BUTLER WRITERS
SHAUN'TAE SWANSON
Butler Writers is an outreach of the Butler University English Department and MFA Creative Writing program that seeks to empower and amplify the voices of high school students in the Indianapolis community by connecting them with mentors and methods for self-expression.

Since its inception in 2011, this Jefferson Award-winning initiative has generated more than 1,800 mentee-mentor contact hours annually and served more than 1,500 unique students at our IPS partner schools.

For the first time, Manuscripts is proud to present a piece from a young poet in the Butler Writer’s after-school creative writing club. Shaun'tae Swanson is a sophomore at Shortridge High School. Her writing is influenced by what she witnesses and experiences as a female, as a teenager, as an African American, as a student, and as a human being.

To learn more about the program, please visit butlerwriters.org.
They criticize my words when I speak,  
Because I don’t enunciate every word when I speak,  
Because sometimes I speak too fast and slur my words  
And my grammar is not the best they’ve heard.  
I get too loud and ghetto,  
Clap my hands and roll my neck.  
So, ratchet to them I guess.  
But it’s expected of me the typical black girl,  
Talking like a typical black girl.  
I show typical isn’t in my vocabulary yet—  
That’s what they expect. Too big of a word?  
Nah, just too vague.  
They wonder how I can act so black even when I’m on stage.  
This ain’t no act at all:  
You can’t act an ethnicity or race.  
Or should I say this isn’t an act  
Because that’s the right way to say it  
Perceived as the white way to say it.  
But since when did right equate to white.  
The white way ain’t never been the right way.  
Quit listening to what they say:  
We may not be picking cotton but we still are enslaved to their system.  
Remove the shackles from our ankles and put them on our wrist.  
Me being black and wearing a hoodie is me taking a risk.  
They say me letting my mouth go off is the black woman thing,  
something I can’t resist.  
So is letting the gun go off a white officer thing,  
something they can’t resist?
If my hands are handcuffed, sir, tell me how could I resist?  
Me being black will get me beat blue and black.  
Ain’t that about a bit—  
Load your gun and fire in the blink of the eye. Without a flinch.  
So when I speak and degrade white people, no, I don’t flinch.  
You’ll get two for flinching:  
Two shots that is,  
Two black eyes,  
Two fractured ribs,  
A couple broken bones,  
Two busted lips.
That’s enough to make me ball two of these black fists. 
I refuse to be silenced, 
Not when I’m still oppressed. 
You can’t give me an inch of leeway and make me believe I’m free, 
Or make me believe the white mind is greater than mine. 
I’m not absentminded, 
And you won’t make me absent. 
And though my size is small, my voice is tall, And I’ve been doing big things. I won’t let you belittle me because I’m black. 
I’m brown. My skin is nourished to life through melanin. 
But somehow you summon its death due to melanin. 
What if I told you I refuse to surrender, but somehow my hands are up? 
Shoot, I have the right to remain silent, 
But that’s something I won’t do. 
Anything I say can and will be used against me in the court of law 
If we ever make it that far 
You know y’all get trigger happy 
And end up being the only one to speak on the case 
Making the real victim the suspect now that he’s in the grave, 
But y’all criticize me when I speak— 
At least I mean what I say. 
But when a white man raises his white hand, 
It doesn’t even have to be the right hand. 
The jury hears truth in whatever he says. 
So I’m in constant race because of my race. 
So my voice I raise. 
Not because I’m black, ghetto, or ratchet, 
But because I am pissed off 
That y’all don’t hear what I say 
Unless it’s worth being criticized.
I lose my voice from yelling, but I still don't stop. Is my voice a waste?
Or is it that I must yell so loud that you'll hear me
Over the voice in your head that encourages you to reach for your waist?
Over the voice in your head that tells you
You are better than me because my skin matches dirt and yours is
the color of paste?
Is it that I talk too much, too fast, and too inconsistent for you to keep pace?
Or are the actual words what you distaste?
I've never been one to care—I guess it's the blackness in me.
So criticize me if you please.
As a black woman, I've had to grow tough,
Had my heart on my rolled-up sleeves.
And despite who disagrees,
I'll never limit speech.