

The background is an abstract composition of bold, organic shapes in three colors: a vibrant red, a bright cyan, and a deep purple. The shapes overlap and flow across the frame, creating a dynamic and modern visual field. The red shape is prominent in the upper left and center, while the cyan and purple shapes fill the remaining space, with some areas appearing as layered or nested forms.

# ***R a b b l e***

a chapbook companion  
to pwatem

# Autonomy

noun

- 1. The right or condition of self-government.*
- 2. Freedom from external control or influence; independence.*

# Masthead

## **EDITOR IN CHIEF**

Emily Furlich

## **ASSISTANT EDITOR IN CHIEF**

Caroline Meyers

## **CREATIVE DIRECTORS**

Ava Blakeslee-Carter

Bobby Miller

## **SECRETARY**

Marlon McKay

## **WEBMASTER**

Madeline De Michele

## **SENIOR EDITORS**

Andrew Salsbury

Zoë Winsky

## **GRAPHIC DESIGNER**

Uri Hamman

## **COVER ART**

Bobby Miller

## **ILLUSTRATORS**

Karly Andersen

Rachel Bastien

Erin Christoph

Kayleigh Conroy

Jennifer Contreras

Kingston Delgado

Ellie Erhart

Adele Ingeman

Niki Jiang

Katie Nowak

Grace Rizzo

Seulgi Smith

Devany Solanki

Angelina Winston

## **EDITORIAL STAFF**

Jillian Allen

Caleb Beverstock

Wyatt Booth

Luke Campbell

Erin Christoph

Ellie Duff

Soledad Green

Rola Harb

Kate Kharko

Katie Nowak

Amita Rao

Anya Sczerzenie

Serena Truong

# "Tell the rabble my name is Cabell."

— James Branch Cabell to his editor, to help people learn how to pronounce his name. Cabell used the word derogatively but we are taking it back. These pages will showcase the writing and illustrations of our rabble—the ordinary students of VCU.



pwatem



## **Acknowledgements**

Pwatem would not be possible without the support of Virginia Commonwealth University and the Richmond community. Thank you writers and artists for trusting us with your work. You are the foundation that allows us to create an anthology of the best literature and art that the university has to offer. Thank you Jacob McFadden for your enduring support and the attention you give our journal on a daily basis. Thank you Mark Jeffries and Uri Hamman for offering the creative vision that breathes life into this journal. Thank you Allison Bennett Dyche for exposing us to new ideas and movements in the literature and art world that inspire us to make our journal better.

Thank you Dale Smith for your help in spreading word about our journal to the student body. Thank you to key persons in the Honors College, the School of the Arts, the English Department, the African American Studies Department, and the Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies Department, and countless others for promoting the journal. Finally, thank you Student Media for providing us with the tools to make this journal a reality.





## **Vox**

Glynis Boyd Hughes

pain rendered her mute  
they said speaking up meant she was bad  
and she never wanted to be bad  
praying to be heard was her Christmas wish, ungranted  
like pressing your nose against the window  
of a store you cannot afford to visit  
seeing the things other people buy  
without a second thought  
she did not know what to say  
or why it meant what it did  
but she knew she had to do it.  
these days she calls it as she sees it  
she does not suffer fools lightly  
some call her a bitch, others applaud  
she knows. she doesn't care either way.  
finding her say took a long damn time  
celebrating that freedom never ceases  
to amaze her.

## **The Culture**

Becca Dyson

Afrodisiac

Like the color of my skin

Toffee.

Butterscotch.

Coffee with cream.

I move like the river

All waves and curves and whispers

Flowing through your mind.

Exciting you.

Scaring you.

Not for sale.

My hips

My hair

My brown eyes—

Brown like the soil beneath the cotton fields

Coating the knees of my ancestors.

They are for me.

You've eyes like hornworms

On the leaves of tobacco

Mouth like cotton needing cleaning

Leaves a taste in my mouth

Like cigarettes and backbreak

You dream

Of my people and my culture

Wanting to take

And claim for yourself—

Imitation is not flattery

When the original is scorned.

Angelina Winston





## Words

Jennifer Lee

They said I was weak.  
Burnt and crumpled like toast,  
Called me cockroach and laughed at my wide nose.  
How are you black and depressed?  
How have you been folded over and over again like a sheet?  
How have you birthed another before you birthed yourself?  
How do you cry and want so?  
When will you have?

Well, I got it now.  
My black ass is making it.  
With my fat nose in the air,  
My child at my hip and Prozac in my pocket.  
If my momma ain't taught me nothing  
She taught me how to survive until I found something better.  
And I'm not going any damn where until I get what the fuck I want.

Call me what you will  
But I rise early and fly high.  
And I've been just miserable enough to know  
That misery isn't worth shit,  
Not even a living wage.  
So when you see me doing my thing  
Know that I'm doing that because I said so.

I am forgetting what you said. I am folding them up and sending them away  
from me, but they will come back to you.



## The Little Death

Elise LeSage

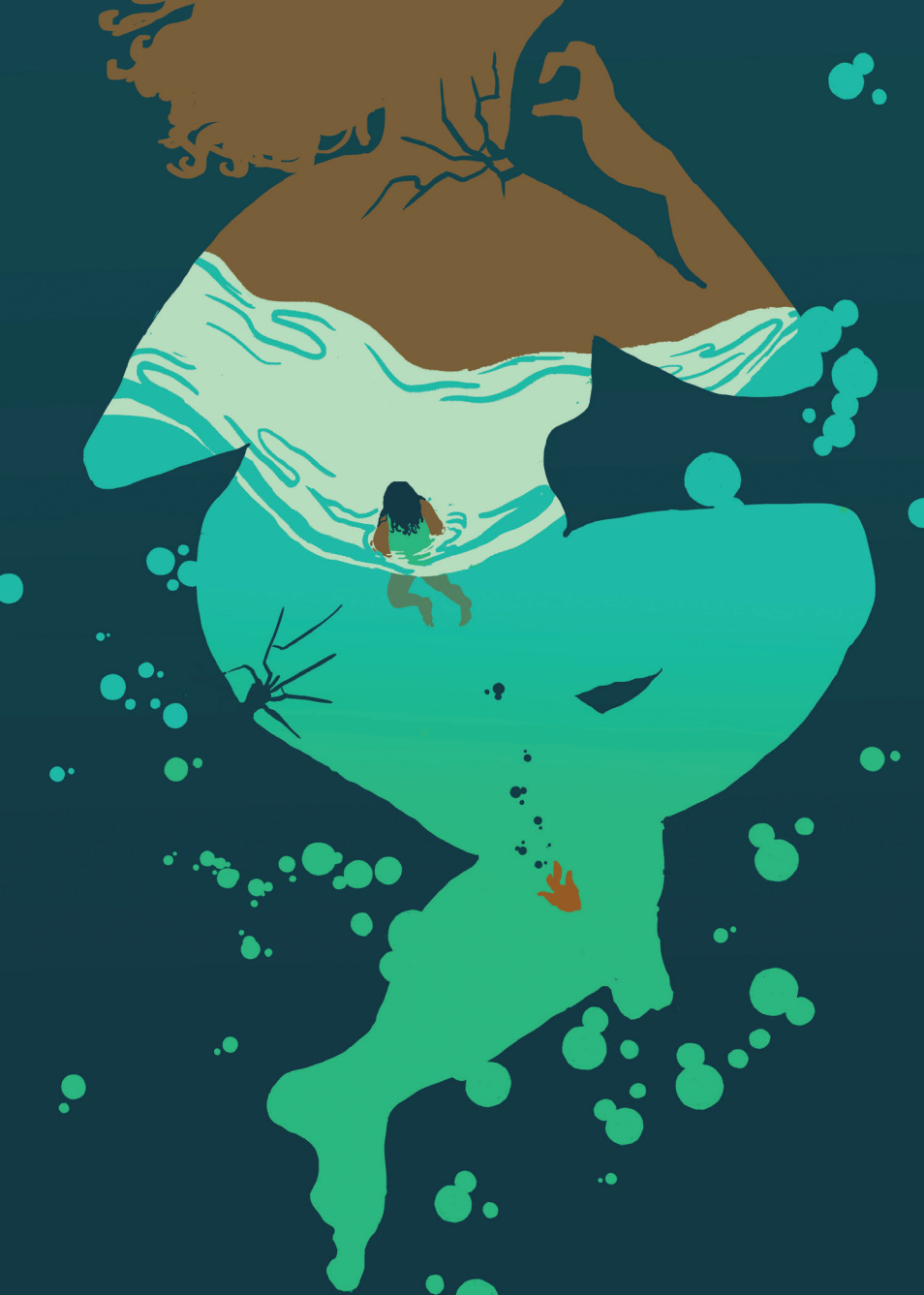
Between the legs  
a region like your homeland—  
certain details unforgettable, like this:  
this terrain, this bruisable warmth on which you first came  
into this world, entering by way of your mother.  
Nostalgic for the feeling of a body finally your own, you are  
remembering your first breath, then,

higher up the leg, you are cavernous and vast.  
There are latches to secret doors; there is a code.  
There is a language and a depth which denotes a certain self-sufficiency.

You always feel more like the hand  
than the tiny warmth it touches  
than those florid waves of blushing  
which lap towards heaven, receding to nothing.

Perhaps it is you in the way of dreams; you are  
the author and the unsuspecting audience  
now seized by the lungs, it

haunts your whole legs, your chest.  
It shows you why the French call it  
*the little death*  
as it leaves you  
on wings that beat in ecstasy, ecstasy.





## **The Longest I've Ever Had to Stare at Something**

Sierra Leach

I wash the headache from my hair.  
This body is the biggest burden I have ever carried,  
too much maintenance with each touch.

Sand collects under my breasts with the things you tasted like,  
just a little more subdued,  
a little less.  
Sand collects between my thighs,  
burns me away as they rub together,  
making me a little less.

Plaque grows thick over every inch of me,  
and sometimes I pick it out from underneath my fingernails  
when I am bored.

I keep forgetting how I look when I look away for too long  
and now "too long" is the same as the distance it takes me to swim back  
home again.  
I run my fingers in circles over the scab on my elbow with my eyes  
closed and it feels just like pornography.

I wonder what my world would sound like without this ringing in it.



# **A Theory of Flight**

Drew Salisbury

not that I could actually fly  
but that it is now a possibility  
and i suspect that this  
has something to do  
with all the new places  
i can fill up with air  
in my chest when i am  
home alone and say  
my new name  
for the hundredth time  
in the palm of my hand



## **Zion Zion**

Rose Rea

Repeated like a stutter on the back of the tongue, like two pieces of debris being carried down the flooded river that is Washington Highway on a blaring Friday morning. Uprooting baptist graves that say married for sixty loving years. That's a long damn time, you think, wishing that the thought was more impressive. Twenty years is how long that swaying grayed woman has owned the roadside restaurant for. She completes heavy french toast orders in under five minutes, working with what must be some kind of buried country crockery witchcraft. The raw ingredients for that kind of thing (asbestos, lead paint, chat piles, fiberglass) are tokens of backroad pasts kept in lockboxes hiding beneath vast construction projects and corporate ambition. Invasive species skitter across the dust on mechanical hind legs which prod at the trash, bending at almost animal angles. Inside, a copy of *The Last Supper* is framed on the wall just over top of a boomerang-patterned high chair with a ripped vinyl cover, angel cake stuffing, fungal blooming out from the wounds, and a steak knife sitting on the fold-out tray which has been waiting to be washed since five-thirty that morning. A bent-over cowboy dines on fried apples and long phone calls in the yellow-lit wood-paneled banquet room. This is the best breakfast they've had in a while; they just don't make them like this anymore

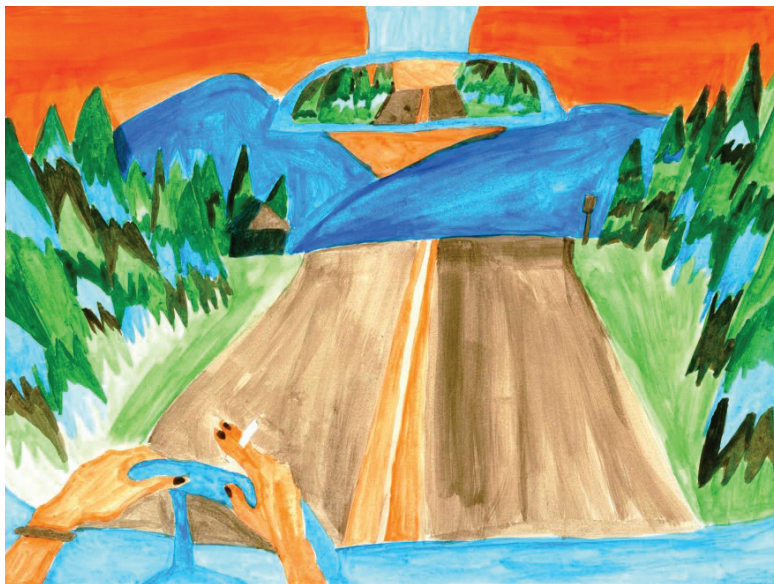
False idols are the subject of two-sided debate on AM radio this morning. Zion Zion.

The chain of the highway forms its links out of auto-shops and nail salons and Taekwondo workshops and vintage car models for sale on cinder blocks in unmowed front lawns, all rumbling beneath the track, sweeping in and out of frequency, returning and then hiding with unknown intentions, back behind their velvet curtains of sound and rainwater. It soundtracks the choked interiors of general stores, which, in decay, still boast the architectural vestments of history: rounded glass

seafoam façades, filling station columns buckling beneath their own weight and that of the rain fall, the sunburn lines of peeled-off lettering, discernible now only in mania. All of it seen through panes of fog and car windows and last night's record-breaking thunderstorm as the remnants kick themselves up from beneath the mudflaps of barrelling eighteen-wheelers leaving the parking lot of a Pilot Travel Center or a Golden Corral, midway through predicting the comfortable pattern that the stoplights will have at the next four-way intersection

Zion Zion, like conjoined twins ripped apart in botched anxious operations.

Girls execute journeys in search of a stick of certain plastic. First it was beneath a cherry red awning, same shade as the innately suspicious



Erin Cristoph



patina over her eyes. Inside they have Claritin and condoms and low-ceilinged galleries of fried chicken tins, but no moments of biological truth are to be found beyond, of course, the swampy smell growing to engulf this entire strip of the highway, the whole county proper. The valley between the twin trailer parks has flooded in the two minutes it takes for the enzymes to react inside of a pregnancy test. Unceremoniously inducted into noble legacies of public tears, of irrationality on display. She'll locate a sense of charity in presenting her desperation to others, to pharmacy clerks and adjacent truck drivers and others shouldered with guardianship over the highways and the nowhere towns that those holy lines spring into existence. At dinner they'll all go home and spoon microwaved potatoes au gratin beneath an overhead ceiling fan, surrounded by their terminally silent children. Just to hear a sound they will for a moment consider bringing up the red-eyed girl they'd seen walking in a daze through the miniature whorls of the Exxon aisles that Friday morning, but decide against it, filing away the image into the drawer of things to remain unrevisited

Zion Zion, like the two chords of the ceiling fan clanging together when the blades are going too fast.

She wants to cup the fatty face of her younger self and ask: Is this the sorrow you begged for, chickadee? When you wanted tangibility out of pain, the way the air feels like a baseball landing perfect in the palm, searing, as your arm is stuck out of a window at seventy miles per hour. She wants to add: The pain is stronger now, but more fun. It is a privilege to kneel over and cradle your spilling wound instead of an obligation. You dreamt of this route in your fetid teenage dramas, a path constructed out of boredom, artlessly, pushing hair out of your eyes and stomping to the dog whistle rhythm of self-loathing. Now the world has the bright unreality of a nightmare, the sweating of a dream about to eat itself shut. Your false fleshy idols play back on listless reels coming undone from their hooks, plastic fluttering like windowsill bugs in the ecstatic thrash of death. The film cells drain their color processing with too much frantic playback. The reds are pinks now

Zion Zion, like double exposure.

## Fortitude

Becca Dyson

How much bravery it takes  
to bloom  
The seedling slumbers warm  
and safe—  
Nurtured and nestled by  
the earth.  
Cool rain and gentle  
affirmations  
Give her the strength to  
push through.

How she musters up the courage  
and prepares to see the sky  
From her foetal position, she  
unfurls spindly green arms  
The earth yields  
to the seedling's hesitant prods—  
falls out of the way as she emerges.

Vulnerable, now she's abandoned the soil—  
but the breeze is there to whisper its praise.  
Sunshine is a kind of warmth  
she has never felt before, and  
Emboldened by its insistence,  
a little sprout begins to bloom.

Now a flower, she lifts up her head.  
Raindrops kiss her face again and again,  
conveying the clouds' admiration.  
The sun beams so brightly,  
feeding her full.

Our flower is brazen now, and wise.

The earth still lingers at her feet—  
familiar grounding comfort.  
Sunshine and rain and wind  
are not always gentle—  
but she has learned resilience.

Jennifer Contreras



Heavy soles are careless—  
                  they may trample flowers' petals  
But the bees are quick to rush in,  
                  sharing stories and consolations  
Of the times they have been swatted.





## Peregrinaje

Michael Cabezas

1.

A dog chases his tail,  
my head moved in a similar motion but  
was chasing sleep.  
Circular—and my neighbor watched with the same curiosity.  
Gestures left with oil from my skin on the plastic that surrounds the  
window.  
I lean back so that my neighbor can see as we approach the canopy.

2.

The intensity of the Sun was too great to distinguish the differences  
between sweat and rain  
before they evaporated.  
Its presence invited solace,  
to sit in the thin shower and breathe in the muddy banks and gasoline.

3.

Our feathers skim outer skin  
of the Tacana.  
Satin strides to progress  
as we deepen.  
The secondary bosque requires a blessing to enter.  
Their density was striking and took me in full embrace.  
La Selva, more domineering in comparison, with one breath  
bedewed, and two steps delude.  
My limbs sank within  
surrendered  
to the consumption of each other  
I fall, short of breath and look up

Devany Solanki

to remember the sun's inability to penetrate  
their marquee, let alone the moon and the stars.

I revive  
to realize their breath is actually mine.

4.

“With all of these faces”

I can't tell.

Found myself, staring  
into the features of the people  
and when a gaze is returned  
I wondered.

5.

De dulce y de sal  
pare por el miel.

Wait for me as I round the corner of the calle with the mirador.

Manejando entre las nubes  
reggaeton durante la misa.  
Proper bendicios directly from el padre.  
It's been a while—he could tell.

6.

Rose vendor gave me a double-take  
—twice

though I do wish there were someone to buy elote for me  
—and walk away.

7.

Snap one would expect to be whips in a cattle farming department  
heard in la calle during the parade of child dancers, then viejitos,  
miming manipulations of an angry bull  
that I will come to understand later in the day.



Towards the end, they're too exhausted to stamp anymore  
until the crowd shouts and they are shot with water from a plastic bag,  
noticing one being carried off fairly limp, but they didn't need rope for  
that one  
or the bulldozer.  
Maybe that's how it got its name.  
Yet another sort of guilty pleasure  
watching them being turned in ways  
tied in knots  
tumbled for points  
as I kicked the aluminum for noise  
seated on the barrier that separated the sand,  
that I would occasionally feel on my face  
as the chase flew by,  
from the drunken crowd—attempting to hydrate.  
Feeling side effects of the mamona—the slow roasted carcass left  
rotating in a small brick house  
but big enough to see from the road  
painted with salt water I presume  
and shawarma shaved directly onto your plate.  
Its remnants felt hours later,  
in my chapped lips, oil slicked face,  
and slow smoked shirt.



[pwatem@gmail.com](mailto:pwatem@gmail.com)

[pwatem.com](http://pwatem.com)

©2018 by pwatem

VCU Student Media Center

P.O. Box 842010

Richmond, VA 23284-2010

