

# REFLECTION STATEMENT

If 2016 showed me anything, it was that rhetoric could work wonders. In a terrifying testimony to the fragility of a corrupt democracy, I watched with a mixture of horror and fascination as the free world was handed over to a 70-year-old billionaire who claimed to be for the people.

In his rhetoric and policy, Donald Trump scapegoated minorities for the US's problems, and offered simple, idealistic solutions. Unsurprisingly, this led historians to draw concerning parallels with the rise of authoritarian demagogues in the past. Trump's ill-crafted, monosyllabic outbursts broadcasted a hollow, gut-level populism for the modern world. He was the antithesis of the standard, Washington politician: loud, uncensored, unrehearsed, and best of all, politically incorrect. Under the surface, however, his policies would continue the American status quo of the past three decades: pacify the middle and working classes with spineless rhetoric, and preserve the oligarchical establishment which had driven them to vote for him.

I centred my Major Work around the climate of detachment and disillusionment that made Trump possible. Shelley's 'Ozymandias' drove my focus away from the sole events of 2016 and toward the notion of empire in general. The poem's timeless themes of pretension and hubris suggest that all empires throughout history are inherently doomed, as the assumption of infallibility will inevitably lead to self-destruction – but not before the people have their own say; thus, American imperialism was met with Trump.

*Bones of a Nation* is a poetic exposure of the corrupt landscape in American politics. It ranges from persuasive to elegiac, at times a spitting indictment of the Washington establishment, at others a mournful ode to the spirit of democracy. I envision it slicing through the American consciousness and awakening all corners of society. It should galvanise the furore of protestors,

dismantle the self-satisfaction of politicians, and win the passions of cynics. It is a nod to the power people have over their own lives. When all seems hopeless, and the existing order seems bound in perpetuity, we must remember that Western history is a narrative of progressive victories, and that no change was ever enforced without the might of the people.

This revolutionary zeal arose, in part, from my English Advanced studies of *The Motorcycle Diaries*. As Che Guevara travels through the crumbling cities of South America, his political voice blooms, fuelled by his rage upon discovering deep injustice. His rhetoric grows in eloquence and insight, and is dotted by visceral imagery and fiery symbolism. When visiting Lima, Peru, he declares that the city “waits for the blood of a truly emancipating revolution.” Guevara’s memoir suggests that revolution is often the last refuge of the powerless, which in turn reminded me of the words of Martin Luther King Jr: “riot is the language of the unheard.” Desperation suddenly became a key feature of my poetic voice.

My English Extension 1 studies in post-World War II ways of thinking confronted me with the risk of cynicism in the face of oppression. The confessional poetry of Sylvia Plath espouses a deflated female voice; achingly poignant, yet hopelessly so. ‘Fever 103°’ explores the desire to emancipate herself from patriarchal society, though her extended metaphor of a feverish, hallucinatory rage makes it clear that she only sees liberation as possible in her imagination. Though Plath’s sense of futility is acute, her striking feminist voice, lashing out with brutal sincerity against her oppressor until he squirms, is oddly empowering. At once political and humanist, it was a balanced harmony I strove to recreate.

I found similar inspiration in other female poets. Gwendolyn Brooks’ tribute to Langston Hughes’ “muscular tears” spoke volumes to me. It was a phrase that captured a sense of virile grief, and the power we have to use our sorrow and anger for good. I borrowed it for my own *A Woman in Muscular Tears*, which celebrates the protestors of the Washington Women’s March. Margaret Atwood’s ‘Men with the Heads of Eagles’ exemplified the wry feminist

sarcasm that I envisioned for the poem's hero – a Lady Liberty who, like her copper derivation, embodies both female empowerment and *Libertas*.

The first draft of my MW consisted of five thematic poems: an introduction to Washington, social inequality, religion, war and political philosophy, and the final revolution. It was largely a long, unbroken tirade of stream of consciousness built on abstract imagery, with no clear setting, personas, characters or perspectives. It was a bitter condemnation of a world that seemed to be going insane, delivered in the unbridled, one-paced howl of a deranged preacher standing on a parapet. It lacked variety and relied heavily on the abstract, giving the reader nothing concrete to connect with.

My MW changed drastically by its second draft. It was now made up of fourteen poems with unique poetic voices. The introductory poem, *Washington DC at Dusk*, removed any ambiguity of setting. *November* was partially delivered in tetrameter, while *The Ballad of Chelsea Manning* was built of anaphoric couplets. EE Cummings' 'i sing of olaf' was a powerful inspiration for this poem; both Olaf and Manning represent dissidence against corruption and authority, as well as the political paradox of hero/traitor. I also introduced a range of other personas to reflect on America's place in history: a mad, allegorical preacher, a Lady Liberty figure, and the peasant girl Epponina, a timeless personification of democracy.

*Bones of a Nation* is narrative-like in structure, beginning with a clear orientation, building to a climax, and ending with a fairly open resolution. In the final stages of drafting, I broke it into six sections to strengthen the climactic pace. *III: Empire?* is quite mournful, with a lyrical, serene tone and an abundance of metaphor. Tim Dlugos' picturesque setting in 'White Petals' inspired the "sun-glazed Potomac" in my own *White Petals* – a thinly forested place of tranquillity where the Capitol sentences the subject to motherhood. The climax comes with *Inauguration Day*, which ironically takes us away from the action, questioning the significance of this political turning point through the differing perspectives of white and black Americans.

The stylistic climax comes with the mad preacher's last call for revolution before he fades into the abstract, his work having been done. It ends with *History: An Ode to Youth*, the shortest of all the poems, summarising the ongoing need for alertness, resistance and action.

The voice of the mad preacher imitates the uninhibited free verse of Allen Ginsberg, whose 'Howl' was transformative to the way I approached poetry. His style is raw, unpunctuated and unbridled, and the persona he assumes is psychedelic and otherworldly; his urgent, momentous howl seems to bear the entire thought bubble of humanity. This is reflective of the preacher: he is not an individual, but rather a poetic personification of working class frustrations and passions. He is an anarchist, an orator, a warrior, a protestor, and a poet.

Both poems in the preacher's perspective are full of anaphora, enjambment and nonsensical stream of consciousness, creating an unrestrained, slightly disoriented tone. *The Preacher's Letter To...* is his last call for revolution. The voice reverts from the collective to the individual in the last two, uncharacteristically peaceful, lines, suggesting that even the most ardent leaders of grassroots movements are bound to watch from afar as change takes place without their help.

After familiarising myself with the genre of political poetry, I realised that it is a unique fusion of the emotions of poetry with the guttural passions of politics. In my research, I found Lincoln immortalised in Vachel Lindsay's 'Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight' and Carl Sandburg's 'The Long Shadow of Lincoln.' Both poems personify Lincoln as a timeless reminder of democratic grit for equality and justice. Meanwhile, Jena Osman's 'Dropping Leaflets', written shortly after 9/11, embodies the distressed voice of a nation besieged by fear and hatred – a world that the mad preacher often reflects in his virulent scrutiny of it. Fred Marchant's image of legislators "cast[ing] their votes like stones for this war" encapsulated my vision of the skewed willpowers of Washington lawmakers.

*Bones of a Nation* is filled with dense imagery and extended metaphors. The “white petals” that drop onto the Potomac are symbolic of a foetus that has no potential for life, but is valued by conservative lawmakers above the life of the woman carrying it. *The Patriot’s Daughter* is America. The metaphor for country as child is one I’ve always believed in relation to patriotism: if a parent loves their child, they don’t make excuses for them as they destroy themselves.

The final rendering of *Bones of a Nation* is a diverse and colourful call for alert exhaustion, for muscular tears. It often walks the line between cynicism and condemnation, which is reflective of the struggle all protest movements must overcome. The concept of power and corruption is universal; it is a staple of humanity just as love and determination are. But if rhetoric can lead people to war and tyranny, it must lead them to peace and democracy also.