





Exhaling Our World
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InsideOut Literary Arts “inspires and equips young people to think critically, create bravely and share their voices with the world.”

Citywide Poets, InsideOut's award-winning after school program, is a writing community that meets weekly at various sites across the City of Detroit, and offers a number of open mic and performance opportunities. The InsideOut Youth Performance Troupe members are the official youth community ambassadors for InsideOut Literary Arts.

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This has been one of the hardest years of my life, in every aspect. As an artist, these are the times when art can either flow forth or become stagnant. The 2024 Youth Performance Troupe has been a life source that has continually allowed me to replenish my creativity and pour out instead of hold in.

Every week we come together to laugh, live, write—and exhale. This group is the breath of air we need after we exhale this world that tries to choke us. It's the light we inhale after we let go of the dark. The YPT has been the highlight and saving grace and beacon of hope that today's world threatens to overshadow. I am proud. I am grateful. I am humbled and in awe and in love—by, of, and with these youth poets who bring their best selves every time we get together.

The other thing these youth continue to do is embrace and then master every form I put before them. From golden shovels to prose to haiku. In tribute to the work they've created so beautifully, it's my honor to make sure they all know that they ARE poetry:

aniya

we keep things hidden
until the exact moment
the light is revealed.

faith

strength and conviction
are the currency we pay
to ignite passion.

jessica

to be a vessel
for the past and the future . . .
we remain the gift.

jordyn

keen, piercing, sharpened.
slicing and spreading, loving—
we need and are sage.

coaches

we will hold the line.
the most scaturient part:
we keep on learning

ypt

we exhale the world.
we cleanse and let go before
we breath in the sun.

Lovingly,

Alana Gracey
YPT Coach and Grateful Artist

A week ago, I stood in line for over an hour to vote. I was filled with hope and excitement. I was waiting with bated and expectant breath. Today, I am exhaling the complexities of my country...of my world. I believe that unshakeable hope still resides inside of me. I also feel strongly like the wind has been knocked out of my sails in a way I hadn't imagined. My brilliant and beautiful babies have passionately breathed optimism back into my bones and remind me often that *we gone be alright*. It is the only logical (if not simultaneously whimsical) response to what I believe are darker and more challenging days ahead.

I am exhaling my world.

The 2024 InsideOut Youth Performance Troupe are leading this charge. While I deeply love every troupe I've had the privilege to coach, I have admittedly grown as a professional artist because of this current troupe. Aniya, Faith, Jessica and Jordyn have a no-nonsense approach to their craft. It is truly an *all or nothing, go hard or go home*, and *our words have power* intentionality that takes up residency in my heart unlike any other performance troupe or slam team I've ever coached in this program. It is a quiet badge of honor to know that my art, my coaching, my *life* has touched these brilliant young artists in a tangible way. It is beautiful and scary and humbling to have that power. Moreover, I am moved year over year by the way these young poets inspire and teach me. It's an even exchange. I am not the Yoda in the room. I am an eager and active student as much as I am an educator and coach. Like every troupe before them, these babies have enriched my art, helped me to age backwards with their youthfulness, and have given me a hope for a positive future.

This ever so thin sliver of hope, the breathtakingly beautiful writing of my brilliant babies, and love – the only TRUE currency – are holding me as I embrace a very changing world ahead.

Exhaling Our World is written with fierce bravery and authenticity. It speaks hard truths. It peels back the layers of vulnerability, spills them fragrantly like oranges. There are head nods, and tears, and laughter tucked behind each one of these gorgeous pages. Breathe in the sun. Breathe, friend.

Then EXHALE and fight for the magic in these words.

La Shaun phoenix Moore
Coach. Mentor. Fangirl.
New World, 2024

Listen.

The foundational tenet of collaborative story-making is agreeing to listen. We are tasked with being fully present in the process and building stories on the breath of agreement. We build ensemble on the trust that as we listen we will also be heard, our contributions validated. Our collaborators illuminate paths we might not see, much less take. Storyteller and audience become one as we witness disparate moments coalesce into cohesive narratives.

Hidden, Faithful, Jordyn and Jessica took this agreement and soared. I challenged them to listen and they were like, “What else you got?” Without missing a beat, they did the amazing work of seamlessly creating the path as they walked it. They practice the grace of supporting one another and we are rewarded with their beautiful insights. They created a space where risk taking was embraced and the messy, nonlinear act of making art was enthusiastically accepted. They joyfully, patiently refine inevitable dissonant chords into their unique four-part harmony. Their powerful individual voices combine to create extraordinary stories. Together, they create narrative solutions that are at once intelligent and authentically human. They are brave, my friends. They are brave and they lift one another up.

Listen, let’s crash out then follow them to a brave, new land.

Rico Bruce Wade

Coach, Mentor, Proud Poppa Bear, & Friend

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Aniya Davis

Aniya Davis is a member of the 2024 InsideOut Literary Arts Youth Performance Troupe. She has been writing since 2021 and loves to learn new ways to express herself through writing. Starting out in an afterschool program at Jalen Rose Leadership Academy, Aniya learned to share her gifts with the world through spoken word poetry. In May 2024, Aniya competed in a slam competition and won the opportunity to join the Youth Performance Troupe. Since that moment, Aniya has been to many new places sharing the stories of her identity, past traumas, personal growth, and self-acceptance. She's explored new literary forms and is currently exploring different ways to heal.

Writing poetry is a significant and important form of expression for Aniya. She hopes to continue penning words that bring voice to her experiences and that speak truth to power for others.

The Self-Portrait of a Fawn

After-poem of "Self-Portrait as Out-Fighter" by Camille Rankine

I am a fawn.

Small and fragile,

Gentle to touch,

Forgiving,

Easy to manipulate.

With my

Gazing brown eyes,

I stare

Into bright headlights.

The warmth of it feels

So familiar,

Yet so far off.

In the frigid night,

I feel nothing

But hands reaching

For wobbling legs

That have yet to properly stand.

I begin to blossom

Like a white daisy,

But my growth is stunted

By the spread of an infection.

My innocent mind,

Smeared by buckled hands

and ragged nails.

Bears and coyotes feast upon

My bare skin and bones

In the quiet, small forest

I thought I felt safe in,
Taking away what I could never have.
I kept my hooves clean for you.
I sewed my mouth shut,
I yearned for that “love”.
Now I look at those headlights
And let them come closer.
Just to get Further
And further
Away From the sight
Of the marks
your teeth punctured into my skin.

My Honest Poem

My name is Aniya. It's the name my mother gave me.
A combination of my family's initials,
Whose traits I display.
I'm learning to be myself, although I don't know exactly who I am.
I know some things that I like, at least.

I like the color green,
I still want a nose piercing
I plan to be a millionaire someday.
Maybe that's too big of a dream.

I have a tendency to be too optimistic.
I speak too loudly and way too much.
Oversharing every thought I have on paper,
My pen is the only one who listens.

I over complicate things and overwork myself.
(Even now, I feel like this poem isn't good enough.)

But everything can't be all bad.
Right?
I like my personality.
My eyes, my voice.
I like watching myself grow.

I'm like an orchid,
Specific and stubborn.
But once cared for properly,
It blooms in abundance.

Just like the orchid, I'm persistent.
Opening my petals to bloom,
Finding ways to better myself,
Taking on the world around me.

Run away, Love

Run away, Love.

Love is about many things.

Each meaning is different from the other, but still similar in some way.

Love can take any form. From letters and caring words to decorative rooms and bouquets of roses.

Love fits in no category,

Love knows no boundaries.

If someone were to ask me what love is, I'd say that love is running away. Not like running from home or traveling to some place new. It's always more than that.

Love is running away from old habits, old friends, family, old lovers. Exploring the world you've created for yourself, rebuilding broken things.

Love is running away from doubt, fear, and past circumstances.

Love is doing things you never thought you'd be able to do like being a light through darkness, guiding you to open doors.

Love is accepting that everyone will not love you and learning to love yourself instead.

Love is about many things. Whatever shape it may take, the love will always be.

Trophy *after the visual artist Meleko Mokgosi*

I sit in a room full of trophies.
Every shelf is stocked with gold and silver.
From smallest to largest, each one shines
A little brighter than me, I think.

I do all these things for my family and my education,
Yet I'm still never recognized.
People always seem to drown
In the glisten of gold behind me.

*My wish has always been
To go back in time and be held by my Mother
Like she did when I was young,
So I don't have to stay hidden*

In the shadow of imperfection.
Maybe if I took this picture in another room
I'd finally be seen by people.
Or if I did what my parents asked
Maybe they could see me too.

Summer of 1999

A Golden Shovel after Gwendolyn Brooks

My friends and I, we
Stick to the burning pavement, real-
-izing that everything in life repeats itself, burning in an endless fire, though we have to stay cool.
The hot summer breeze isn't making it any better. We
Keep digging deeper into our thoughts. We left
Our happiness behind us a long time ago. School
Never taught us this subject, we
Try to distract ourselves with memories of our lives, but the thought keeps lurk-
-ing around in our minds though we try not to bring it up. Late-
-ly, things have been feeling way too off. We
Feel the rain hit our freshly straightened hair. Lightning strikes
Down on the world. It flashes straight
Into our hearts, piercing our souls open. We
Run inside laughing like nothing's wrong. Sing-
-ing all those rainy-day songs, hoping for it to leave. Deciding to sin,

We go in the fridge and look around. We
Take beer and thin
Every bottle, craving more and taking the gin
We were never allowed to drink. We
Slow the music down and instead we play some jazz.
We start to unwind and clean up our mess. Maybe June
Wasn't the right month for us. We
Notice our once pure souls are gradually starting to die.
Slowly but surely, whatever we've been running from will catch up soon.

Hidden Speaks of Rivers

after Langston Hughes

I once heard about rivers.
The rivers that Mother Earth created for us to thrive in,
The source of our existence rests in each body of her glistening waters.

I've known their beauty.
I learned about their history and felt the love they give
Yet, I still don't know
What could be beyond the river's surface.

I always wondered if others value these waters as much as I do.

Walking beside the water,
Feeling the gentle touch of the breeze,
Slow currents flow through my body.
I listen closely
To the whispers of the wind tell stories
That no one else can hear.
Even though it doesn't last forever, I'm grateful.

The water teaches me its beauty,
With its rippling currents and rock-covered outline
Giving me peace of mind.

The calmness of the settled waves
Rinse the day away,
Allowing me to go on and on
Like the rivers that flow along the shore.



Faith Coats

Faith Coats is a Black 17-year-old poet based in Detroit. She is a member of the 2024 InsideOut Literary Arts Youth Performance Troupe, a musician, a sister, a friend, and an artist. She goes by two poet names, which are Faithful for her more soft-spoken works and F.M.C for her harder hitting pieces. Her work centers around discussing the issues that young teens and adults face when discovering themselves. Faith opens up about the burnout that youth struggle with and the family issues that heavily influence their lives. She has discovered herself through this expression of art and hopes anyone who reads her work will do the same.

The Flower Blade Killer by FMC

Again,

Tell me to open like a flower.

And I will open like a switchblade.

Ready to cut with rigid metallic flavor

up		down
your	and	your
lips		spine

You won't hold me this time.

Tonight, a flower will not wither in a dark alleyway.

Instead, a switchblade will gleam with pristine precision.

Not waiting

Not even a syllable will slip from the zipper

Because you'll already be on cement and concrete

Choking on thorned petals and bloody stems

Whispering for an end.

Just like a once beautiful flower did.

So, are you ready to be painted in roses?

You don't get time to think

Do you hear the quickening paced steps

You don't get time to run

Do you hear the rapid climax of a heart boiling over

It's coming

Are you ready for a woman once flower

Now rebirthed murder weapon

To make decay, right where the sun never shines?

Are you afraid?

I am not.

The killer is never afraid.

Atlanta (Voicemail)

Your call has been forwarded to an automatic voice message system. He is not available. In a respectful tone to hide your anger, please record your message. When you are finished recording, you may never return his calls again or you may get therapy, which you probably need.

Beep-----

You want it so badly, don't you? News Flash: There's more to this than plastering gifts to make up for your lack of love. Love is not bought with materialistic things. And love doesn't grow as you age. You need to plant a seed for that. Then you have to give it physical touch, meaningful conversations, and consistency. But right now, I'm okay without your nutrients. While you were doing whatever you do, I was taking my sweet 17 years to bloom like a sunflower. A sunflower that looks awfully like a nightshade to you. Now, I will finally sprout my petal wings and take flight into anywhere. I won't wait any longer. Now...it is your turn to bloom.

Beep-----

The Trilogy of Complex Oranges

Complex Oranges by Faithful

Our arms and knees lock.
We curl around each other forming a disfigured shape of maybe a heart,
But it's closest to an orange.
And
Why do you always eat oranges in our bed?
Its tanginess fills up the empty emotion of space in our room.
And the peels become crunchy chips,
when we're being distracted by *Living Single*
Even though we feel ambivalent.

I coil more under you

Your peels are still there,
It's like they shed every time my mouth opens and closes
On words,
Sheets,
Lips,
We have an illiterate love.
I keep you here in my arms.
I cover your eyes with my words.
Talk about how I'm sorry that my body constantly folds and crisscrosses over yours.
You continue to peel,

You ever wonder why I love?
It fills me with embarrassment up my thighs.
There are so many oranges.
I loved to call you the nerd you were.
Fun Facts followed your form through a door of me.
And I just let you pass through every time with your magnificent fun facts.
You made me love.
And sick.

And oh my gosh can you please stop peeling.

I remember when you unlocked your knees from mine.
You told me that you were death happy
How a walk in a park of nothingness could grip, pinch, and tug you into purgatory (pur ga tory)
It fit you.
Even though joy never caressed your face.
My head touches my knees now.

You stopped peeling.

I still play the reruns of *Living Single*,
Because you can never make something just like it again.
Nostalgic, but dramatic.
Just like how I thought you were, when you weren't.
You warned me from the beginning,

That I shouldn't give in to my selfishness.

I pitched the deceased orange peels that once loved on
a juicy fruit of sweetness that you picked at.

It was us.

The straight, neat white sheets of my bed have a pile of oranges on top of it .

With an encasing of unpreventable heartbreak on its outer core.

My spine still remembers its place when I shape myself into a desperate C around them.

Looking for the other half of my disfigured shape of maybe a heart,

But it's closer to an orange.

I'm so sorry.

I fucking love you.

I wish I had understood your complex oranges.

Complex Oranges: You are not a bad child.

By: F.M.C

Here let me handle this.

Maybe it was too complex.

Words are hard to understand.

But I still choose to use my tongue with a beautiful whimsical pen.

But all you see is fuck I mean duck.

I wrote a masterpiece of time and effort.

You don't hear me.

You don't feel me.

So much immaturity.

Should I ask what my poem was about

Or if I'm "school appropriate" enough?

My words show my passion and love for poetry.

So when I say duck it is not whether I get those two days, it's whether I made tears come to your eyes.

If I wrapped you in a pool of your emotions.

I'm sorry that you don't have the capacity to understand my complexity.

But I continue to peel off the layers of those feelings and

I hope that you'll understand soon enough.

And to my poem complex oranges...

I still fucking love you.

A letter to my poem titled Complex Oranges: The Talent Show.

By: F.M.C

A neglectful mother to a child.

The last note at the bottom of my notes app.

I haven't revisited you for almost a year now.

You are not one of those poems that I forgot.

We still have family ties,

But those ties are now drenched in so much hurt to the point where I can't read you anywhere.

The people who have heard you, when I took you out that box, only remember you for one thing:

The "Fuck" poem.

I only remember you for one thing too:
“Words hurt too.”

You will stay in that corner of the room away from the “good” poems,

Because since I can’t punish anyone else, it will be you.
Everyone loved “Purple”.
Everyone loved “It’s time for dinner”.
No one even looks at you.
Even the thought of you...
I don’t remember a single line from you except “I fucking love you” which is ironic, because my love for you is lost.
It’s funny because it’s not your fault.
I mean when is it truly the child’s fault?
I failed to protect you.
I knew your worth and I still summoned you onto my tongue for them to see.
They rejected you before they could even hear you, before that dreadful line.
I took your side for a while.
Even dabbled in a few poems about you.
Forgot you.

I have new poems now.
Everyone loves them.
They don’t cause any suspensions.
Not only worth two days of reflecting.
Not “you better teach this poem to follow the rules,” as if you can learn how to be appropriate.
How can I teach something to be rebirthed?
Or how to be taken out of this world for just having a “bad” word?
I know this hurts, but I’ll never love you again like the days I spent writing and rewriting you to my standard of perfection.
But that’s just how it is now, and I’m sorry that I can’t read you anymore.
Maybe someone else will love you.

Best wishes,
The Mother of a Scapegoat.

Morning Come

The early birds croak at her spirit
and she awakens from her slumber.
I couldn't count the years it took for her to fly into her womanhood from her spirit alone.
It was clear she spent her life gathering time to unlock her prosperity.

I know she feels me, but she doesn't speak to me.
Instead, she shows me her wings while I follow her into the city streets.
I wonder if she feels the need to remember me,
as I stalk her 43-year-old silhouette.
It is clear her outline is so different from my blueprint.

I realize that she is a hawk with no fear in her hips and thighs.
No care for thoughts of her living life.
She doesn't turn corners,
she just struts forward,
She knows I'm there locked in her shadow.

Her shadow...
so vast and spread eagle
like a cloak for an uprising villain or superhero.
Whatever gets her through the days
of hard walking and standing.

Every strut she takes.
A click and clank of heel
not shrouding a sound
because she still desires to be known.
She still desires to be seen.

So when wind brushes her scars,
she gives thanks for it,
because there's no need to fear what's already behind us or
what has already given up to break us.
The past won't do it again,

because she may be sweet as a peach,
but she won't take bruises from the past again.
I see her tall and mighty.
I see her steel-boned and open water ready.
Ready to go headfirst into anything.

And most of all
I see her pen, paper, and poetry.
Till sunup and sunset
she breaths it in like a fresh morning
and swallows it with her spirit.

Her soul...
less than pure but never devil,
so powerful and strong hold.

I find myself tripping on it as soon as she stops in her tracks.
She windows me like a glass mirror.

When she finally gazes upon the past of her,
I realize that I've never felt so small in my girl body before.
Right here, in front of me, is a woman.
The scariest thing I have ever encountered in my life.
Her silence...Her smile... the movement of her hand across the air,

is telling me that I am now a woman
and that it's okay to fear what I am not ready for.

It's time to take flight, little black berry bird.

your morning is coming.

That is what I am telling myself.

Faith Speaks of Rivers

And she doesn't know why.

It only carried her sorrowed memories in scaling waves to crash back into her rocks.

Pushing them back onto her,

Telling her:

Maybe instead of polluting us with your nightly talks,

you could possibly speak to us in future mornings.

Then you can see life spring from its confinements.

You can see life get out of bed.

Get dressed.

And walk out and see a river and say,

Thank you.



Jessica Lee

Jessica Lee (she/her) also known under MissJexiLee and 李洁茜 is a multimedia artist based in Detroit and a member of the 2024 InsideOut Youth Performance Troupe. She is a Chinese American painter, musician, muralist, writer, lover, and most of all Detroiter. Her work centers around the Asian American experience and explores how femininity contrasts and effects that experience as a first-generation immigrant. She was born in Shanghai, China and moved to Detroit when she was six years old. She writes for those who came before her and those who will come after her, and pays respect to her history through her words on the page. Jessica is the co-founder of Detroit Film and Art Collective and is a participant within studios and programs at numerous institutions including the University of Michigan- Stamps School of Arts and College of Creative Studies.

Catch Jessica at gigs for her band, poetry slams, hidden in her dark room, hands covered in clay, losing a pick in her guitar, or with her eye behind a camera.

Self-Portrait with Chink Eyes

Pipe down, don't mope around.
Dope hung and left to spoil.
Slum lords run and slung;
Opium, dens and railroad.
No place for the hopeless.
Give up your joy-ridden.
Better yet, your first-born girl.
She will be barren.
She will hold the pain and anguish,
of 200 Japanese soldiers.
You will expel her from your home,
from your hearts.
She would have a daughter,
who will hold it in her womb.
She would escape through the same rail,
That carries her only child to his doom.
His reappings were sent home, after the fare of his fix.
The same hit his grandfather sought half a century earlier.
His extremities were blown off,
in the name of the Transcontinental.
Not so happy, go lucky now huh?
Seventy-five years ago, December of '37.
Rape of Nan Jing.
We fell to the nation of the rising sun.
No reparations or acknowledgement to this dawn.
Traces sit in my mind and soul.
Oh, dear motherland.
Let me sing the song of the stark.
To break down our great walls and rise again.

Celebration's Over

after Lucille Clifton

won't you clean up for me?
you ain't never seen a record so pristine
celebrate me with your decadent lies
with gluttony in hand you never fail to amuse them --
me? i eat right out of your indulgent hand
what have i become?

i think i've done enough of preaching to the choir
have too much soul to put into my sermon
shaped into a sweet little lamb made out of plastic and Styrofoam
into the great unknown, baby girl

a world so cruel wasn't made for your porcelain skin
kind of shattered that even kintsugi can't make shine
of earth and bone, you were crafted out of light
life is what you're here for, but what do you live for?

i bleed red, yet i appear blue, and end up all purple
had you seen my flesh, you'd take a bite too
no one sweeter, peel away my skin to suck my sap,
model my carcass in your display case
born hungry, i was vying out of the womb for subsistence

in hearth and in home, call out to me
Psalms 137 left in rubble and debris; looted of the empire and stripped of our gold, among the fallen ruins of
Babylon.

both of our empires have crumbled under this system
they call me yellow-faced like i've been smearing paint on since birth but i remain complacent with being
nonwhite
and never have i ever done that but take a look at old hollywood then make your judgment, now listen,
woman, i have never pretended to be something i'm not

what have you done but made a mockery of my people?
did you see christ when you pillaged our homes?
i only remember seeing crates of opium poppies
see, you wanted our abundance that you couldn't have
to break our great walls down
be your ploy in an international game of chess
except you underestimate the mother and her will for revenge
this resentment flows through bloodlines down to myself
i feel it coursing through my very being

made within fryer burns and carry out and laundromats
even though we became second-class citizens to you in the name of it
we know the name of the game hold us down to lift you up

here they know nothing of our capabilities
on routine of cheap labor with a side of exploitation

this is because they know our potential
bridge the gap between us as humans make us seem like animals to justify your crimes

between us we know your secrets and you make assumptions, we are not the same
there are 12 moons in the lunar year and i'm growing tired of the starshine
and put me in the aim of the moon for we will bathe in its beams

for us people were crafted out of clay
my limbs forged through terracotta
one stone upon another we build
hand in hand we fight
latching onto sacred traditions passed over in flight
as the night comes over me and wraps me tight
my heartstrings pull at every pluck
we will recover with each other

i reach out my hand

come see where i prosper

celebrate with me over what i once mourned over
with every night hawker and street vendor

let me show you generations that reside within me
that they tried to erase again and again

to hold me down and leave me rotten, yet
everyday i thrive for abundance, knowing
something has tried to take me, bones and all

has tried to eliminate me off the face of this earth
tried to recognize before it's too late

to let china sleep, for when she wakes she will shake this world
and i'll tell you that she's out for the kill

me? i'm just the messenger
and she's the one you should be scared of

you tried to rob all one has
and there's no doubt that you've failed

My Honest Poem

inspired by Rudy Francisco

I was born on August 24th; that makes me a Virgo.
I know the deep depths of what that means (unlike Rudy).
I'm 5 foot and 3 inches on the dot.
I have my grandmother's teeth. I bite my nails until it hurts.
And if you stick around long enough to realize,
I have a tendency to gnaw away at the surface level.

I'm learning to not go bankrupt on love.
I often give too much where I care less,
and I give too little when I should care more.
I was born floating in a tub and have been drowning in my own amniotic fluid.

Freefall was never an option for me.

To be honest, I've always been drawn to heights.
Some people think it's because I'm running from something.
From the current that's waiting to swallow me whole from beneath.
They're right, I don't think I'll ever be able to stop running.

I have always been a dreamer, the youngest sibling out of 4.
My fantasizations run endless like the fields I prance through.
It's easier living in make-believe than facing cold, crushing reality.
So I make worlds for myself to bury my hopes in.
It sounds crazy but it's always been easier,
if anything, a preemptive measure to make sure my heart suffers no open wounds.
It's hard enough when it's scabbed twice over.
These places I go, they tell me I'll never stay.
I'm not scared of what's coming after me, but rather what will eventually catch up to me.

I'm Unsung and Overrun.

Last week, I toppled over endless tasks, I landed face down to stare my ego dead in its face.
It couldn't bear to get up, much like me.
Running this race makes you realize the facade that can hide in a friendly face.
I've never run a marathon, but they should give me national recognition for the conditions I've endured.
I deserve something after running through hail all these years.

I know I sound absurd,
But whenever I get a moment alone, I release my grip on reality.

If they knew the places I've been, the mountains I've climbed in search of worth, the bridges I've crossed in hopes of meeting will to strive farther.
I've dived into the Mariana Trench, and the fish at the bottom tell me to find air again. Visit Alexandria and they'll tell you tales of my lost sacraments stored away.
If only they knew of my ventures, strip me of my gold and leave me weary for scurvy.

My real name is 李洁茜.
You wouldn't know that from being my friend, or coworker, or teacher.

I don't use it as much as I should.

I have plant induced comas.

I have a gold stuffed grin.

My hobbies include putting myself in situations I'll never outrun,
painting myself blue so I understand melancholy, and
convincing myself that I have something worth fighting for.

I know less and less each day

but I know that she lives on in me.

I know she broadcasts my life on a 24/7 streaming channel.

It reminds her she isn't leaving anytime soon.

Illustrate

look at the larger picture

and take a minute to

capture your anger

parallel your views

and take a look within

Who told **you** that I must be that?
the thing you're so convinced that I must be

Did your **ego** let you know? Or did your **soul** have a feeling?

that this is just who i am

this world captures me whole in one exposure

then compartmentalizes me into fitting characteristics

so i make sense and belong in a category

that fits in your frontal cortex

your brains a *booby trap* in a forest

and my hearts the **fawn** that trips that **wire**

i fall off into your cliff of conformity
but this self-focus is bogus

Who am I to say that I am the center of this ecosystem?

when i belong in your jail of species

so you can put me in a children's book and make a mockery of me?

small children can learn a lesson from one who dares to go against authority

make an example out of me like a deer in the headlights of a bright light and scare me straight

so i beg of you again look at the bigger picture
and to take a break from birdwatching

to catch a sight of the wired cage

that prevents you from looking through the birds eye view
so walk towards the sun

and bathe in its warm rays

pay homage to those who came before you
and allowed you to have a place in this space

then cheer on and let those wings carry you

because they have tried to chain you down
but you reached for the clouds and flew so far

that you never had to take flight again

blessed be
let's get free

Grew Straight Out of Blight

you want to build up?
must be willing to stand down
this place was once blight

-

we detroit proper
forfeit your homes to make way
to those who did flight

-

we the contractors
of your up & coming city
only we loved

Jessica Speaks of Rivers

after Langston Hughes

Oh, I know rivers
I've known rivers that grumble and roar to the same rumble as the human breath.

My soul has grown abundant like the rivers.

I dunked my head in Nile and rejoiced as the history flooded through me.
I became golden like the Yellow River after it birthed the beginning of my people.
I rode the Rio Grande and it dumped me in a gulf warmer than bath water.
I heard the call of the Yangtze River and begged on its toll to take me back to my hometown,
to once again meet the sea and tell it to flow through me.

I let these rivers hold me down and bring me up with the tide.
I've known more rivers than man;
basins have built civilizations.

One day I'll match those currents and the soul of the river, and we will become one.



Jordyn Mousa-Sage

Jordyn Mousa-Sage (Jj) is a queer, Lebanese-Iraqi literary artist who works in English and Arabic. Born in Beirut, Jordyn and their family are immigrants to the land we know but do not despair of cultural divides. Jj began writing poetry in their sophomore year of high school with InsideOut Literary Arts CityWide Poets program after rereading some of their mother's poetry. They later became a member of the 2024 InsideOut Youth Advisory Board and the 2024 InsideOut Youth Performance Troupe, publishing in the Michigan Reading Association's Kaleidoscope Magazine that same year! With literary liberation, Jordyn writes about the grief, glory, and gifts within the Arabian world, providing grounds for perspective, passion, and empathy. Jj plans to continue these pursuits, majoring in Comparative Literature at whatever institution they attend.

"Ideas never die..." —Ghassan Kanafani (Journalist, poet, political critic & Jj's secondary inspiration)

Dear West,

I have lost my literary liberty. The fault lines have been proportioned to be all *our* fault and that is flawed and fucked. The pages of pager deaths have been enlisted below the grievances of our Palestinian neighbors. My Uncle should not need to adopt me for my Lebanese passport to be brought up in serious conversation. Occupation should not occur, let alone become a regional invasion. But I will ignore the rules of English because it is not my first language. I speak it because you only understand verbatim metaphors that can stand at attention 5 feet in front of your face like soldiers. My essays analyze how you will forever psychologically torture yourself trying to find the unknown. We are not it.

Tell your friends, West, The East is filled with trees and soil that withheld decades of erosion. We taught you tectonic plates and fruit names and math and agriculture and architecture and love and poetry and hope and religion and built your cities and we let you stay... We are called foreign; you are called terror.

We teach our children love; you teach them to kill us.

We teach our children to beware the Western betrayal; you teach your children to betray.

We tell stories of times before the war; you tell of its glory.

We tell our neighbors to be careful at nightfall, the bombs can come at any time; you gloat about how much destruction happens in 5 minutes.

We welcome the estranged; you lie to it...

I grieve the civilian victims you killed as a *means to an end*. THERE WERE NO WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION; there was only you. I continue to write about your injustices. But I preach to the open choir that sings songs of honest land and martyrs while the rest of the birds dance on the electrical wire fire, patiently waiting their next turn. I have never met an Arabian individual fearful of death and peaceful of life.

We wait and wait and wait and wait and wait and wait and wait and wait and want and want and want

but never and never receive the love of land that loves its people – that love of their life that loves to grieve that loss and defame themselves of the constant wait and wait –

we wait for forever.

I sleep with the struggle and strangling in my own throat that forces you to lower your head in shame, but I go to sleep staring at my ceilings with the same bewildered cries as Kanafani's son. I endure the same rugged roads and fallen trees as Darwich depicted from a lover's betrayal. I dream my engine will explode and my body will bear witness to fire before I leave.

I aspire to inspire the grievances of grief.

This may be my letter to a young poet someday. For now, it is a letter to the humans that hope humanity isn't humdly floating towards the clouds next to the souls of the murdered and massacred students. Let this letter educate you, dear West, just as you took away education from the rising suns and shining stars.

Levantine derives from your occupation – French *Levant* means *rising sun*, originating from the Italian *Levante* meaning *rising sun*, originating from the Arab *Al-Mashriq* meaning *the land where the sun rises*. Even with occupation and book burnings and murder and massacre and stealing knowledge we created and lack the comprehension to understand that شامي (*Chami*) are the bilad of ballads and books. شامي is what you did not learn. You did not learn of hope, of dreams, or resistance, of صبر or أصل or شرف or مسخرة or عشق or the actual passion of Arabia.

You did not learn شامي, you only occupied it and killed the growing dreams.

If The World Collapsed

What would you do? If a star exploded and took 30 seconds instead of 30 years and you looked at me for the last 5, remembering everything that has made us who we are and everything that has led us to this moment, all our thoughts included: the ones of you, the ones of me, the ones of feelings, the ones of your eyes and your hair and your perfume and your heart and your mind, all the ones that keep me up at night; if I smiled and you stared I would not worry to kiss you any longer, I would experience the joy of you in the last 30 seconds of the world and believe in God without the hesitation of religion and see the moment the star exploded, witnessing the universe in all its glorious glory and finally know as a definite fact that God took his time with you the same way he took his time with this land, the land that is forbidden of me, of me to grow olives and oranges and breathe the sea air and show you my attention towards the passion and pomegranate but understand that I will always have more attention for you — I want to ask again the same way the West asks relative questions and ruptures their own answers but I cannot. What would you do? If the world was ending in 30 seconds rather than 30 years. Would you look at me and remember or close your eyes and forget?

Eulogy of an Occupiers' Dignity

after Lucille Clifton

Won't you follow my teachings?

Celebrate the gift I've given you

You berate me at every turn

With the blood on my hands?

Me, you, and the cemetery; bring your tears

What else can we do but dress in our finest black attire, pray, and play Quaraan for the next 40 days

I cry and cry; fight and fight; shout and shout; INTIFADA INTIFADA; THAWRA THAWRA

SH3BIYEH

Have you heard?

Shaped hedges near the headstones of the Palestinians

Into watermelons, they carved them in memory

A grove of oranges is "la e5ri mafr2, la yameenak, had dikenit abu marwan, kemil kamil woo wara

bitchooft sikt 3lit Al-Khalidi. Hoowi by3rif il taryee men hoonak

Kind-hearted and naïve

Of what should I make you a cake?

Life? It's great hamdallah, kelshi 5er

I made my mother a bouquet of rubble

Had to, it was all our family had left

No...

Model the keffiyeh in solidarity and resistance against the occupation not in fashion trends and in a *The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody* kind of way

Born to live life with passion as I hold its fruit

In a desert storm of bombs, I cannot ride my camel to

Babylon, you killed them and then buried that city in archives of lies and deceptions

Both with ignorance and after stealing our language, all three times we rewrote it

Nonwhite is criminal

And it's punishable by abandonment and betrayal

Woman, the mother that taught you the agriculture you needed to survive in our mother tongue's dirt

What more could you want than hospitality and cultural invitations?

Did you expect our people to erase you off the census and leave you barren?

I do not believe that is plausible for us.

See we don't trojan horse your refugee camps with humanitarian aid trucks.

To live an honest and happy life.

Be Arab, live Arabian

Except Palestinians, they own their recognition

Myself? I don't mind, my brothers and sisters by descent have committed only crimes of innocence

I don't need college or any scholarships

Made up my mind the second my mother told me never to abandon the oppressed

It may be the only thing she will never be buried with

Up is where our fruit grows, towards the heavens

Here is where we learn patience and love so we can become growing fruit

On this land is the hard part Habibi

This is the ultimate test of belief

Bridge us to your so-called “freedom”, you have the money and the resources, but none of the aspiration

Between your occupation and genocide, the carpet bombings, beheading our children,
forcing us to starvation, raping our women, stripping our men, leaving infants
dehydrated, ending over 142 family names, burning our books, displacing over
1 million Palestinians, *DID I MENTION YOUR OCCUPATION AND GENOCIDE*

Starshine is a gift from God
And a promise for better endings
Clay, and cement, are what we build our house of, not drywall and wood
My anger building
One second I could ruin your blood-stained
Hand by praying Allah shows you no mercy
Holding my breath, I have trained for years to flee to the ocean in hopes of finding an asylum lighthouse
with drinkable water, anything halal, and a prayer mat

Tight core, shut eyes, my temper is rising
My one hand, can tear apart your drywalled bedrooms, ceilings, and all the kitchen tiling to leave you
with nothing
Other ideas like molotoves in *Corna Beer Bottles*, drink a lime with that ya wlad lil sharamet il kano
wled 3r, tah hathkoom ya rab Allah yeitkoom min hal2

Hand; me my keys back now
Come here with no army and no arsenal so I can show you a promised land and manhood
Celebrate my grandmother's 83rd birthday so you comprehend how your illegal state is too young for
country-hood
With bags over nobody's head
Me, my cousins, my aunts, my uncles, my nieces, and nephews will make you a grand feast
That will put you to shame after we teach you to dance to the song of martyrs that are held on your
shoulders

Every day you sleep you will remember what you've done and wake in cold sweat and boiling tears
Something like this you can never be forgiven of
Has your mother called to ask when you're coming home?
Tried? You never tried, you stole. Pull up the maps and look at what you granted without right
To anticipate silence is merely senseless, did you not expect resistance when you did not respect existence
Kill our families again and again, we won't leave unless to our graves
Me, my friends, and our poisoned tongues will dance like monkeys until the land returns to its rightful
owners

And I hope you're not tired
Has no one told you that we all are; but you don't lay down, not after you put so many to involuntary
eternal rest
Failed. It's what you do. This spirit cannot be buried under the rubble or the dirt.

13 Things The West Has Forgotten: A Haiku Suite

- I. Melancholy homes
 Absent land and empty trees
 Open oceans' air
- II. Water flows eastern
 Flowers named after our love
 Grow; never foil
- III. Grief lives within us
 Sinking hope into our lives
 Keeping us alive
- IV. Bewildered cries
 Ruggedness of all our roads
 Ceilings of manhood
- V. Do you feel ashamed?
 When you hear Arabian
 or of Palestine?
- VI. A neighbor with love
 holds more contempt than any
 promised land or tongue
- VII. Trust all the olives
 Sleep in groves of our writing
 Wake to their warfare
- VIII. Subtle and silent
 Mourning during the mornings
 & once moons speak to stars
- IX. Dear Arabia,
 we are speaking your behalf
 still amongst this life
- X. We do not fear guns
 In schools or home invasions;
 We were bred in wars
- XI. Name me your terror
 Call me with fear at nightly
 Hour; death during wakes
- XII. In the name of God,
 One day our land will be ours
 Then beg for mercy

XIII. Poisoned tongue and fruit
 Bargained borders with our lives
 History still lies

Self-Portrait as Sabr¹

Around this time, I wear thin

Bring all whom you know

Contagious is what they call me
Definitely what I have come to feel like

Everyone discusses me

Figured I would start to matter but would rather
Gather children, learn from me
Hold hands and rejoice in mockery

Indulge actions that try to

Justify the pain caused but rather
Kindle urges and make them butterflies while
Laying in open fields,

Mutter mama's favorite song, and
Neglect insecurities

Occasionally, opening doors to wondrous opportunities

Prepare for heartbreak
Quander desires
Rest assured some feelings are only delusion
Study surroundings and peers
Test friends, trust is rare and so are dreams

Unleash them into the sky, they may never happen

Vividly draw *Treasure Island*
Witness all the worthless attempts
X will soon mark the spot where your homeland is liberated

You have no idea what it's like to be me

Zoom and mellow out, it will all make sense soon

¹ Patience

Jordyn Speaks of Rivers

after Langston Hughes

It's crystal and shallow
Cool and crisp
float to Syria and find us near the Red Sea
The Nile holds our bones while the Euphrates our souls
Limestone was molded together by our water and our men
We died on the land sold amongst the Europeans
Mama told me not to find myself between borders
As I learn to swim over and over again
Through rip currents and high tides
But my immigration status is the only thing that fits between the cracks
So I will only flow in the crystal, cool, crisp, and the shallow water

Gratitude



The 2024 InsideOut Youth Performance Troupe would like to thank Suma Rosen, Michelle Bolofer, Justin Rogers and the entire InsideOut Literary Arts staff, writers, sponsors, and donors for making this year's Troupe a huge success. We also extend our deepest gratitude for all of the guest writers who touched our lives, audiences who have supported our work, and our artistic community who constantly inspires us.

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