

ILLUMINATI



Fall 2023 Writing and Art Competition

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Untitled Art

Margo Shappie



The Tracks

Allison Cruz

The knocking on our door that followed every train thundering past became quite normal as I aged. At its nearest, the tracks behind my house rested fifty feet from our backyard, a distance my parents constantly warned us was not as long as we thought. Every overthrown football or poorly kicked soccer ball would cause our little bodies to shiver as we approached the old, rusty, jagged tracks. The trains that traveled them weren't any less scary. Steel behemoths, each carrying a large brand and unique graffiti on their side, with cargo unknown. There was never a passenger train that came through our tracks, but somehow, they always brought visitors.

My parents were a special sort. My dad, an Appalachian Atticus Finch, always earned our respect through his never-ending pool of wisdom. From simple things like laundry to more complex issues like dealing with the loss of our grandparents, my father always had a calm and collected look about him with some wise words to follow shortly after. My dad was judge and jury, and my mother was the executioner. Loving, kind, and one hell of a cook, my mother was nothing short of a shining example of motherhood. However, if my dad ever pointed out one of the children's mishaps or failings, she would turn into one scary woman. My dad always said it was her days in the army coming back. The kids didn't really care why, we just knew to avoid her wrath—something we did by following the rules.

The first of these rules was that the kids were never to answer the door. The first time I broke this rule was in the third grade. It was my birthday, in the middle of September, and my parents had finally said I was old enough to have a friend spend the night. It was around four in the afternoon, and I was home alone. My friend was supposed to get to my house at 5:30, after everyone else got home from work. It was dark outside, making the pitter-patter of rain less shocking when it started. Then came the familiar sound of a steel behemoth stampeding down the tracks, and while that all may seem intense, after having lived here for nine years, I was used to it.

The truly scary sound was the rapping at the door.

I could lie and call it naiveté, but in all actuality, I knew that the person at the door was a visitor from the tracks. Knees trembling—out of fear or excitement, I still do not know—I reached for the silver door handle. A gust from the storm pushed open the door, as thunder roared and a crack of lightning illuminated the left side of the...woman?

I was expecting some ghostly specter, but instead, this elegantly framed woman stood in front of me, wearing little more than a brown shawl. Her pointed features and dark skin were accented by her bright, beaded jewelry and luminous, caramel eyes. Her face was twisted in a pleading manner, and she began to speak some sort of gibberish. She was sopping wet and shivering from the cold. I ran to our closet of coats and grabbed one of my mother's many rain jackets, as well as a thick winter coat of mine. I sprinted back to the door and gave her both pieces of clothing, apologizing for not being able to understand her. First, confusion wracked her face, then a soft look of understanding. She bowed her head as if thanking me, and closed the door. Her silhouette disappeared into the rain and darkness of the storm.

The second rule was to never invite the train passengers in. Similar to the first time, I found myself home alone with nothing to do except watch reruns of *Spongebob* on Nickelodeon. The house began to shake as another harbinger of industry screamed over the tracks. Three hard, quick knocks soon followed. Curiosity pulled me to the door, and I found myself once again shaking in anticipation. Short and thin, the wiry frame of a man was covered by an oversized beige flannel and denim overalls. His hands and feet were exposed, with blood pooling around the base of the latter. After years of working on my cousin's farm, I knew the pain of bloody soles. I could give him my old work boots, but they would do nothing if his feet still bled. I could wrap his feet with the bandage we keep in the house, but I would need to clean his feet of the dirt and insects that were packed around his wounds.

I started hot water in the bath and invited the man in. He stepped through the auburn wooden threshold, entering our familial domain of peace and comfort. The room grew frigid and quiet, like a funeral in late October. I guided the man upstairs to the bath, and after the water grew murky from blood and dirt, I helped wrap them with athletic tape and bandage. Luckily, my old work boots fit, and he was on his way.

I don't quite remember the third rule. My parents passed before it was ever important enough. Our house grew somber, visitors less common, and loneliness ever-present. To try and cheer myself up, I decided to watch *Star Wars: Episode IV*. It was my dad's favorite movie. The recording of Princess Leia had just started when a train rumbled by. Preemptively, I got up and made my way toward the door, a habit adopted from my parents. This thought brought tears to my eyes. When the knocking sounded I was already standing at the door, swinging it open. I was already thinking of the various things I might be asked for when the door fully opened. My heart swelled at what I saw.

"Oh. Hi Mom, hi Dad."

Fall Into Me

Kayla Roberts

You fall into my chest
Like leaves from the trees
Cascading playfully down
Through crisp autumn air,
To settle upon the ground that is me.

Fall into me.

I am hard, I am unchanging.
But your billowing softness,
Scraping my cracks and potholes
Ignites something of a spark
In my cold and desperate vastness.
Your tendrils caress the gravel,
The bits of plastic and cigarette butts
Left by lovers never truly loving
Are covered under your rainy canopy,
Shadowing my faults, hiding my loneliness.

Fall into me.

I may never touch the stars,
But the gentle crunch of you
Will echo through colder days,
Leaving me with a lifeline to the sky
And memories of a time that I held you,
Safe and stable in mud and concrete
Until the inevitable flakes of winter
Cement you, anchored under a blanket
Of serenity and slush.

Fall into me.

There, I embrace you
Until the resurrection resurges

And life begins to grow anew.
As the sun breaks
And I find you again just out of reach,
Remember that I am unmovable.
Yellow vests may tear me apart
And fill me back up,
But I am forever waiting
For you to *fall into me*
Once more.

Wooly Socks

Sean Hopper

When I wake up each autumn morn,
There is nothing I love more
Than putting on my wooly socks,
Of which I do adore.

I sure do love my wooly socks,
and everything about 'em.
The way in which they warm my toes,
Much warmer than I had 'em.

My wooly socks are brown and orange,
With a stitching of a moose.
For when I go pick out my socks,
It's easy for me to choose.

I really like my wooly socks
In sunlight or a chilly storm.
Although right now, I must admit,
They've become a smidgen warm.

Oh, I adore my wooly socks
And their colors, moose, and stitch.
If I am so bold to confess—
Oh wow—they're starting to itch.

Oh, they're so itchy and so hot,
They're making my feet perspire.
I really hate these wooly socks!
God—are my feet on fire?

I need to get these damn socks off,
I need them off of my feet.
I cannot wear these anymore,
I hope I kept the receipt...

Honorable Mentions

Fiction Submissions - Kayla Roberts and Mason Powers

Poetry - Margo Shappie, Maureen Wilson, and Jon Hine