

## **Advice to my younger self**

Malika Booker

Malika, you are going to be a writer. You are going to fill bookshelves and read books as a part of your job. Yep, that's right. That nerdy little brown skin girl freezing in the playground, filing books in the library to avoid the cold, borrowing 12 books a week from the beautiful Herne Hill library. That girl is going to be a writer. A poet.

Malika, your mother is going to hold a published book by you in her hands. She is going to turn the pages and read her life and self as a Caribbean woman in your words and feel proud. Even though she will continue to worry that maybe you will starve. But that will not happen. You are going to work in a university like your father, teaching other writers and building a community of writers. You are going to pursue your doctorate.

Remember when that fellow student asked you why you were attending a course called 'Towards a Collection'? And how every time you had to work in pairs she would grill you with that question like an annoying wasp. Remember when she said, 'You write your poetry down? I thought you performance poets made up your words on the spot?' Remember how you cried to your writing buddy,

trembling with anger and shame. But how in front of her, you kept your cool and answered calmly, while your Caribbean genes overheated and you vowed to bring in badass poems every single class. Poems that smoked the page, burned it and spoke for themselves.

You will meet her again later on in life. And she will apologise, shamefaced, with honesty about the small world she had inhabited prior to that course. And that term 'performance poet' will stop being a derogatory term used to marginalise black poets.

I'm going to tell you that the poems you wrote then are some of the best in your collection *Pepper Seed*. You will be published in a Penguin anthology with Sharon Olds. Not just any anthology. Penguin Modern Classics. You will be shortlisted with Lorna Goodison for the OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature. You will go to Cave Canem, a week-long retreat for Black poets of African descent, and work with some of the best African American Poets...and sit next to Toi Derricotte talking about poetry and writing. And she will give you worthy lifelong advice.

Yes, you will continue to agonise every time you write something new. Fretting that it will not be a poem, but you will continue. You will finish new work. And just as you stood in the playground using books to escape into language, imagery, characters and scenarios, so too will you meet people who tell you how your work does the same for them.

So, my advice to you, Malika, is to keep doing what you are doing. Keep attending those three to five writing courses on evenings and weekends in libraries and at Spread the Word. Keep attending literature events, literature festivals, Poetry School, Centerprise and Arvon. Pluck up the courage to ask Kwame Dawes to be your mentor. Apply to work at Apples and Snakes as an education coordinator. Attend all of the drama and theatre workshops you can at Battersea Arts Centre. Read, read, read poetry. Build a community of poetry friends and advocates. Begin a writing workshop for black and working-class marginalised writers in order to build community by sharing skills and forming lifelong friendships. Give graciously to Malika's Poetry Kitchen. But, most importantly, remember this is a lifelong vocation and your development hinges on all of the sacrifices it requires. Faith, persistence, belief and generosity will pay off.

### **Malika Booker**

Malika Booker is a British poet of Guyanese and Grenadian Parentage. *Breadfruit* (flippedeye, 2007) received a Poetry Society recommendation. Her collection *Pepper Seed* (Peepal Tree Press, 2013) was longlisted for the OCM Bocas prize and shortlisted for the Seamus Heaney Centre prize for first full collection (2014). Malika is published with the poets Sharon Olds and Warsan Shire in the Penguin Modern Poet Series 3: *Your Family: Your Body* (2017). She is a Fellow of both The Complete Works and Cave Canem. Malika was the Douglas Caster Cultural Fellow in Creative Writing at University of Leeds and is currently a poetry lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University.

A recording of this talk can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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