

Amanda Gorman: Why I Almost Didn't Read My Poem at the Inauguration

Jan 20, 2022 | Well-being | 0 comments



It's told like this: Amanda Gorman performed at the inauguration and the rest is history.

The truth is I almost declined to be the inaugural poet. Why?

I was terrified.

I was scared of failing my people, my poetry. But I was also terrified on a physical level. Covid was still raging, and my age group couldn't get vaccinated yet. Just a few weeks before, domestic terrorists assaulted the U.S. Capitol, the very steps where I would recite. I didn't know then that I'd become famous, but I *did* know at the inauguration I was going to become highly visible — which is a very dangerous thing to be in America, especially if you're Black and outspoken and have no Secret Service.

It didn't help that I was getting DMs from friends telling me not-so-jokingly to buy a bulletproof vest. My mom had us crouch in our living room so that she could practice shielding my body from bullets. A loved one warned me to "be ready to die" if I went to the Capitol building, telling me, "It's just not worth it." I had insomnia and nightmares, barely ate or drank for days. I finally wrote to some close friends and family, telling them that I was most likely going to pull out of the ceremony.

I got some texts praising the Lord. I got called pathologically insane. But I knew only I could answer the question for myself: *Was this poem worth it?*

The night before I was to give the Inaugural Committee my final decision felt like the longest of my life. My neighborhood was eerily quiet in that early morning dark, though I strained my ears for noise to distract me from the choice that lay ahead. It felt like my little world stood still. And then it struck me: Maybe being brave enough doesn't mean lessening my fear, but listening to it. I closed my eyes in bed and let myself utter all the leviathans that scared me, both monstrous and minuscule. What stood out most of all was the worry that I'd spend the rest of my life wondering what this poem could have achieved. There was only one way to find out.

By the time the sun rose I knew one thing for sure: I was going to be the 2021 inaugural poet. I can't say I was completely confident in my choice, but I was completely committed to it.

I'm a firm believer that often terror is trying to tell us of a force far greater than despair. In this way, I look at fear not as cowardice, but as a call forward, a summons to fight for what we hold dear. And now more than ever, we have every right to be affected, afflicted, affronted. If you're alive, you're afraid. If you're not afraid, then you're not paying attention. The only thing we have to fear is *having no fear itself* — having no feeling on behalf of whom and what we've lost, whom and what we love.

On the morning of Inauguration Day, I went through the motions of getting ready on autopilot, mindless and mechanical, doing my hair and make up even as I anxiously practiced my poem. On the way to the Capitol building I recited the mantra I say before any performance: *I am the daughter of Black writers. We're descended from freedom fighters who broke their chains and they changed the world. They call me.*

Though I spent the next hour shivering in my seat from nerves and the unforgiving January cold, as I stepped up to the dais to recite, I felt warm, like the words waiting in my mouth were aflame. It seemed that the world stood still. I looked out and spoke to it, I haven't looked back.

Amanda Gorman delivering "The Hill We Climb" on Jan. 20, 2021. Credit...Pool photo by Patrick Semansky

On that Jan. 20, what I found waiting beyond my fear was every person who searched beyond their own fears to find space for hope in their lives, who welcomed the impact of a poem into protests, hospitals, classrooms, conversations, living rooms, offices, art and all manner of moments. I may have worked on the words, but it was other people who put those words to work. What we've seen isn't just the power of a poem. It's the power of the people.

Yet while the inauguration might have seemed like a ray of light, this past year for many has felt like a return to the same old gloom. Our nation is still haunted by disease, inequality and environmental crises. But though our fears may be the same, we are not. If nothing else, this must be known: Even as we've grieved, we've grown; even fatigued we've found that this hill we climb is one we must mount together. We are battered, but bolder; worn, but wiser. I'm not telling you to *not* be tired or afraid. If anything, the very fact that we're weary means we are, by definition, changed; we are brave enough to listen to, and learn from, our fear. This time will be different because this time *we'll* be different. We already are.

And yes, I still am terrified every day. Yet fear can be love trying its best in the dark. So do not fear your fear. Own it. Free it. This isn't a liberation that I or anyone can give you — it's a power you must look for, learn, love, lead and locate for yourself.

Why? The truth is, hope isn't a promise we give. It's a promise we live. Tell it like this, and we, like our words, will not rest.

And the rest is history.

FEATURED IMAGE: Lauren Dukoff

By Amanda Gorman

Amanda Gorman is a poet and the author of "The Hill We Climb" and "Call Us What We Carry."

THE NEW YORK TIMES

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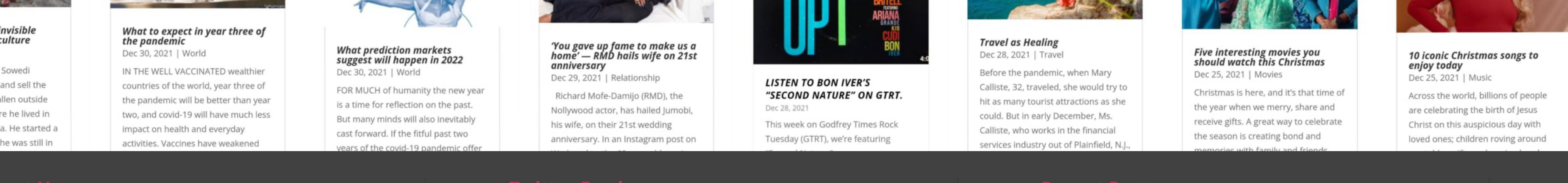
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- January 2021
- December 2020
- November 2020
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