

'The Hill We Climb'

-Amanda Gorman

When day comes we ask ourselves,
'where can we find light in this never-ending shade,'
the loss we carry,
a sea we must wade?
We've braved the belly of the beast.
We've learned that quiet isn't always peace,
and the norms and notions
of what just is
isn't always just-ice.
And yet the dawn is ours
before we knew it,
somehow we do it.
Somehow we've weathered and witnessed
a nation that isn't broken
but simply unfinished.
We, the successors of a country and a time
where a skinny Black girl
descended from slaves and raised by a single mother
can dream of becoming president
only to find herself reciting for one.
And yes, we are far from polished,
far from pristine,
but that doesn't mean we are
striving to form a union that is perfect.
We are striving to forge a union with purpose,
to compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters, and
conditions of man.
And so we lift our gazes not to what stands between us
but what stands before us.
We close the divide because we know, to put our future first,
we must first put our differences aside.
We lay down our arms
so we can reach out our arms
to one another.
We seek harm to none and harmony for all.
Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true:
That even as we grieved, we grew;
that even as we hurt, we hoped;
that even as we tired, we tried;
that we'll forever be tied together, victorious,
not because we will never again know defeat
but because we will never again sow division.
Scripture tells us to envision

that everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree
and no one shall make them afraid.
If we're to live up to our own time
then victory won't lie in the blade
but in all the bridges we've made.
That is the promise to glade,
the hill we climb
if only we dare it,
because being American is more than a pride we inherit —
it's the past we step into
and how we repair it.
We've seen a force that would shatter our nation
rather than share it
would destroy our country if it meant delaying democracy.
And this effort very nearly succeeded.
But while democracy can be periodically delayed,
it can never be permanently defeated.
In this truth,
in this faith we trust,
for while we have our eyes on the future,
history has its eyes on us.
This is the era of just redemption
we feared at its inception.
We did not feel prepared to be the heirs
of such a terrifying hour
but within it we found the power
to author a new chapter,
to offer hope and laughter to ourselves.
So while once we asked,
'how could we possibly prevail over catastrophe,'
now we assert,
'how could catastrophe possibly prevail over us?'
We will not march back to what was
but move to what shall be:
a country that is bruised but whole,
benevolent but bold,
fierce, and free.
We will not be turned around
or interrupted by intimidation
because we know our inaction and inertia
will be the inheritance of the next generation.
Our blunders become their burdens.
But one thing is certain:
If we merge mercy with might,
and might with right,
then love becomes our legacy

and change our children's birthright.
So let us leave behind a country
better than the one we were left with.
Every breath from my bronze-pounded chest,
we will raise this wounded world into a wondrous one.
We will rise from the gold-limned hills of the west,
we will rise from the windswept northeast
where our forefathers first realized revolution,
we will rise from the lake-rimmed cities of the midwestern states,
we will rise from the sunbaked south.
We will rebuild, reconcile, and recover
in every known nook of our nation and
every corner called our country,
our people diverse and beautiful will emerge,
battered and beautiful.
When day comes we step out of the shade,
afame and unafraid.
The new dawn blooms as we free it.
For there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it,
if only we're brave enough to be it.

The New American Dream of Amanda Gorman's 'The Hill We Climb'

Aaron Meacham
5-7 minutes

How the poet connects America's past to its future.

Plenty of history was made on January 20, 2021. Plenty of firsts. Plenty of barriers broken. And while it's easy to get swept up in the currents of politics that dominate our attention, there was another current flowing strong that day. National Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman not only became the youngest poet to recite at a presidential inauguration, but did so with a fresh, vibrant vision of a new American Dream.

The American Dream has faced an identity crisis in recent decades as our visions of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness evolve. This is not to say the American Dream has always been without controversy in the past; Langston Hughes addressed the very issue almost 100 years ago in his 1926 poem "[I, Too](#)." But as America's role on the world stage shifts, so have the interests of its citizens shifted from owning a plot of land they can call their own to earning status and seeking personal fortune. The medium of poetry itself has also [undergone a recent transformation](#) from a dying mode of expression to a renewed one — a transformation not lost on Gorman as she marches across history in "[The Hill We Climb](#)."

Her poem embodies the American ideal of a melting pot as it blends modern language with the more traditional, but this version of the American melting pot is itself a modern re-imagining. Unlike the historical view of a melting pot where new cultures largely assimilated to an American framework, Gorman's vision of a melting pot reflects the preservation and sharing of cultures in a multicultural network. She blends past with present with lines like "We lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one another," drawing from the obvious language of the Second Amendment and seeking to reconcile it with modern anxieties. This complex narrative of American identity permeates the poem with the tension of both looking back to our history and forward to our future — a tension that very much matches the tension many Americans feel.

The image of climbing hills, as well as the reckoning of America's dark past, draws clear lines to Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech. At a time when America is again faced with its deficiencies addressing racial justice, the image also conjures up connections to the doomed Sisyphus, forever pushing his boulder hopelessly up his own hill. Gorman rejects this nihilist possibility outright, her tone resolute and determined:

"So, while once we asked: 'How could we possibly prevail over catastrophe?' Now we assert, 'How could catastrophe possibly prevail over us?'"

We will not march back to what was, but move to what shall be”

This new American Dream is not one of rugged individualism, but collective strength. It is bold and focused without losing touch with the traditional values of American culture. Gorman taps into American sensibilities grounded in hard work and everyday struggles. It is the language of America’s people, both past and present, that makes her poem so resonant. Her language is both complex and authentic, mixing together to produce a result that feels genuine.

Poetry has a way of treading into the territory of the ideal or the abstract, but Gorman anticipates and avoids such pitfalls with lines like, “we are far from polished, far from pristine, but that doesn’t mean we are striving to form a union that is perfect.” This is not the comforting lie, oversimplified for easier digestion. For a nation whose streets were once said to have been paved with gold, many Americans express frustration at [the lack of opportunities available to them](#) despite their desire to do good, honest work. The idea that any goal is achievable through perseverance is woven into the fabric of the American identity, into the types of stories we tell our children, into the values we expect of one another.

Gorman clearly understands how important this idea of hard work is to our moving forward together. Not only does the road ahead demand our hard work, but Americans also crave an internal consistency of our narrative that will allow us to recognize the America of the past and of the present in the America of the future. Without that kind of recognition, we once again risk large sections of the nation seeking to return to an idealized yesterday rather than a better tomorrow.

In many ways, “The Hill We Climb” serves as a bridge connecting us to our history. Gorman employs sporadic rhyme patterns that call to mind the history of poetic form, but she is never so constrained by a rhyme scheme that the poem ever feels quaint. Her language draws on historical allusions at times, but frames those terms against a backdrop that is fresh, modern, and — most importantly — relevant. Her tone is optimistic without crossing into the idealistic or the naïve. And her message is complex in a way that feels authentic and genuine.

“The Hill We Climb” lays out a demanding example for how we can use the knowledge and skills from our past to craft for ourselves a future that we can be proud of. Why? “Because being American is more than a pride we inherit; it’s the past we step into and how we repair it.”

Amanda Gorman has two books of songs and poetry, *Change Sings: A Children’s Anthem*, and *The Hill We Climb: Poems*. You can learn more about her and follow her on social media at theamandagorman.com.