Today is reminding me of the day that Laura killed herself. Almost exactly three years ago on a frigid January evening so much like this one. I didn’t know that she was dangling from a Sheet tied around the smoke alarm in her lock up cell as I stood outside and stared at the trees and the sky beyond the perimeter fence. Those first few years I spent an inordinate amount of time staring past the fence.

I was so cold, burrowed down into layers of Cheap clothing. Thermal underwear, uniform, coat, hat, thin gloves, hood. I only remember two days that have been that cold since I migrated to South Carolina from New Jersey six years ago, that day and today. On both days, the sky has looked and felt exactly the same. Weak winter sunlight fading into the gray of evening. I watched the wind shake the trees in rhythm to the music blasting from my earphones. A plane
Streaked across the twilit sky
dragging a billowing white contrail
behind it. Going somewhere far from
here and I wanted to be on it. Done
with my time.

In lock up Laura was finishing her
time years early. Prison isn't for
everyone. We find ourselves doing things in
here and acting in ways that may seem
absurd to the average civilian. We're driven
to extremes by longing and humiliation and
loneliness. The last time I saw Laura I was
bringing library books to the special
management unit and she was locked in a
Cell being strip searched. Two officers
stood outside her door ordering her to
Strip, Squat and Cough. “Spread your
cheeks,” they requested. “Cough again. And
again. Again,” for close to ten minutes.

For her it could be argued this was
for her protection. She had a history of
hurting herself. But it may be those
daily, gnawing humiliations that wear
away at our souls.

Like on the night she did it. Her
Girlfriend had gone down to SMU to take out the trash for the officers and they argued through the locked door. "Aren't you tired?" Sarah berated. "Fuck, you're pathetic. Just kill yourself." Two hours later she was dead. When no one in your life has ever loved or cared for you and you think you've finally found someone kindred that understands, you tend to take everything they say to heart.

I reflected on those thoughts that night when right before lights out at eleven the warden and the chaplain walked onto our living unit to deliver the news. Sarah trailed behind them, her eyes swollen and still leaking tears. Believing that she now had another victim, more blood on her hands, more guilt and shame on her already overburdened conscience.

"She hung herself. She was taken to the hospital. She didn't survive," the warden informed us, then turned on her heels and exited back
into the freezing night, back to her home. And then to bed. We sat there, forty eight women collectively dumbstruck. Then Sarah collapsed and began to wail. As the women who didn’t really care made their way back to their cells I moved to comfort her. She was my friend.

The ridiculousness of the situation confounded me. How pointless it seemed to die over a prison romance. This is how we function as women in prison though. We cultivate these dysfunctional, codependent relationships. So many of us are so ill and broken that we imagine our only salvation can be found in this desperate and stubborn type of love.

Not so the men. Men will lift weights and work on their legal issues. Do their time and come out looking buff and angry. Women fall in love. Is it surprising? We are wives and mothers in exile. Who will we love if not each other?

Entertainment in prison is scarce. Mental health treatment and
rehabilitative resources even rarer. We do what we can to distract ourselves from the overwhelming despair of our circumstances and the longing for our estranged families. Broken people without the tools to fix ourselves we are forsaken by society. So we love and depend on each other. We build and destroy our own societies on a daily basis. Then we are released, afraid and unprepared, into yours. We are guilty but you are complicit. So much for corrections. Prison is nothing but cold storage, a warehouse of castaways.

On the night that Laura died I believed myself immune from all these problems. I was a model inmate, doing my best to atone for my crime and pay my debt to society. Editor of the prison newspaper, a member of the hospice team, active in the Greyhound rescue program, I thought these activities insulated me from the emotional problems that plagued most of the population. My life was as
Different from Laura's as it could possibly be.

Two years later I was proven wrong when an officer emptied a full can of pepper spray through the flap in my lockup door while I stood on the sink trying to cut my wrist on the fire sprinkler. I hadn't eaten or drank anything in nine days, my own girlfriend was in the cell next door loudly urging me to kill myself.

I am proof and testimony that if you do enough time and allow yourself to become lonely enough you will turn to whatever outlet you can find to ease that loneliness a little. If you are addicted and obsessive by nature, as I am, then that addiction and obsession, left unaddressed, will transfer itself to whatever target is available. Be it starving, bingeing, exercise, purging, sex, self-mutilation, I've engaged in them all obsessively during the past years. Drugs are incidental. Drugs
are merely a symptom of the disease. And judging from our behavior inside I'm not at all convinced that incarceration is the cure. My paternal grandmother was a whore. A heroin addict and a prostitute. I have one picture of her that was taken at the Jersey Shore sometime in the 1930’s. Neither my father or I look anything like her, though we closely resemble each other. We must look like who ever the trick was that provided our genetic material. This gives me a very random sense of my identity. Like my grandmother I am also a heroin addict. I've never been a whore though. I've come close a couple of times but I've never actually had sex for drugs or money. So I remain a whore only in the sense that we all are. For all my existential pretensions my morality is still as ambiguous as any common prostitute.
My grandmother gave birth to my father in prison. I don't know the details of her life though I've been wildly curious all of mine. My father was ashamed and he fabricated many lies. Now most of my family is dead and there is no one left to tell me truth or lies.

I have been in prison for the past six years. I have a little more than six more to go. Six years ago I nearly killed a man while robbing his house. It was a violent and bloody display involving a tire iron, four shotguns and resulting in him receiving ninety staples in his head. If it gives me the shivers after all this time I can only imagine how he must feel. Maybe I should have been a whore. I would have hurt less people and been home long ago.

After his unfortunate birth my father returned to prison twice more. Once for armed robbery and once for welfare...
fraud. I was really young when he did that second bid and my family told me he was traveling with the circus taming lions. Why do I begin to believe that my hair and eye color are not the only traits that are genetic?

My mother blamed me for my father having to join the circus. Men in suits had come to our door one day when I was home from school and I happily told them that yes, of course my Daddy lived with us. I didn’t know I wasn’t supposed to tell. They arrested him a week later.

I should have joined the circus. I would have traveled the world and swung from a flying trapeze maybe been shot out of a cannon. Lived a life of danger and excitement.

When my grandmother’s picture was taken it must have been winter because she is wearing a
coat. She is smiling and her smile makes her wrinkle her nose. I never saw that picture until I was twenty one years old but when I smile I wrinkle my nose just like she does. Perhaps my identity is not so random as I've believed.

My maternal grandfather was run over by a train. I don't have any photos of him. He passed out drunk on railroad tracks and a train severed both his legs. I'm told his friends scooped him off the tracks and put him in the back of a truck. They rode around town looking for someone to help him but no one would. This story leaves me with a lot of questions. If his friends were there why did they let this happen? And why didn't they take him to the hospital. Surely even in the 40's in rural Pennsylvania there were hospitals.

My maternal grandmother sold my mother and my aunt to
families in New Jersey. They were three and five years old. They never saw her again until her funeral forty years later and by that point she wasn’t answering any questions. I think about my white trash, Irish Catholic grandparents sometimes. I imagine my grandfather lying in the back of a truck and dying as he stared into an empty sky, and I wonder was it night or day? My grandmother was twenty-one years old and widowed with six children. Why chose my aunt and my mother to set though? Was that decision as random as the man who sired my father? Who would I have been if the women in my family were never sold? I went to White Haven, Pennsylvania once and I stood on the railroad tracks. But the blood is long gone and the sky is silent. Some years ago I called my
Aunt from prison and told her I was contemplating suicide. She begged me to find the sweet girl inside myself that she remembered. I’m thirty-seven years old now, far from a girl, and whoever that child was I suspect she’s long dead. But I do remember that when I was young I wanted to tell stories. I would walk alone with my dog and make up tales about the people I saw. A black haired girl on a motorcycle, the man that sold me candy at the corner store. My imagination has been burned down by time and drugs. All I have left now are true stories. They’ve festered inside me for thirty-seven years, and now on this night so much like another that I recall my conscience demanded that this story be told. On the night Laura killed herself I sleepwalked into the bathroom to get a glass of water. When I flicked on the
light a cricket with a crushed back leg dragged itself painfully across the floor. I stared at it, dumb and shocked. Where did it come from and how did it get so wounded? It was midnight on the coldest January day in forever. An inch of ice had blanketed the ground for a week. The whole world was locked down and frozen dead. How did this lone and injured cricket make its way here to die in prison?