

THE OPAL

Literary Magazine



Summer 2023

Issue 2

The Opal claims [First North American Serial Rights](#) for all included works.

All contributors maintain full ownership of their work.

All artwork is in the public domain.

Editors

Elizabeth Bright

Cooper Robinson

Callie Rowland

Readers

Tallie Davis

Aniria Williams

Layout

Cooper Robinson

TABLE OF CONTENTS

NONFICTION

“Cancer Can’t Take It All” by Rachel Williams 1

FICTION

“D-flat” by Teela Kelley 7

POETRY

“Tanner” by Jonathan Fletcher 16

“Est in Sanguinem” by Stevie Habern 18

“Marlboro Light 100’s” by Stevie Habern 20

“Light in the Eleventh Hour” by Stevie Habern 23

“Inheritance” by Madeline McConico 24

“Three Ways to Tie a Knot” by Madeline McConico 27

“My Dog Havoc as Tiangou” by Calista Malone 29

“A Phone Call to Anne Sexton and Angela Carter to Tell Them I Have a
Boyfriend” by Emily Mayo 30

“Canned GOODS” by Emily Mayo 32

“Hands of Wrath” by Lauryn Martin 33

“Click” by Annie Seboe 34

CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

CREATIVE NONFICTION



From William MacKenzie's National Encyclopedia, *Aurora Borealis in High Latitudes*, 1891

CANCER CAN'T TAKE IT ALL

By Rachel Williams

At that time in my life, I had never seen such courage through heartbreak. Not once had I witnessed someone display that much strength amidst tears. My brothers, father, and I watched as my mom untied her head scarf, revealing her shaven head for the first time. Her lips quivered and tried their hardest to form a smile. That was the first time I ever saw a woman without hair. Despite the fact that society told me beautiful women had hair, I saw an angel before me: the angel of strength and beauty and every good thing in the world. At that moment cancer could not take anything from my mom or my family. If we could get through this, we could get through all of it.

When I was eleven years old my mother was diagnosed with stage three breast cancer. At that age, I had no idea what ‘cancer’ entailed, but I understood it was something very bad. That May in 2012 began a journey my family had never asked for. For what it is worth, my mom did her very best to keep our lives as normal and consistent as possible. She rarely complained and always put my family before herself, even though she was the one with the intruder in her body. No matter how hard she tried, though, our lives did change. Forever.

Just a few weeks after her diagnosis, my mom had a mastectomy. Thankfully, the surgery went as planned with no complications. The doctor also informed us the cancer had not spread. This was fantastic news for my family. It felt like a huge weight had been lifted from our shoulders, but this was only just the beginning.

Soon after the surgery, my mom began her six months of intense chemotherapy treatments. This is when the fact that she had cancer actually hit me. I would tell myself chemotherapy was a good thing: it was ridding her body of the disease, but it was hard to watch the effects of the treatments become a part of our lives. My mom now had a much different taste, and meals she used to love she now could not even stand to smell.

She would also be pretty tired more often, occasionally taking long naps during the day. The hardest effect of chemotherapy for my mom to initially to come accept was the hair loss. As her treatments began, her hair would fall out everywhere: in the shower, in our food, on her bed... With the supportive presence of her best friend, my mom had her head shaved. The barber had shut down the entire shop that night to offer my mom privacy. That night when she came home she was very emotional. As young as I was, I did not quite comprehend the magnitude of losing all hair, but looking back now I see how challenging and difficult this must have been. This only makes me admire my mother more.

My mom's chemotherapy treatments typically took place on Tuesdays. Since she was gone a good portion of the day and surely would be tired afterward, one of our neighbors handmade my family tacos each week on that day. This was the birth of 'Taco Tuesdays' in our family, which we often still celebrate. This was also just one example of the amazing love and support our family received from the community.

My mom taught English at the high school and was already a highly beloved teacher. When she announced to her students and fellow staff she had been diagnosed with cancer, everyone was devastated. My mom promptly let her principal know she would have to take a leave of absence for her health and planned her last day. That last day she was at the high school, the entire school had been surprisingly covered in pink. On every single locker there were little pink ribbons and every door was decorated. All of the staff had purchased shirts saying 'We Heart Willy' (a nickname played off our last name, 'Williams'). Her students had made a cake and gotten a pink crown and sash for her. This last day was overwhelming and showed my mom she was in no way alone. For the high school's homecoming theme the following school year of 2012-2013, the students chose 'Touchdowns for Tracey' (my mom's name).

To kick off their homecoming week, they invited my mom to come for a surprise appearance in an assembly. The support from the high school never ceased.

When my mom's more intense chemotherapy treatments finally came to an end around October 2012, I decided to throw a party for her. This party was dubbed the 'no-more-chemo party,' and I invited just about all of our family and friends. My aunt helped me decorate cupcakes and prepare a homemade movie to show. This day I always hold close to my heart; it was such a joyous time. Both sides of my family, along with plenty of good friends, joined together in celebrating a milestone in my mom's battle with cancer and thanked God we were almost to the finish line. I will always cherish my initiative to make that party happen.

Around this time period sparked a fire of hope in our hearts. My mom was finished with chemotherapy and feeling better all the time. She had even gone back to school, starting with half-days then back to full-time. It felt like we had finally made it out of the woods. She even was in the works of creating our family's first Relay for Life team to help other survivors. She still had minor chemotherapy treatments on Tuesdays, but these were nothing compared to the first six months.

Tuesday, April 2, 2013, I came home from school with a friend. My mom had been particularly tired that day, but she still managed to scold me for eating too many chips before dinner. That night I said 'I love you' to her for the last time ever. I woke up in the middle of the night to my father's panicked screams. My heart shattered, but I was sure she would be fine; she was just giving us all a scare. I still vividly remember every motion on the way to the hospital. These few hours often play over and over in my head some days.

That very early morning of April 3, 2013, my mom died of a heart attack likely caused by her treatment medication. For a couple of hours at the hospital I would just cry and cry, but after countless friends and family kept hugging me, I only grew numb. I was twelve years old. I needed my

mom now more than ever and she was gone forever.

The days after her death all blurred into one time frame. The house was rarely empty: we had an abundance of visitors bringing food, cards and gifts, and love. I slept a lot and struggled for an appetite. It was not completely miserable, however, because my family would constantly hear hilarious stories of her we had never known.

Her visitation and funeral were wondrous. I stood at the visitation, greeting an endless line. The funeral took place at the high school, a place she belonged, in the gym. My family was kept separate until just a few minutes before the service began. I was the first of my family to walk into the crowded gym, leading the way to our front-row seats. As I walked, I was overwhelmed: the gym was full, there was not an empty space. One single person, my mom, had made an impact on all of these people. There were enough flowers sent to fill our entire porch, so all of my extended family took quite a few. This image only deepened my love and respect for the great woman I called mom. On top of this, my mom's death was covered on the front page of our newspaper and on our local news station. It was then that I realized this loss was not mine alone.

In the following months, my mom's graduating class organized a benefit to help out our family financially. Again, this event highlighted the never-ending support our family received. A scholarship was created in honor of my mom to benefit a senior. To raise money for that scholarship, her graduating class annually puts on 'Volley for Willy,' which takes place at a high school volleyball game. A bench was also donated to the school by the class of 2013. My mom had previously been asked to speak at the class of 2013's graduation, so some fellow teachers read the draft of her speech in place. In all of these ways, my mom's memory was and is kept alive.

In my senior year of high school, I took Yearbook in my mom's classroom each day. I sat in the room where she once taught and

inspired many, unable now to receive the same for myself when my time came. Accepting and overcoming her death was especially difficult for me, but I try to live as she did, never missing an opportunity to put a smile on others' faces. To help other families the same way mine had been so lucky to be helped, I have been the team captain of my family's Relay for Life team for the last few years. I have also organized three fundraisers at high school sporting events to raise money to split between the American Cancer Society and local families affected by cancer. Throughout my high school years, I estimate these events brought in \$4,000.

While my heartbreak over her death will never end, the hurting has lessened over the years. When a lot of people think of my mom, they think of the cancer that took over the last year of her life. While cancer is also a big part of how I remember my mom, I try to think of it differently. Cancer was a tiny part of my mom's life, and while it may seem natural to say it did not define her, in some ways it did. My mom was already a courageous, brave, and strong person before she was diagnosed, but having cancer gave the world a chance to see this truth. She had done so much good in the world and in no way deserved cancer, but she was never bitter. Cancer could have blown out the light of her colorful personality in an instant, but instead, the world watched as she continued to shine, brighter than ever.

FICTION



Paul Nash, *Landscape of the Moon's First Quarter*, 1943

D-FLAT

By Teela Kelley

Three years, six months, and eleven days. That was how long it had been since Marianne last spoke. As she opened the faded, red door of her car and got inside, she wondered what her grandfather would say if he were here. But she knew the answer. He would have made a fist, thumb extended up, then touched the thumb to his bottom lip and pulled his hand downward to his chin in the sign for patience. It was the one sign that had stuck with him from Marianne's fifth grade sign language class. "It will come," he'd say. *Patience, it will come.* It was his favorite advice. As she drove the five miles from her tiny apartment to the dingy, old building in which her musical group rehearsed, a multitude of memories surfaced in her mind. Waves of love and grief rose and mingled together, threatening to choke her.

"Marianne," called Lillie, approaching her as she walked in for rehearsal. Marianne was grateful, for once, that she had no voice to betray her. "Janet has the flu!"

Marianne's eyes widened in alarm; her other feelings temporarily pushed aside. She quickly walked over to her chair and set her violin case down, then signed, "*What about Sandy? I thought she was the backup.*"

Lillie rummaged in her bag for her sheet music while Marianne got out her violin and began tuning it. "How many rehearsals have you seen Sandy attend?" asked Lillie sarcastically. Marianne didn't look up from the violin, but she could feel Lillie's pointed look. "Exactly. She'll never learn the song by tomorrow night, even if she decides to show up." She placed her music on the stand in front of her chair and reached for her flute case. "Besides, she won't be able to find that opening D-flat without help. She never has been brilliant at singing a cappella. Jim never thought we'd need her. He only added her as Janet's backup so that she would stop complaining about him not including her in his life." Getting out her flute, she said, "If he asks me, he should dump her."

Marianne grinned, then stopped tuning, and signed, “*He won’t ask you. So, what are we going to do?*”

“I don’t know. I can’t think of anyone else who could sing it, especially at such short notice,” said Lillie. She began warming up her flute, while Marianne practiced some trills on her instrument.

They knew plenty of singers, but this was an original song that Jim had composed specifically to open the first Spring concert in the park. It was unusual to start with an a cappella song, but it fit the outdoor setting beautifully, acting as the perfect transition between sounds of nature and the musical instruments. Marianne knew that the concert would be fundamentally changed and incomplete if they cut it. They needed to wow the audience and the sponsors. The city was holding outdoor concerts this year to help raise community interest in the park and to showcase local performers. Sponsorships were to be offered to a select few of the performing groups. Without the sponsorship, they wouldn’t even be able to keep the studio and rented equipment. Even if they could still rent the essential equipment on a performance only basis, they would be limited on where they could perform. She doubted that Jim or the others would think it was worth it to continue. Although she hadn’t personally connected with all of them, performing with this group helped her to feel as though she still belonged in the world.

She had gone on a few dates with Andrew, the guitarist, but that had not gone anywhere. The few signs she had tried to teach him didn’t really stick, so they just ended up sitting at the table texting, barely looking at each other. They might as well have been at different tables, or even different restaurants. Plus, as soon as Lillie shipped their names, and the word “Mariandrew” came out of her mouth, Marianne knew she couldn’t take any relationship they had seriously. Lillie had a cousin who was deaf, so she had a basic knowledge of ASL. That, and her extroverted personality and great sense of humor made Lillie her closest friend here.

Marianne had perfect pitch. She had inherited it from her grandfather,

or so the two of them had chosen to believe. It was a way of being closer to the man she so admired. When she was a kid, he'd made up a game just for the two of them where they would try to name the pitch of everyday sounds, like a car horn or a chirping bird. Just before he died, he had asked her to sing to him, in his way. He just coughed out: "D-flat!" and she'd had to think of a song that started on that note and sing it. He said she had never sounded as sweet. He'd told her that since he was weakening, her ability was getting stronger. But he was wrong. After he died, her voice had completely abandoned her. *What a waste*, she thought, *perfect pitch but no voice. Sounds like a bad joke*. The others didn't know about her ability. She was just the mute violinist to them. She even played some wrong notes in rehearsals occasionally so that no one would notice. Janet, their vocalist, was always kind to Marianne, but she would have killed to have perfect pitch. Julian, the keyboardist/pianist, was jealous if anyone claimed to know more about music than he did. Marianne had encountered a lot of jealousy before, so she seldom let anyone know about her gift. In any case, it was useless now. Marianne was bound to silence, only able to unleash her voice through the violin strings. She knew the opening song perfectly, but it didn't matter.

Jim walked in, looking worried but determined, and they all took their seats. "Well Marianne, you're up," he said.

Her stomach clenched. "*What?*" She signed, hands starting to tremble slightly.

He glanced at Lillie for a translation, but then he saw Marianne's anxious face and understood. He clarified, "You're up. We are moving your solo to the top of the show." He gave her a moment to take a shaking breath. Julian shot Marianne an envying look. "No pressure," said Jim, "but don't screw up because if we don't wow the sponsors from the first note, someone else will win out and we'll be rehearsing in my dining room." Some of the others laughed, but Marianne knew that Jim didn't have enough space at home for rehearsals. Even if he did, his house was not a good location for everyone, and there was the equipment to consider.

Marianne would likely lose one of the only remaining tethers to sanity she had.

“At least Sandy would show up,” whispered Lillie. There was a snort from the piccolo player, Cynthia, and a soft chuckle escaped Andrew’s mouth. “What about Sandy?” She asked so that Jim could hear. She didn’t quite succeed at keeping a note of sarcasm out of her voice. There was another snort from Cynthia. Fortunately, Jim was too preoccupied to notice. Marianne half-smiled, but her anxiety was rising.

“Okay, let’s get started,” said Jim. “Marianne, are you ready?” She swallowed, then nodded and raised her violin and bow. Despite Julian’s jealousy, there was no pretense from Marianne today. Perfection was required to affirm Jim’s confidence in her. She performed her solo beautifully, but that did not stem the tide of anxiety.

“Great work everyone,” said Jim. “Remember, final run-through tomorrow at 10am!” He shouted as they dispersed, and Marianne walked toward the door with Lillie.

“Are you ok?” Lillie asked, voice edged with concern.

“*I will be,*” Marianne’s hands indicated. Her eyes weren’t so sure.

“Well, you were nervous about the solo, maybe getting it over first will help.”

“*Maybe. I’ll see you tomorrow,*” signed Marianne. She didn’t really think it would help, but she needed to get out of there and home.

When Marianne closed her apartment door behind her, her shoulders slumped, she walked the few feet to her one chair and dropped into it, head in her hands. *Can I do this? Will I let them down too?* For the first time in months, as if hoping for a miracle, some level of improvement that would show she was worthy of this, she attempted to sing softly. There was no sound. Nothing. Her vocal cords may as well have been removed, for all the good they did her. She slammed her fist down on the coffee/dining table in frustration. *I’m useless,* she thought. After she had composed herself a bit, she texted her best friend, Kim, and asked if she could Skype video-call her.

No one had been there for Marianne the way that Kim was right after Marianne had lost her grandfather. She was the one who had gone with her for her ASL lessons because she couldn't go alone, and she needed someone to practice with. She was 10 years older than Marianne, and almost like an older sister, or a mom. Marianne's own mother's closest relationship was with alcohol. Kim text back and said she was free.

Kim's smiling face appeared on Marianne's tablet screen. Marianne couldn't help but smile in response, though her eyes betrayed her sadness and frustration. With her hands, Kim asked if she would like both sides of the conversation to be in sign language.

Marianne's hands formed the words, "*How did you know?*"

"Your eyes. What made you try it tonight? Did something happen with the concert?"

Marianne explained what was happening and expressed her feelings of grief and anxiety...*I just thought after three years of therapy, I would have made some progress. I let him down and now I am letting the other musicians down. He couldn't leave me much, and I have sunk it all into therapy that isn't helping me. If only I had my voice...* Her hands dropped. She couldn't finish that thought.

Kim shook her head gently, "*But you do have a voice.*"

Marianne's gaze dropped to her hands. "*You know what I mean.*"

"I do." Kim tapped her keyboard until Marianne looked up, meeting her kind and steady gaze. "*I do but look. You have not let him down. I think he would be incredibly proud of you. I know I am. You are opening the concert! Not long ago, you would not have felt capable of this. I think it shows you have made a lot of progress. Your confidence performing has skyrocketed from where it was. Maybe you cannot physically speak, but you make the violin sing like no one I've ever heard. Remember what he would say. Patience.*"

"It will come. Thank you, Kim. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, sweet friend."

That night, Marianne dreamt that her violin sang with her voice. It was pleasant to hear her voice again, but then the dream shifted. She kept trying to open her mouth to sing, but in place of teeth and a tongue there were

violin strings. The audience looking at her did not seem to notice anything strange. She could not move from the stage. There was no option but to continue, and finding her bow in her hand, she raised it to her mouth to play. With every slice across the strings, she felt agonizing pain, but she could not stop until she reached the end of the piece. At the end of her performance, the strings fell from her mouth. She fell to her knees and a dry croak escaped her. She woke, thinking for a moment that it was real, and felt with her, *when*, very present tongue for her teeth...which were accounted for. Marianne checked her phone for the time and knew that there was no point in trying to go back to sleep. She needed to get this day started.

After she got out of the shower and got dressed, Marianne saw that Janet had sent out a group text to everyone, apologizing for being absent and wishing them all the best of luck with the concert. She had also text Marianne separately: “You’ve got this! You will be amazing!” it read. Marianne appreciated it, but what Janet couldn’t understand was that even if everything went perfectly, the success would still feel empty. She looked in the mirror to put on her makeup but paused and looked into the reflection of her own grey eyes. The eyes of her mother, who couldn’t cope with her life without a bottle. *I refuse to let that be me*, she thought.

When Marianne was a young girl, because music came so easily to her, she had thought everything else should too, and she would be frustrated when it didn’t. Learning to ride her bike without training wheels had been particularly troublesome. She was ready to give up one day, convinced she would never get it right, when her grandfather had first given her his now unforgettable advice: “Patience, it will come.”

“What will come, Grandpa?” She had asked.

“Patience,” he replied with a grin.

She hadn’t understood then. At first, she’d thought it was a joke, but she understood later that the genius of the advice was that it referred to the co-dependent relationship of patience and skill. Patience developed skill,

and the process of acquiring the skill developed patience. It struck her now though, that he had meant patience, or the process of gaining it, was the more important thing. It was ok if some skills or abilities were not mastered because patience would be. *I will have patience, but I will keep trying*, she told herself. She opened her mouth to try one simple note. There was nothing but a small, choked cough. Her vision blurred, but she wiped the dampness away and put on her makeup, before heading toward her door and out into the day.

The final rehearsal was a bit of a mess. Marianne's bow slipped twice; Becca, the percussionist, got off-beat during the last song; Julian could be heard mumbling about incompetence under his breath; and Cynthia kept getting out of breath. "All right everyone," said Jim. "I know that wasn't our best, but we always have jitters before performances and that is all I am seeing here. We got the nerves out here, but I know the show will be beautiful, because you are all brilliantly talented and ready for this chance. I will see you all on the lawn at 2 for sound check."

Marianne went home for a quick lunch, which she only managed to take a few bites of because she was not sure if it would stay down, then changed into her black concert dress. The next hour crept by as she waited and tried, to no avail, to calm herself. Inside her, there was a spike of anxiety which warred with relief when it was time to go. As she drove to the park, she went over the solo in her mind to try to settle the nerves. After she had parked her car but before she got out to walk toward the big stage on the bright green lawn, Marianne sat for a moment, took a deep breath, then slowly released it. She reminded herself that this was a great opportunity for her and that her grandfather would be proud of how far she had come. She refused to give in to the fear of letting the others down. *I can do this*. She hoped her mind would convince her doubting heart.

The equipment was set up and sound check went smoothly. Everyone looked calm and focused. Jim went up onto the stage and the emcee announced them. It was time. Marianne took another deep breath and

gradually let it go. She stepped onto the stage and slowly walked to the microphone; violin held at her side. All was quiet except for the birds singing. As she began to lift her instrument, she glanced into the crowd and her gaze fell on a smiling, kindly looking old man near the front of the audience, standing with a young girl whose shining hair was in two nut brown braids. Marianne had worn her hair in braids like that when she was a child. For a moment, she was 11 years old again, looking into the beloved face of her grandfather. They were at an outdoor concert like this one. As it began, he had turned to her and said, “You will be up there one day, and the birds themselves will take their pitch from you.” She had forgotten she had that memory. Slowly, she lowered her violin.

And, for the first time in three years, six months, and twelve days, Marianne opened her mouth and sang a perfect D-flat. The birds stopped and listened.

POETRY



Samuel Colman, *The Rock of Salvation*, 1837

TANNER

By Jonathan Fletcher

Though I expect
no hereafter: no pearly gates,
no Rainbow Bridge,
I believe in you, us, our walks—
mostly side by side,
sometimes you in front,
yet paired, leashed as one.

Though I see
no evidence of Providence,
I believe in the prints
we made, left. May
the sediment harden
around one of ours, remain
for others to find, save!

Though I await
no heavenly reunion—
you, me young again,
forever free of pain, tears—
I believe in your tail
and tongue—wagging,
licking until the end.

Though I follow
no higher power, call
this life no walk with God,
I believe in the directions,

places you led me. O,
my dog, my dog, my dog,
didn't we go where we needed?

EST IN SANGUINEM

By Stevie Habern

D.E.H.

When I think of you, and I so often do,
I think of warm cigar smoke and music.
Good music.
The kind they stopped making.
I remember that the band is called Eagles.
Not *the Eagles*.
I remember you named me for a woman
Who sang of landslides and gold dust.
I remember the twinkle in your hazel eyes,
When I choked on my first 'ole fashioned at Red Lobster.

E.L.H.

When I think of you, and I so often do,
I think of hairspray and books.
Good books.
The kind where the good guys win.
I remember Michael Crawford was the best Phantom,
No matter what anyone else says.
I remember you rocking me as I cried
At that football game, you know the one.
I remember your chocolate eyes melting,
When you promised me I'd be alright.

S.E.H

When I think of you—
And love, I always think of you—
Ah, hell.

I think of everything good.
I remember everything good.
I see the blue eyes I was always jealous of,
And the blonde hair I could never pull off.
To speak of you is to reach down my throat,
And pull out my heart.
I think maybe God took one soul
And split it into two completely different beings.
“Semper Fi.”
We sure as fuck aren’t marines, kid.
But you speak Latin,
And I speak you.

MARLBORO LIGHT 100'S

By Stevie Habern

God Bless the woman
who was working the counter
my first time. When she found out
she was popping my cherry,
she reached between us
to take them back, her eyes
the same desperate shade
as Cassandra's.

"I don't want to sell you these.

Please, don't start.

Worst mistake of my life."

They all say that before
you've hooked yourself.
I do it myself, now.
Here's the contradiction.

Bill (a proud member
of the greatest generation)
found out about it
when i asked him to stop
on our way back to campus.
His withered eyes widened
as he threw his newsboy cap
covered head back and howled
in a genuine way I'd never
heard before.

"No, really!?! You don't!"

He goes from
talking to me
like I'm an obligation,
to talking like we
were in the trenches together.
Tells me about what it was like
to go hungry,
about his ex-wife,
about his regrets.

Doug (the hard working
good 'ol boy who lives
across the alley)
caught me on my back steps
one summer afternoon.
He paused on his way
into his home/taxidermy office,
grinned a conspiratorial grin.
*"Do your parents know
you do that?"*

He goes from
being a kind faced stranger
to an old friend
who can keep a secret.
Tells me about
the football coach who got fired,
about his work,
about his hopes.

Brenda (my second boss,
my second mother)
offered me one as a joke
at the end of our first shift together.
She laughed when I pulled
my own out of my purse,
her chocolate eyes twinkling
brighter than the drive-thru lights.
"How long have you been doing that!?"

She goes from
being a new coworker,
to being a partner in crime.
Tells me about
her other shitty job,
about her children,
about her love.

Is it worth it?

My black tar lungs
would tell you no.
My vacant stomach
would tell you no.
But my heart cherishes
these connections
as if they're gold.
Craves them like an athlete
craves competition.
Craves them like an artist
craves inspiration.
Craves them like a smoker
craves a cigarette.

LIGHT IN THE ELEVENTH HOUR

By Stevie Habern

God knows it's hard to see that light,
but baby, hear me out when I say—
it may not be big, but I swear it's bright.

Now we may be fresh out of fight,
and we might be out of prayers to pray—
God knows it's hard to see that light.

Our hands are shaking from holding too tight
as we watch all our resolve decay,
It may not be big, but I swear it's bright.

Fear's the best motivator—hell, maybe it's spite.
What if it's fire we need to light the way?
God knows it's hard to see the light.

Through ash and cinder, with heaven's might
Through blackest night or brightest day,
God knows it's hard to see the light—
It may not be big, but I swear it's bright.

Oh, we all well know it's hard to see that light,
But it's getting bigger now, and it sure is bright.

INHERITANCE

By Madeline McConico

I sit at the table, hands folded before God
as dad shouts out a prayer. Something like—

God come rain down on us. Something like—
God condemn us all. Something like

a young boy who never had the Love of God
like—Please, for god sakes someone say Amen.
I don't pray along.

My eyes flutter in disobedience
as I chuckle uncomfortably at my brother
knocking my feet beneath the table, quietly
underneath my dad's prayer.

I look at the fried chicken mom made
in the kitchen. Where she makes everything.
Like apologies and biscuits and prayers and 911 calls.

My father still prays. Curses while he does it.
God, I don't want no more of this.
God, punish them foot stompin',
Flag wavin', red neck,
Wood pecker white folk.

They got themselves stuck all up in our food.
Our teeth too.

I look at the fried chicken. The chicken
my sister won't eat.

Something about ancestral food.
Something about visiting her best friend
Valeria de Mexico. "They call it home," she said.
They call their food home too-
Enchiladas, chilaquiles, Elote,
her hogar, her inheritance.

My sister says, fried chicken doesn't go nowhere.
Doesn't take us no where but the roofs
of white people's mouths. The bottom of their feet.
Why can't this fried chicken be home too?
Where did it come from?

Dad prays and spits and shouts and cries.

*God punish them all for it. Let thunder
Rain down on them for all they done to us.*

Kandyce says, she tried rushing
after the inheritance that her friend Valeria's
family sang about. Thanked God for.

Found nothing but rushing water at the
Shore. Found nothing, but the cotton
tangled in her mouth. It left her dry and speechless.

My father just cries now. Over the food.
Over us— before he says.

And let all God's children say—

And we said it, we said

Punish those foot stompin',

Flag wavin', red neck,

Wood pecker white folk.

And we said it,

Amen.

THREE WAYS TO TIE A KNOT

By Madeline McConico

I.

His copper shiny head bobs in tune to Mania, buzzing with enough scripture to harm someone. He smells of aftershave every morning and wears a button up. This time he wears forest green. His collar is up and he holds two African printed ties in front of me. *Which one should I wear, Mariab.* I point to the one streaked with yellow— my favorite color. I rush after him heading toward the bathroom mirror. He drapes the tie around his neck, crosses the wide end over the narrow end while humming *Wade in the Water*. Loops the wide end of his tie under the narrow end and taps in tune to all that Negro Spiritual rumbling and rushing through him. *Tap your foot like this, Mariab.* I tap with him. I snap with him. He leans down to tell me this: *Never forget that we are African American, Mariab. And you, you are my African princess.*

II.

He's screaming at my brother's offense. Knocking, knocking the snap backs from their heads as they bounce to Bobby Shmurda's *Hot N*gga* and practice holding hand guns to the white man they're angry at. Dad looks away from the Jordans they stole scattered on the floor. Looks away from their Blackness. Tells them to turn that shit down. They ain't no hot nigga. They some hood hustling niggas. Tells them to pull up their fucking pants.

III.

He loops an African printed tie around my brothers' broad,
black necks —their hood hustling nigga necks. He quiets the
Blackness their bodies bounce and snap with. *We're an
African American family, you all*, he says. My father pulls their
offensive blackness under the words. Tightens the knot.

MY DOG HAVOC AS TIANGOU

By Calista Malone

He is on his haunches, paws holding onto the expanse
of space gray that is the refrigerator door.
Waiting like a shadow beneath the light
of the water dispenser for a bite
out of the moon.

Hopping from crater to crater on the lunar surface
like an astronaut. Imagine the moon
an apple. Imagine the moon a conductor.
Imagine it ice falling from the freezer door
into the black jowls of this divine dog.

The moon begins its eclipse as it melts
into water on his tongue. The dog, having no
concern for the repercussions, swallows
the moon rock—a softening cube—no longer
fruit or musician. Now in his belly, more magnificent,
it melts with acid and chicken chow. He sits
at my feet, unbothered by the slow death
of waves in the Pacific, no longer rocking
from shore to deep and back again but closing in
over the wreckage of Pangaea. Without a moon,
the world spins wildly off its axis, night spanning
miles upon miles of only blackness, days
just quarters of what they used to be and at least
a thousand of them. As he settles into

an afternoon nap, I consider
asking him how it feels to be legendary and alive.

**A PHONE CALL TO ANNE SEXTON AND
ANGELA CARTER TO TELL THEM I HAVE A
BOYFRIEND**

By Emily Mayo

...lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.

A woman like that is not a woman, quite.

I have been her kind.

- Anne Sexton, "Her Kind"

I think I want to be in love with you but I don't know how.

- Angela Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*

The payphone across from my newspapered
dwelling in the bad part of town opens a portal
to hell for \$1.25, and the devil accepts
the collect call to the witch and the werewolf,
old fiends of mine
old friends of mine.

I'm calling home,
to tell my mothers the news.

That

I fear I cannot love—
that I will bite
into the fabric
of the thing

and und o t h e f e e l i n g .

That I will accidentally unravel it with canine
determination and good intention.

Down to one,

solitary

t h

r e

a

d

I tell them that I am too hungry,
too wanting,
too animal.

That my wolf heart is not made
for girl body.

I fear,
I tell them,

that I might leave a red rabbit at his door
one night and never stop—
that I will kiss him right into the ground—

that he will see my crooked spine
and love me.

Canned GOODS

By Emily Mayo

I stopped buying jars after you left.
Like me, they softened at your touch.
Like you, they hardened at mine.

The lid, fighting my wanting hands,
bit at the heart of my palm to protect its innards.
Pickling for the sake of preserving.
Rotting without consumption.

And how hungry I was.

Now, I buy cans,
generous in their undressing,
obliging to the gentle pull of a finger
that says, *come here*.

Sharing their deliciousness
without resistance or hesitation,
so I can reach my hands into the soul of it
and devour.

The taste is sweeter without the struggle,
and I am full.

HANDS OF WRATH

By Lauryn Martin

You dangle dangerously over the fire without a care,
clinging to the web of lies that you've surrounded yourself with.
And what is it that holds you back from the crackling flare?
Nothing but the unseen hands of the Blacksmith.

The black clouds of smoke billow as the flames lick
the strands of complacency that you sit comfortably on.
Suddenly, your foot slips and you begin to panic
as the heat reminds you of mistakes forgone.

The orange claws of wrath dig into your skin,
and drag you down into the bottomless pit.
You cry out in agony but the ashes only grin.
The inferno's blade sharper than wit.

Just when you think you can take no more,
a pair of tongs retracts you from the fire.
Your burns are soothed as are your sores,
but the water is soon tainted with dirt and mire.

You then realize it wasn't just the flames you had to fear,
but the raging waves that threatened to drown.
The pressure hold you down, unable to steer
back toward the surface, so your mind shuts down.

Had only you been warned of the Smith's wrath,
you could have avoided the fiery aftermath.

CLICK

By Annie Seboe

Click, click, click,
Crisp sounds of my imagination
Spilling out onto the page.
The repetitive, quick clicks of deletion
And the silences in between thoughts
Flowing from my mind to the keys.
My clicks can create or destroy.
When clicked in certain formations,
Unite or divide.
One click on “K”
Changes “now” to “know,”
Causing two people to breathe the
Present moment together
Or only have memories to hold
Between them.
Two clicks on “L” and “E”
Change “only” to “lonely,”
Uniting lovers in solidarity
Or pushing two hearts apart.
My clicks can inspire love
Or isolation,
Build a life
Or ruin it.
The clicks are for me to choose.
Click, now, click, | now.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

JONATHAN FLETCHER

Originally from San Antonio, Texas, Jonathan Fletcher, a disabled writer of color, currently resides in New York City, where he is pursuing a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing in Poetry at Columbia University School of the Arts. His work has been featured in numerous literary journals and anthologies, including Arts Alive San Antonio, *New Feathers Anthology*, and *Yearling: A Poetry Journal for Working Writers*. Additionally, his work has been featured by The League of Women Voters of the San Antonio Area and at the Briscoe Western Art Museum and the San Antonio Museum of Art. In 2023, his work was also chosen as a finalist for the Plentitudes Prize in Poetry. He has served as a Creative Artist/Teacher (CA/T) for New York City's iHOPE, a specialized school for students with traumatic brain injuries, as well as a poetry editor for Exchange, Columbia University's literary magazine for incarcerated writers and artists.

STEVIE HABERN

Stevie Habern was born in a tiny village on the border between Ohio and Indiana. She now attends Ohio Northern University in Ada, Ohio, which is also a tiny village. Her short story "The Witch of Silver Gate " and her three poems "Questions from Sappho", "Answers from Sappho" and "The Sin-Eater" were published in the spring issue of the literary magazine *Polaris*. When not writing, she likes to go on late night drives, stare at the moon, and hunt ghosts.

TEELA KELLEY

Teela Kelley is a 34-year-old avid reader, community theatre actor, and aspiring writer. She currently works at State Farm Insurance and is an English major at Middle Tennessee State University. She has loved to read all her life, but only discovered her passion for writing a few years ago. Teela writes fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry. “D-flat” is her first short story, and she is thrilled to have it published! She deeply cherishes the written word and strongly believes in its ability to change lives.

CALISTA MALONE

Calista Malone is a poet from the North Florida Panhandle. She is working towards her MFA in poetry from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and has an MA from Auburn University. She has poems featured in *Gulf Stream Magazine*, *Saw Palm*, *Sheepshead*, *Pampelmousse*, *Broadside Print*, and *In Parenthesis*.

LAURYN MARTIN

Lauryn Martin is an artist and writer from Independence, KY, whose passion is to tell a story in every medium she uses.

EMILY MAYO

Emily Mayo is a Cuban American woman navigating early adulthood through the pursuit of life’s sazón (as long as it’s Goya brand)! Having graduated from New World School of the Arts High School, Emily has received a conservatory-style acting education, and now studies English as an undergraduate at DePaul University. Early introduction to playwrights John Leguizamo and Nilo Cruz inspired the injection of ethnic identity into the heart of her works. The writing of this Miami native reflects on identity and heritage, tackling the upsetting, unsettling, and taboo with humor and wit.

MADELINE MCCONICO

Madeline McConico holds a BA in English from Iowa State University. She has worked as the co-editor on ISU's literary magazine. Madeline is currently pursuing an MFA at Columbia College Chicago while working as a part time instructor in the English and Creative Writing Department. Her work has appeared in *Allium: A Journal of Poetry & Prose* and is forthcoming in *Mystic Owl*.

ANNIE SEBOE

Annie Seboe is a junior English Literature major at Huntington University. She works as a student content creator and is frequently featured on the University's blog page. In her free time, Annie enjoys baking, writing, and drinking too much coffee.

RACHEL WILLIAMS

Rachel Williams is a 2023 graduate of Illinois Wesleyan University, where she majored in political science with minors in English and law. While at IWU, Rachel served as Editor and Assistant Editor of *Res Publica*, a political science journal, and *Tributaries*, a creative writing and photography magazine, respectively. She also periodically wrote for the school newspaper, *The Argus*. In 2020, Rachel was awarded IWU Department of English's Essay Prize. Outside of writing, Rachel enjoys trivia nights and couponing.

