

20 Selected Etudes for Horn in F
Composed by Sarah E H Heller

N^o 1: Genesis

September 1992

I drag a chair and a heavy black case into the living room, and very carefully rest my exercise book on the coffee table against my mother's Baldwin Brass candlesticks. Seating myself primly before the stand I haul the French horn case close to my feet; I've only played it once, at school, on a day last spring when we decided what instruments we'd like to learn in the fall. In its battered case, the French Horn dimly mirrors the lights of the living room, the scars of those who came before me causing the light to reflect at odd angles. Slowly and carefully, I free the horn from its resting place of contoured black velvet—it is heavy and foreign to my small hands. I can hardly lift it, much less hold it correctly; gracelessly I pull the instrument onto my lap and balance it on my knees. I cautiously flex my fingers against the smooth keys; somewhere within the instrument I hear the valves respond sluggishly, unwillingly—finally they click loudly into place. Uncomfortably I try to stretch the fingers of my left hand between the thumb valve and pinky ring, but the span of my hand is too short and I instead curl my pinky around the tubing. I'm not sure what to do with my other hand as I push the edge of the bell into my leg, using the leverage to awkwardly tilt the horn toward my face. Pressing my lips to the cold mouthpiece, I take a deep breath and blow.

An offensive sound sputters from the bell and the dog leaves the room with a grunt, seeking a quieter place to lounge. As I watch her leave the room, I catch sight of my mother, leaning against the wall with a smile.

Only four stairs separate me from the stage of the South Haven Congregational Church where I sing on Sundays, but today those four broad, harvest gold steps seem insurmountable in my nervousness. Slowly I climb the stairs to perform solo in the holiday service; my French Horn is clutched tightly to my chest, wrinkling the front of my carefully chosen dress.

A few months ago I ran the mile at school—twelve minutes after the whistle blew I stood panting and shaking, my head throbbing and my skin on fire, ready to throw up—wondering what I’d done to deserve such wicked torment.

At the top of the stairs I turn, my body threatening to recreate its post-run trauma. Struggling to control my shaking hands I bare my teeth in a pathetic smile as the pastor introduces me, and after the gentle applause of the congregation—full of my friends and their families—dies down, I’m left feeling horribly exposed in the overwhelming silence. All rational thought has left me; I only know I can’t run back now to the safety of my parents—I can’t run off the stage with all my classmates watching. There’s nothing left to do but play.

Closing my eyes against the audience and taking a jagged breath, I clumsily hoist the horn to my mouth and let my fingers take over. The result—a trembling, memorized rendition of “Angels We Have Heard on High” played by a ten-year-old girl on her rented French Horn—echoes startlingly in the cavernous sanctuary.

I don’t remember returning to sit with my parents in the burgundy upholstered pews, and I certainly don’t recall the rest of the service. Instead I remember my parents comforting me on the ride home while I cried miserably in embarrassment.

I never want to play solo again.

Nº 3: Shame

October 1993

Resting my head against the top of my French horn, I ponder the mysteries of my band director's wig while he joyfully berates the woodwinds. A second clarinet is painfully squeaking her way through a C Major scale, stopping at every note as the director tells her she is still flat, asking her if she has ever bothered to tune. She doesn't fight against his cruel sarcasm; instead she adjusts the ligature of her instrument and turns a deeper shade of pink.

Maybe it isn't a wig, but it certainly isn't real—from day to day the black wiry hair never changes, never looks longer or shorter—every day his hair is exactly the same shape. Slowly one eye slides shut and in vain I try to keep the other open.

Am I keeping you awake, Miss Heller?

With the sound of my band director's voice both eyes open wide, and I clutch my French horn tight against my body as if it can offer protection from this unwanted attention. The clarinets look relieved, and the realization is upon me that I am the target of this horrible man's ire. He is gazing down his sharp, hooked nose, sneering; I sink further into my chair, feeling my face turn bright red.

Since Miss Heller is bored, perhaps she should play the scales solo.

In his long, bony fingers the baton is raised and pointed menacingly in my direction; my hands start to shake at the thought of everyone listening to me play. I make a big show of shuffling the music on the stand and attempt to adjust a stuck tuning slide; still he glares down from his perch on the podium.

We're all waiting.

We haven't even finished warming up—halfway through the mandatory scales he grew angry with the unsuspecting woodwinds, forgetting about the rest of us for at least 15 minutes. My horn is still cold, and I know playing successfully at this point in the class period is nearly impossible; I'm sure he realizes this as well. Licking my lips I blow a tentative note and no sound comes out. Somewhere behind me I hear giggling, and the director rolls his eyes theatrically. Again I try; again, nothing happens. A third attempt brings marginal success and a quiet tone slips apologetically from my horn. I'm so nervous I'm starting to sweat, and my glasses are sliding down my nose.

A bit louder, please.

My embarrassment is quickly turning to resentment—clearly he is enjoying this. I can't think clearly, and taking a deep breath I blow forcefully into my horn, hoping furiously for the right note. Instead a horrible sound rips through the band room; something resembling an angry squawk echoes off the cold cement walls, dissolving into the laughter of the students around me. I close my eyes against the director's smirk.

Miss Heller, perhaps you should spend less time napping, and dedicate more time to practicing.

He seems pleased with himself as he turns his attention to finishing the scales, and before I can regain control of my battered pride, a hot tear escapes shamefully from the corner of my eye.

N° 4: Stalemate

February 1994

Again I'm arguing with my mother about practicing, and again I'm being threatened with house arrest if I don't get my French Horn out this minute.

But I don't have anything to practice!

I whine in protest for at least the third time in this losing battle, but my mother doesn't buy it. To the threat of grounding she adds the promise of calling my director to find out exactly what I should be practicing, and feeling cornered, I finally drop the lie and storm loudly down the hallway to my bedroom. Once there I dramatically slam drawers and toss pillows, searching for the music books I would rather not find.

Finally I reemerge, and giving my mother the angriest look I can manage I violently snatch my French Horn off the floor of the foyer, painfully smacking my knee in the process. Before I can escape again to my room, my mother interjects.

You can practice in the kitchen.

Coming from my mother it is a command, not a request. In the kitchen I'll be forced to actually practice, rather than playing a note or two in my bedroom and passing the rest of the time pretending to figure out music. I open my mouth to protest, but before I can say a word I am pinned in place by a look—The Look. My mother has perfected The Look over 20 years of teaching—specially developed to stop even the most hardened delinquent dead in his tracks. Caught in the full force of The Look, I know I'm stuck practicing in the kitchen for the next hour. Grumbling quietly, I set up my stand near the kitchen table and noisily scrape one of the white wooden chairs across the hardwood floor.

The messier side of playing French Horn, of playing any brass instrument, is the spit valve—a valve located on the main pipe of the instrument with the sole purpose of emptying the “condensation” that accumulates while playing. When my tone begins to pop and gurgle 20 minutes into reluctant scales and etudes, my mother's voice interrupts from the next room.

Don't you dare empty that spit on the floor.

I stare furiously at the wall separating us, my pride still injured from losing the perpetual battle to practice. Very quietly I press the spit valve and blow into the horn—smiling

maliciously, I watch as 20 minutes of spit splatters against the wood floor, choosing not to think about the mopping I'll be doing as soon as my mother enters the kitchen.

Nº 5: Tedium

November 1994

All we play are marches, and all I play are endless off-beats, painfully repetitious eighth notes, always in the same key. Always in F; I get lost in the countless, monotonous notes—regardless of how carefully, how meticulously I count—I always seem to end a measure off, misplaced in the horrible tedium of playing the same note over and over for 20 measures at a time. Instead I mime the part, listening to the flourish of martial glory of the trumpets and trombones, intensely envious of their melodies and glissandos. They flourish, and I want to quit.

Nº 6: Overture

June 1995

From the house I hear my mother's voice, warning me that I'm running out of time, indicating that I don't want to know what will happen if I'm not dressed by the time my parents are ready to leave.

No one else dresses up for these things, just us! I don't see why I have to change just to go to a stupid musical.

I shout back at her from the porch, but the ominous silence I hear in response is all the motivation I need. Loudly I stomp through the house to my bedroom, passing along the

way my father, who shoots me a look of sympathy before strapping himself into a tie with a scowl that rivals mine.

Finally I am deemed presentable—in sacrificing my dirty jeans, rumpled t shirt and brushing my shoulder-length hair, I am transformed from a miniature Kurt Cobain into a well-groomed young lady. After a few minutes more of arguing with my mother, I grab a sweater in annoyance and we leave the house.

The Weidner Center is impressive and comfortable, a newly renovated and expensive space that attracts national touring companies and boasts not only its own Symphony, but a Youth Symphony as well. Inside, the theater is cool and dim, and as we take our seats I complain loudly that my legs are freezing and my toes are numb, explaining pointedly that frozen legs and numb toes would not be a problem were I wearing jeans and sneakers, rather than a skirt and sandals. Besides, that girl over there is wearing jeans, and I point this out indignantly. Finally my mother interrupts with a string of commands, sick of my ceaseless twelve-year-old whining.

Hush. You look beautiful. Stop complaining.

I stare at my feet in stubborn anger, bitterly grateful for the sweater draped over my shoulders, when the house lights grow dark and the overture begins.

My cold legs and frozen toes are forgotten as chills of a different sort run through my body—from the first row in the balcony I lean forward, eager to see the hornist playing this astonishing overture. The orchestra is not in the traditional pit; instead, the

musicians are elevated above the stage and separated from the audience by a gauzy curtain, brilliantly backlit in reds and blues. On the platform, crisp shadows of musicians play electric guitars and a bass, keyboards and a drum set—yet in the middle of the usual rock band instrumentation is the silhouette of a woman playing French Horn. She is the source of the dark, velvety solo that soars above the guitars.

Jittery with excitement, my animosity is forgotten as I nudge my mother and whisper loudly.

There's a French Horn up there! She's playing a French Horn!

My mother smiles at me, pressing her finger to her lips in a reminder to be silent. I turn the other direction to my father, pointing and leaning in close to whisper, quieter this time.

French Horn!

He nods and I settle back into the plush seats, my eyes glued to the hornist's silhouette, my ears straining to catch every note she plays—every note that is most definitely not an off-beat, in this music that is most definitely not one of the marches I detest so genuinely.

That evening, after only a little pestering on my part, my parents take me to the mall and I excitedly hand over my hard-earned babysitting money to buy “The Who’s Tommy.” In the waning light of the ride home I strain to read the liner notes, replaying the entire rock opera in my head. At home I play the overture again and again until I can

reproduce the solos flawlessly on the horn I rented for the summer. In the doorway I notice my father, listening to me play.

Nº 7: Ambush

February 1996

She has me by the hand, and with my other hand I struggle against the weight my case—the bell of which bumps painfully against my knee as she drags me down the hallway and into the classroom. The instructor looks up in surprise at our dramatic entrance, and using our momentum my energetic friend swings me into the center of the room. Now not only the instructor, but the other hornists in the room are looking at me in astonishment. Not knowing what to do, I wave awkwardly.

This is Sarah.

Again I wave stupidly, feeling uncomfortably exposed. My friend is extremely talented when it comes to music; every year she competes in multiple piano competitions and wins, and at school she is the first chair French horn. I am second chair, but only because there are only two of us. Saying I am second chair feels like lying—in truth I am simply left over. On Sundays she rehearses with the Green Bay Youth Symphony Orchestra, and tonight she has convinced me to come along and listen in on her sectional. So I stand there, slowly turning red, while the instructor looks at me in amusement. I turn to my friend for help.

We don't have enough Horn players, y'know? She's here to audition.

My mouth drops open in astonishment—audition? She’s ambushed me!

The instructor smiles and introduces himself, motioning for me to take a seat. I nod, speechless, and drop into the nearest chair.

For the next hour I listen as the young musicians struggle through their music; when they depart for full orchestra rehearsal, my sneaky friend gives me a brief thumbs up before I can grab her arm in panic. Suddenly I am left alone with the instructor, a college-aged guy with shaggy hair the color of sand, who pulls his chair closer to mine.

So, you want to audition?

He is smiling at me encouragingly, and I feel my face growing very warm as I explain that I’m not at all good, and I’m only here because my friend made me come, and I don’t have anything prepared anyway; all the while looking with great interest at my shoes. He nods and laughs at my predicament before going to his shoulder bag, returning with a handful of sheet music. My heart sinks as I realize he’s going to make me play.

Since you have your horn with you anyway, do you mind playing a little?

I bite my lip for a moment before answering; already the familiar anxiety that accompanies playing solo is rushing through my body. He smiles at me again, nudging me with his elbow.

No pressure. I'll play with you.

I relent, nodding and attempting a grin. Together we play some long notes and scales to warm up, moving into some simple etudes from his book and finally looking at the music the others played in the sectional. When I miss notes he doesn't scold me, and after playing for a little over half an hour I almost feel relaxed. At last he asks me to play a passage on my own—my hands don't shake and I can hardly hear the pulse thudding in my temples. After I finish he grins at me, nodding slowly.

Nice job, Sarah.

This time my smile is genuine and spontaneous, and for the first time the flush across my cheeks stems from pride, rather than shame.

Nº 8: Astonishment

May 1996

Backstage at the beautiful Weidner Center I'm surrounded by young musicians dressed all in black—with looks of great concentration the members of the Green Bay Youth Symphony try to keep their instruments in tune by blowing warm air through them, hum solos while their fingers flutter against keys, adjust the tuning pegs one last time and make sure they have all the music in order. Holding my French Horn close to me I bite my lip anxiously—dressed in a long black velvet gown, I'm part of the crowd of musicians, waiting to take the stage. In the comfortable dressing room I slipped into my concert black and gazed at myself in the mirror, amazed at the elegant young woman who

gazed back at me, her dark hair cascading over her shoulders and shimmering in the vanity lights. Almost before I can slide into my brand-new black heels a frenzy of activity sweeps me into the hallway and here I stand, moments away from playing in an actual symphony. Playing music that actual symphonies play, and not a march or syrupy Andrew Lloyd Weber compilation.

The cue is given and I am one of the first to take the stage; the sultry click of my heels on the hard floor startles me and I shift my weight to my toes so I don't walk so loudly. After finding my chair I squint into the audience to find my parents, but the dazzling illumination of the stage renders the audience invisible; in its place I see a vast expanse of darkness intensified by the rows of lights that glitter brilliantly in my carefully polished horn. I concentrate instead on the elements of the luxurious theater I can see—the curtains that soar above me and disappear into shadows, hiding their lofty origins; the meticulously swept black floor at my feet; the complex control panels that peak tantalizing from the side of the stage, tucked away from the audience.

While the rest of the musicians take their seats I study the scuff marks on the floor, amazed that I've leaned in from my plush seat in the balcony to see *Phantom of the Opera*, *Tommy* and *Miss Saigon* performed by national touring companies in this very spot.

The conductor has taken the stage and with a flourish of her baton I furiously count the measures of rest leading to the heroic burst of French Horn—around me the tense strains of Dvorak's New World Symphony build and swirl, and as I lift the horn to my mouth I am astonished at the sense of accomplishment in those first notes, astonished

at the pride that swells within me, pride I've never felt before. Everything about this moment is beautiful. I've found what I love.

Nº 9: Frustration

March 1997

I let out a strangled little shout, drumming my feet against the floor in frustration. My private instructor laughs good-naturedly at my miniature temper-tantrum, moving her chair closer to mine.

Take a deep breath. Relax.

She takes my horn away from me, setting it gently on the floor at her feet. She puts her hand on my shoulder reassuringly as I take a deep breath and flex my fingers a few times. After a short break we revisit the offending passage—a run of sixteenth notes that, despite my persistence, I cannot play without missing a note; the frustrating part is each time I miss a different note. We play the run together slowly, her strong and seasoned tenor supporting my struggling tone. On each note we pause, making sure I not only play the correct pitch but play it in tune.

This concerto is harder than anything I've played in the past; I nearly panicked at the amount of black notes covering the page when I received it in the mail. Shortly I'll send a tape of myself playing the concerto to my new school in Illinois, that way I don't have to travel four hours just to play an audition. For two months I've been practicing arduously, playing so often that both my parents now hum the concerto without realizing it.

After nearly half an hour of playing sixteenth notes at half tempo, I can skip through the passages with seemingly little effort. My instructor shares in my small triumph, congratulating me with a high five.

Excellent, Sarah!

Why don't you take a break, and then we'll talk about your tone.

With a groan, I throw my head back theatrically. It never ends.

N^o. 10: Success

August 1997

I slide into my chair, smiling at the other French horn players with a shy mixture of trepidation and pride. I had to check with the band director one more time before finally taking my seat, and with a welcoming grin he assuaged my anxiety.

No, I didn't make a mistake; you submitted a wonderful audition tape. There's a great deal of promise in your musicianship.

A new state, new city, new school—and a band director who not only believes I have talent, but expects me to prove it from the start. I've never been first chair.

Miss Heller, could I please have a tuning note?

He is smiling at me, and the gap between his front teeth makes me think of David Letterman. I grin nervously, and after taking a deep breath, a clean, dark note slides gracefully from my horn, soaring to the vaulted ceiling and filling the spacious band room. It isn't exactly Mozart, but I couldn't have hoped for a better solo debut.

Nº 11: Reward

October 1997

The metal shines so flawlessly that I can see the entire room reflected in the elegant curves of the beautiful new instrument. In the bell I see my face—I see the astonished smile on my lips as I admire the unblemished nickel finish of the horn; there are no dents, no scratches, not even fingerprints. In wonder I run my fingers gently across the complicated system of tuning slides, savoring how perfectly it rests in the contoured black velvet. Mirrored in the bell I can see my parents standing behind me, and I turn to them in near-speechless gratitude.

It's beautiful.

They smile at my reverent appreciation, and my dad comes forward to put his hands on my shoulders.

You deserve it. We're so proud of you, so in awe of your talent. Enjoy it.

I can't believe this shining new French Horn is mine. It's simply...perfect.

Nº 12: Satisfaction**May 1998**

My band director calls me “The Amazing Sarah Heller.” In the concert last night I played a solo—my eyes glue to the director, I watched as he turned to look only at me, smiling encouragingly and directing as if in that moment I was the only one on stage. In a rush of nervous energy I heard my horn soar over the rest of the ensemble, and for twelve measures I was the most important person in that high school auditorium. At the end of the song my director motioned for me to stand, to recognize me as a solo performer. Full of pride I rose, clutching my French Horn tightly and grinning wildly in response to the audience’s applause and the ensemble’s foot-stomping. The thrill when playing solo—the feeling of significance, of pride, the feeling that I’m genuinely talented—is exhilarating, and I want to stay first chair to satisfy that thrill.

Nº 13: Distraction**July 1999**

His eyebrows are enormous. Patiently and gently, he corrects my mistakes and chides me for not practicing, but all I see are his eyebrows. Like the long ponytail that hangs down his back, his eyebrows are black, streaked with gray. Like the long ponytail that hangs down his back, they are sadly overdue for grooming. He must find my rapt attention encouraging as he plays Kopprasch profoundly, but all I see are his eyebrows, two fascinatingly huge and hairy caterpillars perched on his forehead, content in listening to him play French horn.

Do you understand?

He asks, and absently I nod, trying to tear myself from his enormous eyebrows.

Nº 14: Pride

September 1999

My band director still calls me “The Amazing Sarah Heller”, yet I am no longer first chair. Although he explained why he put a freshman in the first chair—he wants to generate competition—I feel injured, and more importantly, embarrassed. When we pass in the hallways I smile appropriately at him, but I want to ask him how he could betray me so in my senior year.

Nº 15: Suspense

February 2000

Like a scene from a movie, the stairs seem to extend above me for miles. My palms are sweating, and I can’t seem to take more than five steps without hitting the bell of my case against my knee.

I stop at the landing, setting my burden down momentarily to straighten my suit and wipe my hands against my legs. The back of my jacket is wrinkled from sitting all day—first in meetings, then in a music theory placement test, and finally waiting to be called for auditions, where I yawned ceaselessly in nervousness. The University of Illinois music building is cold, but my cheeks are flushed bright red and I can feel beads of sweat between my shoulder blades.

A man with a well-groomed beard and a hunter-green blazer, looking every inch like a professor, sticks his head out into the hallway and motions me into his office

impatiently. Attempting a confident smile, I gather my French horn and my books from the floor and enter.

You'll hear from the school by mid-April.

With a curt nod he shuts the door—I am suddenly exhausted as the nervous energy surrounding my audition lifts.

In April the suspense is resolved, and I lock myself in my room and cry miserably while my parents try to comfort me through the bedroom door.

Nº 16: Motivation

October 2001

The night is cold—much too cold for my poorly planned Halloween costume. Shivering violently, I realize too late that wearing a mini skirt, a long duster, and little else is nowhere near enough clothing for a cold October night in Iowa. I look killer as a punk rock devil, but I'm freezing my ass off.

To compensate, I've been drinking the toxic purple 'Jungle Juice' since I arrived, which, instead of leaving me oblivious to the cold as I'd planned, has left me thoroughly drunk and thoroughly chilled.

The gusty courtyard is poorly lit—one blinding spotlight cuts through the darkness, making some areas painfully bright while others remain in ominous shadows. I've ventured from my huddle of friends for more Jungle Juice; squinting through the slashes

of light on my way back, my clunky, knee-high boots catch a rough patch of concrete. Before my body has a chance to register that it's falling, a large hand shoots from the darkness and grabs my arm, steadying me.

I wobble a bit before finding my balance, and peer out of my intoxication to find the owner of the well-timed hand. Instead I only see the outline of a very tall, obviously male body—whoever it is has that horrible spotlight directly behind him.

Hey, I know you. You were in University Band last semester, right? The principle Horn player?

Now I have a voice and a very strong grip, but still no face. Again I blink in that painful light, squinting and shielding my eyes in an attempt to discern any features. Finally I give up—I can't see him.

I can't see you.

I blurt this out, and after a moment his shadow shifts—now he is standing next to me, the light at his side rather than his back, and finally I can see his face. I know him too; he was one of the percussionists in University Band last semester. I'm surprised he remembers me—I'm not even sure we've ever spoken.

Yeah, that was me. Though saying I was principle horn in a band that doesn't require auditions doesn't feel right. I was only first chair because I sucked less than the others.

He laughs and smiles at me—in the sideways light his smile is brilliant.

You're a great hornist—don't sell yourself short! I know how hard it is to play that instrument well. The solos you played were beautiful.

Surprised by the unexpected compliment, I mumble 'thank you' through a demure grin and close my eyes a moment as I look away. Bad idea—the sudden lapse of darkness causes the earth to lurch sideways—before I can open my eyes again, I lurch sideways with it. Again his strong grasp rescues me before I can go any further. My eyes wide open, I look up at him gratefully.

Thanks—without you I'd have fallen twice now. You're very helpful, you know.

Should I say it?

Very attractive, too.

I look him straight in the eye with my brazen statement—would I be this bold without two hours of unidentified liquor in me? No, were I sober I'd have scurried away by now, to eye him from safely across the courtyard and giggle about him with my friends.

Suddenly the wind picks up, reminding me that the fingers of my left hand are nearly

drenched in Jungle Juice as a result of my uncharacteristic clumsiness. The October wind slashes painfully at the exposed flesh curled around the red plastic cup.

Would you like my drink? My fingers are almost numb.

Laughing again he takes the cup in one hand and the fingers of my left hand in the other.

You need to keep these fingers so you can try out for Concert Band next semester.

Because I'm a music major, they moved me up from University Band. So I can see more of you.

I giggle girlishly and despite the cold, I feel the heat of what must be a brilliant red blush illuminating my cheeks. My fingers are still in his grasp, and while I nod and tell him I'll probably audition, he collects the fingers of my right hand as well. As we stand there chatting, a nudge in my back sends me stumbling for a third time, this time right into his broad chest. I glance over my shoulder for the cause and catch a fleeting glimpse of my friend giving me a thumbs up before she disappears into the crowd.

Nº 17: Routine

December 2002

The applause has died down, and after collecting my music I make my way off stage with the rest of the Concert Band, trying not to step in the puddles of spit dotting the floor. In the cool hallway outside the stage door, my director pats me on the back and

congratulates me on my solos. I thank him before tucking my horn under my arm and finding my parents in the crowd.

Nº 18: Suspense

March 2003

Sitting cross-legged in the hallway, I take a very deep breath to center myself before resting my head against the cool concrete blocks that make up the music building walls. I should be over the jitters that accompany playing solo, but this is more than a solo played in a concert and forgotten—this is the audition for the University of Iowa Horn Studio—my gateway to a music degree.

For months I've been practicing the same two concertos, neglecting my boyfriend and my schoolwork to put long hours of work in the poorly lit practice rooms of the music building. My boyfriend—a percussionist and music major himself—has been very supportive and understanding; the professors who teach my neglected classes have not. I'm not looking forward to the report card this semester.

I know the concertos inside and out—the complicated sixteenth note runs play perpetually in my head, and recently I woke up to find the fingers of my left hand performing the solos without my permission. Still, my stomach is in knots—cradling my horn in my lap I hold my hands before my eyes to see if they are shaking. They are.

Finally the door opens and the bald French Horn professor I've gotten to know over the last few months sticks his head out, smiling and gesturing for me to enter. As I take my seat in front of the lonely music stand in the middle of the room, I quietly hum the first note I'll play—if I can get past that note, I'll be fine. I just have to play that first note perfectly. No pressure.

After the solos are played, the intervals identified and the theory proven, I cock my head anxiously as my evaluator writes a few notes in silence. I don't like his silence at all, and finally I speak tentatively, my nervous voice threatening to fail me in an ironic comparison to that first note I played beautifully. Perfectly.

When should I expect to hear from you?

He turns from his place at the piano and raises his eyebrows.

Hear from me?

He echoes my question, and my heart sinks. I shouldn't even expect to hear from him?

My results. When should I expect to know if I'm in the studio or not?

I flutter my fingers against the smooth keys of my French Horn with great concentration, dreading his response. I just hope he won't leave me in suspense, letting me wait for months when his decision is already made. I'm startled by his laughter.

Sarah, you played beautifully, and you'll make a great addition to the Horn Studio. We have seminar on Monday afternoons—I'll see you there next week.

Smiling hard, I thank him several times and stride out of the room, my head held high.

N^o. 19: Pride

August 2004

Walking to the music building to check chair placements, I know I performed horribly at my audition for Concert Band this semester. I perform horribly at my audition for Concert Band every semester, but the Director of Bands, who is also the Concert Band director, likes me and knows what I can do. Last semester I completely botched the sight reading required for the audition—I ended spectacularly in a finale of wrong notes played at the wrong tempo. But, like every semester since I initially auditioned for Concert Band, when the placements went up my name was at the top—Sarah Heller, principle horn.

After finding my name on the list, I stand quietly in the hallway, a horrible feeling in my stomach. My name is second—in the principle position is a name I've never seen before. A freshman.

The Director of Bands looks up from his desk when I enter his office—with a friendly smile he greets me and I smile back, appropriately.

I need to concentrate on graduating this semester. I can't be in Concert Band.

He looks at me without saying a word, and I know I haven't fooled him. Slowly he nods, and I thank him, wrestling with my pride, embarrassment, and a shameful lump in my throat. What I want to ask is how he could betray me so in my senior year.

The valves are locked shut. Sitting in my old bedroom with my feet tucked under me, I worry nervously about the delicate valves while my parents' dog sleeps nearby. Only hours of coaxing with sewing machine oil and a pair of needle-nose pliers can resurrect the dead mechanics; lovingly and carefully I work over my French Horn, pleading with it to once again live, frantically and sincerely begging forgiveness for nearly two years of neglect, two years of betrayal. Reluctantly the valves turn again and I want to cry—I've missed the smell of the oil, the sound of the valves sliding into place, the glittering reflection of lights in the carefully polished finish, the triumphant sense of accomplishment and creation. The smooth keys feel familiar under my fingers, and my hand stretches comfortably to find the pinkie ring and trigger valve. The horn is cool and reassuring under my left hand, and cupping my right hand for proper tuning, I slide it into the bell and cock my arm so I can lift the horn off my upper thigh. In putting the mouthpiece to my lips I instantly feel elegant and refined, beautiful—I am dressed in black, my long dark hair shimmering under stage lights, playing solo before a soaring symphony.

The tentative first note is rusty, but the strength is there—the passion is there. Patiently I start my old routine of warming up, playing long notes and scales, eventually moving into etudes that flow easily from my memory and through my fingers. I only stop when the dog gets up to happily greet my mother—she is standing in door, smiling at me.

The lowest band at Illinois State University has open seating and a dearth of Hornists, and the director enthusiastically welcomes me into the ensemble. At the start of rehearsal my horn and I slide quietly into the fourth chair, feeling the smooth keys click reassuringly as I flex my long fingers. The mouthpiece against my lips is familiar and welcoming, and when the director drops his baton I settle into the comfortable rhythm of off-beats.