

# **FREDERICK ZACKEL**

## **Marwan's David**

Marwan, a former student of mine who sculpts free-standing statues from tombstone marble, knows he is stepping onto a minefield of trouble with his new work of art.

He expects to be hated, threatened, maybe even killed.

I taught then, as I teach now, Introduction to the Humanities, the same course offered by most of the colleges and universities around the world. You know it. *Studia Humanitatis*, as the Renaissance humanists called it. The study of being human. Or the study of being humane, if you will.

These great works and great ideas are the gifts the past has given the present, I intone like any boring prof, and these great works and great ideas are the gifts that the present someday passes on to the future.

Marwan scribbled incessantly while I lectured. But his scribbling was closer to note-taking than the rest of the class seemed capable of doing.

His scribbles were a twenty-first century kid trying to master the heroic proportions of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Renaissance art, as done by legendary names like Donatello, Caravaggio, Michelangelo, and Bernini.

Back when he was my student, Marwan was fascinated by David. The glorious and mighty King David who united the Twelve Tribes of Israel and ruled for forty years and made Jerusalem the capital of the Hebrew nation.

The shepherd boy David who killed the giant Goliath.

He felled him with a slingshot, Marwan insisted.

That's why so many artists—painters and sculptors both—choose David as their subject. Against all odds, the shepherd boy prevails and triumphs over his more powerful enemy.

Marwan came back the other day.

I sculpted my own David, Marwan told me. Want to see it?

Before he began working, Marwan studied the great masters. Marwan studied Donatello's David, life-sized and naked except for a fourteenth-century shepherd's hat from Tuscany, his foot atop the severed Goliath's head. Donatello's David is cocky, saucy, insolent, triumphant.

The first free-standing statue in a thousand years of Western civilisation, I lectured. Done in 1430, at the start of the Renaissance.

I like him, Marwan said, because he's cocky. But he looks silly being naked.

Marwan said his David is more like Michelangelo's David, which was created more than seventy years after Donatello's work.

A political piece of marble, Marwan said. Just as Michelangelo was making a statement about the tyrannical Medicis being kicked out of power in Florence.

Except Marwan's David isn't eighteen feet six inches tall, as Michelangelo's David is.

Marwan scoffed. Three times as high as a man? David is the giant, not Goliath. He's not a boy, either. He's a man. He's a god, really, a grown-up god.

His David is only three feet high.

He must be small. The forces of tyranny against him are so great.

His David is not naked either.

He wears street clothes, T-shirt and tennis shoes, like any teenager today.

Does he still have his slingshot? I asked.

Would he be David without it?

Marwan didn't spend three years on his David, as Michelangelo did on his David. But Marwan expects a world of trouble when he shows it, as much trouble as Michelangelo caught in 1504.

When it was placed in the Piazza della Signoria, Medici supporters threw stones at it at night, and security guards had to be stationed around it.

Marwan studied Caravaggio's David, too.

Caravaggio chose the moment when David lifts the bloody severed head of Goliath by the hair, the drama enhanced by Caravaggio's use of chiaroscuro, so that the two heads—one living and one dead—are drenched in bright light, like klieglights, the background black as the abyss of Death.

Marwan kept coming back to Michelangelo's David.

David is caught in the moment before taking aim, seems almost pensive as he gauges the wind, the distance, the trajectory.

Marwan studied the David differences between Michelangelo and Bernini.

Almost twenty years after Michelangelo, Bernini chooses the moment of utter concentration just before David lets fly with his slingshot.

Look at David's concentration, Marwan told. His eyes are squinting, he chews on his lower lip, his muscles are tense, he's ready to shoot. Look at his toes, how they clutch the ground below his feet.

The moment of truth, I said.

The moment of truth.

Marwan didn't paint his David with oil on canvas, as Caravaggio did. Marwan didn't cast his David in bronze, as Donatello did, or in marble as Bernini did. Marwan didn't discover a giant block of Carrara marble in a stonecutter's back lot, as Michelangelo did, a block so cracked that a century of previous sculptors had refused it as unusable.

Instead, Marwan spent his time outside classes, driving the back county roads of northwest Ohio, searching for weathered tombstones that nobody wanted, that could be carted away by a college kid with shaggy hair and no money.

His David is cut from granite, a weathered headstone he found abandoned, uncarved, unclaimed behind some farmer's barn.

His David is caught in the most dramatic moment.

As young David throws his rock at the Israeli Army, an Israeli soldier's bullet gets him right between his eyes.

David is frozen in time. The rock will fall from his opened hand. His body will fall in the street. David is dead before he hits the ground.

Marwan is a Palestinian-American.