

# 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

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Lucy Flattery-Vickness is the City of Oakland's 2017 Youth Poet Laureate. Flattery-Vickness first wrote in a Green Windows workshop when she was fourteen, part of a series of free workshops run for the Oakland Youth Poet Laureate program at the Oakland Public Library.

## 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  
kneeled 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.  
 Damn it, 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?

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Azariah Cole-Shephard, the 2016 Oakland Youth Poet Laureate, is what many refer to as a poet-activist. Recently she created an outline for her organization, performed nationwide, taught at multiple institutions of higher learning including various high schools and Stanford University, received a Resolution from the City of Oakland, and more. She spends her free time mentoring youth, volunteering, photography, learning from members of the Black Panther Party, and grassroots organizing. She is the founder of Melanin Elevatin Black Literacy Program and is currently working on expanding the program to meet a wider range of needs in the community.