

THE GRAIL

VOL. XIX March 22 ISSUE II



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VOL. XIX

March 22, 2024

ISSUE II

www.reedthegrail.org

FROM THE EDITORS

With the semester making mincemeat of our brain cells, we turn to the theme of **chaos** for the second issue of the Grail Volume XIX! This issue runs the gamut from emotional turmoil to unraveling gender boundaries to incoherent explosions.

Inside, find such improbable prose as Piper S. McKeever's "Boyfriend" (2) and Joshua Tree's "Planned Obsolescence" (8). If you wish to eradicate order through poetry, see Anthony Valdespino's "The Weight of Emptiness" (7) or SB's "Plato" (1). Our visual art, including the front cover, includes the befuddling work of Henry McDonald.

Tame this issue's tumultuous frontiers with the next issue, **astrocowboys**! Our collective creative faculties have run dry and this is the best we could

come up with. Watch out for us on SB Info or head to our website at **reedthegrail.org** for a link to submit your work (deadline is March 27th)! Until then, attempt not to space out (ha ha) too much in conference.

XOXO,

Caroline "Care" Taylor Paden,

Adrian Keller Feld,

Robert Bourbon,

Inez Gallant,

Maxine Emilia Bresnan

and Declan Bradley

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Front cover photo: 3.3 by Henry McDonald

plato
By SB

Last night Plato asserted that the worst thing about living in trillium is that you can't, on habit, sit out side and stare at it.

He was two shots in and professing at me the beauty of such a building, but to me even a shoebox could be a building.

I don't think he knows anything, how could he?

He died centuries ago.

He definitely doesn't know anything about living in trillium, but he knows more about staring at it than I do.

Maybe that's the worst thing about living anywhere, not knowing.
not knowing what else.

not knowing anything but the view from the window.



Dinosaur Watch at Nighttime with Moon, Chair, Visitor, and Quest by Charlotte Applebaum

Boyfriend

By PIPER S. MCKEEVER

Theo was my boyfriend for the summer—*just* for the summer. We both knew that when August faded out we'd go our separate ways. Theo wore these flannels that fit just right but would've been big on me, and that summer the flannels shrunk suddenly in the wash. That's at least what Theo told me, shrugging and saying, "I guess I ran them too hot" in a deeper voice than usual. Once it started to get cold outside, like silent service at one of those fancy restaurants, I found a flannel around my shoulders and I didn't think to protest like I usually would. When I got back home, I went to wash it myself, hoping it wouldn't shrink some more if I tried my hand at it. I knew Theo was no good at chores, or really anything at all. Theo couldn't cook or clean all that well. Theo wasn't creative or athletic. Theo didn't have any real academic aspirations or aptitudes. It didn't surprise me that Theo would fuck up and shrink a flannel in the wash by picking the wrong setting. When I stuck it in the washer, I noticed that the flannel size was the real culprit. Theo's flannels were always mediums, but this one was an extra small—my size. I decided I wouldn't say anything about it.

We didn't do much together. The summer was short, as it always was, and we met in late June. I didn't mind that we didn't have much time together. Theo could make a couple of hours feel like a weekend. I could feel the time in the same way you feel drums at a concert kicking you in the chest, reminding you it's there. I never liked that feeling. My dad used to take me to those hardcore shows, hoping they'd let him get up front since he was with a kid. I'd end up crying and we'd go home because my heart felt like it was being manipulated by the beat, moving arrhythmically—I thought I would die. Sometimes Theo made me feel like I was going to die, like my heart was bleeding out inside of me. But that was only when Theo kissed me, and Theo didn't kiss me a lot; I always had to make the first move. The first night we kissed was

when we drank together in the parking lot of the local botanical garden. I stole liquor from the store I worked at and we sat in the car silently so if the cops came cruising by they wouldn't notice us. The city lights were low by that part of the Papagos, something about the zoo animals or the military base or something. It was the only place in the whole city where you could see the stars, and I mean really see them. Theo knew all about constellations from the arcane books piled up near the bed procured from thrift store deadstock and dingy metaphysical shops run by crones and their creaky husbands. Well, the books were mostly on the bed. That's why I never slept over, not even once that summer, though I would've liked to. When I asked if I could sleep over Theo would just kiss me again so I would feel like I was dying and forget all about it.

Theo didn't even mean to become my boyfriend. We sat down by the lake, which isn't really a lake, according to Wikipedia. Wikipedia calls it an "artificial perennial reservoir" which are all words I know separately but don't compute together. College kids would sit around it when there was nothing else to do, riding up with their bikes to light up joints and put them out every so often just in case the police decided to show up. They'd dole out fees and warnings to the poor souls, on many levels, who happened to be in the wrong place. Theo's dad was one of those more important cops so we didn't smoke weed in public places. When I mentioned it, Theo stared at me for a minute with these moon-sized eyes before saying, "It's like his eyes are everywhere." Theo always felt like there was someone watching, like at any minute we'd be arrested for some crime we didn't commit. Before we left the lake I joked that we could be like Bonnie and Clyde if we wanted to be.

"Like I'd be your boyfriend or something?"

Before thinking about it I said, "Yeah."

Theo didn't like when I said that metaphysical books aren't actually about real metaphysics and that those shops are lying to you and swindling you out of your money. Theo didn't care and would tell me, "Sometimes it's nice to just believe in something, anything." I knew we didn't have a lot in common, but that's what happens when you're home from college; you have no one to talk to about the things only your classmates would know. Our course catalog was filled with topics like *gender and sexuality in Korean film* and *understanding American Evangelical worship* which were niche, sometimes absurd, and possibly useless. I'd still burn thousands of dollars a semester on them to pad a schedule of game theory (which is less fun than it sounds) and Macroeconomics, which I insist is fake, but would get me a cushy job in a high rise if I couldn't find something more interesting and lucrative to do. I went to some fancy school back east, three thousand miles from home exactly, with *Oxford in America* inspired architecture and rickety old professors who griped about how much the college was changing, yet it felt like everything was staying the same. I couldn't imagine it any other way until I met Theo. I asked about why Theo stayed in Phoenix, and through a thick sigh Theo explained, "When I go too far I start to forget who I am." And I guess I understood.

Theo never called me *girlfriend* or *baby* or even *babe* which I detested but would have preferred to nothing. I did get a lot of *sweet girl*. I'm not sure why, but it made me feel like a lollipop. I felt like I'd just be licked and licked until there was nothing left. When I made Theo come with me to shop for shoes at Nordstrom one of the employees saw Theo moping by the insoles and said, "Your girlfriend's a keeper." Theo's eyes rolled so fast I swore they were gearing up to knock out some bowling pins. I may not have been a girlfriend, but Theo was certainly my boyfriend. It was evident in everything. The way we walked next to each other, the way we held hands, and, when I didn't expect it, I'd get wrapped up from behind with a hug likemy sister's boyfriend always did to her. At restaurants, the waitstaff slid the bill over to Theo,

winking usually. I thought a lot about my sister's boyfriend in comparison to mine. It scared me how similar they were, especially because Theo always struck me as different, which is why I didn't mind that we had nothing in common. Theo would ramble about something real, like crystals, that I didn't believe in before I rambled about something like NASDAQ, which isn't real, but I believe in.

Before Theo, I never thought I'd get a boyfriend. The first crush I ever had was this freckly redhead in the first grade who always smelled like one of those Strawberry Shortcake body washes my mom couldn't afford. I was so mad at that redhead, and I would have this impulse to bite her in the face so she could never talk again. I'd get so angry that I would cry every day in the lavatory at lunchtime when she would sit around with her pretty friends who didn't like eggheads like me. One day she saw me crying and asked me where it hurt, so I pointed to my cheeks which were sunburnt because my single dad didn't have a wife to tell him to put sunscreen on me. After she gave me a kiss on each cheek, I realized I didn't want to bite her; I wanted to kiss her. I asked her to be my girlfriend in the schoolyard and she said yes, but I think she thought we were just playing pretend. I still think about her sometimes.

Since then I'd only had girlfriends, and I liked having girlfriends; I liked the way it sounded, I liked the way it felt. I liked braiding their hair during lunch and giving them kisses in the odd spots where I knew the security cameras were blind at school. I liked having sleepovers while my sister's boyfriends had to leave after dinnertime. I could stay up at night with my girlfriend and conjure shapes out of hickeys, making rounded stars on our stomachs and arrows pointing toward our hearts. Even though Theo wasn't my girlfriend I was okay with that. I would've been fine if she was, but it just didn't suit her. It didn't suit her just like the name Thecla didn't suit her. I'd never heard the name before, it sounded peculiar and antediluvian. I was mostly right.

“I was named after this Saint who left her fiance to follow one of the apostles around. They tried to kill her but God *smited* them or something and she just ended up living in a cave.”

Theo thought it was funny but I took it like gospel, like the name decreed some sort of divine protection.

Theo walked with invincibility, so maybe she took it like gospel too. I noticed it in girls like Theo, the type of girls who were boyfriends. Girls who wore board shorts in the summertime and men’s cut jeans from the GAP. Whenever Theo went to a frat party and all the brothers went to send the girls who were clucking around in the living room back down to the basement, they never included her. It seemed to bother Theo sometimes, but other times it didn’t. It depended on the mood whether or not “woman” was stolen from her back pocket, like a wallet no one thinks about until suddenly it’s taken away, and all you can remember is maybe an ID was shoved in there and a few grocery receipts but you want it back anyway. It didn’t bother Theo when that meant drinking beer on the patio on the Fourth of July, even if the football and mechanical jargon tossed around were too culturally foreign for her comprehension. Theo liked it when it meant blending in and didn’t like it when it meant sticking out.

When it was time for us to break up and go back to school I knew I didn’t want to stay with her. When we talked, we didn’t talk about anything, or we just argued because Theo was dense and I was too stubborn. Theo wanted a wife and a family and didn’t care about fame and I wanted to be so important that I could win myself an obituary in the *New Yorker* and never know that I did because I’d be dead already. Theo wanted to stay here, let the city coat her lungs with its poisonous particles and have it settle there. I wanted to move somewhere unfamiliar and labyrinthine like Istanbul, which would take lifetimes to comprehend. Theo believed in things and I didn’t. When it was time to say goodbye I let Theo drive me to the airport. After we pulled into departures Theo

grabbed my bags from the trunk and hugged me goodbye. As we hugged, it occurred to me that I convinced myself for the entire summer that Theo wasn’t good at anything, but that wasn’t true. Theo was a good boyfriend. She was better than my sister’s, or my best friend’s, or even my roommate’s. Theo was so good I wouldn’t want another boyfriend after her again. I decided I wouldn’t tell her that. But when Theo turned away to get back into the car for the last time, something came over me. I was supposed to let her go, but I grabbed her arm and pulled her back in instead.



3.2 by Henry McDonald

The Bookstore

By WILLOW ROONEY

There was a bookstore, small and simple, tucked between the coffee shop no one went to and the busy street that grew larger with every passing car, threatening to swallow the store. Very few customers came in, and fewer still bought anything. She watched everyone who came in, weighing the words she would say if they asked for help. They settled on her tongue like stones.

A man came in, the bell ringing above the door like some sort of sentence. She waved, but he didn't see, already picking up a book and reading the back cover. Greedy eyes stared, taking in his shape.

He was scratchy in the way a man was. He had arm hair that poked and the whisper of stubble on his chin like he hadn't shaved in a few days.

Maybe just one.

His hair was slightly unkempt in a wind-swept way that she could never do. In the way she would look messy, in a way he looked effortless and she was lazy. His glasses were smudged with dried water from the rain outside, and there was a red bump of skin promising a white head on the tip of his nose. She'd be called Rudolph for it. A purple hickey stained the side of his neck, and he wore it proudly like a string of pearls. She'd be called whore. She would lie and say her curling iron burnt the skin, no one would believe her.

His fingers were long in the way hers could never be, with chipping nail polish and scribbled notes of what to do for the day. He had tattoos of two words from some poem she barely remembered. Two little words, sprawling in blue-black ink. She could never have tattoos on the back of her hand, somewhere so visible. She'd be stupid for the choice, and he was full of art and life, and it spilled out onto his skin. Maybe he just wanted something he could draw doodles around in pen ink, seeing how it washed away under the sink and

left two small words behind.

He walked into her little bookstore, though it wasn't really hers. She just worked there, with her apron that was a little too big with a porcupine assortment of pins. Maybe she felt proud of her apron, tightened it a little when he walked up to her.

Do you have any poetry books?

Of course they had poetry books. A small, independently owned bookstore crammed full of local authors and second hand copies of classics. The entire back room was stuffed with rhymes and couplets, sonnets and lyrics, and an array of letters that slithered and made her head spin.

She showed him the room, lost in the light from the tall window in the back that showed everything she—they had to offer, a siren's call to beckon in patrons through the front door.

He clapped his hands, rings clinking together in a way that bled musicality and she would be too loud for, take up too much room for. She watched his high tops move with buoyancy, covered in thick black lines of spirals and swirls. He walked on his toes, and he'd be called light as a feather and aware of the space he holds. He'd get polite applause. She'd get glares for being weird.

This is perfect.

Perfect in the way she couldn't quite taste, like fairy floss dissolved in water and then it's just sweet water. No one wanted to drink that, except the bees. She would be a flower for the bees, and he would be a man that held the perfect amount of space in an odd way. A creative way that bled out of the corners of him and leaked into the real world like ink footprints following behind him or puddles of chipping black nail polish.

Scratchy and perfect, a thing she could

never be behind the counter at the bookstore, ringing him up with the employee discount (it's not like she used it). He smiled at her in a way that made her feel a little lighter and a little bit sad.

Thank you—

His eyes, hazel, darted to her nametag hidden among enamel and gold.

Thank you Lauren.

Plain. Normal. Her name deflated on his tongue like a balloon let go. It hit the wall with a splat and sank. All the air was gone.

You're welcome.

She didn't ask his name. She didn't need to, want to.

He left a cloud of smoke behind, and it burned. Maybe she relished the way air stung down her throat and settled in her lungs, tucked behind a rib cage that threatened to crack. She leaned over the counter, half expecting there to be a pool of oil on water left where he had stood. There wasn't. Just a note with his number and a drawn smiley face.

It was crooked.

In the Beginning

By O. BLISK

Pool noodles. Five dollars. Holy war.

The Weight of Emptiness

By ANTHONY VALDESPINO

Everyone's desires run faster than greyhounds,
racing up an ever-growing mountain;
a peak that has never been touched,
could never be touched, will never be
touched, and yet they persist towards it.

In honesty, I too feel that same urge
as I stare: the perfect pinnacle, the achievement
no one can top... to see over others,
to be over others, to reign over others,
to laugh over others, to live over others.

My sanity has left me for grand expectations; I
make

a stew out of them every hour of the day.

When my wants spill down my throat, it
barely meets my stomach.

It spits them out in an irritable rage:

Give me food to eat!

And so I toiled in endless fields of crops

I could not reap from;

And so I stapled aimless thoughts on dreams

I could not awake from;

And so I jump down caverns shining gold, now

lost in a prison I cannot escape from...

**The starving flesh hurts so greatly; I eat myself
in a chaos.**

What can stop my teeth from gnawing in hatred?
my bones snap

like branches, my blood floods my chalice. I feast
on this wretched meal of mine,

and still I mope in hunger.

Amidst the state of my body in pieces, in the
shallowest bases of desperation, I feel Him in my
suffering,

molding my form anew; not in the flesh that I
have devoured

but in the soul which He has saved.

What can I give what you already have?

I am being held captive in folly and fright, —

my hope is bruised from battles within, —

my tears taste sweeter than water and wine.

He simply said, 'Trust in me,' and so I did.

And by His grace alone, every color came from
above,

lifting me higher than the tallest towers,

higher than the Nepalese mountains, higher than

the cirrus clouds, higher than the egos of pride...

And this weight was lifted from me, this weight of
emptiness. For

once, I am filled, — filled from rest! which only

He can provide.



Renn Fayre Scene, 1998. Courtesy of Special Collections and Archives, Eric V. Hauser Memorial Library, Reed College.

Planned Obsolescence

By JOSHUA TREE

The windows cast the walkway in iridescent blue, shimmering and scattered, an elegant light show. If you hadn't seen it every day of your life, you'd call it beautiful, but it's just normal.

It's a reminder that you're trapped on a ship in the middle of space, surrounded by nothing but distant, dying stars. The universe is much too cold for you to survive in.

But Clover's hand is warm. Not as warm as yours, but its chill is distinctly human. He's real. You turn your gaze toward him and admire his hair, a halo shining in the infinite light.

"I love you."

You can't tell if you said that aloud, if you even said that at all, if you were talking to Clover or some secret other, but nobody responds. You reach his room. You've been here before, you think, but you can't remember when. He unlocks it by tapping a finger to the latch, and it slides open smoothly, just as smoothly as yours.

The room's identical to yours, too. Except for a pathetic little potted plant. It must be plastic, of course, since the only real plants are in the parks every five levels. You stop looking at it; it makes you sad, somehow.

It's lonely, an imitation of what it should be. Like you and Clover, you guess.

The door slides shut, and you both collapse on his bed.

"The people you mentioned earlier, the ones who you've talked to about blowing this thing up," you say after an awkward silence. "Who are they?"

He smiles, and you start to melt.

"Of course! There's fourteen others I've talked to that would be interested. You are, too, so that's sixteen. I'm the only one who has any knowledge of making explosives, but Daniel's a mechanic, so he has a map of the entire ship. He knows the best place to put them. Not everyone's as useful as him, but the more we have, the better distraction we can make."

To be honest, you aren't fully processing everything he's saying; you're too distracted by the way his hair fans out around his head. You think you understand, though.

"Daniel's a mechanic?" you ask slowly, unsure of yourself. "I thought the androids took care of all that stuff."

"It's what keeps him from losing his mind. Most people have jobs, didn't you know? Meaningless, redundant jobs, but jobs nonetheless," he says. You catch a hint of condescension in his voice.

"He's going to help us destroy where we live. I wouldn't call that 'not losing his mind.'"

"Ahaha, you know what I mean."

"Yeah, I guess."

He sighs and starts twirling his hair idly. You almost ask him to stop, since he's messed up his angelic halo, but he's not an angel. An angel of destruction, maybe, but not an angel. And anyway, he can do whatever he wants.

"Can I meet them?" you ask impulsively.

"Maybe. If they want you to join. The Leftovers of Humanity are quite picky, you know."

“With a name like that? Guess they aren’t all that picky about titles.” You know the name doesn’t matter, but it’s fun to tease him.

He hums and begins staring at you, his eyes boring into your soul.

You don’t mind at all. You almost like how his piercing gaze feels, a reminder that you’re real after all, that maybe you matter to someone, just a little bit.

“Sure, I’ll bring you along. We’re pretty close to being ready, though, so I’m not sure what you’ll be able to do,” he finally says.

“I’ll look pretty. Or maybe I’ll be your plus-one for the apocalypse.”

“That sounds like something I’ve read.”

“Was it good?”

“No. It was rather derivative.” He laughs suddenly, then stands up.

“What?”

“Time’s almost up.”

Your face falls. You stand up, too, and make your way to the door. There’s still a few hours before you’ll be tired enough to go to bed, but you can’t spend any more time with him. It’s the rules, rules made by people long-dead who should by all means hold no power over you.

But you aren’t a rule-breaker. You aren’t the type of guy who sticks out of a crowd. Not that you’ve ever seen a crowd before.

The irony of that thought only fully hits you when you’re trying (and failing) to go to sleep that night.

He sends you a message the next day. Well,

you assume it’s him. Clover’s the only person you know who’d randomly send you a message, even though your tablet claims it’s from an unknown sender.

“Meet me at the park on Level 20 in an hour.”

There’s a smiley face after it. A few seconds later, you get a picture of his smiling face in front of a familiar tree.

Of course the tree’s familiar. You’ve been to that park countless times before. Never for planning a sinister deed, of course, but you recognize the tree nonetheless.

You wonder if you’ll recognize the places you’re going to blow up. You probably will recognize every inch of this ship, even when it’s bent and twisted, drifting in the emptiness of space.

You watch the lights go by for an hour, just wasting time until you can see him again. Him, and the rest of the Leftovers of Humanity.

What an awful name, truly.

You don’t have high hopes for them. But if Clover thinks that they might be able to end this rotten world, then you’re going to believe him. You trust him much more than you’d ever be able to elucidate.

0A lot of that trust probably comes from his ethereal beauty. And the fact that you’re in love with him, and the fact that you think he loves you, too, even though he’d never admit it, trying to explain that ‘trash like him’ (his words, not yours) could never experience something as hopeful as love.

You think he's just afraid of experiencing something good in his life. You are, too, that's why you're trying to destroy everything you've ever known. But oh well, it'll be fun anyway, and maybe dying will make both of you admit that you care about each other too much to live.

The appointed time comes, and you take the elevator down to Level 20. You realize you don't know how elevators work. You don't know how this ship works, either.

You've spent your whole life here, and you don't understand anything about it at all.

You're kind of pathetic, you think.

And then the elevator dings, reminding you that you're at your destination, and you step off into the (relatively) fresh air of the arboretum. He's waiting for you underneath the same tree he sent you a picture of, and you wonder if he's moved at all.

What was the point of both of you waiting for an hour, if neither of you had anything better to do?

As if he can read your mind, he says, "It's more dramatic like this, don't you think?"

And you agree. There's no point in doing something that isn't fun, after all, since you don't have anything else.

"Yeah, of course."

Then, you notice something. Or more accurately, a lack of something.

"Where's everyone else?"

"Hm, well, you'll figure it out soon enough." A smile plays across his lips, and he kicks his feet, as if he's a little boy on a swing set.

You're so focused on his feet, kicking back and

forth and back and forth, that you don't notice what's in his hand, that you don't notice his thumb moving up, up, even higher, to rest on a big red button you've never seen before.

"Oh," you have time to say.

He presses it, and explosions reverberate throughout the ship, giant clouds of red and orange puffing up everywhere you can see, ripping through the beautiful metal catwalks all above you, tearing the world to ash.

And above it all is the sound of his laughter cutting through the chaos, a requiem for your lives, a requiem for this doomed voyage, the doomed hopes of the humanity that wanted your descendants to make it somewhere.

You watch him, utterly transfixed, as destruction rains all around both of you. Screaming metal, screaming people, screaming androids. They're all the same, aren't they?

They're all going to be dead soon, dying or dead, so who cares?

You walk over to him, your beautiful love, grinning and kicking his feet like a little boy, his eyes the color of ash and blackened metal, and hold him tight as tears fall down your face for the first time you can remember.

And then you kiss him, his lips melting into yours, as the world ends around you. You think he starts crying, too, but you don't care. It'd be hypocritical for you to care, after all.



3.1 by *Henry McDonald*

The Eternal Feminine (Cézanne, 1877)

By JUNIPER WHITE

I got my new limbs at the Louvre! Da Vinci wants me! Da Vinci drools at the sight of me, Renaissance Woman, blood and bone and wings! You know that feeling when the bullet enters your bloodstream? That's my whole life now! Adrenaline! EXPLOSION! My new limbs are modeled from paintings, ripped from statues! I drip I DRIP with blood, it's sweeter than honey it's stronger than water it's everything! I paid for this body in blood! I'm chomping at the bullet between my teeth and it's iron like my blood! I've got a Mona Lisa smile and I've got her right hand sewed to my wrist. I've got a tank top I thrifted at the gift store and it makes me look HOT AS FUCK. I've got the whip they flogged Jesus with strung through my belt even though my shorts are already too tight. I've got an ornithopter and I'll take you for a ride! I'm standing in the museum bathroom wiping blood from my teeth with a tampon while a woman I've never met sits in the sink and commiserates about how lipstick just gets everywhere. I've got lipstick in places you couldn't imagine, I've got lips in places you couldn't imagine, I've got paint in every orifice!

You think I was born with eyes this color? You think I was born? By positioning the patrons of the painting in the distance the artist audits audience, forcing you into the fucking art, the little audio guide headphones babble like piranhas. By positioning you on the dissection table the artist asks if he can take you out to dinner. I think the canvas looks like a bullet hole, but the man admiring it sips his Frappuccino and tells me the canvas is actually a rectangle. I consider wanting him, I consider what his breath could taste like if he let me resculpt his throat.

Hi pretty girl! I wanna lick up Van Gogh's sweat though really he was more famous for his blood. I'd attach his ear to my head but that'd be cliché and I've gotta keep em on their toes, baby! I've actually got his sunflowers growing out of my shoulder where it meets the marbled bicep! Mirrors in the mortars, crushed and mixed into paints. I've got everybody's eyes on me! I can see myself a thousand thousand times! I've got watercolors intravenous, I've got oil paints metabolizing, I THINK I COULD FLY IF I FELL!

