

# I Can't Breathe

By Makayla Rivera

"I (patrollers name), do swear, that I will as searcher for guns, swords, and other weapons among the slaves in my district, faithfully, and as privately as I can, discharge the trust reposed in me as the law directs, to the best of my power. So help me, God."- Slave Patrollers Oath, 1828.

Eager and wide-eyed, I marched through the building of my brand new school  
Fuchsia beads bounced on the ends of my braids  
Click-clacking against my backpack  
Complimenting my magenta skirt,

Gifted to me by grandma  
I thought of grandma today, and how proud she was of me for carrying on her dreams deferred

I feel the eyes of a tall man dressed in blue  
A gleaming security badge asserts his dominance His words shoot at me like fire hoses  
Drenching me with shame  
"Your outfit is giving it all away".  
I never knew my thirteen-year old body was there for the taking  
An honors student sent to the office like a delinquent  
Given a plain tee-shirt to cover up  
My vibrant, pink colors vanish under the "school appropriate", *white* fabric  
My joy of self expression made colorless

I shrink in the oversized tee  
Drowning in the cotton  
I can't breathe  
I am too small  
Suddenly the school feels all too big  
Grandma would be so disheartened to know her gift went to waste

Dress coded.

In gym class, he runs past me  
My rapist scores a goal, a smirk on his face He had won  
I am helpless  
My innocence, lost  
But the fire of rage could not be put out  
I would not be silenced  
I won't let these walls swallow me whole  
I must take back my power

I sit across from the SROs with my head held high  
But suspicious blue eyes, graze over my body Freezing me over  
Paralyzing me

Just like he did that night  
As the white office walls closed in on me, I long for the warmth of my mother's chestnut skin The questions  
begin

"Well what were you wearing?"

"Are you sure you got the right guy, he's an all star player?"

"Have you ever been suspended before?"

"Were you intoxicated?"

"Why did you wait so long to come forward?"

"Are you sure you said no?"

My head falls to my hands as a tear rolls down my cheek

I can't breathe

My fire is put out

Interrogated.

Walking through the metal detectors at school,  
Each day feels like a prison  
Whistles blown at us like dogs who need to be trained  
Criminals who have never committed a crime  
Crushed in spirit and soul by the weight of low expectations  
My story was already written for me  
How can I feel free here?

Like a caged bird who can't sing,  
I long to be heard  
To spread my wings and fly away from these gray walls  
Classrooms with no teachers  
History books that exclude my story  
SROs lurk in the hallways  
Policed at fifteen  
Trapped in the system like I'm tethered to concrete  
Being dragged down to the pipeline  
The air is thick with apathy  
I can't breathe  
Years of frustration boil within me  
Hot-headed  
I lash out with my fists  
"Assault"  
I fall into their trap.

Arrested.

## About Makayla:

*Makayla Rivera joined the Center on Gender Justice and Opportunity as a Youth Storyteller in Residence in February of 2023. Makayla is a high school junior from West Orange, New Jersey who received the New Jersey Governor's Award in Arts Education last year and was a gold medalist in the state-wide competition for the NAACP Act-So Program in the category of poetry written.*