P.S. Your Name is Art: (Nihil Novi Est)
By Kendra Fortmeyer

When you are sixteen, you go see Les Misérables on Broadway. It’s not your choice; it’s your mother’s, for her birthday. You are sulking and miserable—Jenny Stonefield, who’s generally acknowledged to be the hottest girl in school, is having a huge party this weekend and somehow you got invited, and this is practically the key to being popular for the rest of high school and clearly your mother hates you. “There will be other parties, honey,” she laughs. You glare at the valet parking attendant wonder if you can bribe him to leave you the keys. You can’t.

But twenty minutes into the show, you’re completely entranced. The drabness. The bleakness. The pain. You feel connected to 19th-century France in a way you can’t quite understand. Your older brother sneaks you a glass of wine at intermission, and you sit through the second act feeling the warmth crawl through your belly. You lean on your mother’s shoulder. When Jean Valjean dies, you weep without shame.

On Monday, the whole school is buzzing with gossip about Jenny’s party: the cops were called, Brian Jenkins was smoking pot, Marcia Hornfield made out with Jenny’s boyfriend, Greg, in a closet. But all this seems to pale in comparison with Éponine’s unrequited love for Marius, with tiny Cosette sweeping the floor in rags. You walk the halls humming Do you hear the people sing?

You start reading the classical poets, writing sonnets. You watch every single film that Kenneth Branagh has ever made. The jocks call you a fag. The popular girls stare. You find a bowler hat for five dollars at Goodwill and wear it to school. Your teachers don’t even ask you to take it off, because you’re suddenly the Smart One, the kid who knows iambic pentameter and the causes of the fall of the Roman Empire. People start listening to you in class. You listen to NPR.

The art teacher stops you as you’re cleaning up one day. Her fingers are covered in chalk pastel. “Art,” she says, “I know you’re very theatrical.” And you shrug because that’s not exactly true, but who’s splitting hairs, and she goes on, “There’s been talk in the arts department about giving students more direction in the spring show.” She leans close, grips your arm. “I think you should go to the meeting.” You walk sleeve covered in fingerprints.

You aren’t sure at first, but the thought of it keeps you up all night. Your school, transformed. There is a sense of something grander—people singing in the hallways, swept up, living, loving, something deeper and more vibrant. Chicago, Cabaret, Rent.

The meeting is at 7:40. The sky is still pale when you get to the school. The meeting is in a small lounge that
smells like farts. It’s you, three PTA mothers, and Ms. Strauss, the theater teacher. When you tell them your ideas, they frown.

“The sex,” they say.
“‘The history!” you protest. “The glitz! The overwhelming cultural significance!”

“The sex,” they say. “How about Annie?”

Annie? Are they kidding?

“Okay, fine,” they say. “What about Oklahoma?“

“South Pacific?” you offer weakly.

In the end they choose Cats. Cats. You go home and stare at the ceiling.

Cats?

The next few weeks are a nightmare. Half of the ensemble starts giggling whenever they say the word “Jellical.” Grizabella can’t sing on key. The costume designers propose: leopard print sweatshirts, tights and cat ears. Both male cast members rebel. You sit at the edge of the stage, stare into your bowler hat, and hate your life.

The cast gets tighter. At least three-quarters of the ensemble knows the lyrics, and Brian Jenkins has started going by “Mr. Mistoffelees” in class. The cast starts calling you “Intrepid Leader,” in and out of class. One weekend they go see an Avenue Q matinee. You’re invited, but you say you’re sick. Or your mom’s sick. They come back to school singing “The Internet is for Porn,” and Jenny Stonefeld, who’s playing Rumpleteazer, tells you how amazing Broadway was. “I know,” you say. “It’s like it’s realer than life.” Jenny Stonefeld nods, awed.

Three weeks before opening, the first bowler hat appears. The girl playing Electra wears one to rehearsal. She grins at you and tips it elaborately. You stare, clear your throat, and have the cast run “The Jellical Ball” again. By the end of the week, two more hats have appeared. Bowlers start popping up everywhere, anonymous black fungi.

Kids start walking the halls carrying the works of Plato. They discuss Laurence Olivier, voices rising as you walk by. In rehearsal, the cast hangs on your every word. People take notes. “I’m glad you’re making friends,” your mom says, and you don’t say, don’t want me. You spend hours on Wikipedia trying to find some new obsessions that no one else cares about: forgotten bands from the 1980s, competitive Bingo, the entire Sweet Valley High series. You write in your diary, Why won’t you just leave me alone? and scribble it out, because you heard that on the radio yesterday.

The night of the show, you sit backstage, feeling
ridiculous in a director’s chair. People in various states of felinity rush by, warming up, rehearsing lines. You overheard, walking by the dressing room earlier—Jenny and the cast got you flowers. She’s going to give a speech thanking you for giving them all, for a brief period of time, something ‘realer than life.’

In a way, you hate that this is the realer life you’ve given them—Jellical cats and puppet sex. But at the same time, you feel jealous, guarded. You don’t want them to know the tragedy of Jean Valjean’s death, to soar on the heights of Marius’ love for Cosette. It’s all that’s standing between you and them, and for the first time in your life you know definitively that you don’t want to be a them.

“Art, five minutes ’til curtain,” Mrs. Strauss tells you. You nod, take a breath, and walk out the door.

The evening air is cool against your skin, sky deepening as the sun sinks behind the school. You look up at the first star and try to make some sense of it all. The stupid thing just sits there, a twinkling speck, a monstrous ball of burning gas, traveling light from a star already dead, whatever. People have been looking to the sky for significance for thousands of years, and like everything else in your life, it feels exhausted.

You look at the grass, damp and flattened, stretching away towards the liquid light of the parking lot, and you think, I could just get up and go, now. I could just leave, and no one would stop me. You press your cheek to the brick and close your eyes, just wanting to be awake, to be present, to feel things a million people haven’t felt before.

“Art!” Ms. Strauss is shouting from inside. “Art, curtain in 30 seconds!”

You lift your head from the brick. Then you stand up and head towards real life.