

# THE GRAIL

VOL. XIX February 16, 2024 ISSUE I



INSIDE

RELIGION. WILDFIRE. PANCAKES.

## THE REVELERS

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## FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Reader,

As we embark on our journeys through the new year (according to both relevant celestial bodies), and through college, it's time for the first issue of the Grail Volume XIX, with our theme of **bildungsroman!** Whether it be a more traditional coming-of-age, coming into a new place, or moving on to a different life stage, we've widened the definition of this literary term to mean many things to many different people, seen in this illuminating issue.

Journey throughout our prose pieces, including Jake Alwitt's "Little Green Creatures" (4) and Elsie Wing's "The Revelers" (1). Or if you prefer to come of age with poetry, check out Peach Reeder's "Dear Myself, Myself" (3) or Anthony Valdespino's "So much to ask" (9). We even have visual art in this issue—see Emma Fan's "See Through: a self portrait" on the front cover.

After growing up in this issue, go wild with our next issue's theme of **chaos!** It's as open as it sounds,

so have fun letting your words run rampant across the page. No rules, no masters! Watch out for us on SB Info or head to our website at [reedthegrail.org](http://reedthegrail.org) for a link to submit your work (deadline is *March 1st*—a sort of pregame to April Fools', if you will), and to see other bildungsroman pieces that we didn't get to publish in print! Until then, sow discord and don't forget to do some homework.

XOXO,

Caroline "Care" T. Paden,

Adrian Keller Feld,

Robert Bourbon,

Inez Gallant,

Maxine Emilia Bresnan

& Declan Bradley

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Front cover photo: "See Through: a self portrait" by **Emma**

## The Revelers

By ELISE WING

I was eighteen and very lonely when I knocked on the door of the Nur Ashki Jerrahi Sufi Order's Dergah in Chelsea, Manhattan. The door itself was narrow with a metal grate on it, the sufis had tucked themselves between an Irish pub and a dim late-night lounge. I was nervous, wearing a long skirt and shawl I'd found at the Bushwick Goodwill. When the Wali opened the door, I told him that back in the Bay Area, I was friends with Amin al-Jamal, the grandson of Sidi Muhammad Sa'id al-Jamal. Hearing the surname al-Jamal (*literally: the Camel*), the Wali's face lit up and he welcomed me into the Dergah. Sidi, who had passed away a few years before, had been a beloved Sufi Shayk.

Inside everyone went barefoot, kneeled on sheepskins, shared glasses of mint tea. People stirred stew and cut bread in the kitchen, talked softly in English and Arabic, Farsi, Turkish, Berber. In the bathroom I washed myself the way I read on WikiHow: hands, mouth, nose, face, arms, hair, feet. I learned how people greeted each other in the Dergah: a deep head nod with one hand over the heart, often followed by an embrace. The light was warm and dim and it smelled like rosewater. And soon enough we were doing the Zikr, a musical chanting that seemed to morph and move underneath us, like a wave. There was singing, accompanied by the Santoor and Gimbri, and there was a spiral dance where you got to sort of hug strangers and hold their hands, which you don't get to do very much in New York. More people filtered in throughout the night, fifty or sixty by the time the whirling started. They said if you kept your eye on the crux between your thumb and your forefinger you wouldn't get dizzy. I got dizzy anyway. The rhythms of the Zikr echoed in the thumps and squeaks of the subway car careering around corners on the ride back to Clinton-Washington: *la 'ilaha illa Ilah. la 'ilaha illa Ilah*. Almost

I frequently had no idea what was happening. I arrived only knowing sufism from poetry: Rumi and *The Conference of the Birds*, and bits Amin had fed me. That was the real reason I ended up at the Dergah—I missed Amin. He is in grad school now, becoming an arachnologist, but back then he studied insects, a fixation so complete he felt compelled to eat them: fried grasshoppers, roly-polys and bees in teriyaki sauce. At the 24-hour Korean grocery store I found a can of silk worms in black bean sauce that I mailed to him. We had spent the previous summer reading each other's science fiction stories, listening to doom metal and making sculptures that we hid in the oak trees of the San Geronimo Valley. *They're totems*, he said. *Not idols*.

I attended the Dergah semi-regularly for about a year. Once I showed up, hoping to attend Zikr as usual, and there was a memorial service happening for a member of the Dergah. I can't remember his name. He had been twenty-six years old, and in his picture he was handsome, smiling through a thick beard as he stood on a kitesurfing board. He worked at a bakery. His supervisor said on his first opening shift, he blasted Iron Maiden through the bakery speakers, to wake the customers up.

In the end, I didn't study sufism hard enough to understand what was happening around me in the Dergah: I didn't take the Shaha-da, I never converted. The plague year came. I left New York. But a year later I found myself dropping my phone in a metal bowl to amplify "Run to the Hills" while mixing pancakes for my coworkers, and thinking about the man whose name I couldn't remember. Rain buffered the canvas tent. Butter and batter sizzled against cast iron. It was dark out, and we needed a flashlight to see if the pancake undersides were oozy, or burned, or



maybe perfect. We weren't really awake yet, but we were trying. That was the spring we spent in the burn scar north of Santa Cruz, clearing trails and roads of charred, fallen debris. The fire swept through six months earlier, but once, as we were digging out a drainage swale, we found a pocket of roots clinging to some smoldering warmth. We picked it up and felt its heat like a baby animal, passed it around until it fell apart.

Over that month we watched the landscape change: rain turned the ash to black mud, anthracobia fungus bloomed up in orange polka dots, followed by parrot mushrooms and elf cups. Salamanders made their slow pilgrimages across the trail, tunnel spiders built cities in the bare ground. Redwoods and Manzanitas send shoots up from their charred stumps, followed by flowers: chickweed, milkmaids, trillium. In our last week there I found a hatchling garter snake in the old fireline berm. It slipped between my fingers and into the bracken. The foreman yelled to keep moving. I kept moving dirt and underneath it I found more dirt. My roommate asked me to scratch a pentacle into his pec with a bit of obsidian, *for protection*. Later, in a new city, I met a group with radical haircuts who were sure we could reach transcendence by flogging each other with salvaged bicycle innertubes. And then my friend went to Columbia to take Ayahuasca and ended up tied to a Poinsettia tree because she ripped open the Shaman's earlobe.

White kids! Why are we like this? Why do we need things to be so foreign, so indecipherable, so extreme, so utterly devoid of context, in order to feel like we've woken up? Why would I only say God's name in a language I didn't understand?

We sprinkled chocolate chips in the pancakes and watched the batter seize up. Once in a while, slogging uphill with a dolmar of gasoline over my shoulder, my breath sunk into a rhythm a little like Zikr: *la 'ilaha illa Ilah*. Someone stooped to lift a salamander off the path. But I forgot to tell you the important part. This happened in the Der-gah around midnight on a Thursday in November, 2018. We had finished whirling and everyone sat on the carpet, feeling glowy and warm. In the silence before the Shaykh spoke we could hear the rain outside, the taxis honking, and people coming out of the bars on either side of us, drunk, laughing loud.

"We can hear the revelers outside," the Shaykh said. She stopped on that word and smiled. "There are many ways to revel in the light."



*The Mexican Flag in Montreal by Natalie Martinez*

## Dear Myself, Myself

By HP REEDER

scrubbing the bathroom floors till the pink tile  
sparkles in between pure white grout  
i've got a snakeskin i'm shedding  
the only way to remember is to lose  
an action of contradiction,  
yet the hypocrisy falls away with every snip  
to cover is to project cruelty  
below four years of grime i can't erase  
is a warmth worthy of exposure  
i'm getting clean, baby!  
i'm revealing myself to myself

some things cannot be summed up in words  
only whispers into split ends  
cascading towards my parent's bathroom sink  
the "you-missed-a-spot"s into the dorm's drain  
people will see below this layer of change  
and i will not be pretty  
but i will be me  
i'm getting clean, baby! to myself, myself

memory leaves a mark i won't erase  
i'm making space for my love  
i'm nursing away the bruises atop my skin  
but there's scars on my bones that i'll press just to  
check on them - keeping them there  
for cleanliness is not forgettance  
i'm soaking up change  
there's a self to be cultivated here  
i'm tending to the garden of my soul  
weeding for life to be lived  
i'm getting clean baby! for myself, myself



*Brothers Only by Piper McKeever*



*Jhateau Floor by Piper McKeever*

## *Little Green Creatures*

By JAKE ALWITT

Goblins, ghouls, and little creatures that make funny noises and skitter around at night: they're all real, I saw one once. He was a little green guy, about two-and-a-half-feet-tall, wearing a child-sized Dallas Cowboys onesie, a pair of cheap star-shaped sunglasses, and he was smoking a gas-station cigar that smelled like my grandfather's fingernails.

He smiled at me. His nose was longer than his cigar, and his teeth looked like someone had stuffed his mouth full with a bunch of broken saltines. His ears were long and curved like scimitars, and his black hair was shiny like all those guys I'd seen in *The Godfather* when I'd watched it with my dad. Around his neck was a gold chain that went down to his waist.

He gave me the middle finger and flicked cigar ashes onto my shoes before disappearing through a sewer grate.

I saw him again one time, at a convenience store ripping open a 12 pack of canned beers he hadn't paid for. I just watched and drank my soda; watched as he pried open each and every can, and dumped the contents onto the floor. He would then crumple the empty cans into discs, and eat them like rice cakes, and once he'd finished the cans he ate the cardboard.

I glanced back at the store clerk, who seemed blind to the whole ordeal.

Once the little Goblin or Ghoul was finished with the box, he excitedly made for the door, but slipped in a puddle of beer and crashed into the wall.

He let out a scream that nearly made my ears bleed, and a long green tongue lashed

out from his mouth like an angry snake.

When he popped up from the floor his nose was missing.

*I tripped, and this happened,* he said, holding his nose like an unripe banana in one hand, *Fix it?*

I didn't move, but in an instant, he was standing in front of me, and he wrapped my fingers around the length of his nose, moving my hand to his face, and sticking it right back where it had come from.

*Thanks!* he said, and he grabbed a bag of yogurt-covered raisins from the shelf and threw them at me. I caught them, and before I realized neither of us had paid for them or could pay for them he was gone, and all I was left with was the ringing of the bell above the door.

I saw him again in my house.

My dad had just called me to go and help rake up the wet leaves that had gathered like a damp carpet in our yard, and I reluctantly threw open my closet door for my jacket.

I wasn't surprised to see him sitting there in the dark, this time wearing a child-sized Adidas tracksuit and gambler's sunglasses that hid his eyes. In his hands he held an empty paper plate. *Don't say anything,* he said, *I was just sitting here eating a large collection of black spiders and bugs.* I asked him to leave, and he made like he was about to scream, but instead he lowered his head and shamefully shuffled out of the room.

Once he left I saw that he'd left a three-dollar-bill on my desk, and later that day I

told my dad I'd found it on the sidewalk, but he told me it wasn't real and someone just thought they were being funny.

I didn't see him for years after that, not until I had a yard of my own.

I was lost in my own world, my senses dulled by the earmuffs I had donned as I piloted my John Deere lawn mower around my stretch of grass backing up to the nearby woods. At first I thought he was a squirrel, and I was about to swerve when I saw a familiar green face that froze my foot. The last I saw of him was his tiny body wrapped in a plastic Red Sox poncho, strangling a garter snake. Then the lawnmower lurched forward and there was the sound of a knife on steel, and I leapt from the machine in a panic only to see it trailing a glowing green goop that I tracked back to a writhing mass. I buried the little ghoul, and had a cry over him, and a beer. I even nibbled at the can in his honor, though I felt like a fucking idiot for it.



*Lose It*

By HP REEDER

On one day, there was a sunrise.  
Today there is rain.  
Today I have never been nothing.  
I just have to figure out who I am.  
It is such a big question.  
There's so much water flowing through  
This waterfall, even though it looks peaceful  
From far away.  
The fish swim behind a rock,  
Trying to fight the current.  
I want to join them but I  
Have forgotten how to swim.  
It snuck up on me, this forgettance of self.  
All I used to know was the fight against change.  
I knew how to stay still.  
The rain has soaked me to the bone.  
I have gone with the current.  
It is not spring and I am not a salmon  
And I don't know how to swim back up.  
I am here and I don't know what here is  
And I don't know where I've been and  
I don't care to know where I am going.

*Canyon Snow by Natalie Martinez*



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## *The Drive to Live*

By IZZY DEADYET

Okay, yeah, so it all started with my left lung, right? I was maybe 54 at the time, and the thing went and developed a tumor on me. I reacted poorly to the news, of course, spent most of a week taking long walks and screaming at the river. I almost gave up, you know? Yeah, I was just about to lie down and let it happen. I didn't have much in particular I wanted to live for, and it just... sounded like the path of least resistance.

It was the birds that did it for me. I woke up one morning and there was a finch outside my window. I sat there, and it hopped around, chirped at me for a bit, and flew away, and I realized that I wanted it to come back.

I wanted to be there, to see it come back.

So I got to work.

It took up about two months, getting the necessary supplies, and throwing everything together. Getting the blood cells to oxidize properly took some finagling, and I ended up having to shunt the process to a rather bulky external unit, which I had to carry around with me. I would later refine the design, of course, you have to understand I was under some intense time pressure to get the first prototype functional at all.

But function it did, and I cut the tumor out, along with both of my lungs for good measure, just three weeks before I was expected to kick it. By that point I had firmly made up my mind that if I was forced into being a thinking, feeling being, then I was going to at least eke as much joy out of the experience as I could.

The rest was honestly a bit of rinse and repeat. My

heart, kidneys, my full muscular system, they all eventually gave out, and I gave them each a personal overhaul in turn.

The trickiest one was the nose, I think. Replicating taste was a simple matter of chemical analysis to determine flavor, and then an obscene density of nerves to apprehend texture and shape. Smell, however, was much more complex. I ended up having to program each odor individually, and I've come across smells that I hadn't encountered before and needed to add within the last decade, even.

The nose also led to a bigger problem; that of the brain. Brain cells, as it turns out, do last quite a while when it comes to aging, but it did start to become a problem in due time. Full Upload wasn't a thing back then, mind you. It took massive computers, the size of a large room, just to store a mind. But at that point, see, I was entrenched. I had fallen in love once or twice, grieved a few losses, and watched a lot of finches gather nesting materials. It had taken a while, and no small amount of spite, but I had earnestly started to love being alive.

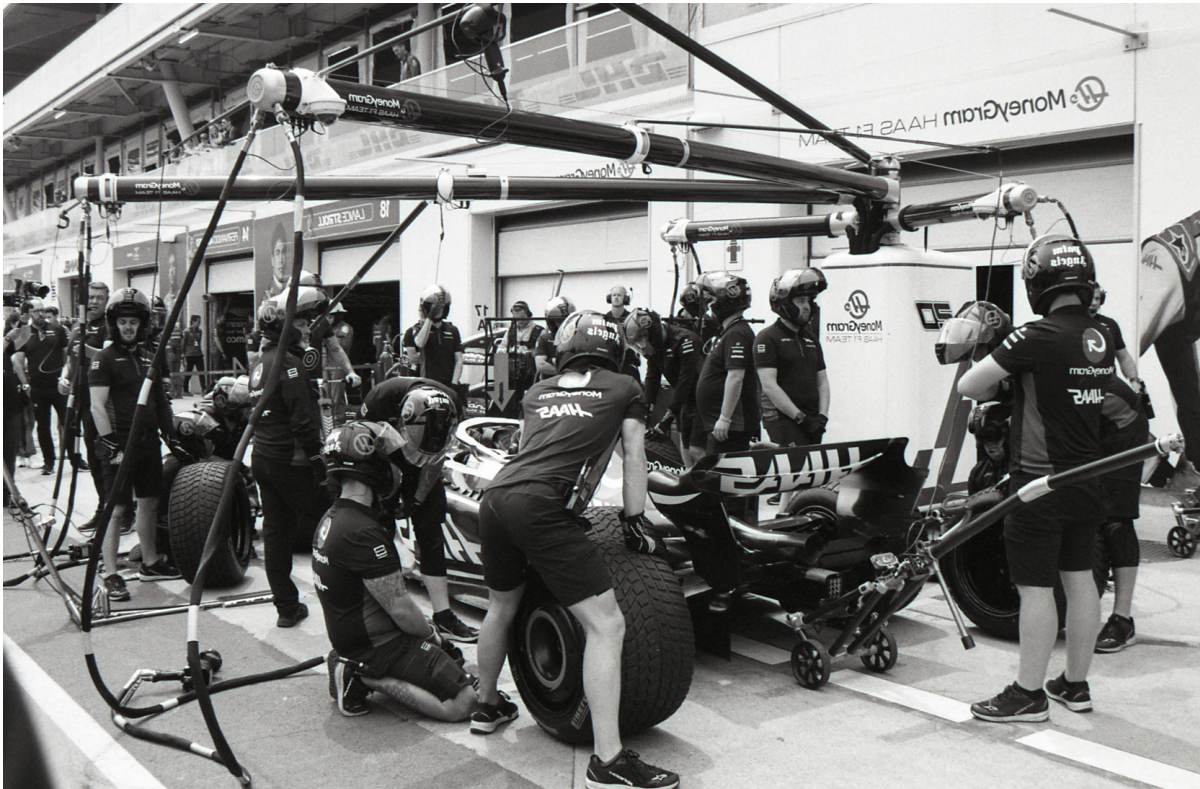
And so I decided to continue doing just that.

My first design used a processor in my skull, with a signal transmitted through gravitational waves, streaming information from a database under my home to a unit in my chest, wherever I was. It was terribly inefficient, and I couldn't move more than a few miles from my brain before I started to encounter lag (sidenote, if you haven't experienced your own mind skipping like a holorec with a scratch in the drive, I would emphatically recommend you avoid it), but I was, what, maybe 200 by that point? 225? Anyway, I

had been around the block, and had plenty of experience designing workarounds.

Oh, I hope you'll understand, but I can't really tell you what my current system is, as that would be something of a security risk. If you'd like, I do have the blueprints for my previous design on a drive somewhere, I'd be happy to send you a copy. And in return, could you send me a bit of the tea leaves you use? This blend is quite spectacular.

Yes, well, I suppose it's getting late. Would you like to meet again sometime? I know I didn't exactly leave any time for questions.



*Pit Stop by Natalie Martinez*

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*So much to ask*

By ANTHONY VALDESPINO

Those who truly know you  
say that you are the  
essence of all solutions, —  
that you are the answer itself.  
So have mercy on my state as I  
ask this question:  
Why does lust taste sweet like honeycomb..?  
Is it not vile to want some body  
and reject their soul? — for it  
would be a moving corpse  
I seek and not the  
life which breathes (your presence).

A composure is hard to sustain  
if I stand on mountainous slopes.  
How easy it is to tumble with  
laughter, to immolate  
myself in carelessness —  
an avalanche of fire.  
Goodness is the ultimate liberty, and yet  
it feels like a punishment  
I pursue; temptation rings bells of  
reward, but the ringer hides a dagger  
behind him.

O, Lord, bring clarity to my dark side, before  
it betrays the lighter half.