

Alora Young: An Interview by Isabel Oliver
Conducted on November 12th, 2021

Alora Young is a poet and activist from Nashville, Tennessee. As Youth Poet Laureate of the Southern United States, she is passionate about the power of using creative language to spread a message. Her non-profit AboveGround is driven by this passion, inspiring children to channel their voices through creative writing. She hopes to learn more about spoken word poetry and its effectiveness in communication in her time at Swarthmore College.

ISABEL OLIVER: Hello!

ALORA YOUNG: Hi!

OLIVER: Good morning! How are you?

YOUNG: Morning! I'm well how are you?

OLIVER: I'm very good. I just got my booster shot yesterday, my COVID booster shot. So we're feeling a little rough this morning, but we're gonna get through it. I'm really excited to be here. How are you feeling this morning? How are you? Good?

YOUNG: I'm good. Yeah.

OLIVER: Good. Love to hear it. Okay, well, before we jump in, I just want to give you a little background about why we're here today, what we're doing, I told you that I'm creating an archive. And this archive is for my class about Youth Activism here at Duke. It's an archive about poetry and Youth Activism, and youth poets and how they use poetry to do activism. I'm really excited to learn about you and all the work you've done. This interview is really about you. And we really want to create a history that is representative of the real changemakers, who are these youth activists. Because like I said, I think I mentioned this to you before, but history has excluded the narratives of youth activists, and we know that they're the ones actually doing the work. And so with this interview, the best way we can convey to these young people that Youth Activism works is by sharing the stories, the stories of youth activists. And so they're the people making that happen, and we want to share their stories. That's what we're doing here today. And I'm really excited to speak with you. So just gonna say ground rules. This is being recorded. As you can see, we're gonna transcribe it and put it in the archive. But it's your interview, you can take anything out that you want to, and if you don't want to answer a question, don't have to. So I really just want to create a comfortable space for you to talk about yourself and let us know who you are and how awesome you are. And I'm really excited to have this conversation with you. Do you have any questions for me before we get started?

YOUNG: Nope, I'm good.

OLIVER: Okay, awesome. So I'm going to start with the big, broad question of "tell me about yourself?" Tell me where you are now, just tell me who Alora is.

YOUNG: My name is Alora Young. I'm currently a freshman at Swarthmore College, and I am a poet. I have wanted to be a poet since I was like a very small child. My mom says that I first said that I wanted to be a writer when I was two years old. And ever since then, I've been writing poems and stories and songs and creating. I write hundreds of poems every year. During the pandemic, I wrote 1000 poems that year. That was a wild year. And so, writing is my everything. And it's a major part of who I am. And my goal is to share writing and spoken word with the world and use it to make the world a better place.

OLIVER: Wow, thank you for that. I mean, I can tell how passionate you are about poetry and activism already. So I want to dive deeper into that motivation of why you got into poetry. Can you take me back to—I mean, you were two years old, you weren't a sentient being—but can you take me back to when you really felt like, "this is something I want to do?" Take me to that motivation and what sparks your joy of poetry every day?

YOUNG: So the first poem that I remember writing, it's very clear in my head, it was called "Stars of sorrow, see you tomorrow." And I wrote it when I moved from New Jersey to Tennessee when I was seven years old. So it was my way of expressing to myself and my parents, my complicated emotions about moving and leaving all my friends. And from that moment, I discovered that I could use words in a way that I couldn't always express myself in normal conversations.

OLIVER: Wow, that's really powerful. Can you use Tell me about emotion: is poetry always emotional for you?

YOUNG: Poetry is how I experience the world. I think in rhymes. The thoughts in my head, my internal monologue, it has rhythm, it has rhyme, it has meter. Sometimes it's emotional, sometimes it's logical, but it is always poetic because it's a fundamental part of who I am and how I perceive the world. I don't always write poetry about my emotions, because I've come to use it as a tool to explain how I see the world and to explain the world through poetry. So a lot of times I use it for political activism, because I know that I can say complex theories and statements and ideas in a smaller amount of words in a cohesive way, because of the way my brain works. And so poetry is not just a tool for me, but it is the fundamental lens through which I view the world.

OLIVER: Wow, that's really powerful. I want to touch on that, how you use poetry through political activism later, but right now I want to focus on that relationship between yourself and poetry. Could you tell me how your identities shape your poetry because you say it's a lens through how you view the world? What do those lenses look like?

YOUNG: So as a black woman, my culture is inseparable from rhythm. I have this book that I wrote, it's called *Walking Gentry Home*, and it comes out from Penguin Random House next year, Hogarth Books is the imprint. And it chronicles my family history over 207 years, entirely in poetry. And I talk about how, as a black girl, for generations, the very nature of being a black girl has been inseparable from rhythm. It's the Negro hymns that my enslaved ancestors sang, it's the church songs that my mom sang when she was a child prodigy. It's the dances that they do in their sororities. It's a constant rhythm, a constant vibration that permeates every facet of my life as a Black woman. And I don't know what I would do without that rhythm because it's such a fundamental part of my community. And as a Black woman, I feel like it's a common thing that I share with a lot of other women of color.

OLIVER: This is so fascinating to me this idea of rhythm. I remember you mentioned that you wrote songs as well. Tell me about that.

YOUNG: I am a lyricist. So I hear the music in my head. But I don't generally have the skill set to compose. I play the piano and I play the banjo. But I'm not advanced enough to properly compose, but I'm taking some classes on it. But I've been writing songs since I was little, like the first like piece of writing that I ever majorly wrote was a song. And my exact words to my mom, were Mommy, I want to be a songwriter. I started talking when I was like seven months old. It was like really weird because I didn't walk for an entire year after that. So I could talk in full sentences, but I couldn't walk. So it was just carrying around a baby speaking in full sentences, which my mom says was kind of creepy. To me songs and poetry, feel the same. It's the lyrics. I am a lyricist. And whether that's writing poems with the same sort of rhyme and beat and flow, or songs, because I write musicals as well. So, that sort of connection, the flow between the spoken word and the song, it's sort of blurred in my mind. And I feel like the parts of song that excite me, can also be found in poetry, or at least in the style of poetry I do.

OLIVER: That's amazing. I am a big fan of music myself, so learning your perspective on that is really cool to me. You're from Nashville, right? Tennessee? Yeah, so music must be a big, obviously, it's a big thing in Nashville. Could you tell me about how your environment has shaped your poetry, your music, who you are? Because I know that you moved as well. So tell me about your environment.

YOUNG: Yes. Nashville is Music City, so I've been surrounded by music constantly since I moved there when I was eight. And the thing about me moving to Nashville is, my mom is from Tennessee, and her family has been in Tennessee for nine generations. So basically, I lived in

New Jersey just long enough for me to not be able to respond "Born and raised!" when somebody asks if I'm from Tennessee. So I am a Tennessean, and I'm a ninth generation Tennessean, and Tennessee is a very deeply musical place. My mom is a singer. Well, she's a chef now, but she was a singer. She was a child prodigy actually. She was a crazy talented musician. And she plays a bunch of instruments. And she was like the best band director in the state two years in a row in high school. She's incredibly talented, musically. And my dad and I have a shared love of musical theater. We always went to go see plays and concerts and everything. My first ever concert I saw was Bon Jovi. So it was like me 10 years old at a Bon Jovi concert having the time of my life! And it was where I belonged: a part of the music a part of the rhythm. Because music isn't just notes, it's vibrations. When you think about a song, if you touch a speaker, if you listen to your headphones, you can feel the vibrations, you can feel the music coursing through your body. And you can feel your heartbeat sync into time with the rhythm and the drums in the beat. And living in that world of rhythm is where I belong. Just a part of the music, one with those vibrations. And I never want to be anywhere else.

OLIVER: Alora, I can't tell you how interesting this is to me, you seem that you have such a spiritual connection with yourself and the world around you. And that really comes through in your work. And you were just telling me about it, how you feel it in your heart. Can you go a little deeper on that? Can you can you tell me about your spirituality and how you feel things?

YOUNG: Yes, I am religious. So actually, if you look at my wall, that's Jesus. That's Mary.

OLIVER: Hah! I love it.

YOUNG: And over here on this corner—please note the pride flags. I'm a confusing person.

OLIVER: (laughing) No, no. I'm with you, Alora.

YOUNG: Yeah. But here I have a poster that says, "With joy, you will draw water from the wells of salvation." And that is my favorite Bible quote. And I feel like, even in that quote, you can feel the sort of tempo that's that beat. It's a persistent beat throughout every facet of my life. And I feel that my religion as a Southern Baptist has that musicality. You go to church, you sing the hymns, you fall out crying on the floor because the music is too powerful. I have written gospel songs like since I was little because, to me, God is in the music. And in this verse, "With joy, you will draw water from the wells of salvation." "With joy, you will draw water from the wells of salvation." It's a lyric. It's a lyric to a song. While I'm not always the strongest component of "follow the Bible exactly as it is," I think if you look at the different parts of it, it is a song. It is an epic. It has that musicality. Because I think, once again, God is in the music.

OLIVER: Thank you for that. Yeah, that is really powerful. Especially in a world where we maybe shy away from religion, it's really inspiring to see that you can be so empowered by it.

Let me just give myself a moment to see where we want to go next. I think we've gotten a good background on you and how your motivations and your inspirations drive your work. I think I want to get into your activism. If you could take me back, like we did with your poetry, take me back to the first time you felt like an activist.

YOUNG: I am a fighter. Ever since I was young, I see injustice in the world, and my little brain— I'm autistic. I'm neurodivergent. So I couldn't comprehend why people would do things unfairly. And it filled me with so much rage, the first time that I was like, "Wait a minute, the world isn't doing things the right way." Because I just couldn't comprehend why people would be unkind, why people would do things unfairly. And I remember that I've always had that sort of fight, that do things the kind way. Because the Golden Rule, treat others how you want to be treated, I followed it staunchly. And as I grew older, I discovered this quote, and it was something like "To be a good person, you have to do good in the world." And then there was another quote, that was like, "You're never too young to make a change in the world." The only thing that's different about you as a young person is that you've been around for a shorter period of time. You are no less capable. It was a prettier quote than that. But that was the general gist. My mom says I'm a really good listener, o when I hear something that strikes a chord with me, I take it to heart. So from that point on, I made a conscious effort to do kind things, to put kindness into the world, and to fight for other people like I wish other people would fight for me because I got bullied in high school. I got bullied in middle school and high school. And I never wanted anybody else to experience the loneliness that I felt. And so I decided that I would do everything to stop it. I started my nonprofit because I remembered how I felt when all of the other kids who had gotten into "Encore", which is the Honors Program in elementary schools would get up and leave the classroom. And I'd be left with a few other people who weren't in Encore, feeling like I was stupid. And I remember coming to Tennessee and being one of the only Black people in my class and being like, "Wait, something is wrong here." Why am I different here? And I remember feeling like that and I was like, "No kid should have to feel that way." No kid should be forced to have that realization. And so I started my nonprofit to try and help kids not feel the same pain I did. Because if you're supposed to do good in the world— to be a good person, you have to do good in the world. When I see somebody who is struggling, I speak up. I don't ever want to be a bystander.

OLIVER: Thank you for being vulnerable, first of all. Thank you for those lovely sentiments about just putting kindness into the world, that was so encouraging to hear. I want to bring in poetry to everything you just said, all those experiences. Could you tell me how you use poetry in those moments, and how it was woven into those experiences of being neurodivergent, getting bullied. Obviously you talked about, it's a great avenue for you to express your emotions. And so I would really love to hear your experiences with poetry through those.

YOUNG: When I was 11 years old, I realized that I could write things that other people would relate to because I had discovered books that made me feel less alone. And I was like, "I am

going to write something that makes other people feel less alone." I wrote a sci-fi novel a while ago, it was in middle school to early high school. And my thought was, "I am going to write a book where every person, every minority feels like they're represented." It's going to be a sci-fi novel, but the only difference is that they're going to be here, everyone's going to be here. And they're just going to go on an adventure, just a normal sci-fi adventure, but all the brown kids are going to get to go. And from that moment, I realized I could use my writing, and I could use my poetry, to help people feel less alone, to include people, to fight for people. When I was feeling sad about something, I would write a poem in the hopes that somebody would read that poem, and know that they weren't alone. And when I saw something bad in the world, I would write a poem in the hopes that someone would read that poem and understand what was happening and that they could help change it. I write poems for our government, so that individual people in our government can be like, "Okay, I didn't understand this before, but this poem gave me an insight into what this feels like, and why I should care." And I want to help people see why things matter. And I do that through poetry, and it has worked really well.

OLIVER: That's awesome. Could you elaborate a little more on the difference of poetry versus prose? Because you say that it can help people understand, tell me how.

YOUNG: I am actually writing a research paper about this. I believe that spoken word poetry is going to be a vital tool in communications in the coming years because not only does it use meter, sonic devices, and all of these memory tools that help you retain information, but it says things in a high level, and it says things in such a way that you can fit so much comprehension, so much information into one line that explains a sentiment that if somebody was giving a regular speech or writing prose would take way longer to explain. It has the conciseness and the memory factors that give our brains the capacity to absorb information. Think about it, oral history: for thousands of years our stories were passed down through oral histories with poems, and rhythm and meter, and you would memorize it like a song. And then you would sing that history. And you would tell that story, as a storyteller. I feel that spoken word is going to become a fundamental tool of remembrance and of communication in our modern society. I think it can be used as a tool for teaching students with learning disabilities, I think it can replace traditional speeches in our political spheres, I think instead of a politician giving a speech, they can give a spoken word poem, and you can understand way more about their stances and about who they are as a person through a poem than you can from a regular speech, because of metaphor, because of simile, because of sonic devices, and rhythm, and all of these different components, and you're going to absorb more from it than if it was given to you in a traditional prose format. And I want to be at the forefront of that movement and of that field. That's literally going to be my major: spoken word pedagogy, the teaching of spoken word and how we can use it as a tool.

OLIVER: I agree with you on all those ideas. I think that's so exciting to hear; your passion about this is so exciting. How have you seen the impact of your poetry played out? Because I'm

sure if you don't see it, you don't believe it. So I want to hear how you've been inspired by seeing your work impact people?

YOUNG: Well, first of all the kids I worked with at my nonprofit, I saw astronomical changes in that group of kids. I had one student who went from never writing, went from hating writing, to being an outstanding young poet. I had a little girl who, at eight years old, performed for a virtual audience of 500 people with an original poem. I had a student too, I think was struggling with some sort of ADHD, like what I have, go. And I figured out that what he loved was pictures, and so we taught him photography. And through that, even though it wasn't poetry, we saw so much change in him. And he had a really incredible eye for photography. And I had this teacher in elementary school, whose thing was that every person has something special. Every person has a gift. And she worked with elementary schoolers, and she helped them figure out what theirs was and hone it. And I have been able to help people discover their gifts through poetry. And I have seen people come to understand things, I've seen people learn, I've seen people cry because I put into words an experience that they've been having that they couldn't explain. And it's like, I wrote a poem about Kurdistan. And I read it, and a girl started crying. And she told me, that is what happened to my family in Kurdistan, that is what we have been experiencing, and you put it into words. And I think the ability to put something into words, to give somebody the words, is vital. And it's also a blessing. I'm so moved by everything you just said. I really want to keep on the topic of your nonprofit. First of all, could you just tell us what it is, what you do, what's the name? So we have it in the archive. And then I also want to know why you decided to work with children. Yes, so my organization is called AboveGround. And we worked with Nashville elementary schools, specifically Aiken Elementary School, in order to teach children a combination of Black History and creative writing in the hopes that it would increase their self esteem and increase their love of school and learning. And we had incredible results. We worked with a group of five kids. And then I also ran my program in my high school, during school, after school hours, and we saw so much improvement and such a love for the arts develop and all the kids we worked with. And I'm planning to start up a branch in Philadelphia. Because the thing about it is, you realize that you are different than the people around you at a very young age. I've actually written about it, how, at seven or eight, you develop the ability to understand the "in" group and the "out" group. And so I wanted to work with children because I wanted to get to them before the world did.

OLIVER: Wow, that's really powerful. I'm from outside of Philadelphia, and I live pretty close to Swarthmore, so that's really cool for me to hear. I'm so excited about that. Let me see where I want to take us next because this is just so cool to me that you had this inspiration to start this nonprofit, and then now you see it actualized. Could you maybe give some advice to people or take us through your journey of creating that nonprofit, because, you know, a lot of people have ideas, but they can't see them through. Tell me your process with creating it.

YOUNG: My process with creating it... Well, I had the idea. And then I figured out, okay, this is what needs to happen in order for this to become a reality. And then I thought, "Who in my life has the connections to allow me to do this successfully?" And then I made a lesson plan, a mock lesson plan, and I thought, "Who can I work with to help me do this successfully?" And I found a partner. And I got my principal, and I was like, "I want to work with elementary schoolers, I want to teach them." And she was like, "Okay, let's contact some elementary schools." We contact some elementary schools, Aiken got back to us, so we met with the principal. And I explained to her my mission, and I explained to her how I would teach, what I would teach, we would read to the students, and all the things. And she was like, "Okay, we will send out a poll and see who wants to do this." We sent it out, got back eight students. And then five of them signed up, filled out the paperwork and signed up, and then we went to Aiken that next Tuesday. And we opened. And from then, the rest is history. Paralysis about execution is such a major part of why ideas don't get started. One of my favorite quotes is "Write right now." Write right now. If you have an idea, and you want to do it, and you have a connection to somebody who may be able to help you, or you have a friend who you think might also like to be involved, or you have any sort of idea about how you could get it done. Count to three, and reach out.

OLIVER: I love that. Yeah, that's awesome. And that's such vital information for youth to hear that we have all these ideas, and we can do them. It might be hard to find resources. But if there's a will, there's a way. So thank you so much for sharing that story. I guess I want to talk a little more about poetry and social justice, and how you think that has an impact on social justice. I remember you said earlier political activism through poetry. Could you to speak a little more on that, and how poetry can be a tool, a powerful tool for social change?

YOUNG: Yes. One second. Let me think.

OLIVER: Go ahead.

YOUNG: I think that poetry can be a powerful tool for social change, because it can provide the element of emotional connection that is lacking in other forms of communication. When you read a poem to an audience, through your use of simile and metaphor and literary devices, you can form an emotional connection that is unlike anything that you can produce with a regular speech or a piece of prose. And I think, in movements, like the Black Lives Matter movement, where there is such a deep emotional component, the struggle of witnessing what we have had to witness, that emotional connection, and helping people who are on the other side, to understand the emotions you feel, creates a human connection. And a human connection is how the world changes.

OLIVER: Yeah, I've seen that connection in your stories, like you said, with the poem about Kurdistan. I want to know about your process of poetry. Because like you said, you wrote a

poem on Kurdistan, and it reached an audience and that was really gratifying for you. How do you choose what to write about?

YOUNG: I write about everything. I don't choose what to write about.

OLIVER: (laughing) That's all.

YOUNG: I write about what I feel, I write about what I see, I write about what I experienced, and I write about what upsets me. I write about everything. I'm writing hundreds of poems a year. It's almost like journaling. When I experience something in the world, I write about it. And it just happens to be in poetry.

OLIVER: Does that ever get overwhelming? Do you ever feel like "I don't want to have a response to this right now?" "I don't want to think about it." Or is it always your first instinct to write?

YOUNG: It's usually my first instinct. There are times when something is just too big and I need to think about it before I have something to say. But usually it's my first instinct.

OLIVER: Good to know. I think I want to talk about performance and poetry, you talked about spoken word and the power of it, but what's the difference between writing poems and performing them for you?

YOUNG: I love performing. I feel like there is something so human about words said aloud. There is a connection to spoken language that can't be garnered from a written page. And it's not just spoken language: sign language—it's really really strong with sign language, that human connection. And I love it. Please give me a moment I am thinking. I think that in our modern era, we have come to understand the power and sanctity of live performance, but of performance, you can see a word you can see coming out of somebody's mouth because of the advent of YouTube and TikTok and all of these things, platforms where you're watching videos of people. There is a component of human connection, like the development of parasocial relationships. There is so much strength that comes with watching someone speak. And I feel like it's almost a vital part of some poems, especially poems I've written, they're made to be heard. And I think it is so beautiful and so powerful. And it's my favorite thing. I love it. I love performing.

OLIVER: I love that. I'm so happy that you had that experience. Who are some of the poets you like watching perform? Who inspire you and who do you just love to view?

YOUNG: I love watching Morgan Parker perform. Some other good performance poets.. have you ever seen the documentary Louder Than a Bomb?

OLIVER: I've heard of it. I don't think I've watched it, though.

YOUNG: I recommend it. Those are some very powerful performances. I'm still, to this day, obsessed with Adam Gottlieb, who was a performer in that documentary. And I've been following his work ever since I saw it. And I love watching my friends perform, actually, because you feel closer to somebody after you experience their work out loud. I have a group of friends from the Youth Poet Laureate program. And through watching each other perform and through hearing each other's work, we became so close. And all of my closest friends have been made through poetry. I ran the creative writing club at my high school. And one of my closest friends from high school was my like co-leader of the club, she was a year above me. And art and sharing art is such a powerful experience, such a powerful bonding experience.

OLIVER: That's awesome. With this reception of poetry, how it's received when it's performed, how do you think that's changed, that recognition and reception of poetry in the past few years or past decade? How do you think that's changed?

YOUNG: I think spoken word—it's not a new thing. I think it's a resurgence. Poets used to be like celebrities. They used to be rock stars, because poetry is so powerful, like Shakespeare, his sonnets. And then it sort of fell out of fashion, and then it came back in the 60s with Toni Morrison and Audre Lorde and Nikki Giovanni. And then it went away again, with the insurgence of social media and pop music and all that kind of stuff. There was like an area where poets fell out of fashion, but now they're back and they're back full force. Amanda Gorman is performing at the Super Bowl, it's a whole thing, presidential Inauguration. And poetry is back, baby.

OLIVER: I love it. I love it. Amanda Gorman—super young. You are super young. Can you speak more to youth and poetry? Why you think the youth are using it and how they get inspired by it? Because to me, it is a youth movement. Poetry is a youth movement in itself. So I want to hear your thoughts about that.

YOUNG: I think poetry has always, well not always, but in the modern era, been a tool of the youth. Because you write poetry in high school, you take a class about it, you do all of that stuff. And it is such a viscerally emotional experience to be a young person and especially to be a Gen Z young person. We are experiencing one of the most brutal, environmental, and societal eras in American history. This is deeply tumultuous and we are expressing it the only ways we know how: through art, because art is the strongest tool of emotional expression there is.

OLIVER: I'm going to let that sit because that is so powerful. You're right. Art is a very powerful thing.

YOUNG: I have a quote that is "They say the victor decides how the world remembers history, but I think that's wrong. I think the artists decide how the world remembers history."

OLIVER: I did read that quote, yeah. Tell me more about that quote because it's so awesome. I saw it on your website. I was like, "Yeah, this should be everywhere." Tell me about it.

YOUNG: I just think... I think what I said! For so many generations, we have these artists who are creating the, the pieces of writing, the pieces of the artwork, the poetry, the music, that defines generations, that defines eras. Even architecture—that is art. We define entire eras by their house styles. Oh, the colonial house styles, oh, the Victorian house styles. And it's art. Art is the fundamental tie to culture. And when an era passes, when it becomes a bygone era, what is left of what was actually happening is the art. That is what makes up history. The art is how you remember that they were here. And they were beautiful.

OLIVER: Yeah. We talked about poetry and activism. And that was so powerful, what you just said, how it remains. And I'm feeling with all this emotion, it is such a powerful thing, and it's so encouraging, but I want to know about you, as a poet, as an activist—we talked about getting overwhelmed and how you write all the time, as a response to everything— but I wonder if you ever had any moments of confusion, or hopelessness or burnout, with your poetry and with your activism, because that's a really real thing. And it's important for us to share with the youth, you know, that happens. But if you had that experience, could you tell us what happened and how you got out of it maybe?

YOUNG: Absolutely. So the first time I experienced writer burnout was during the Black Lives Matter resurgence of 2020, during George Floyd and all of that. I was destroyed. I was empty. I had written every poem I could think, to write, and I had nothing left to give. And I just had to be with myself. And I had to understand that taking moments away from writing didn't make me any less of a writer. Because you are allowed to be human. And being human is what makes you an artist. So if you try to deny yourself to humanity, your art is not going to come back because you are denying yourself your art. And so I took care of me. And I didn't worry about "Oh, I'm not writing as much. Oh, I'm not being as productive." Because I know that, without me, there is no art. And if I destroy myself, I can't create anymore.

OLIVER: Thank you for sharing that. That's really inspiring, and it's good for people to know, I think. I want to be mindful of your time. So I want to turn us to a more positive note. And kind of focus on you, Alora. You told us that you have to make art. We have periods of burnout, but it's the thing that's going to last, and we need to create it. I just want to know what kind of advice or what do you think would be helpful for youth to know about poetry, about activism? Give us those inspiring words that I know you have in you.

YOUNG: Once again, I'd like to come back to my favorite quote: "Write right right now." Do not be afraid that your writing isn't good enough. Do not be afraid that you are not a poet, because you are a poet. If you believe yourself to be a poet, if you have those words, if you have that art inside of you, you are a poet, and no one can take that away from you. No one can take your art away from you. And you can change the world with it. Don't be afraid of it. You don't have to fear your art because it's a part of who you are. Do not fear yourself. Know that you are beautiful. And know that you can make beauty in the world.

OLIVER: Thank you. And I guess final question is: what comes next for you?

YOUNG: What comes next? Well, I have my book coming out. And then I actually wrote two books this semester. So I'm going to work on those. I'm going to polish those up and get those sent out. And then I'm probably going to make a musical? I'm working on a musical, and I think that's what I'm going to do next, I'm going to pursue the musical.

OLIVER: How do you have time for this in college? I'm curious.

YOUNG: Well, the thing is, I write on my phone. So like, I'm sitting in the lounge, I finished my homework, or I'm procrastinating on my homework. And I'm like, "Hm I'm on my phone, I wonder what I'll do." Poem! And recently, while I was procrastinating on my homework, I went through, and I wrote poems about a bunch of my hall mates. And because there's so many people who live on my hall in my dorm, I could write an entire book of poetry just with poems about my hall mates. And I have a bunch of them now, so might as well, and this is how it happens. It's procrastination.

OLIVER: Oh my god. That's a really funny story. Have you shown the poems to them?

YOUNG: Yeah, we had a group reading.

OLIVER: Oh my god. That's amazing.

YOUNG: I have a poem it's called "Ode to the Boys on Willets 3rd (and Aidan.)" Aidan doesn't live on Willets 3rd, but he's always here so I forgot he didn't live here, but he's included in the poem. So it's ode to the boys on Willets third, and Aidan.

OLIVER: Wow. I love it. That's awesome. Thank you so much for being here today, for sharing all those powerful thoughts you have. It was so exciting to hear you talk about this. And I'm really excited to get this out, have it in the Duke archive, and hopefully people can learn from it. Because what you have to say is so important. I really want to thank you for your time. And I just want to leave some space. Is there anything that you think we haven't discussed today that

you want to put in that archive, that you want to have here? You have this space to say it. Is there anything you want to say?

YOUNG: I think we had a pretty comprehensive conversation.

OLIVER: It was productive. It was. Yeah. [simultaneous laughter] Awesome. And like I texted you, if you have any poet friends that you think I should interview, please put me in touch with them. That would be awesome.

YOUNG: I have two! They're actually at Duke.

OLIVER: Oh, no way! I've been trying to find people here, and it's hard for me. I can't find them.

YOUNG: So Shelby Tisdale. And what is Spencer's last name? There's a poet who was a young arts finalist with me who goes to Duke. He's from Taiwan. What is Spencer's last name? Please hold while I look him up on Instagram.

OLIVER: Please do.

YOUNG: Spencer Chang.

OLIVER: Okay, thank you so much. That's awesome. I really want to talk to them. Thank you for this conversation. This is awesome. I'm going to type this up. It's going to be in a transcript. I'm going to send it back to you to review. And thank you so much for sitting down with me today. This was so awesome. And I hope that everything goes well with you with your book. I cannot wait to read it because I definitely will. I'm so excited for you! Alright, this is awesome. Thank you so much.

YOUNG: Thank you. Bye. Have a good day.

OLIVER: You too.

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