

Bottle Gourd Sprout, Calabash Open Mic

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for Della Manley

2012:

I was shaking. My mother and her friend, Esther, nudged me onto the Calabash stage. I gripped the podium, pinning my poem down to stop the sea breeze from discarding my metaphors. I had a curious near-confidence, a bit of a disconnect from reality. It was the first time I realized that the Prednisone I was on for my skin crisis could make me high; high enough to get through two poems I wrote in Poetry 301 as an undergraduate English Literature student in Portland, Oregon, after I decided to let go seven years of girls' school and Jamaica, at least for a while. It might seem that I left chasing a dream to write, but it was more of a nascent inclination. It's just been there even when I get lost in the business of other things. My aunt Rachel declared my future when she came over to dinner one night when I was a girl. She was making up stories about the cows printed on our plastic children's placemats and named my fate. "You are the writer," she said. Since then, I have not been able to leave literature alone.

Open mics can feel like transition events between big sets and big-named featured authors. Some of the audience will go home to refresh themselves—Treasure Beach is hot. Others remain to enjoy the festival in its fullness—always open to a "good" or "bad" performance of new voices, unpublished writers and people who want to be brave and share their poems.

The audience for the segment I read in was over a hundred strong, decked out in linen or cotton, some in something special and fresh from a local designer. Like them, I was dressed for the weather. But looking back at the photos from the day, I wonder if I chose my clothes in the dark; nothing matched.

I think I read a poem I'd written about the flag I'd hung up in my white-walled room to assert my homesickness-induced patriotism in the substance-free hall I was living in. The poem has had several names, starting life as "Emblem," becoming "Explication of a Flag"; but when it was going to emerge into a publication and I was tasked with finding a better title, I drew for support from my Aunt Sarah, who said with no fuss, "What about 'Gold for the Chains?'" Honestly, though, I don't know if that was the poem I read *that* day, but I know it was my mother and Esther who endeavoured to push me on stage; my aunt who helped me to make a quick and bold decision when I was waffling, and I know that the selection of poems I read at the open mic in the slot of Carolyn Cooper's strict three minutes was met with loud applause from the crowd.

When I came off the stage, adrenaline waning, Mommy smiled; hugged me. I exhaled. A world was opening. Something big had happened. No different from a first publication, it was an

affirmation. Not yet thinking too much about what it might all mean, I was getting to a place where I could rest in the knowledge that home *could* appreciate my work read aloud.

2014:

That year, it wasn't my mother who took me there. I didn't know yet about the haste required to book a room for the weekend, or how tenuous a booking you thought you'd secured might be if your host hadn't yet realized the dates you'd made a query about were for Calabash weekend. The first impediment: my sister and I would be staying forty minutes away from the festival. The second: I had to work, so we'd be leaving in the evening. The third: we used Google Maps to find our way, a choice that my mother had significant reservations about. She'd laid a map on the table showing us the route from Montego Bay, filled her radiator up and reminded us to get gas. Seven hours later, the gas light was flashing and the car overheating (she hadn't tightened the cap completely). We had no idea where we were and were fairly certain that on one of the many wrong turns, we had met a three-piece-suited ghost. We made it in spite of overconfident tech but missed the Friday night readings.

In any case, seasoned Calabash goers know how to choose a seat where breeze blows, or one from which you can easily slip out when it might be the right time (for you) to get a bite from Jack Sprat or to dip out to the beach for a few. But significantly, if they want to read on the open mic, performance hopefuls should know that they should fly, not run, to the front of the tent as soon as the sign-up for the session is announced.

I was just in time for both, and looking forward to reading my palindrome; a poem born from a class assignment where I recounted a night of pain when I'd burnt my hands on scotch bonnet pepper and failed to scrub them of the oils well enough before I bathed. My poetry teacher was intrigued by the imagery and impressed that I had managed to mirror the first half of the poem and the experience so well but felt the poem could do more. She challenged me to make the setting more vivid. I started to think about home; remembered the particular unrest of the summer before. After seven edits, the poem became a less perfect palindrome, a worker cooking soup overhearing blithely indifferent privileged yacht club patrons while in the East, Kingston heard the reverberation of shelling through Tivoli at varying decibel levels depending on their distance from the clock. My reading went well: crowd clapped, kudos dropped. Neat, tidy, sub-three minutes.

2016:

I bombed. My poem fell splat on the Calabash open mic stage. By then, I thought I'd grown comfortable with Carolyn Cooper's sequencing system. I would also try to get out of my head enough to appreciate the readers slated ahead of me. Until this point, I had felt enough angst melt as I crossed the stage to deliver, feeling the momentum of the energy of whichever reader had come on before and the crowd's reception pull me out and drive me to get settled and get on with my own.

Energies remain on stage. This time, a set of high school students heralded to the front of the tent as I was signing up, somehow ended up with a bloc of spots. It didn't help that they were chaperoned by an ex of mine whom I had met under similar conditions.

What followed was a forty-five-minute set made up of their dramatic monologues about teenage angst and feelings. No showing, just telling us all about how very difficult life as a fifteen-year-old was with no acknowledgement that a microphone might amplify the decibels of their communiques. As they read, the crowd filed out. I was thrown by the time I reached the podium. I faced a near-empty tent. I read my poem and the few still there did not seem to realize I was done at the end. Sparse clapping closed my reading.

I returned to the tent, fighting tears through the session that followed. Back in the room I had rented for the weekend, I cried. At the time, I felt the high school students had sucked the energy out of the stage. They hadn't, though. An open mic is a gamble. On any given day, a stage could field craft-conscious emerging hopefuls, an inspired reader sharing an excerpt from a medical text, the self-published author promoting their work without marketing budget and billboard for their book, and new poets (even high school students) making their debut on a world-acclaimed stage in their country, in their backyard, available to us.

With even more time to consider what could have gone wrong, the poem I read didn't lend naturally to a strong stage performance and I hadn't prepared enough. You can never predict your audience and trying to anticipate what company you might find yourself in on a stage is a fool's errand. A stage and the audience in that exact moment are something to meet. It was also my first experience with teenagers and poetry. My better angels have won out in how I think about their work and how brave they were to share it in that medium when my own version of such poems ended life on DeviantArt.

My own shortcomings at the front of a classroom, a truly terrifying stage, have shown me enough times that I need to wheel and come again when I misjudge what cultural reference or song might intrigue my students in a PowerPoint. Drawing for Sting when discussing the Russian revolution with sixteen-year-olds will humble you quickly. It is always key to respect the stage, which remains at the border of the lawn at Jake's in and out of Calabash season, which, without the tent, the bookshop, and rows of expectant chairs, shrinks.

Rhea Manley is pursuing an MA in Literatures in English at UWI Mona. Her chapbook, *Girl School*, was published in 2025 by Peekash Press as part of the Bocas Breakthrough Fellowship for emerging writers, which Manley was awarded in 2024. Her poetry was shortlisted for the Edward Baugh Prize for Poetry in 2019 and 2022, and has been published in *PREE Magazine*, *New Voices: Selected by Lorna Goodison* (UWI Press, 2019), *Caribbean Quarterly*, and other literary outlets.