x-mas

At the time of the photograph, I didn’t notice the tree going hungry in the back, its plastic branches spaced apart like bones on a ribcage. The tinsel drooping like strings of saliva. An anemic rosary of Christmas lights. My brother and I knelt in front of the tree, our striped shirts compensating for the dearth of gifts beneath it.

I do remember how proud my father was that he had cut out the perfect star from a cereal box. He had wrapped it tightly in aluminum foil before he placed it at the tip of our skinny tree. It seemed like an ingenious solution back then.

My mother made us change our poses repeatedly as we held on to the same presents. And then my father got into the picture, and then my mother traded places with my father, and then I traded places with him, all of us pretending we were capturing a moment of joy on the most magical day of the year. All of us pretending that my mother wasn’t sick, that my father hadn’t wasted his paycheck with his drinking buddies once again.

“Just a few more,” my mother informed us, and we pasted those false smiles back on our faces the way my father had stuck the fake star on the tree. We had to use up the entire roll of film because it was a borrowed camera. The neighbors wanted it back by the following morning, which was Christmas Day for everyone else.