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Fairy Tales: A Compilation - The Rail

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The Rail

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Languages and Literatures of Europe and the Americas 353 (20th Century Russian Arts and Culture)

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Artist Statement

The Rail is a satire of the rail in Hawai'i and the increasing time and tax money necessary for its completion. It can also stand as a general metaphor for government inefficiency and greed. I was inspired by the Soviet fairy tales that served to subvert the regime through political commentary. The Rail retains most of the original elements of the traditional fairy tale, including family conflict, the hero's journey, and magic. The difference is that all of these things are used to alienate and turn the hero against the social order rather than teaching him to live inside it and appreciate it.

I. There once lived a little boy named Jack. He lived with his mother, father, and sister in a little cabin deep in the Evergreen Forest. Their cabin was small, but very expensive. Because of this, Jack's parents had to pay the Head Witch every week in order to keep their house. They were hard workers, but these payments took up all of their income.

Thus, little Jack was in charge of paying for his family's food. Jack did honest work as a coal miner. He earned enough money to buy three loaves of bread for his family every week, but that was all he could buy. His family had to survive off of what he could afford.

One day, Jack was returning home from a long day at work after stopping at the market. He had his Sunday bag of bread loaves at his side. Suddenly, he saw a little white rabbit with brown feet dart past in the corner of his eye. 'Wonderful!' thought little Jack. His family would have something extra to eat this week. It had been years since they'd had any meat in their diet. So, he set off to catch the rabbit.

But the little rabbit was very hard to catch, for he was fast and shifty. Before he knew it, Jack was in an unfamiliar part

of the woods. The rabbit was nowhere in sight. The dark trees loomed overhead. Jack clutched his bag of loaves tight to his chest. He turned around and around, hoping he'd see something he recognized, but nothing looked familiar.

Jack walked in what he guessed was the direction back home, but he couldn't be sure. He was absolutely terrified. Tears began to well up in his eyes and he clutched the bag tighter for comfort. Suddenly, he saw a little orange light shining through the trees in the distance. He walked towards it, hoping there was someone there that could help him.

Jack finally stumbled into a little grove. At the opposite end, the grove narrowed into a bottlenecked path with trees growing densely on either side. Blocking anyone's passage onto that path were two giant trolls wielding clubs made of uprooted trees. Beside them sat a squat little booth illuminated by two orange lanterns, inside which sat a wretched old woman with a mighty long nose and boils on her cheeks. Above the booth hung a shakily hand-lettered sign, which read:

HEAD WITCH'S TOLL BOOTHE YE MUST PAY TO PASS



My goal in academia, specifically for my Russian major, is to broaden my cultural horizons. Learning about culture through literature is particularly interesting to me. In my work, "The Rail," my aim was to showcase what I learned in the Russian Fairy Tales course, LLEA 353. I tried to do this by highlighting cultural issues relevant to the residents of O'ahu in a fantastical and otherworldly way.

This must be the Head Witch my parents go to see every week to pay for our cabin, Jack thought. He gulped, nervous at the prospect of meeting her. She beckoned him with a long, bony finger and a wide grin full of yellow, rotting teeth.

Jack timidly stepped up to the booth and began to speak, but she silenced him and gestured toward a pile of notes nailed to the side of the booth. "Pick a number, please," she croaked. Confused little Jack reached up and tore off the top piece of paper from the stack. 96. He looked around. There was no one else there.

Jack took a seat on a stump at the other end of the clearing. He waited and waited for what seemed like hours. The trolls didn't move a muscle. Flies buzzed around their heads and in their ears. The Head Witch moved around behind her booth. Back there were piled various large burlap sacks of rotting food. Jack watched in fascination as she dug through one of them, extracted a cooing dove covered in slugs, and swallowed it whole. She smacked her lips.

The Head Witch finally reoccupied her position at the front of the booth and rasped, "Number 96?"

"That's me," chirped Jack. "Yes, little Jack, come up here," said the Head Witch. Jack felt prickles all over. "How do you know who I am?" he asked. "I know everyone in town," said the Head Witch. "Now tell me, what brings you to the middle of our lovely Evergreen Forest?"

Little Jack was relieved to finally have someone to share his misfortunes with. He explained his situation to the Head Witch in great detail, right up to the part where he stumbled into the clearing and found her booth. Poor Jack was so upset that his eyes began to tear up again. "I just want to go home!" Jack shouted in frustration.

The Head Witch peered down at him quizzically. Her long nose twitched, and she stroked her long eyebrow hairs, which she left messily askew.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, brightening. "I have the perfect thing to help you, Jack." Jack felt hope fill his chest. He wanted so badly to go home—no, he needed to! He tightened his hand around his bag of loaves. If I don't get home, he thought, my family will surely starve!

"Yes, please help me, Head Witch!" cried poor little Jack. "Well, alright," said the Head Witch. "I have the power to make you a magic rail that will take you all the way back to your cabin. How do you like the sound of that?"

Jack's heart fluttered. A magic railroad? That would be amazing! he thought. "Yes!" Jack shouted enthusiastically.

The Head Witch held up one bony finger, right in Jack's face. It was stained red. "On one condition," she croaked. "It will cost you one loaf of bread."

Jack's stomach dropped. He clasped his bag of loaves tightly to his chest. How could he give up a loaf? What if his family starved? But he decided that his family would simply have to live off the two remaining loaves this week. Besides,

if he had a magic railroad to take him home, maybe he could hunt some rabbits on the way back. So he agreed.

"Fantastic!" screeched the Head Witch, so abruptly that it gave Jack a fright. "I'll set to work and have your rail done by tonight!"

Poor Jack was so tired he stumbled right back to his little tree stump on the other edge of the clearing and fell fast asleep, hoping that when he woke up his magic railroad would be all finished.

II. Jack awoke suddenly to the sound of birds chirping loudly. The rising sun was peeking over the tops of the tall trees. He remembered where he was.

He looked to the opposite end of the clearing, but there was no one at the booth. There was no magic railroad in sight, either. Haphazardly nailed to the booth's sign was a notice:

AWAY FOR TEA. BACK AT SUNSET.
TAKE UP ANY INQUIRIES WITH TROLLS.

The trolls stood in the same position as the day before. Have they been there all night? Jack thought. Flies buzzed in and out of the gaps in their teeth.

Jack's stomach rumbled. He was so hungry, but he dared not eat one of the two remaining loaves of bread. Instead, he figured he would make use of the time until sunset by hunting. Jack did his best hunting. He saw rabbits, but they were all too fast for him to catch. Nonetheless, he tried his best for hours, but came back as the sun set with empty hands. By this point, Jack was very frustrated and wondered where his magic railroad could be. He neared the clearing, expecting to march up for a chat with the Head Witch.

As he entered the clearing, he could hardly believe his eyes: there were hundreds, maybe thousands, of forest creatures lining up to get to the booth! One of the Head Witch's trolls began to boom repeatedly, "TAKE A NUMBER! TAKE A NUMBER!"

So Jack did, and sat back down on his stump to wait.

Jack spent hours watching various forest animals (and a few people) pay the Head Witch in various wares and foods. She would toss each item into one of the stained burlap sacks. The fellow, having paid, would then pass through the troll barricade and be on his merry way.

Finally, it was Jack's turn. There was no one else left in the clearing. "Number 674?" croaked the Head Witch. Jack hurried up to the booth. "Have you finished the rail?" he asked. The Head Witch was chewing on something. She didn't look at Jack. Instead, she studied her green, curling nails attentively and droned, "Something came up last night. It was late. I ran out of time."

Jack stared at her for a few seconds. The Head Witch scowled menacingly at him. "It was your fault for asking me to

make it so late in the day, you silly boy! You can't expect me to accommodate such a foolish request!"

Jack was taken aback. He wanted to shout and stamp his feet. It wasn't fair! But he didn't have the courage. Instead, he asked, "W-when will it be done?"

The Head Witch stopped staring at her nails. She craned over the edge of her booth and grinned widely at Jack. "For one more loaf of bread, I'll finish it by tonight. I promise!"

Little Jack gulped. "But what about what happened last night? Isn't it too late for you to finish it tonight, too?"

"Don't insult me, boy!" said the Head Witch. "Tonight I've got all the time in the world. And the power, too!"

Jack thought of the Head Witch's terrifying frown. Then he thought of the rabbits he'd seen while hunting. Oh well, he thought. I'll just have to be sure to catch one on the way back home. So, he handed over his second loaf to the Head Witch.

She stuck her long, bony hand out and down toward Jack. He grasped it with his small, clammy one. She shook it vigorously. "Thank you for your business," she croaked, and suddenly vanished. So Jack was all alone in the clearing, save those giant, unmoving trolls. He walked back to his stump, exhausted from a long day of hunting, and fell fast asleep before he'd even sat fully down.

III. Little Jack awoke the next morning with a start. He looked around groggily. There was no magic railroad in sight. The Head Witch was back in her booth, serving a short line of forest animals. Jack was very angry.

He marched right up to the booth, shoving aside a family of foxes who were bargaining for their passage through the trolls by offering four massacred squirrels. The foxes stumbled away, chittering. "Where is my magic railroad?" demanded Jack, planting himself squarely in front of the booth.

The Head Witch stared down at him angrily. "Who do you think you are?" she growled in a deep and terrible voice. "We have a process around here!" Her trolls loomed over him. "TAKE A NUMBER," they shouted in unison.

Sulking, Jack took a number and retreated to his stump. He glared at the Head Witch and her trolls, wishing he could burn holes in them with his eyes. He did this until the little gathering of animals waiting for their numbers to be called had dwindled to nothing. The Head Witch glanced at Jack, then away from him. She emitted a loud yawn.

Then, the Head Witch turned around and spent some time picking through her burlap sacks of food. He saw her move the two loaves he'd been duped out of into a different sack, where they were covered with what looks like the entrails of some unfortunate animal—to be eaten another day, perhaps. Then she picked out some more appetizing food: various bugs, a rotten apple core, three tiny acorns, and rotting berries on twigs. She stuffed her cheeks full of these things. She tossed a few caterpillars to her trolls, who gobbled them up greedily. Finally, with a butterfly wing dangling out of the corner of her

mouth, she faced the front of the booth and called, "Number 32?" She looked around expectantly, as if she hadn't seen Jack waiting on his stump the entire time.

Jack stomped up to the booth. "That's me. Where is my magic railroad?" he demanded. The Head Witch scowled at him. "Yesterday was a very long day, as I'm sure you saw yourself," she croaked. "Boy, you saw that line!" She chuckled, as if remembering the day fondly, then became suddenly morose. "But I will do you a favor. I assure you, I will finish your rail tonight for just one more loaf of bread."

"That's it!" shouted Jack. "I've had it with you!" He didn't care at all about the trolls, who moved toward him menacingly. He clutched the bag with his final loaf of bread close to him. "I'll find my way back myself!"

Little Jack tried his very best to dart through the trolls' legs to make it to the other side and escape down the path, but the troll on the left scooped him up like a feather and held him by the back of his shirt. He lowered Jack down until he was face to face with the Head Witch. She laughed theatrically; her breath smelled of rotten meat. "Ah, how I love your spirit!" she cried.

"Sweet Jack," the Head Witch rasped, "I will finish your precious rail tonight for one last loaf of bread, I assure you!" She tore Jack's bag of bread—his final loaf—out of his hands and shoved it down her throat with her mouth open wide like a snake, bag and all. The troll stuck Jack high in a tree, where he clung, terrified. From there he watched as the witch constructed the rail in an instant, with a simple wave of her hand.

The troll brought Jack down from the tree and placed him on the ground. Jack had never felt so cheated in his life. His lips quivered and his eyes filled with tears as he looked at the shiny, horizontal metal pole which stretched out into the dark trees far, far out of sight. "This isn't a railroad!" he cried.

The Head Witch laughed and laughed and laughed. "You're right, my boy—but I promised you a rail!" she croaked. "This is what I call a handrail. I saw it in some of my divinations! Now go on, follow it home. You can even rest your hand on it, like so. Well? Aren't you going to thank me?"

Her cackles resounded in the night sky. A flock of birds flew overhead, searching for shelter.

IV. Poor, cold little Jack walked through the forest all night, shivering and hungry. He kept his hand on the cool metal railing, trying not to faint from exhaustion. He wondered at this strange, cylindrical thing called a handrail. He wished that he had a railroad instead.

Jack kept his eye out for anything he could hunt and bring back for his family. At the thought of them he felt dreadfully worried; surely, they must be suffering from unbearable hunger by now. But Jack saw nothing, as if the forest were devoid of life.

Jack walked for hours. Finally, the forest began to look familiar. This was lucky timing for Jack, since the handrail ended

abruptly, and he was still some distance from home. But he knew the way back from where it stopped, so he rushed back to his family's cabin.

He walked inside and cried out, "I'm home!" But poor little Jack received no response, for he had taken far too long. Alas, his family had died of starvation. He sat at the table, feeling terribly alone.

Suddenly, Jack was distracted from his thoughts by a flutter of wings at his window. It was a carrier pigeon. He pried the note off the pigeon's foot. In scratchy, uneven writing, it said:

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN,

YOUR WEEKLY HOME PAYMENT IS OVERDUE. THIS IS YOUR ONE AND ONLY NOTICE. I SHALL BE SENDING THE TROLLS TO REPOSSESS IT WITHIN A FORTNIGHT.

WARM REGARDS, HEAD WITCH

P.S. IF YOU HAVE ANY CONCERNS PLEASE TAKE THEM UP WITH MY SECRETARY, MR. BROWNFOOT AT THE MINISTRY OF RABBITS.