Train Boy

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2019

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in Ceramics in the Department of Ceramics of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

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Train Boy is the name of a hallucinatory figure who has visited me throughout my life. He is not my only figure, but he is one of the most consistent and impactful hallucinations I have had. The work is an attempt to change my relationship with Train Boy. This written thesis tells the story of my interactions with Train Boy.

Train Boy's Story

I used to love the sound of the train, at once wild and homey. A promise that you'd be here with me soon. But you don't play or talk anymore, Train Boy. You stand behind me, head down, hands buried in your pockets. As always, the brim of your hat covers your eyes.
A threatening spectre in the room.
Your silence is deafening, oppressing.

Waiting for an opening, for the opportunity to climb on top of me, slip your cold hands around my throat. I choke remembering the pressure of it from that first time.

The train told me you were coming, and I saw you appear. I walked back to my room, hoping to have the chance to talk to you again. It had been so long since we actually talked.

I laid down in bed, and an instant later I felt your weight pinning me down, body frozen, voice caught deep in my chest. I couldn't get any air to my lungs. Your grip was too cruel. There were people outside my door calling for me, but I couldn't answer them. All I knew was the pressure on my throat, making me certain, I'm going to die.

You kept me there for hours as I muttered the same words over and over. "You're not real. You're not real." Trying to reassure myself. The first but not the last time I thought you'd kill me.

Every time I hear the train, you know I'm glancing back, to see if you're there. Maybe you'll put a hand on my shoulder or my head. I scrub my scalp, but the feeling

of your hand stays with me, like bugs crawling through my hair. I shave my head again to make it stop. Maybe the train will wail out, and you won't come at all. Taunting me, knowing that I expect to see you at any moment. I stay on edge for a week or more. My heart rate won't go down. I can't eat for the sickening anxiety gnawing at my insides. I'm one stressor away from another panic

attack hidden away in the bathroom. You don't bother to show yourself. Still, I feel you near me.

When did we stop being friends? Was it when she left me? You've become cold, only speaking in my head. Never out loud, like you used to when we were kids and played together. Do you remember how you sound? You talk like me when

I get tired or overly excited and begin to dip into what little accent I have. There's a twang to it, not southern, just what comes from growing up in the redneck center of Pennsylvania. Too many vowels. Wide harsh sounds with blurred edges. She talks like that too.

Why did she do that to us, to me? Maybe it seemed fun when we were eight,

like some strange bit of magic. What Kid wouldn't want to be a part of that? Did she just not Know how to tell me? I would have understood, but she put it off too long. Until her seeing what I did became my anchor to reality. She sees too, so I must not be crazy. Eighteen years living two lives only to find out one of them is fake. It's all in my head. I feel ashamed to admit what I believed for the

majority of my life, what I still believe if I'm going to be completely honest. She was my proof that you were real, that all of it was real. I'm afraid if I continue to indulge the world my mind made up, I won't be able to function in the world everyone else lives in. I spent so much of my time dedicated to that world, your world. And I still do. Ignoring it feels

like just as much work as engaging it.

Do you miss her as much as I do, Train Boy? Did you feel betrayed when she and her jerk off boyfriend abused my autonomy? Somewhere in my mind I know I'm not to blame, but I still feel guilty for not being able to stop what they did to me. Are you taking your anger at her out on me? She doesn't believe in you, Train Boy.

Not like I do. She said she saw my world and you. I thought whenever you weren't with me, you must have been visiting her. She lived two fields away, she must be hearing the train same as me. But it was all a lie, Train Boy.

I meet someone new, see something strange, unsure of whether or not that person was there, that the incident did happen.

I look to the people around, is someone else reacting to this, or is it just me? On my own how can I differentiate between the outside world and mine? I resent the fact that she's the only other person to have known so much about everything I see and hear, to know about what I thought I could do and had to do. Are you here to punish me, Train Boy? For leaving it all behind?

Here to trap me inside my head until I'm forced to face the truer reality?

I miss how things used to be. Do you know that you were my first best friend and confidant? I remember that first time we met. I was probably too young, too small to be allowed to take Natty for walks, but my beagle boy was with me when I first saw you. We went on a short walk around

the yard. A train was blowing its whistle. You could always hear the train in Shippensburg. Just as we were making our way down the gravel driveway, I saw you there at the end of the lane, leaning against our mailbox. You looked around my age, maybe a year or two older. Dirty blonde hair past your ears, gawky-limbed, ripped jeans, a ribbed white tank and a trucker hat that was too big for

your head. I don't know if you gave yourself a name other than the one I'll always call you.

We started talking, and you listened. You never talked of your personal self, just of the other world and what went on there. We'd play and talk for hours, climbing trees, drawing pictures on the great big rock that bordered my yard and the neighbor's field. The best part of my week, and gone for years now.

Replaced with a wash of cold fear, a sinking, pooling feeling of sickness in my gut when that whistle blows.

You know I can't drive. I see things, so I'm not allowed behind the wheel. Each time I want to go home, I'm trapped on the train, knowing any minute you'll come. If I as much as go take a piss, finally alone, away from

all those crowds of people you hate. I know you might seize that chance to have me in your grasp again. I can't move away from you, get away. If I just look at you that's it, you've got me. Going home is tainted by you. I feel your presence as I walk alone at night, practically running to get back home or to studio so that I'm not alone,

not vulnerable anymore. I trusted you more than anyone, and now I fear you more than anything.

If I show you to everyone, what would you do? You've always been hiding, Train Boy, from the people around me, always an opportunist. You don't want me to be able to call for help. What if I show them your face? I've been making

you from pieces, dissecting and reassembling you into something within my control. At least, that's what I've been telling myself. How do I gain agency over something my mind made? I'll make you with my hands instead. I could destroy you just as easily. We'll see. You've been active lately. Stalking me in between work and classes, lurking in the corner

of the room during the mornings I'm home alone.

I thought my partner would always be enough of a deterrent for you to stay away, but you rode home with us in the car a couple months ago. When we got stopped by the passing train, you climbed right in. I think if I just expose you, I'll gain the upperhand. But there you go, showing yourself

in the company of those who make me feel safest. Is this your response? Letting me know that no matter what I do to keep myself safe, you'll find a way to work around it. I thought if I just ignored you and all the rest of it, you would all fade away. But it's so damn exhausting. One encounter with you, and I need a day or more in bed to recover. Exhausting.

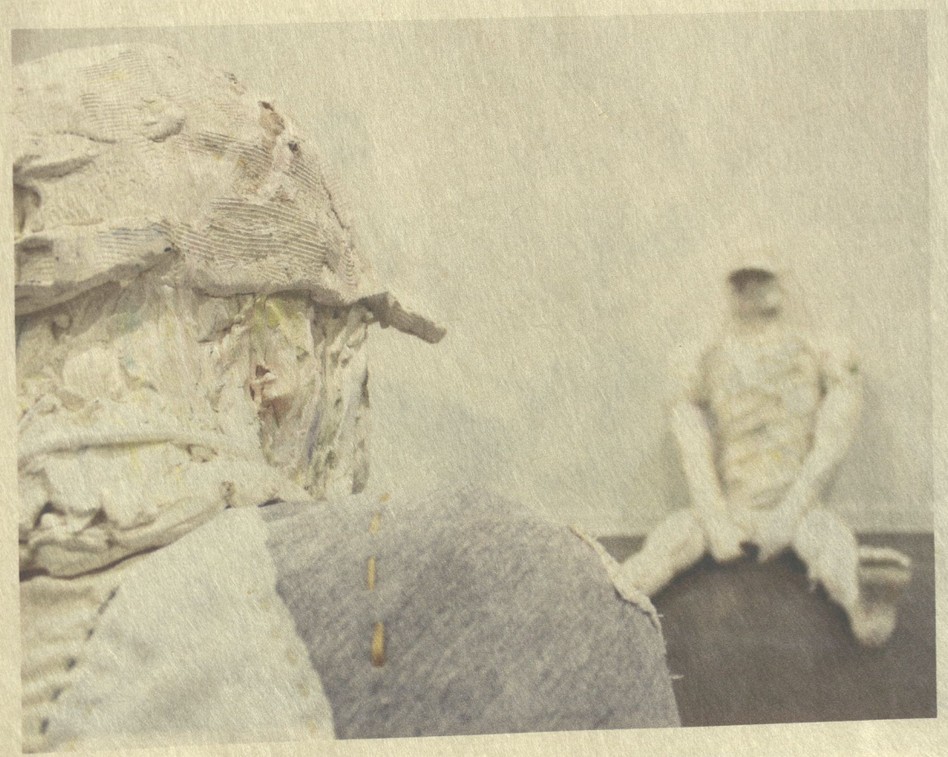
I am not finished yet. Your piece will be completed and on display soon enough. What will you do when I've left you there to confront yourself? I am afraid you will lash out at me even harder than before, but I have never been able to take a stand against you before, so I'm going to try anyway. Maybe this is my shot to gain some agency over you for once. Even if the only outcome

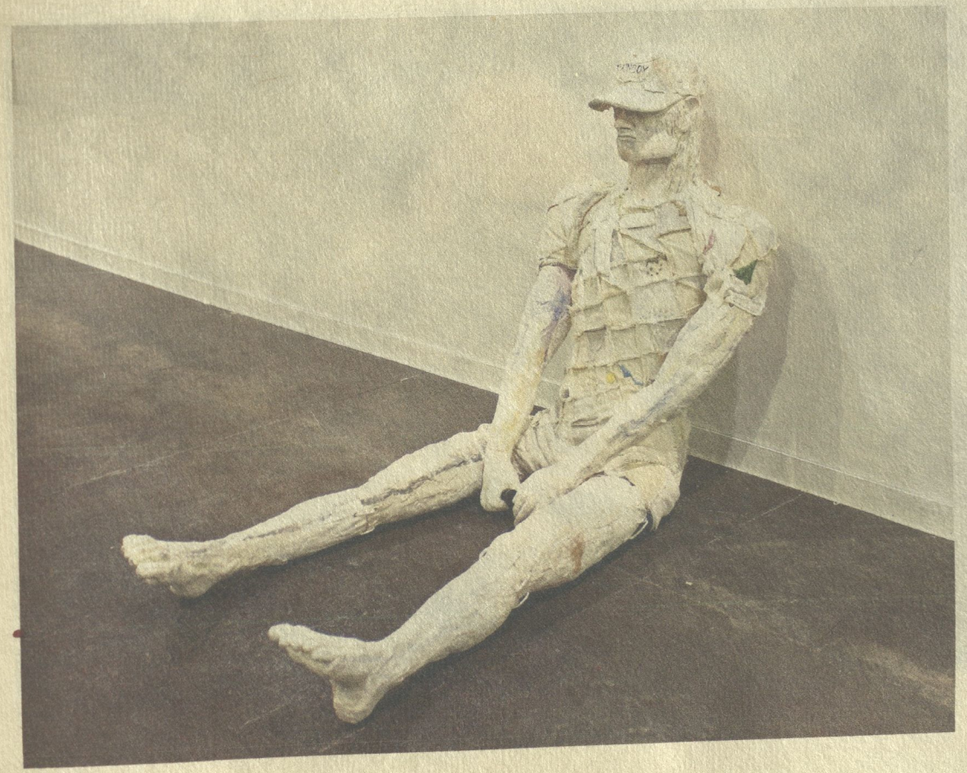
is that I am finally able to make you
Known to those around me. Maybe I can
make you remember how you used to be. If
I make you face the past, maybe I can
finally reconcile with what I've lost. I
miss you, Train Boy. I can see you, the you
now and the you I remember. I didn't
realize just how much I missed you until I
saw you sitting there, the same as when

we were both younger. You're all
mostly done now. No more sculpting,
just some stitching left to do.

Images from Train Boy Installation

Train Boy
ceramic, majolica, underglaze, embroidery,
fabric, found objects
2019



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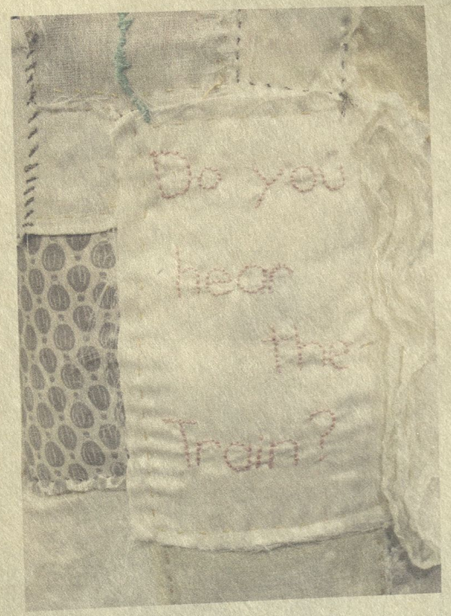
Do you
hear
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Train?