

**Michelle Obama: Like the rest of the country, I was profoundly moved as I watched you read your poem “The Hill We Climb” at last month’s Inauguration. How did you prepare yourself for a moment like that?**

Every time we meet, I secretly hope you forget me because then I get a clean slate. But you being the amazing person you are, you always remember. When I first wrote the poem, I was thinking that in the week leading up to the Inauguration I would be rehearsing every day. But everything was moving so quickly, I actually didn’t get to really sit down with the text until the night before. Most of my preparation was stepping into the emotionality of the poem, getting my body and my psyche ready for that moment. There was a lot of the night-before performing in the mirror.



**You are part of a rising generation that isn’t afraid to call out racism and injustice when you see it. Your generation was out front at the Black Lives Matter protests last summer, and you were using your voices long before that to demand change. How do you think art fits into these larger social movements? Do you think about these things as you write?**

Absolutely. Poetry and language are often at the heartbeat of movements for change. If we look to the [Black Lives Matter protests](#), you see banners that say, They buried us but they didn’t know we were seeds. That’s poetry being marshaled to speak of racial justice. If you analyse Martin Luther King’s “[I Have a Dream](#)” speech, it’s a great document of rhetoric that’s also a great document of poetry, of imagery, of song. Never underestimate [the power of art](#) as the language of the people.

**Poetry sometimes gets a bad rap—people think it’s all stuffy. How do you think we can make poetry accessible and cool, especially for a young audience?**

Poetry is already cool. Where we run into trouble is often we are looking through such a tight pinhole of what poems can be. Specifically we’re looking at dead white men. Those are the poems that are taught in school and referred to as classics. We really need to break out of the pathology that poetry is only owned by certain elites.

Where we can start is highlighting and celebrating poets who reflect humanity in all of its diverse colours and breadth.



**You’ve spoken a lot about your speech difficulty, something you share in common with the legendary poet Maya Angelou— What does it mean to you to have overcome it?**

President Biden has talked about having a stutter. [Maya Angelou](#) was mute for several years. I could not say certain sounds, like *r*, so I would be saying things like *poetwee* or *dolla*. My last name is Gorman, and I could not say that really until three years ago. For a long time, I looked at it as a weakness. Now I really look at it as a strength because going through that process, it made me a writer, for one, because I had to find a form in which I could communicate other than through my mouth, and two, when I was brave enough to try to take those words from the page onto the stage, I brought with me this understanding of the complexity of sound, pronunciation, emphasis.

**One last question: Do you have any advice for young girls, and Black girls in particular, who earn their way into the spotlight?**

My question is do they have any advice for me. I’m new to this, so I’m still learning. I would say anyone who finds themselves suddenly visible and suddenly famous, think about the big picture. Especially for girls of colour, we’re treated as lightning or gold in the pan—we’re not treated as things that are going to last. You really have to crown yourself with the belief that what I’m about and what I’m here for is way beyond this moment. I’m learning that I am not lightning that strikes once. I am the hurricane that comes every single year, and you can expect to see me again soon.