



&?

RABBLE

a chapbook companion to Pwatem

"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.

Masthead

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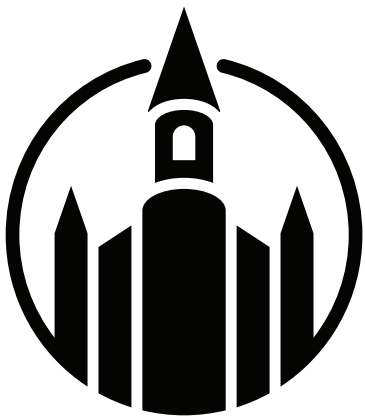


A question in symbols wondering;

What next? - What does it mean?

A question which in itself interrogates the bounds and integrity of written language and communication

So? - So what? - &?



PWATEM

Balikatan

Diana Thien

She wore the same patterned nightgown as last time, a year ago.
He wore a blue t-shirt from Navy Scuba School, his favorite.

She had a young face, Filipino blood.
He was already balding.

She decided against *Shelby*.
He thanked God for that.

She was dying for a cigarette.
He offered his dip, jokingly.

She called the nurse *puta* under her breath.
He chuckled and shook his head.

She watched her pulse rise and fall on the monitor.
He watched Family Guy on the blocky tv in the corner.

She couldn't get *high-risk pregnancy* out of her head.
He couldn't help but notice the doctor looked like Wilford Brimley.

She prayed with beads and candles the nurses wouldn't let her light.
He flipped through catalogs.

She retraced her steps to this moment.
He smiled silently in his paternity.

She wanted this to be over with.
He suggested they get Burger King to celebrate.
She'd rather not.





Sonnet to a Subway Bag

Max Motmans

Subway bag cast in thermoplastic, in
one of a hundred injection molds, you
were born wrongly, of heat and of oil.
you're toxic, they say, to fish and birds but
your microplastic particles live in
us all, you are part of us subway bag.
you are so special, you know how to live
as trash, you know how to live eternally
trampled, so many steps since your first flight:
Subway bag, you were cast from a window
of a 2008 Honda Civic
Thrown, you floated, so angelic for one
Moment in the wind, haloed in the sun
Subway bag, when I see you I see you

That Thing in my Throat

Noel Elias

put your ear to my thigh
do you see
 it's where all the words are coming from

still buried within the muscle we formed when we got down to pray
as children
mom always took me to do so underneath the magnolia tree in
our backyard

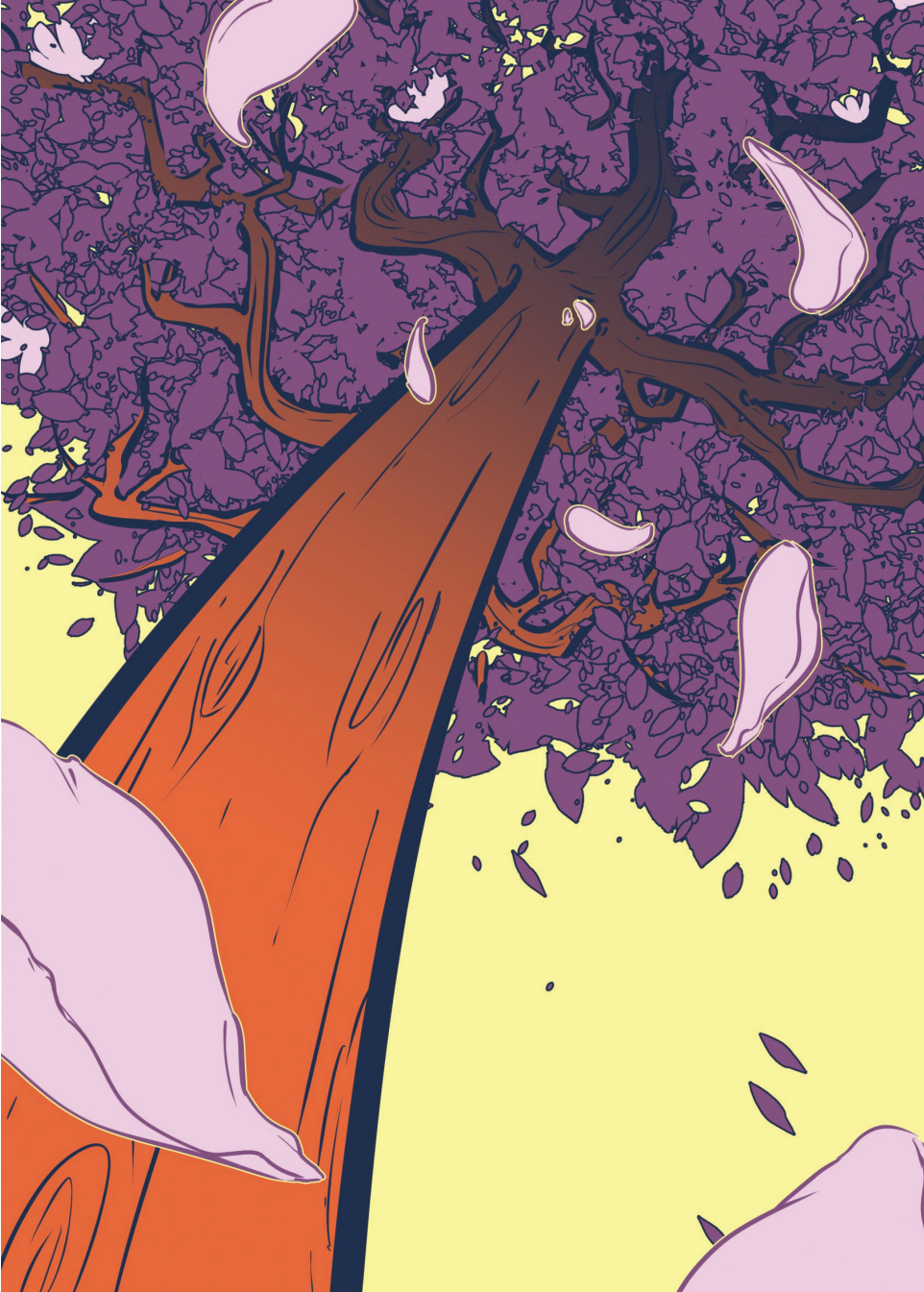
sometimes
the breath of her hymns would cause the magnolias to fall on my head
 I submerged them into the opening of my spine
 lift up my shirt
 you can see something sprouting

my brother always picked their seeds out to send
cascading on his knees
he stretched himself out
like a squirrel with freshly cut nails clinging onto a tree
and wandered through the hill he could make of his body

my eyes
however
always sat
 perched
 steamed
with the necks of giraffes
and how they could coil around anything they pleased

but my limbs have a tendency to fasten themselves tightly
with ribbons
and I still have not learned
how to surrender my weight
against another

Christina Duran





Horizons

Adam C. Mansfield

The first time that I met Rebecca in person, we were standing opposite of each other in a plain concrete stairwell—she was at the top of the stairs, and I was at the bottom—in Cabaniss Hall. We had met on the VCU Class of 2019 page a few months earlier, messaged every day since, and had planned to meet up our first night at the dorms: August 15th, 2015.

“Adam?” She suggested, unsure, from the top of the steps. Orange light from the window on the floor above us illuminated her upper half: straight black hair falling down on either side of thick black glasses, a constellation of concealer-covered acne on both cheeks, and her small-toothed smile.

“Rebecca . . . ?” I cocked my head and pointed shakey finger guns at her as if she could be someone else—as if any other person would be in this corner stairwell at 8PM on move-in day when the elevator worked just fine.

“Yeah!” She glowed at the mutual recognition. Her flip-flops slapped against the concrete as she scrambled down the stairs to wrap me in her arms. I took a deep breath as our chests pressed together, my face buried where her neck met her shoulder, while she began to squeeze the air out of me.

“Ready to go check it all out?” I asked, hands gesturing wildly to distract from how hot my cheeks had become. She had been complaining for months about how short she was and how it made going to concerts so frustrating, but we stood the same 5’3,” eye to eye, and that made my heart trip over every beat.

She took my hand, spread her smile wide, and led us down the stairs.

As we walked out the front door, I felt a vibration in my pocket.

How’s your first day going, babe? Love you. — Jesse

I started to reply, but my eyes pulled up to the message she had sent an hour before.

Go fuck yourself. I deserve better than you.

I turned my phone off.

• • •

In my first month of college, my father went from excited to tired, tired to jaundiced, jaundiced to hospice. As each stage transitioned from one to the next, so, too, did Jesse's patience.

Received August 23rd, 2015

You can see him any time. Hang out with me before I leave for GMU.

Received September 4th, 2015

He's fine. You're overreacting because of your anxiety.

Received September 14th, 2015

So? He drinks all the time. Of course he's sick. He'll be back out and home again just like last year. When was the last time you heard of alcoholism killing a person?

Received September 23rd, 2015

My mom is a nurse—you wouldn't be the one to sign the hospice forms. I don't believe you.

I tried to explain myself to Jesse, tried to get things back to how they were in junior year, when we shared our first kiss under the awning outside of Gino's Pizza, my hand cradling her face while my thumb stroked her cheek, but I found all of my explanations going to Rebecca instead. I found comfort on her bedroom floor, her head on my chest with my arms around her, as I whimpered out guilt-ridden sobs for my father to take his last breath so that none of us—especially him—would have to suffer anymore.

During the 21 days that my father unspooled in that hospital bed, Jesse visited only in hypotheticals. The last picture I have of my father is me leaning over his hospital bed, my arms around him in an embrace, his yellow arms wrapped around my back. Rebecca took that picture on the day he was hospitalized. She was the only person that came with me.

At my father's memorial, I sat next to Jesse, her hand resting on mine while the dull ringing in my ears washed out the priest's monologue. Rebecca had offered to come, had insisted on coming, but I had told

her that I needed to take Jesse. I thought that I'd be betraying my dad to bring anyone but the girl he thought I'd end up marrying, even if I no longer planned to.

As the priest called my name to say the few words I had planned to read for my father, Jesse squeezed encouragement into my hand. I rose, and Jesse rose with me. She hugged me, her face pressed to my chest, and told me that she loved me—that I would do fine up there. I thanked her under my breath, turned in the pew, and walked to the aisle.

The stage where the priest stood was decorated with flower wreaths and inflated photos. My dad's mustache-smile, his dark skin and salt-and-pepper hair, his swollen construction hands—all on display for a crowd of friends-turned-strangers and acquaintances-by-proxy that sobbed like widows.

A hollow lighthouse for my drowned father.

I remember, in that moment, I wasn't overcome with sorrow, but blind, black rage.

• • •

When I got back to campus, I found Rebecca waiting for me at the dining hall. She held me, limp with shock, until our legs became too tired to stand, and we sat down with our fingers interlocked.

"I'm here. I know that I can't fix this, but I'm here. It's okay."

I stared into her black eyes, flashed a weak but genuine smile, and tuned out to the numb in my ears.

The next night, I called Jesse. It was the last night we ever spoke.

• • •

I wasn't lucid until winter came around. January, 2016, I lay on my back in Rebecca's bed, her breathing slowed to a soft snore into my neck. *Comet* was up on her laptop, and we had reached the climax of the story: Lost love pursued in a desperate act of reconciliation, two suns set on a distant sky as the air itself seems to vibrate.

That night, she asked me, now, if we are going to do this.

"Do what?"

She kisses me, hard, pressing my back into her bed and placing my hands on her hips. I kiss her back, hungry, desperate. My stomach turns in on itself.

I begin to sob. Violent, choking sobs. She rolls off of me as I sit up, gasping. I see blurred fairy lights, the square glow of her laptop, and her now upright silhouette.

“What’s going on? Is it a panic attack? What do you need?”

I jump from her bed, my bare feet smacking cold onto her tile floor, and run out of her room, down the stairwell, out the door, and into the snow that had piled up outside on the dorm’s lawn. I collapse, knees to my chest, fingers locked behind my head, and scream into the white until the frost cuts my throat hoarse.

• • •

The summer dragged along in a bog. Back home, everything became a signifier, my father the ubiquitous signified. I’d walk into the door of our small-made-smaller, one-story home only to be slapped across the jaw with the phantom question of how school went that day. Our Jack Russell, Petie, would lick my hand as I fed him, and I would flinch at the memory of him playfully barking whenever my dad would chase him around the yard. I would spend each night with my eyes to the sky, trying to find the “blinking star” that my dad told me satellites were when I was five and wondering if that flickering in the sky was the asteroid that would eventually take him from me.

• • •

Rebecca and I came back to school—nearly a year to the day of our first meeting—and went exploring in the city again. We crossed the Manchester Bridge, stared out at the Richmond skyline, tried to grasp hold of anything that would allow us to share ourselves again.

I don’t remember a single word that was said that night, but I know that we left campus at sunset and walked back, past our new dorm on Grace, at 5 in the morning. We climbed the stairs of the parking deck on Broad so that we could watch the horizon birth a new sun, but an early-morning rainstorm swept in and drenched us as we stood there, side-by-side, laughing at the irony in the gray twilight.

What is Love (But a Hangman's Noose)

Jennifer Bui

Once I have tried to cry for:

the hands of mercy—calloused yet
gentle on my lacerated body, bandages of
forget-me-nots and butterflies, “It won't happen again”—
cruel forgiveness—you sneered like a blood-winged angel and
laughed,
backhanded my red-bruised face, arm to throat,
“No one can hear you beg”—
“No”—only to swallow my broken pleas,
unable to say, “Yes,” drowning with
“I love you” in a double suicide of fear and filth.

I have tried to forget:

the taste of your lips—soft with
honeyed blood, sweet with
peach blossom dew—
the feel of your skin on
mine—flushed with rubies,
cherries cloaked in satin's sheen—
the smell of your perfume—
snowdrops and gunpowder,
wildfire ablaze, gladioli and desperation—
the sight of you veiled in
moonlight—tempest of petals, a
seraph's halo, holy white and silver candlelight—
the sound of your voice—gentle
like liquid amber, solar
adoration, praise and dripping candle wax.

I tried to remember:

your fury and insults—barbed
wires and cat o' nine tails and hydrochloric acid—
the darkness of panicked
silence—collar of thorns, hoarse throat, blackout—
the stench of fake baby's breath—
equinox flowers by the Styx, sweat, and disinfectant—
the pinching of steel chains—
handcuffs too tight, blade to skin, claws to burning flesh—
the blandness of poison—
lack of consent, cigarette smoke, bruises of nightshade.

I starved myself for one,

“Forever mine;”

I ripped apart the night, thread by thread,

reaching for fireflies by the river of the dead;

I planted flower beds to hide

the courtyard of corpses beneath my shaky smiles;

I hypnotized myself with a

skyline's end, where clouds yearn for concrete.

My life or your love?

What is worth my senses, my memories?

How do I feel beyond this grime called tainted innocence?

How do I taste beyond strawberry kisses and iron?

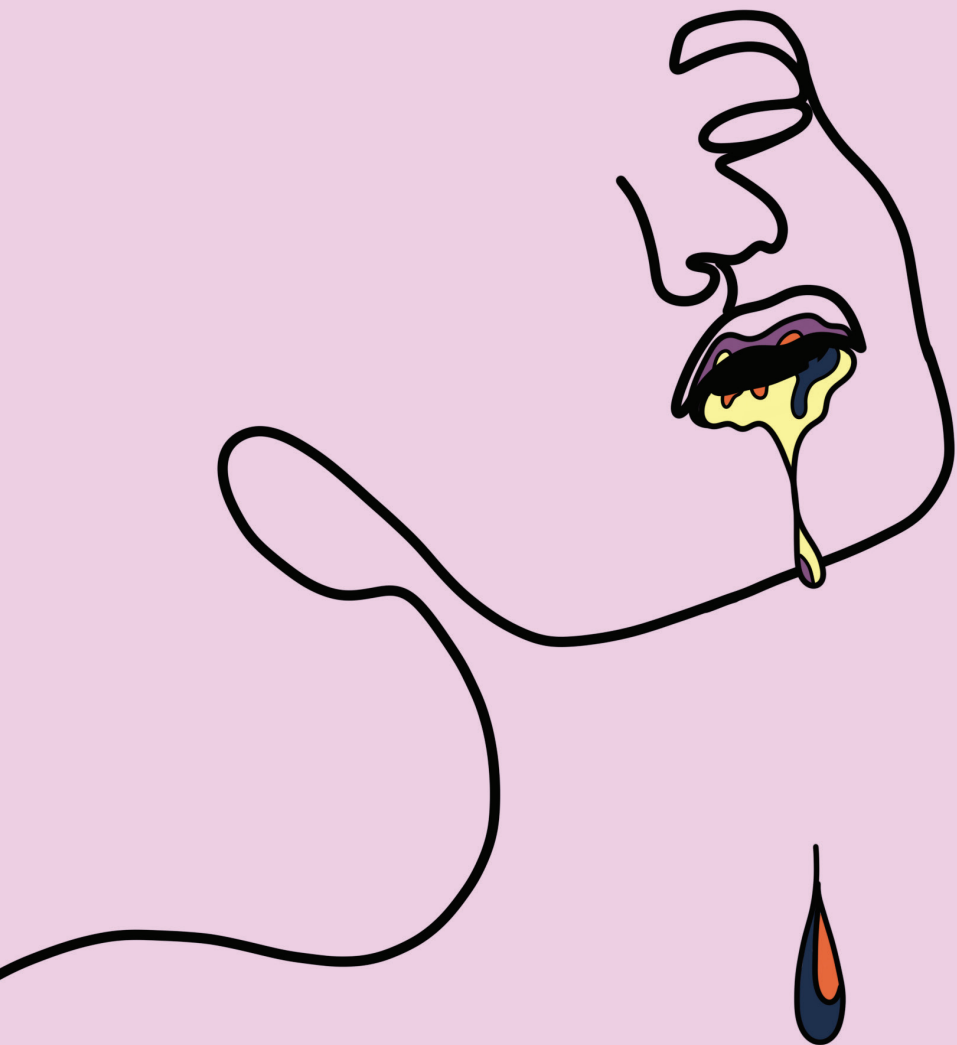
How do I smell anything beyond ash and bleach?

How can I hear more than a whip's whistle or pained whimpers?

How can I see beyond cypresses and rooftop tears?

A hangman's noose of memories and spring dream weights—a victim's
confession, a lover's
execution.





Phlegm Pangea

Angie Zhao

Lick peanut butter off a
spoon
 and knead it with her tongue
into a taupe wad maybe
 a sweet pit sandpaper in
texture

until it softens and thickens
likens
 into frothy tree sap absolving railroad
spikes or swallowtail
 wings or maybe into ancient glue
strong enough to weld
 continents back together—
not a grandiose reversal
just a
 crossed-stitched pinata a
king-sized quilt for
 galvanized pipe dreams

But like a dove of peace
 she does nothing more insatiable
 than glide through the galaxy
and drag along a dry stem

Ava Blakeslee-Carter

Yong Lee Laundromat

Abby Wolpert

My panties are on display,
swishing and swirling,
circling and sanitizing
in the washing machine,
dragged up Division Ave.
in a basket as porous
as Swiss cheese.

After inhaling the sud-scented
aroma of the load before, I stuffed
tight my belongings and initiated renewal.
Only a thin, translucent window
between my gyrating garments
and the shop's patrons-
a glass portal into my soiled secrets:

thongs speckled in crimson,
some from seventh grade,
faded ochre at the lining,
but too sentimental to dispose of,
gravy splashed bedsheets
from dinner in bed,
and a nightgown, lace trimmed-
like my mothers.

Perhaps this is intimacy
now that you are
gone.





Rip-Tides of Crimson

Taya Boyles

My decisions
Whether the intentions
Lead to a ripple of violence
In one form or another
Rip-tides of crimson
Pour out from my fingertips
Toxicity seeps through my lips
A hurricane of blurred gray
In regards to my stay
The question still lingers
Whether this short existence
Is for better or worse.

Blue Gift

Angie Zhao

Your cheek is
indigo like
november dawn,
fingerpaint splotches,
soft underbrow a night
crescent and the
dark thumbprint on your
temple, on pink neck
flesh making you
almost violet

I think your pen,
the one I bought you
from that old stone-
washed stationary stand,
is leaking

Bobby Miller





Practice

Tony Swenson

While we are fooled
By the thermostat, our
 Young eyes fill with rage.
 Our lungs loathe the heavy air
 As salty bullets collect into
 The foam wounds of the mat.
Converging at the knee,

 Spring-loaded like a gun,
 He hooks my leg with his claw.
 My gaze collides with the maroon horizon
 And the fluorescent ringing grows louder.

His slushy cotton shoulder
Soaks into my ear,
Past my rotted ear helmet.
Our breath
 Is as sharp as a shiv,
 Soles screeching like banshees
 On the bleach-wafting mat.
Thirst only tastes like
Red iron, plated with sand.

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