends
And all the blood I've lost,
accidental or on purpose.

My grandmother says
She can still smell it on me –
The freshness of youth.

I don't know why people desire this so much.
Skin pulled tightly around bone and muscle.
Shiny eyes and smooth legs.

This seems like a play or dollhouse
No one grows old or dies.

I think it's the dying –
not a wrinkle
or crow's feet.

The decaying of skin
and pain in your joints.

Reminding us of all the places we've been –
but, couldn't remember the name.
Crawling through a dark tunnel
and then you are here

Again.

A small squishy baby with new skin.



Katja's Rowan

Katja Rowan is a Detroit-based performer, artist, and writer. Her work explores queer narratives, nature, and the surreal, tiny displacements of reality.

Her pieces are published in The Apprentice Writer, elementia magazine, Get Loud Movement's chapbook "Despite It All, We Breathe Out," "Dispatches from Home" from InsideOut Literary Arts, and the 2018 and 2019 Citywide Poets anthologies "riot jazz" and "eye to eye," among others. She is a member of the 2020 Detroit Youth Performance Troupe, and through that has performed for End Prejudice, Teens in the D, and Next World Collective.

She is currently a member of the InsideOut Literary Arts Youth Advisory Board (a select group of teens who are paid to organize events and publish poetry for the organization). She was a youth assistant at the 2019 Louder Than A Bomb youth poetry festival, and contributed virtual workshops for the 2020 festival. She has performed at Murals in the Market, the art gallery Public Pool, the MOCAD, and other locations around Detroit.

In her future existence, she wants to work in environmental activism, film, dance, and creative writing.

Quarantine Stars

I am taking out the trash.

sky the opaque of a black grill cover
stars behind my eyes sparkle-glass
holes in the grill cover or
holes in my lungs or
the stars move and i watch
i a parasitic human.

Unexpected clear skies
Beijing NYC Venice

i a parasitic human
plastic bag of vegetable peelings
in my hand i watch
the stars behind my eyes and
wonder if i am crazy.

Satellites visible between
Vega North Star Orion

i wonder if i am crazy
watch satellites circle above me
tiny glittering bugs
among the stars i have never seen so
clearly
humans have tried so hard
tried to colonize even this unreachable
sky

i watch the earth shrug off its mantle of humanity
and hope i will stay.

Fingerbones

sea glass as
the backbone bits of
waves
coral as bones clinking
at the shoreline
I collect in the stoop of
an old woman in the
hopes of building a new
back.

hold me up like a porch
before it sinks into sand
dry me in sun
so that I crumble at
touch.

my current method is far too messy.

I build a body of coral
held by static electricity
I evaporate like dust
unhindered by veins or breasts
or the curve of the sand
old age chips away at
dust fingerbones

hold me up like a house
like a kite string
like a fossil
like a paper crane pale as loss
dry me in sun
so that I become crumbled sand
and swallow,
porches,
my teeth pale as a shell
finally having found
my spine.

letter to the women i have wanted to kiss

ripped tank tops and dyed hair
words rusty from disuse
shaking fingers and beautiful hands
soft lips and sharp tongue
laughter like the difference between
the smallest children and
the hardest swearwords
whispered around smoke

feet blistered and bloody
voice harsh as shoe heels on a rough floor
voice in my ear
words used easy as breath
collarbones two gates to the
terror of a body
eyelids purple and red and
glimmer like teeth in the
stage-lights

eyes too big in a face
dream and ground two paths
in the in between
catchphrases and fish
and sad singing in a bathtub
mind and body two choices
in the in between
desperation and starlight
blood and water

it is all blood and water
words and no words
voices and questions that
I can barely hear over
the hum
of the heart
in a cloud
someplace in the next city.

mother and earth

bent backs
grasses bent in a tweak of fingers
bent my fingers bent my bones
my toes in
earth sweating dew
digging a way out

sweetness
sucking on a single clover

sweat for me
my back wet and bent
bones buried snap like twigs
my bones tomorrow buried
my bones decay
and feed
clovers
children

the wheel rolls on through this earth

my skeleton straight
as a blade
of grass
snapped by fingers
like children at play.

the world will go down
and feed on me
and I will not see it.

but only my fingers
a snapped clover
and its sweet ends.

The Old Lady And The Sea

in another life
crab crouch on the beach
I try to drink the ocean.
flatten shame sadness rage
between my clashing teeth.

breakneck pulse broken-watch of my stomach and heart
continues. my body spits
unwanted words onto the sand
like crab-foam.

I am distant scuttling on your awareness
the sun paints me bright red
shards of light line my broken knees
and only the ants taste me.

I contain all of your bitterness.
I the old hag on the beach
the old crab

i drink
the pollution
and refuse to swallow.

words scuttle helpless on the sand
until the sun bleaches their bones clean.



Jae'lah Glenn

Jae'lah Glenn is a Detroit based poet, activist, and songwriter who has been creating art for the past 4 years.

She's in the 12th grade and currently attends Tri-County Education Center. She writes poems about growing up in Detroit as a black girl, her family and how they have contributed to her life, and also about the injustices black women face in America. She uses her poetry to help herself and others cope.

She spends her leisure time either napping or hanging out with her loved ones. You can find her work in many InsideOut Literary Arts anthologies.

Black Utopia

A walk in the park.

A simple stroll to the gas station.

A bunch of black everywhere.

So many other examples of freedom –
of experience.

We've come so far
and didn't have to lose anybody to show it.

The news will be sunny every morning.
We don't expect salt water rain clouds.

We can dress up our other issues
all pretty and perfect.
No more caskets have to fly.
Our arms can rest.
So can our parents'.

Look at how bold my mouth is now
to anybody who questions my blackness!

My arms are free from my window.

No more bullet hole competitions.
We only do backflips around this house.
My brothers stay alive around this house.
Ain't nobody gotta cry around this house.

You see how all the clouds are pushed aside?

My goodness it's such a beautiful place we live in!

Atatiana Jefferson Speaks While She Waits In Line To Go Somewhere

I haven't heard any poems about me yet.
I wonder what's taking so long
I know how y'all writers like to do –
Pick up a pen and can't seem to write
about your own trauma.

I'm still waiting in line.
 It's like a club around here.
Somebody's gotta check to see if you really dead or not.

They're checking IDs like I wasn't killed in my home.
 I wear my name on the lease.
 My nephew is still there with my death in his eyes

I haven't seen Sandra.
I wonder if she's in line too?
'Cause they got me all the way in the back
like my death wasn't shit.

I mean, I ain't even got no poems in my name.

So, maybe I'm not dead.
Maybe I'm just waiting in line
with the other black bodies.
 Like god doesn't know what to do with us.

I can feel another black body
behind me with their headphones in
hands up,
bullet wounds,
noose hanging around their neck.

There's another...
and another.

Who would've wanted our blood on their hands?

You would think this was heaven
the way all these bodies have died
in the hands of something white.

The more I talk,
the more I can feel my body moving.
It sounds like sirens

Like death knocking at my front door.

Disappearing Act

All the black girls are disappearing.
You would've thought we were never here
in the first place.

The way the mouths don't never open for us – obscene.
But, the tweets seem to get around quickly
as I see that women who mirror my skin
are no longer home

How do you walk home and not come back?
 Every woman knows what home is.
Hell, we built home.
Why can't we make it past the block?
Make it past the window seal?
Make it through the front door?

I say my name
and I disappear
right beside a dead black woman
with a life thinner than a strand of hair

Don't my life mean more
than a red light gone wrong?
Than a walk home?

Isn't my life worth more than mace?
or keys tucked like bladed nails
between my fingers?

I fall in between the lights
and watch how I can no longer see myself.
 I can no longer see myself.

My voice is somewhere passing time.
This poem is doing nothing but wasting time.
Time is slipping between my fingers.

I can no longer see them.

I can no longer see *them*.

They must have fallen inside the light.
 You know how the sun is...
Always soaking up our skin.
We're not safe under the sun anymore.

The most brilliant light won't shine brighter to find us.

Faygo

I took a sip of Faygo and swallowed in peace.
I took a sip of Faygo and forgot I was in a foreign land.
I took a sip of Faygo and missed home –
 Felt home for the first time in four months.

I took a sip of Faygo and forgot how the pandemic
 will make me spend my birthday in solitude.

A trip to the corner store tuned my life up in one sip.

My Detroit vibe and my Detroit drink
running through me.

Audacity of Hope

Nobody black is dying

That is it.

That's the poem.

Gratitude

The 2020 Detroit Youth Performance Troupe would like to thank Suma Rosen, Michelle Bolofer, Justin Rogers and the entire InsideOut Literary Arts staff, writers and donors for making this year's troupe a reality. We also extend our deepest gratitude for all of the guest writers that touched our lives and our digital workshops during this quarantine season.

We are bravely holding the line for every youth artist who comes after us as we forge ever forward.