Oakland Youth Poets Laureate

Poems by Lucy Flattery-Vickness, Azariah Cole-Shephard, and Leila Mottley

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Love Poem To My City

Lucy Flattery-Vickness

I am
In love
With you

I am in love with you in a platonic sense
Like the kind of love
I pour into breakfasts with mom

This love is a back and forth for sure
But mainly a forth
As in
I take a step
And you be watering can nuzzling at my feet
As in
I age a year
And you be ocean for holding
All my sound

I am in love with you
And it's time I tell this world why

I first fell for your hips
Reaching for the East and the West
Tempting the Bay to crawl up your shores
And then I fell for your motherhood
The way your gut is a harbor,
A cradler of breath

I fell for your crooked teeth,
Train tracks running through your smile
I fell for your palms
For the cracks in your fingers
For the bloody sunrises you held and the gentle fog you let through
For the daughters you held
And the mothers you let slip though

I fell for your roughed-up edges
Your honey thighs
Your dirty sheets
Your soft spots

I am in love with our back and forth
With the way I feel your presence running warm in these veins
The way you sit at the back of all my thoughts
The way you tangled up our roots
The way you guide my tongue around dialogue
My dear
I see in you a womanspirit
With a big curly fro and the knuckles of a boxer
I see in you Angela and Marshawn
Mac Dre and Sly Stone
I see in you an unforgettable city glow and
I love the way you eliminate the need for stars

My dear
From you I have learned the hard questions
Like
When the waves break and fall
Who catches them?
Questions like
Why does my whiteness get to remain nameless,
Yet chronic?
Where do I find the bricks needed to build this body
Into a safe space?

My dear
From you, I have learned listening to insides

You ask “how do I at once hold the gentrifiers
And the gentrified?”
I ask “how do I at once balance mental health
With success?”

You taught the art of walking fine lines
And dancing before the street lights come on
The art of losing loved ones and young ones
With grace
And the art of self
The art of hugging as a form of resistance
And the art of foundation building

My dear, your sidewalks raised me
And I cannot wait to be home
This Playground

Leila Mottley

i hold Oakland's hand
like we have known each other in all our past lives
like her wrists click for me

but some days her hand loosens its grip
so i hold tighter
'cause i am afraid if i let go

if i leave her
i will return to find

the lines in her palms have changed direction

Oakland never liked school.
she was the one in the back of the class
building her own revolution
while teachers spewed history that was never hers

Oakland knew not to take that shit
had too many scars to be called brilliant,
but the brightest cities don't need streetlights or applause
to start protests

i always thought her a god
before i understood that not everyone
kneed at her feet in praise
like i do

that gods like her be taken
have their skin brightened
their speech rearranged
kinda like jesus
and i am gripping her hand until it hurts
like i do not already know
i am losing
like i do not already know
she sees me as only a memory
as what she was
before they claimed her
worthy of the respect we always gave her

i whisper her lullabies every night,
tell her what the stars used to look like
before we were blinded by white
i say goodnight.
turn off the lights.
let go of her hand.

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Leila Mottley is sixteen and a student at Oakland
School for the Arts. She was Oakland’s 2017 Vice
Youth Poet Laureate and is a 2018 Youth Speaks Teen
Poetry Slam winner. She is founder and president of
her school’s Women of Color Club. She is a dedicated
prison abolitionist and founded a youth-led program
called Lift Every Voice, which brings together youth
from different backgrounds in art advocacy workshops
around youth incarceration. Poetry is her own personal
revolution. To speak, when in many ways she feels
silenced, is a way she protests the world around her.
She also believes poetry is a bridge for the most raw
connections, provoking uncomfortable conversations
and propelling understanding.
For the Black Men My Love Cannot Protect

Azariah Cole-Shephard

For the Black men
my love cannot protect,
you are radiant.
Your eloquence is the gun
they swear you have when they shoot you.
The speed of your tongue
is justification to stand their ground.
Your existence is the antithesis of their contentment,
for the world is not prepared for you to succeed.
You are powerful.

I rode BART today.
As I passed Fruitvale station, my heart dropped.
I thought about Oscar.
I thought about the bonding his baby girl will never experience
at the hands of the bondage that took him forever.
I thought about that gun in taser’s clothing,
synonymous with the “oops” that follows genocide.

Dear Black man, that stark white smile shines like the stars,
your lips curve like the crescent moon.
But every time I watch the night sky that is your face,
the fear grows inside.

They took Mike
and Trayvon
and Allen
and Mario
and Alton
and Alva
and Paul
and Phil
and Eric,
and [insert name here]
and I don’t wanna know
what they will do to you.
As the bullet penetrates the tissue,
I buy stock in tissue because these tears won’t stop.

Your tomorrow ain’t promised.
So today I tell you I love you.
I feel you don’t hear that enough.
Baby mama’s, MTV and even BET
screaming you are inadequate.
You are enough.
As you pour yourself out like libations for those you have loved and lost,
Black man remember you need to stand tall.

They say there is no warmth
like the warmth of a mother’s arms.
Her love, a burning passion for your survival.
But what does that warmth do
for the cold body she caresses?

She no longer wears white dresses,
them bloodstains don’t come out.
The bleach done burned her skin,
just like the system done burned us.

And they dare ask are you a respectable negro?
Are you pleasant enough to leave
only a few bumps and bruises when they beat you?
Or are you a beast?
Will you break their bones like you break racial barriers
and turn them against one another
like the stiff pages of the books you have read?

You are intelligent.
How exactly will you use the knowledge in your head
to pass the bar whose weight
we are crushing under,
as we wait for social change?

Black man,
take hold of your sisters,
for this patriarchal society means us no good.
When you make it to your 21st birthday,
please celebrate to no end,
for this is a major life event
that no other race will understand.

Remind your sisters that they should stand tall.
For we are not stepping stones toward liberation,
we be the backbone
that backs you up when nobody else got you.
Dear black man,
I continue to carve the words
“I love you” into your skin with my eyes.
I traded my besos for the bullets I would take for you,
my cries for chrome knuckles raised to the sky,
and death for deconstruction of a system that
don’t want us here.
So when you make it to the end of this year,
You better remember this letter.

For we can no longer count the number of fatalities,
and I cannot claim your body in the morgue.
My cold body may be lying right next to yours.

They killed Tanisha
and Sandra
and Rekia
and Miriam
and Shelly
and Diamond
and Darnisha.
Damnit, the list goes on
and I could be next!

Black Man,
My love.
What will it take to make them see your worth?
I am mourning
and in the morning I am scared you may not be here.
Do you hear me?
Or have you silenced me like the rest of our community do?
I mean it’s fine if you have,
The only question that remains is:
If I don’t speak up for us,
where exactly does that leave you?