



# THE GRAIL

VOL. XV October 2, 2020 ISSUE 1

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### Nü CHAPTER LAST PILLAR

Sky F. offers a tribute to the figure of RBG, and underscores the threat of fascism in the nü chapter of American politics in her wake

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Erik B. takes us into the labyrinthian warehouse from which we might never return. And to think, all we wanted was a nü chair.

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### Nü DAY MIDDAY

Max N.'s story invites us to share a nü day alongside a narrator unsure of his ability to do anything.

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## FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Readers,

Here we arrive in October, having found in the constellation of our many corners a room of our own, a clean well-lighted place. From amidst this nü normal, we're so glad we've come to this bridge together.

Ema C. opens this issue on a reflective note, looking a greyscale self in the eye (1) while Max N. draws us through two days perched between the new unseized, the uncertain memories they soon become, and the company they keep (1-2). Next up, Sky F. commemorates RBG with an illustration that does justice to her towering legacy (3). If you miss swedish meatballs (or, more accurately, HUVUDROLL), head to Ikea with Erik B. to find all the furniture you do and don't need (4) before exploring the play between light and material in Sophie H.'s series of texturally rich portraits (5). Put your car in drive and then reverse to collide with Aislin L. S.'s poetry and photography (6), then settle into a rocking chair (sweet tea optional) on the porch to join Dan P. contemplating cats, cows, and purpose (8). Finally, looking for

the soundtrack to a nü normal? Stroll out of this issue bopping to a recommendation from Lauren M.'s latest album review of fresh tunes from Haley Blais, Vancouver, B.C.'s own nostalgia pop princess (9).

For web exclusive content, electric slide on over to **reedthegrail.org** to listen to audio recordings of this week's poetry as well as a slam poem from Albert K., not to mention a funky fresh podcast following the tale of one shirt in the Big Apple from Lauren M.

For Issue 2, explore the cozy, familiar, and anything that reaches out and wraps you up or in and takes root with the next issue's theme of **comfort**—all that brings it, takes it, and evokes it. We await with an open inbox and a steaming mug of your favorite hot beverage. Stay warm, stay well.

Warmly,

Sophie, Nerissa, Lauren, Erik, Dan, and Aislin

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*Front cover drawing: The Collection by Ross Tidwell.*



*Reflections in Black and White by Ema Chomsky*

# Midday

BY MAX NOBEL

The room smelled like cumin bread. It was fresh from the bakery. A three-quarter block walk from his apartment, which always felt too short—hardly qualifying as an excursion. Only far enough to be a purgatory, between the rest of the city and its domestic version. It didn't count as anything really. When he recalled what he did that day, it wouldn't suffice as an event. At best an ancillary detail, distinctive in its normalcy. Only so many things can have happened to you on a day where you remember buying cumin bread. Memorable now only for its current presence on the table, warm enough to soften butter.

It's only after three slices from the left corner have taken shelter in his stomach that the decision comes to him to walk into town. To go over the hill and through the tunnel on the two-way bike path running beside the highway to a coffee house that will charge tourist prices for what the machine on the counter next to him can brew right now.

He goes mostly to participate in the ambience of the place. To look at the turn-

table and the aptly disheveled pile of nineties culture magazines sitting un-perused on the table in the corner, to regard the digital prints of neon photographs posted on walls the color of cream left out too long. He goes to buy a pastry and watch its fat settle familiarly into brown paper as he anticipates the crumbful shape of its impending absence. He goes to breathe in the smells, to reconnect with those parts of himself that still accept comfort.

He goes to have a destination for his walk, something to organize its kilometers around. The land he moves over used to be cow pastures. There are enough people who still remember it as such. Its central character feels unchanged, as if it spontaneously grew one long brush stroke of asphalt that kept going until it had traced out an urban nerve system. The city has a soft gravity from this distance; suggesting that, when you account for everything else, things naturally move towards it. Cars pass in a rhythm that immediately begins to fade out. His quads tighten as his feet grapple the pavement, swinging his body forward with each step. The land-

scape is patently unconcerned with all of this movement.

It's just as bright out when he gets home. The wind grazes his skin in just the same way, a coolness lingering on its surface. The brown paper bag—greased and twice-folded in his jeans' back right pocket—the only sign that he made the trip out. Not much more of a story than buying cumin bread.

Restless energies pool slowly together to greet him as he closes the door. The textures of the lobby seconds earlier are already lost, with their kind assurance that he is still in the process of arriving. He locks the door, removes his shoes with the opposite heels, sheds his jacket onto a stray chair, plugs his phone into the charger in the kitchen, finally breaks this continuous motion to throw the bag in the trash away under the sink.

The loaf is still on the table. He's relieved he didn't forget to seal the bag. Placing it in the fridge carefully, he loiters a beat, letting his gaze be drawn to the oat

milk, hot sauce, and peanut butter, gathered somehow inconspicuously inside the door.

He needs pesto for tonight. He bought the white beans and everything. He's got to get the pesto. The good kind with cashews and parmesan and olive oil settled at the top so that you don't have to refrigerate before opening. This is a thing he's doing now, getting the pesto. It's an excursion. It's an event. He'll go to the mall to do it. Why not? There's a store there. He can see a matinee movie and put the jar in the cup holder. He's got time for that. People see movies

alone. Better yet, he could call someone. Get the pesto with them. Make conversation that follows wide curves as they weave through the aisles, even though they only have to go to the one. They can see the movie together. Talk about it afterwards. He can have them over for the white beans and pesto. Make an afternoon into evening out of it. Why does he never call people in advance? Make actual plans. Follow through on them. Repeat the process. It's not that much work.

He'll call them. If they don't pick up the first time, he'll call them again. If they don't pick up that time, he'll

leave a voicemail and text them and head over to the mall. He'll be doing something. He'll get the pesto. He can toast the cumin bread and soak up the fat left on the plate with its slices. Just one or two. He's had enough carbs today already. Too many carbs. Maybe he'll skip the toast. And, in any case, go for a run tomorrow. He could use a run. He could run right now. He needs to get the pesto. He'll get the pesto. He'll put on his shoes and jacket right now and go get the pesto. He needs to call them. He'll call them on the walk there. Call twice and then the voicemail and the text message. He already decided that. He'll go.

# Spoonfuls

BY MAX NOBEL

"You're up."

The cornflakes crackle audibly in my mouth. The milk blends between their fragments, swirling on my tongue.

"Yeah, I came down about fifteen minutes ago." I have no recollection of what's occupied that time. My face forms a grin, and I'm soothed by the familiarity of the motion.

He leaves to circle the buffet, warily eyeing the three freshly-squeezed juice options lined up next to the plates, their coloring nonspecifically tropical.

I look at the road we came in on three days ago, its jolted puffs of dust settling in the soles of my shoes, their granularity drowned out in the lush green pouring off every surface of the mountain-side. The color is hyperreal. I stifle

the urge to swipe up on the sheet glass to lower the brightness.

The cook at the omelette station fixes his gaze on a flock of clouds, grazing unhurriedly on the vast patch of sky. Searing swathes of yellow form atop the oil. Hills of green pepper and onion break out onto the surface, and a strike of blue flame tenuously dances. He seems to have already envisioned their textures. I wait for a partridge to pummel against the glass, or, just as likely, seamlessly continue its flight out of the opposite window. I remember to bring another spoonful of cornflakes to my mouth. They taste as good as the first time.

He places the plate with his omelette across from me and sits down, lifting the chair slightly as he scoots in. He tells me her flight came in an hour ago. She hasn't texted him anything. Steam purrs

from the eggs as if trying to draw my attention to something important.

"Do you know if she was on the plane or...?"

"Airlines don't reveal their passenger lists."

"How long till she gets here?"

"If we do see her, it'll be in about two hours."

"So we're just gonna..."

"We're just going to hang out."

His intonation picks up at the last two words, both of them still acquainting themselves with the higher pitch. I help myself to more cornflakes. I realize that I'm waiting for them to taste different.



*Last Pillar of Democracy by Sky Ford*

# Ikea

BY ERIK BESERRA

Dave rolled into the Ikea parking lot in his 2002 Toyota Corolla. Cars and more cars filled the lot. He made his way around several times until a spot in the back was finally relinquished. He pulled in, put the hand brake on, and took a deep breath. *This time will be much better.* Dave thought. *All I need is a chair. All I have to do is get one chair. I can do one chair. Just one. In and out.* He exited his steel carriage and embarked into the store. The escalator at the front of the store beckoned him. Dave grabbed a map from the pedestal, but he knew to not feel welcome. Alas, he stepped onto the escalator and took a few deep breaths. *One chair. In and out.*

Dave studied the map intently. *Bedroom, there might be a chair there. But dining might have chairs too. I'll just go to both.* Striding through the store, he attempted to navigate the array of furniture. There were chairs here and there, but nothing sparked his interest. *Why is this chair called Sven?* Dave looked around to see where he was but realized he was lost. His breath quickened. His heart began to thump against his chest. A worker noticed the man with a confused daze. "Do you need help finding anything?" the worker asked congenially. Breathing faster.

"I need a chair. Just a chair. One chair. Just one," blurted Dave.

"Well, we have Sven..." the worker was quickly interrupted.

"No no no! Not Sven. Just a chair for a desk. A simple chair. In and out."

"Oh, well we have desk chairs in the bedroom section this way." The worker began briskly walking off. Dave followed him out of fear of never being found again.

"So here is a simple desk chair it's..." The chair was just that, simple. *A simple desk chair. Nothing fancy. Just a chair. That's it!*

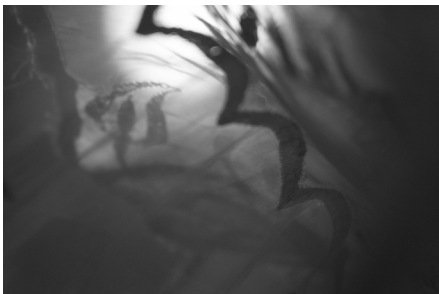
"I'll take it!" exclaimed Dave.

"Oh. Okay, well you will need to go downstairs to find this. It is in Aisle 18 Bin 24." Dave's anxiety crept in more and more. He was so close to getting the chair. The chair. *I just gotta go downstairs. Find the location. Can't get lost. Cannot get lost.* Dave miraculously made his way through the remaining upstairs section and stumbled downstairs. He found himself among towering racks of boxes eventually finding Aisle 18. *There it is Aisle 18. Bin 20. Bin 21. Bin 22. Bin 23.* Dave stared into it and the void that was Bin 24 stared back at him.

There were no chairs.

# *Abstracted Self Portrait*

*By Sophie Halpin*



# *roadkill/killroad*

BY AISLIN LIGHTER STEILL

*To be read forward then backward*

we must stop to eat eventually  
your black-eyed insistence

all soft claw and whittled affect  
there is no evading the crooked snap of your  
milded  
childheart

my timely surrender to tenderguttled suspicions  
swallowed whole  
the delta  
like the sea  
my chamomile ambition to drink you in

other saltbody  
like the Pacific at the wind's breath of  
my hunger at your hand

a funeral  
the idle tongue leaves in the ashes  
having proclaimed a grace to panic  
there is a stillness never granted to the mild

if not indifferent in death  
strewn prone on the road  
pitiful  
the animals  
we drive like and across

the training palmed me as though designed  
the shape of your snow cradle if only  
I would love aloud in the throatglazed morning



*Photo By Aislin Lighter Steill*





*Photo By Aislin Lighter Steill*

biting me christened  
 toothcracking you call me  
 grit in your breakfast  
 the dust in my name and  
 a pretext for cannibalizing the devil  
 as  
 if  
 fanged, you call me

inverted clean through  
 you narrate, singsong birddevil,  
 of our griefs  
 at the red demise of the hour  
 you yawn  
 still  
 you have never swallowed anything whole

there dives the haunt of a tighter coil  
 when I arch my back  
 in the crevice that emerges  
 where dwells a prophecy  
 in the corner of my eye

press into the seat  
 it dies gently in the lift and  
 it squeals sharper on the downgrade

to the old ways  
 we die quickly

with a tea-steeped focus  
 I hear you over the death yelp

# *Porch poems*

BY DAN PRIMKA

Arrogance.  
Standing in a forest  
*alone.*

To be a cow  
munching in the ever  
green meadow



Streetside crosses  
carrying the weight  
of our power  
and lighting our homes.

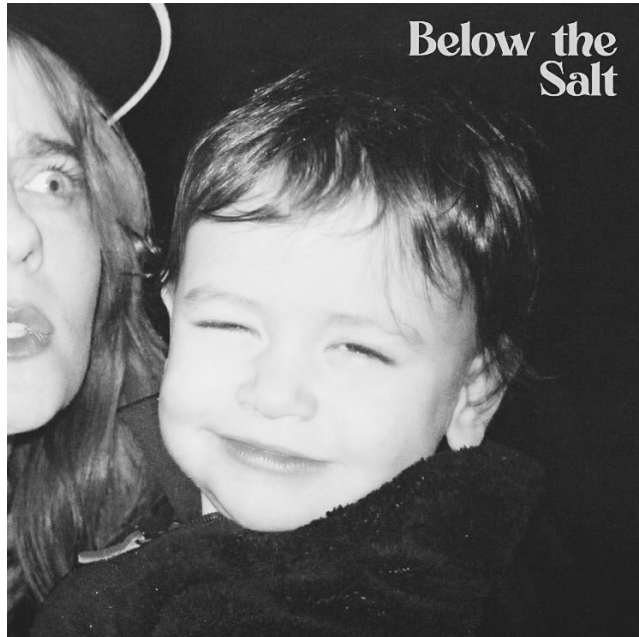
Purpose, what is mine?  
Cats are fascinating creatures.



*Germany Forest By Sophie Halpin*

# *Spoiler Alert: There Is No Coming of Age*

*Review of Below the Salt by Haley Blais*



BY LAUREN MONDROSKI



*Photo of Haley Blais By Lindsay Elliott*

Released on August 25, 2020, Haley Blais' *Below the Salt* is an album I wish I had during my first year of college. Coincidentally, that's when I first started listening to Blais, a Vancouver-based singer-songwriter and vlogger whose wacky sense of humor and DIY bedroom-pop bangers resonated with me, a freshman living on her own for the very first time and trying to make sense of the world and herself. That unsure first-year is a senior now, but no less unsure, and I think that's the point of Blais' debut album: her label writes, "*Below the Salt* is a coming of age story that recognizes that there is no real 'coming of age.'"

Standout tracks remind me of times in which I've faced a formidable yet exciting amount of growth during the past couple of years. "Too Good" is the song to listen to after a guy talks over you in conference, or you finally get the courage to bid farewell to toxic friends and lovers—as Blais proclaims, you are, after all, 'too good.' It's not an anthem about realizing you're better than everyone else, but rather better than the situation you've found yourself in, framed

in a dreamy and danceable soundscape of harmony and sparkling synth. "On a Weekend" is an absolute bop to put on while dancing alone in your dorm room, when the constant FOMO subsides and you realize it's more enjoyable to have your own fun than despair about being left out. "Be Your Own Muse," a lilting Carole King-esque ballad, is less an in-your-face-declaration of self-confidence than it is the end of a messy yet ultimately satisfying process of finding peace in being alone, with the chorus concluding, "I guess sometimes/you just have to be your own muse." This, ultimately, feels more real.

And finally, "Firestarter." This is the tearjerker, the one to cry to cathartically, as Blais' vocals soar at the 2:37 mark, wholly beckoning you to feel the weight of your own self alongside her.

I hope this album speaks to you like it did to me, whether you're experiencing these moments now or you're now on the other side, carrying them with you. Because you're never really done growing up.

*Mama's Hands By Aislin Lighter Steill*

