

From Daughter of Endtimes

My paternal family begins in escape. Guns, knives, hawk feather, car—one word, we'll be gone. Until that day, exhaust smells like work. He lets me know it's time by backing up a metal beast into the carport, cloudy hands cradling our little house. The early morning freeway of Southern California coos, my father revs an engine until it screams down, down the hallway into my bedroom, and I yell from bed that I'm awake already so he doesn't have to break some pollution code. Trevor yells back to me, his teenage daughter, *well if you're awake already, why don't you come help me drain the brakes?* Since it is true that I am already awake, that I am cold enough inside our home to see my breath in the winter months, and in the other months I am a child with tight fists, waiting, I oblige my father. In the way exhaust binds us in this ritual, I know we are as exalted as the beater chariot that will take us from the city when it's time. I emerge from my room knowing my father has a Volvo driver door open for me, which he has learned after bruised years not to close on my leg in haste to get us on the road. I could punish him later for each truck door shut on me in the early years of his fatherhood, but that will be when we are both well enough to tease, that will be when we are safe in some canyon as Los Angeles burns to the south. I have pumped the brakes so many times already that as a teenager I rest my eyes, listen for my father's words of *go* or *now*, and I drop my head into the god we know, a large Volvo steering wheel with braided plastic or leather, and pray, which means sleep, which means for a second know that today we stay.

Our house doesn't know a vacuum for months, but our vehicles get the purr of a Snap-on shop vac, this beautiful red-and-white robot made like they used to be, a thick-funneled machine I can wrap my arms around, and sometimes do. After the brakes there is cereal, sometimes with a scoop of vanilla ice cream because there aren't women around to tell us not to, and there is orange juice and vodka for Trevor before 1995, but that is done by the time I'm a teenager, done with by what is now, which is the future, which will be closer to the end than I could have foreseen. Boom. But before that end, many things will already be gone forever with the drinking. We will have learned that men can change. My father will not be as hard on me. He will not tell me *do it again* every time I do anything. I won't have to practice, demonstrate. He will have

left behind our preparations for the world's collapse, but he won't know that I've already been trained into it so perfectly, ready to do what it takes at costs that rise with the sea level.

There will be two forks and two spoons in the kitchen drawer. There will be one load of laundry between us each week. There will be a case of legal guns in the living room, and a bag of illegal guns under the big oak. There will be cars with atlases under seats, and a handgun and wad of cash under his living room mattress. There will be fire. Everywhere, there will be fire. There will be his red beard and my red hair. There will be red unless we're in a black-and-white photograph, and even then, that image will exist only in the history of the fall, because our story, whoever's left to tell it, is from inside all the red, red.

My maternal family began in sharp things. There was my stepfather's fist and my mother's face. There were the porcelain dolls I busted open with a hammer from my stepfather's toolbox because their eyes, always looking at me. But like with my dad, things changed. My stepdad left my mom and his newborn son, Spencer, for jail again, and my mom burned through enough meth that her cheeks softened like a dollop of cream resting on a spoon. The simplicity of a sharpness made dull. She waved pointy things around her curdled skin, glass and razors and mascara wands. I was eleven and my name was Sarah. I was Spencer's older half-sister and Rich's stepchild and LuAnn's firstborn. In my father's home there was training in prescience, but in my mother's home there was no ideology beyond the moment. At eleven, I chose my father's home when LuAnn started disappearing, and even more so when she stayed.

At my father's I didn't have to care for an infant, and sometimes I even slept. Sometimes I didn't worry about porcelain dolls. I accepted my father's education in masculinity, and we camped in the mountains of California with our guns, with our bodies covered in mud and nothing else. We were the quietest beasts, so I didn't worry about becoming a woman. I never worried about that with him. I worried that if he started disappearing, I would die.

One day after work and school it occurred to me that LuAnn could be dead. I had a feeling, and here's the crux of living in civilization: you need to examine the difference between coincidence and prescience, you need to know that you might worry a thing will happen while it does happen and it means nothing. Or you need to commit. You need to know that coincidence is a lie, that this world will kill you because you are supposed to be dead. You can go live in the mountains. You can

limit the risks. But in the meantime, you can drive to your mother's and see if she's dead.

I drove to LuAnn's house because at times she was there. Through the front door and kitchen, tracing my finger along each surface, I stepped out of the shadows into the living room, where a group of men turned to me, asked, *who are you?* I said, *I'm LuAnn's daughter*, and I haven't said that since. They looked all over me. I stepped back through the dark kitchen toward the back of the house. Spencer was asleep in a room that used to be my own, and in the master suite, I saw my mother staring at herself in a vanity mirror. Then she tugged a dry razor all over her face. She was alive. What to ask her at that moment to understand? My eyes drifted between a poster of Fabio or a man like him taped to the ceiling above her waterbed, lacy, feminine fabrics hanging here and there, and a crack pipe. Her musky perfume, Opium, thickened the air. I couldn't ask LuAnn what would have been most helpful in that moment, maybe something about what it means to be a woman—what did I need to know? She shaved her face over and over with Rich's Gillette. I asked, *whose pipe is that, Mom?* She looked up at me as if I had always been there, watching. *It's not mine*, she said, and smiled deep into the folds of her oval face, paused and tilted her head up to the sky like the patron saint of dismissal, like she might say something else, but she didn't. We never said anything. She walked past me like I was the ghost who wouldn't leave, and I followed her into the living room as she plopped into a sexy leg cross. She sat with the men, and they all stared at her, then me. She asked if my nipples were pierced. She said she wanted to pierce her belly button. She lit a Winston Light and rested it in the coffin ashtray, then told me to show the men my breasts. She told me again to do it. I lifted my shirt and she started to cry. *How could you do that?* she wailed. *How could you do that to your mother?* How would I know.

I killed the raccoon on a sharp Sunday. Around July in Missouri the lesser animals took over. Possums and a raccoon family in the walls, tarantulas hiding by the tub, wolf spiders in my linens. Black snakes circled porch beams and a hawk perched on the old meat hook. I wondered if the world was changing back to something older and I had been left behind to watch. At the height of summer, my body took a sun rash. Then in late August, a raccoon circled and fell in the backyard, got up and did it again. I called the city of Columbia's animal control, which informed me that no one came out on Sundays unless it was rabies. What my particular raccoon had, the attendant said, was distemper. If the raccoon circled like the snakes, it had distemper. If it walked slow

or darted fast in a straight line, it was rabies. The man said the raccoon should be killed right then on account of its suffering.

Does your neighbor have a shovel, ma'am? he asked.

I don't know who my neighbor is or what he has, I told him, *but I have a shovel.*

Only in Missouri could it be true that my landlord's father-in-law shot a baby raccoon in my kitchen with a BB gun earlier that day. It was the cause of a foul odor coming from my air vent. Several men in my landlord's family came to identify the cause of the smell, sure during the entire month I called them about scratching metal sounds that an animal couldn't get in an air vent. Over the weeks, the scratching sound turned to an odor. And yet, that baby was somehow still alive. I walked into my house and the men were all there, wiping their shoes on my carpet, someone's wife watching my television. One of their trucks had a bumper sticker that said *Real Men Love Jesus*. One of them told me I had no right to keep him from spending Sunday with his family.

I was ashamed that those men thought I needed help killing a creature so small, or that it needed to die in the first place. It was a furry little test we all failed. But I didn't say so, even though I could have taken the babe down to the park with my father's Los Angeles Department of Water and Power lineman gloves, which had handled the harder things in my father's day-to-day. Splinters on the wood poles he climbed to reach the power lines. A man he pulled off a live wire. A hawk that he had nursed after it tumbled down from a eucalyptus into our yard, badgered by crows. He shot the crows first, then scooped up the red-tailed hawk with his gloves. In our backyard under the great oak, my father rested the hawk on his bare chest when he thought it well enough. When the hawk sunk its talons into my father's chest upon seeing our Manx cat, my father spread his arms. Every year, two hawks came back to their nest in our yard, and every year my father killed the crows, then watched the hawks. I come from both this uncomplicated killing and the silent, unshared reverence. Him out there on Irving Drive in Thousand Oaks, California, with a .22, east of the Santa Monica mountains and the Pacific.

In Missouri, the second raccoon was a test that was all mine. Was this solipsism? Sure, and that's the truest test of a believer. It's all tests. I didn't want to feel on my end of the shovel the raccoon's skull crack from its spine, even though I knew, I knew a swift push down into the neck fold was the correct way. Refusing that sound, I beat the raccoon indiscriminately. And again. Cicadas screamed and I wailed on the stinking, heaving fur lump that circled away and back into me. When I

dug a grave in the bog of my backyard, I didn't know if the animal was resigned to die or dead. The ground pulled. I let my feet sink into it, thought of being done with all my own circling.

One of the problems with me that I learned early on, that I learned from my father, was that I didn't kill right. Right means quickly. But my hands didn't let anything go.

As a child under the age of ten, I stole food from my mother's family. I could say it was from hunger, and in a way that's true. It was easy to take from the dark kitchen, to take from them. LuAnn in her bedroom, Rich in front of the television with whiskey, music loud, and the neighbors calling. When Rich sucked on his teeth, I opened the fridge just enough to let my small arm inside. In more reckless moments I set a chair next to the fridge and balanced on it to reach for Rich's change jar on top and fished for quarters. He was a tall man, so I could see his feet dangling off the end of his couch from atop my chair. When his toes fell slack, I moved.

LuAnn allotted food to the women in our home, that is, herself and me. Sometimes I took one of Rich's Little Debbie snack cakes from the box in the pantry and pulled another snack cake forward in its place to hide what I'd stolen. One crinkly package of two cakes surely exceeded my seven-hundred-a-day calorie goal, and I was always found out. Mostly, I just took fruit from the crisper that belonged to no one in particular. No one questioned that. I brought my item back to my room and sat in front of the colored dots on a little television, peeling an orange or slicing an apple. I was there with what I wanted, occupied in ritual and sometimes relief.

Not that LuAnn would wake for any sound I made. She only rose if Rich's board of a body ran at her own curled under a blanket. I knew those steps that led elsewhere. He moved fast, barefooted, made floorboards ache when he wanted to fuck her. Sometimes in a drunk mid-stride he'd slice his foot open on the exposed carpet staples that divided our entryway and kitchen, a lesson we all learned tenfold. When Rich faltered but was sure to come back harder, LuAnn would run to my room and jump on my bed. He always stopped at my doorway. Then he'd go back to his couch to recoup, and we two would fly. To the car, to her parents'. Sometimes she couldn't get to my bed soon enough, and we'd stay.

And when we stayed, LuAnn would notice the next day that I had taken one of Rich's snack cake packages, and we practiced talking about this act as though it were one of the problems with our family.

If you don't lose weight by junior high, she would tell me, no one will want to be your friend.

It was true, and I hated my mother for her savvy.

But before I moved in with Trevor full-time, my center of gravity was a buffer for the times my body met LuAnn's explosions. When she ran at me, I held firm, a child of Mercury, static and dark. Facing her, I didn't waver. Not once. LuAnn mentioned decades later, between inhales from a cigarette in her father's backyard, that she had never let a man beat her. *Emotionally, spiritually, sure, but I would never let one hit me.* It was a taunt to my own memory after I had become too powerful to be beaten. It was an assertion over the narrative. And looking back on childhood, my mother never hurt me that bad, even the one time I told her, *that doesn't hurt, you can't even hurt me*, and she went in harder to show me she could.

Food was a gift in our home, too. After an afternoon of gardening when Rich was who knows where, LuAnn would buckle me into the station wagon that my grandparents had purchased for her, and we would go to TCBY. Even after Rich was in jail again for a DUI, this time for crashing his car into a neighbor's car and then pushing his own back into our driveway in the hopes that no one noticed, we ate frozen yogurt. You could say we were like every other suburban mother and daughter in Southern California in the 1980s. My mother gardened while I watched television or peered at a neighbor's house that was rumored to have a pomegranate tree in the backyard. Girls on Calle Margarita Street said that if you lifted your shirt to the man, he would give you a pomegranate. I fantasized unbuckling wet seeds from the bark of a pomegranate, but wondered if I could even get one, if my body would be worth the perfect, magenta thing. While I lusted after this thing with the color of the most alive love, LuAnn was my less exciting constant. She invariably called at me that we were getting yogurt, a treat that reached a sale of twenty-five million dollars in 1986, when I was five and before pomegranates were, as they are now, packaged without their husk, as if the peeling back is a burden. We went for yogurt. It was our time away from the men who could, lasciviously, consume.

When in her car, LuAnn would light a Marlboro Red, or a Capri, or a Winston when two-packs were on sale, and pop a Supremes cassette into the tape deck. She knew every lyric, harmony, tambourine beat. And I was a study of my mother in the times she let me be. With each song, she was Diana Ross and I was Mary Wilson or Florence Ballard, harmonizing with my mother's dismissal of the world. I wanted the

power to run from or ignore whomever I chose. And when we arrived at TCBY, I selected LuAnn's chosen nonfat flavor, then had it blended with candy. It was called *The Shiver*, and it bested the Little Debbie snack cakes every time because it was a slap in my mother's face. I studied her choice, then made it something all my own. The dessert tasted like a solid, defiant life.

When my father was seventeen and my mother eighteen, she asked him to go out for groceries. After he left her apartment, he cut the necks of two sheep from a nearby farmer's flock. When he returned, he yelled to LuAnn to lay out sheets or plastic so that he could butcher the animals on the living room floor. What a peculiar sight it must have been, a red-headed teenage boy dragging two dead or dying sheep into an apartment complex. The police followed the blood trail to my mother's apartment, and because she was the legal adult, only her name appeared in a newspaper article with allusions to sacrifice and Manson, who was believed to have followers hiding out in the caves of Simi Valley, the town next over from their Thousand Oaks. My mother has often told this story as her sentimental memory about her love for Trevor, my father, and as I doubt her ability to love, I necessarily doubt this story. But I know how the floor stains when you share a house with him.

What I also know is that when Trevor and I drove a truck home through the canyons of Southern California and a deer passed us, he always asked if I wanted to stop and kill it for dinner. I never did, and sometimes that was enough for him. And I remember that when he was the keg master at the Topanga Canyon Renaissance Faire, sitting by barrels of beer under the shady oaks, a rattlesnake crawled from its hole to coil in the sun. Trevor let me visit the Faire's psychic, who told me one day I would go to Hawaii, and by the time my prediction was finished, the rattlesnake lay dead from Trevor's knife. Along with women from the canyon's hippie cults who wore feathers in their hair but no bras, we ate the snake fresh from our front-yard grill. It was so good, and the skin was ours to dry and mount on the living room wall alongside the faces of deer. The women brushed their fingers along Trevor's collarbone while he cleaned out the snake's insides, soft-curved beauties circling him with their long hair. I wanted to draw his attention also, for only in his work, his methodical silence, did he seem most like himself, a creature built of loss and reverence that I would never know. But the women, with their long fingers, confidence, and turquoise jewelry—what child could compete against them? The sirens of California. They get a god, men, the great oaks, and wildfire.

When it was only Trevor and me for dinner, he filled a crock pot with chuck and black-eyed peas from Albertsons Market. We ate and listened to records, and he drank from a mason jar with plenty of ice. Trevor played the Plastic Ono Band record a lot, and, like many men his age, revered John Lennon. I could tell because Trevor sang along with all his voice when he thought he was alone, and never sang along when he played the record while we ate. In our home, mealtime was a conduit. And just as with LuAnn, I was a study of my father, so I learned every song.

In one of the heartbreaking Julian Lennon interviews, a reporter asks the son to describe his relationship with his father. Julian chokes up and explains that after his father's murder, he was given only a modest sum from Lennon's estate. Yoko Ono hadn't considered Julian, but more, neither had the father. The father had a newer son, Sean, and a newer life. Lennon may have sang the Plastic Ono Band's "Mother" to his own parents in an attempt to revel in the displacement of that primary, formidable experience of belonging to others, of sharing their red insides, but really, to have your heart broken by the people who made you and then to go and do it to someone you've made. A misdirected revenge. A decision not to love in order to save some part of yourself. It doesn't work.

In "Mother," Lennon screams, *Mama, you left me, I never left you*. While, like my father, I love this song because I've escaped my parents but for the red insides we share, I wish I could ask Trevor if his stomach turns at Lennon's possibilities in fatherhood, squandered. Trevor might say nothing, which would not surprise. Or he might say that things are more complicated. But if that were true, singing along to "Mother" wouldn't feel so...simply good. I'd tell him that. Julian is named after Lennon's mother, Julia, the woman in "Mother" who "left" seventeen-year-old John with an alcoholic father because an off-duty drunk cop drove into her as she crossed the street. Death is never without irony. The blood spills out into a long con with a punch line. So "Mother," in addition to feeling good to sing along to, also makes me nauseous. In "Mother," Lennon sings, *Children / please don't do / what I have done / I couldn't walk / and I tried to run*. And just as it is for Julian, my favorite Lennon song is "Isolation." *Afraid of the sun / Isolation / The sun will never disappear / but the world may not have many years / Isolation*. When you're scared to lose, take. Kill. Which is another way to understand that when I killed the raccoon years later in Missouri, I could have done it fast by crunching down where its skull met its spine. But I, like Julian, don't walk away with dignity. We're no sirens. We close our eyes, we hold on,

even if nothing's holding back. In the Plastic Ono Band's song "Hold On," Lennon sings, *Hold on*.

My favorite plants as a child were the hanging fuchsia LuAnn grew at our home atop Margarita Street. Segmented purple and magenta, sprigs of pink, lime-colored stems and delicate petals, translucent pods wet with dew from being saturated by light, then pushed into night's darkness with a sweet drop. Our front yard was higher than others', so we got the dreamiest sun and the quickest shadows. We balanced downward slopes on each side and isn't that a nice metaphor. I picked the fallen blooms from my mother's garden floor and pushed the pods between my fingers, comforted by the wet death. As for the blossoms still on the plant, I admired them above me like a great chain of authority that attested to LuAnn's skills, despite, well, everything. My mother Ceres, the goddess who makes plants and children thrive alike. And she did—on the nights she woke to escape the house when Rich faltered in a run against her body, she wrapped me in a blanket, threw me on her shoulder, and suddenly I was a dreamy five foot six inches tall. I glanced at the garden as Ceres's legs ran us to the car, looked down at the plants from a great height. In the late hours, the fuchsia petals closed around the pods in their comfortable hanging pots, and these were the only times, in escape, tucked into the long neck of a goddess, that I was held high enough to see what I was missing. The petals turned inward as if to surrender to their own brilliance, and even pulled in and away from the cold, they were luminescent and full. They were safe from civilization and I wanted them for my own. They were safe and pink and never red.

When I am eleven my father teaches me how I am dying. Trevor gets laid off from the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power for drinking on the job, so he makes us dig holes in the backyard of our Irving Drive home. Nothing will stop us. We build a concrete trench around the back of our house, fill in the front yard with landscaping gravel, bury dead animals we find on the road, smooth out a flat spot of earth to build sheds on. The lilies, the cactus, the loquat tree, they are there because they grow indifferent to us. We know dirt, and there are many lessons about feeding the hours of each day in the yard, about filling the gut with a hard expertise. There are timed knot-tying sessions. There are guns to shoot until you can take the kick without flinching, do it again until your eyes go blank. I grease the cast-iron pans, sign Trevor's name on checks, clean the carport with the air compressor, dig the trench under his eye always watching to discern my stroke and exhaustion. I

am not good at this, but I learn. It's labor, plain and simple, father and daughter. I learn about autonomy from landlords because we lay our own carpet when the house floods. I learn I am ugly and tie my hair back with a rubber band. I learn about winter, wool gloves over my hands bloodied when I can't stop ripping off my fingernails. I learn that when adults I barely know try to touch my hands or reach for my shoulder to tell me *if you ever need anything, if you need a safe place*, I see a flicker, I get nauseous and stiff. I dig into the earth, into my body. I learn I am the best daughter when I am quiet and strong.

One day our Manx cat gives birth to the most amazing kittens that I hold and hold because the feel of them is different from adult cats. The animals are more perfect than a pomegranate. There is one runt that my father calls *deformed*. It drags its back legs a little. My father says the mother will reject the kitten, and Lennon rejected Julian, but the kitten seems fine to me. Trevor tells me that I need to kill it. He tells me I have to for its own good, and now I know I never knew then the line between suffering and difference. He suggests a shovel to the head. Or a boot sole down on it fast, but I can't, I can't do it the right way. I tell him I will do it but my own way, it will get done, father, but please let me decide.

I lay the kitten in my hand as I have done before to pet it or hold it into my neck, only this time I do both, then slide my hand into the toilet. The runt struggles, squirms, tries to kick its weak back legs, meows and gets water, stops moving in my hand. I take the kitten out back and rest it in the hole I've prepared. Even after lowering the runt into the ground, I hold onto it, then I let go because that is what I must learn. I scoop dirt on top until the ground looks level, rise from my mark, and from below where the shallow oak roots thrive, the animal cries and cries. I claw the dirt with my stupid, bloody fingers and run back into the house. I plunge my hand into the toilet, this time, like the last, out of fear. The second time I bury the baby, there is no sound from below. Which time did I fail worse? I could have learned a lesson my father never did—we can have a second chance. The kitten could have lived if I let it. We all could live longer, we could all find out that somebody bigger can help. I didn't know I could hear things from underground.

I don't know what I need to learn to stay alive in this family. LuAnn will kill me if it gains her the smallest thing. No doubt. Trevor lets a hawk sink its talons into his chest like an offering, like he will be the world's conduit if it will take him, if it will suck him into the dirt and use him. It did. Or is this Trevor's threat, that he will kill until the world stops him? It did. Even now, with two nows layered and my eyes seeing

the flicker and fade, I don't know I don't know but I want him alive and I love him. I will learn every lesson no matter the cost. I did.

LuAnn bought cans of ladybugs each spring, and sometimes I got to shake the container over her roses, watch the red bugs eat aphids or fly away into the birch trees. Some would end up in my long, red hair, a few found their way to my bedsheets, and there were always some at the bottom of the can, having already been smothered or starved. I emptied the dead ones on the brick flowerbed ledge so that I might examine the desiccated red shells before blowing a puff of air to send the bodies to dirt. They blew into the wind, and rose plants reached underground to feed from the earth, and the ground was where we'd all end up soon, I knew. I had seen it.

One afternoon, LuAnn gardened while I watched a local news story about a man who died in his early thirties. I asked my mother through a window into the yard how old she was. She was in her late twenties. There my mother was, crouched where she would perish, I thought. I told her, *you're going to die soon*. And me, too, I thought. We would be pulled into the ground and I couldn't breathe, tore my toenails clean off to release the feeling of how they forced my skin down, knew that we had lasted longer than our allotment. I didn't like LuAnn but I knew that I needed her to watch out for me. Some neighbors told me that I could always scream and run to their house if I needed to escape—but would I make it in time? is what I asked myself. Would either of us make it out of this house alive, out of Calle Margarita, out of Thousand Oaks in time?

Now I guess I could say that I was scared of my father's complete undoing, since he was the one I needed, as LuAnn would never rise to the occasion to save me and that's the truth—when all else fails, LuAnn has already failed first. I could say that I worried Trevor would crash us into Decker Canyon if we both didn't lean together in unison on his motorcycle. I could say that he drove drunk with me in the car all the time. I could say that my parents both tested their lives more often than they should have. But then, I had only a sense of our future. I saw red, and black, and red. I saw that coincidence and prescience had the same colors. This is a lesson and for years there are lessons.

The oak limbs in our Irving Drive backyard reached out to the world, extended beyond a fence to tangle with the neighbors' trees. The house next door belonged to the Greers. Their daughter, Virginia, whom we called Ginny, was born on the same day and in the same hospital as

me. I often saw her gardening with her mother, Mandy, from our own yard full of unfettered wildness. Their house was covered with a lush, dark green of perfection. Their soil was tended to and smelled like a clean stream. Inside their home, dark, shiny wood gave the living room a decadent sheen that looked like untested elegance. In my mind, their home approximated wealth and safety.

One day I arrived from Margarita Street and saw Ginny out front with Mandy. Mandy went inside for something. I said *hey* to Ginny, who was unlike me in every way. As a smart, blonde, smiling child, she looked alive and clean. Her father, Peter, built her a beautiful playhouse in their backyard and fixed up their home and others, certain he could buy multiple properties on Irvine Drive while the neighborhood was still bad. Peter was right—Thousand Oaks boomed and boomed. But while Ginny and I were children, our street was known as the location of a gang shooting of a pregnant woman. A rumor. Irving crosses Houston, the then-hangout of the mostly white Houston Hoods, the rival gang of Tocas. Tocas, a Latino gang, also lived in the neighborhood. Irving and Houston, behind Thousand Oaks Boulevard, where rivals were often neighbors. Porky's was on the corner of Houston and Thousand Oaks Boulevard, a rib joint with blacked-out windows said by children to be an Italian mob hideout. My father, the white biker with guns, always had handy protection from the supposed violence stemming from race and class in the neighborhood. Sometimes he spoke of Mexican ninjas who hopped along the rooftops and oak trees across our neighborhood. This was not funny. We looked out for all possible predators near and far, and we practiced for the end in the woods on weekends.

Since other parents mandated that their kids weren't allowed to come inside our house, if Ginny and I wanted to play, we did so at her house. On that day I got dropped off to my father, he was inside having sex with his girlfriend Charlene, a woman he was very much in love with, and who also liked to slap me. So I looked for something else to do. I went to Ginny's.

As I walked through Ginny's front gate, I removed my shoes to feel the Greers' dreamy lawn between my toes. Ginny ran to her backyard playhouse, and I was to follow, but the front-yard roses were too beautiful to pass. With a watering mouth I faced the blooms, smelled deeply into one bulbous, pink bud, and rubbed the petals along my lips. They were softer than I could ever remember a human's hand, and gentler, thorns far down the stem. I felt hungry for something that their quiet house wouldn't stop me from trying for. I looked at Ginny running toward her playhouse, and she didn't look back at me. I was starving—knew that

to be a thief was to be barren—so I put the entire rosebud in my mouth and bit down. The petals felt more different from a human's hand than I could ever remember anything being, and the thorns didn't hurt me because the rosebush would never be human. But the taste was not any sweeter than a slap to the jaw. Once ripped from the stem, the bud was dry and unyielding, bitter away from its source, dying but still with the perfume that first drew me. The whole day I felt something like being human; the whole day I tasted bitter.

Back on Margarita Street, when I'm six, I hang out with a girl named Melissa. She is much older than me, almost grown, long and popular. She lives down the block but still on top of the hill, up a steep driveway with a construction truck parked in it, broken house windows and a moldy backyard pool. Melissa says she's had a pomegranate from the man who makes girls lift up their shirts to get one, and I'm not surprised. I want one so bad. She shrugs and says *it's no big deal*. When I screamed from the living room to my mother in her garden that we were all going to die, my mother brought me to Melissa's, so her mother, Gigi, would watch me. Gigi is the one who explains to me that Rich put an ax in LuAnn's head so that I would understand why my mother had stitches. *That's why you'll be around your dad's more right now*, Gigi says. Melissa's father is short, stout, with a red moustache like my dad. When Melissa's dad is in the room, no one talks. I don't ever know his name. When he's out of the room and Gigi is gone wherever, Melissa and her siblings turn on the Playboy channel and stare at naked bodies. Melissa makes us touch each other for I don't know how long. I only remember two times because they are unlike the others, once when I make a point to act casual about what we are doing so I seem more mature, and another when she wakes me to touch her and I tell her I just want to sleep. Angered, she leaves in the night to go back to her house and never touches me again. Blonde, beautiful Melissa. She's a tired part of me, but stunning to look at, someone to aspire to be. One of those California girls. Melissa can almost leave home forever. She tells me she and her boyfriend are moving to Anaheim, where Disneyland is. It sounds like an impossible distance for my own escape. I watch her and her boyfriend kiss off of Avenida de los Arboles. They look like Southern California looks on television. They look unmarked to the world that doesn't know them.

Sometimes both our refrigerators are empty except for condiments, but we still watch Playboy on the television. I ask the Jehovah's Witnesses halfway between my house and Melissa's for cans of food when my

mother tells me to, and I get to take two bags home in two trips, but I don't share any with Melissa *ha ha*. My mom says *ew* to a can of hominy but is still glad that we get it. Sometimes it's like this in our homes but we're never starved. Everyone still has cable television, hamburger meat in the back of a freezer, Christmas. I'm at Melissa's house one time when we put ketchup all over our arms and pretend that we're bleeding. First we ask, what's better on arms, ketchup or hot sauce? Ketchup: looks more like blood but hurts less, let's pretend that we're dead *ha ha no one knows we're not let's scare them*. Smear, smear, almost done, stagger down the driveway like you're dying. Scare kids from down the block, Ashley and Ryan, make them scream and run down the street. *Ha ha we got them*. We own Margarita Street. When Melissa's parents are gone and it's too early for her to touch me, Playboy is on and kids stare. We watch boobs. I don't like watching because it doesn't feel fun to see naked bodies. I don't like being reminded that I have a body that isn't like the ones on television. I feel sick. I smell ketchup. We're like kids but like something else, too, red marks all over and never a thought of a world with answers, just a world where Anaheim is salvation from Thousand Oaks. Knees pressed together on greasy shag carpeting. We stare. Fleas and roaches. *Ha ha kill it don't itch*. We learn to always have a glass of water nearby to put the fleas in. *Ha ha you have the most bites. You suck*. I'm the one who gets lice all the time, I don't even know how. I suck the worst. Something is happening to these children who live in the house with Playboy, who knows what, and who cares that we are all forced into sexuality by some other person, the point is that we feel better when we play dead, we feel light and forget we're hungry so hungry. Margarita Street has too much to hold and that's why it bends itself backward in a spine of hills. Margarita has too much weight, I know that feeling. But we are on top of it all. Closest to the sun. Who knows what happens to kids *ha ha who knows what?*

My father liked the Plastic Ono Band and my mother liked the Beatles. Every Christmas, LuAnn and I woke while Rich was in jail or slept in, *sick*. We drove to her parents' house while listening to a Los Angeles radio station's twenty-four-hour Beatles Christmas program. Was it K-EARTH 101? LuAnn turned up the dial, and I sat in the backseat, both of us happy not to interact. Our most restful time together was in a car. Each holiday that we drove down Westlake Boulevard, I felt safe, sun streaming through my thin, white eyelids, black turning to orange. It was warm on Christmas in Thousand Oaks, unlike on Halloween, when it always seemed to rain.

At moments on these holiday mornings, there was something in LuAnn's singing along that was sad and I knew it, even when I was young enough to still suck my thumb. I didn't understand how someone as mean as she was could be sad. One Christmas when the sun flashed between shadows from the giant sycamore trees on Westlake Boulevard, I clenched my fists while LuAnn sang along to "Julia" because it occurred to me that I had never seen my mother laugh. I'd seen her smile, snicker, but never any of that turning to a better thing. My love for LuAnn was complicated by my hatred for her, and I knew like I thought I knew death what hate felt like. It was so close to me. But I didn't like to understand my mother as a person who didn't laugh.

Lennon wrote "Julia" to memorialize his mother, but also to celebrate his love for Yoko Ono, whose Japanese name means *child of the sea*, and who must have known that the lyrics *oceanchild calls me* were for her. Lennon once said that Yoko wrote "Julia." If Ono made it possible for Lennon to love his mother more complexly, richly, then in a way Ono did write the song. Testimonials are never our own, nor is joy. It was harder to hate my mother when I knew she didn't laugh because it made me aware of a history I didn't know and where that landed: me, a child who didn't laugh. But this is the way we love. After knowing, you either hold on or you don't. You may pick at your hands until they fester, your grip may stiffen, but you decide. You aren't already made in regards to love. You decide this.

At Trevor's, there were nights when I awoke to an empty house, and while this wasn't a surprise, the feeling of wanting LuAnn's help was. One night when the house was empty but flooded with light, I awoke because I was cold. I opened my eyes. The house was a dreamy yellow cloud that allowed me to see all the roaches but not my father. I knew the house was empty and that was why the bugs felt safe emerging. The bugs were safe.

Trevor had left again. I jumped over the hallway roaches and ran to the living room, where I called LuAnn. She told me to walk next door to Barb and Bob Rapanaks' rock house to look for my father. She said she'd stay on the phone until I returned. If I screamed, she might be able to hear me. That night, with my hair wet from a bath hours before, my nightshirt hanging off my boyish shoulders, I was LuAnn's child. At the corner rock house without windows, I tiptoed past the adults, none of them looking at me, anyway. My father sat in a corner and I approached him. They all were getting high, had become addicts, just as their chil-

dren would become. I understood their hunger because it was my own, and I was jealous that they had ways in which to satiate.

Trevor lazily looked up, then stood without a word and walked home behind me while I looked back to make sure he was there. He whispered something short into the phone while LuAnn screamed back, his cue to hang up. I stood there with the bottom of my large T-shirt bunched into my palms. For years I would try to unwind my fists in the late hours, I would sleep on my stomach with my hands smoothed flat underneath me, try to stop holding on to every damn thing. Trevor and I both knew the other was in need, and we both felt guilt for not grabbing the other. I didn't hold on to my father. How to reach out for something that close? It's you.

I needed to hear him clean his knives or awake mid-cry from his nightmares in order to drift into my own. Only in those moments when he was lacking do I return to find when my mother was not. It was over the phone, and I loved her like it hurt, I loved her enough to stick my face into every thorny rose, I loved her more than seven hundred calories, I loved her like Diana Ross's heartbroken voice in every Supremes song, the woman who turned even the phrase *so satisfied* into a dirge. In this memory I see where one thing becomes its other. I am struck with tenderness for this woman I hate, and there are no lies in this, no undoing my mother from me. There is no loss. I've decided.

When George Harrison died, I found out from a Los Angeles radio station while inside my Toyota Camry. "My Sweet Lord" played for twenty-four hours across the city's incredible radio. Like that, for hours, listening over and over as I drove across the basin from North Hollywood to Irvine for graduate school. I cried because I missed him. George. I didn't know why I was struck. It was the twenty-ninth of November, warm Santa Ana winds reaching north and east from the direction I faced on the 101 to 134 to 5 to 710 or 605 to 405 South. Against the wind in traffic, windows open, the air swirled, tying around my neck. I was tired from something that wasn't the drive, a lullaby made from the dreamy Southern California morning sun. It was Thursday, my favorite night of the week to hunt down tamales and beautiful men and turn away from the West Side film editors in Silver Lake bars. I had a suitable fake ID in case anyone asked. No one ever did. But that day, I was scared to go out in the evening. It felt like we had all lost so much in this Southern California, in this city whose industry made stars, and made so many more people mourn. I didn't want to lose any more of them. But "My Sweet Lord" and the record it's on, *All Things Must Pass*, make clear that

Harrison, our star, had been ready to leave us for a long time. He had arrived on the precipice, and I would stay behind as one of the people who hoped our stars would look back, reconsider.

My father's lessons taught me that I'm not a good killer. I killed the raccoon when I was twenty-nine, but I held on to it longer that I should have, even when that holding was beating its body. If it kept dying and I was safe in that moment from death, somehow that moment proved we were both together, alive. The amount of blood that must have poured into my mother's hands before her scalp was stitched. How fast it fled my father but stayed for months on the concrete. I can't stop thinking about the blood they lost in violence.

Even Harrison, our star, couldn't escape where he came from. The release of "My Sweet Lord" instigated a lawsuit that lasted ten years, the final verdict reading that Harrison had subconsciously written the song in the same title refrain, scale descent, and tempo as The Chiffons' hit "He's So Fine." If you listen to the two songs, the similarities are unmistakable. Harrison's own prayer to move on from this world, his testimonial to god that he was ready, had been plagiarized. His authority as the one who could leave, the one who wouldn't hold on to this world or the people in it, had been a pop song about crushing on a really hot guy. Loving god came from loving a man.

It goes without saying that from origin much is made. It's harder to understand how we speak once the beginning has died. There are lessons in each of our hands, but that doesn't mean we're each in a world apart. I speak because my father's voice is my own. Of all the saints who wrote their memoirs and claimed that god spoke the words to them, I tell you now that I speak the words for my god. When Harrison sang of leaving, I think he articulated most the correct way to stay. Write a better version of an older song. Of an older anything. Learn that lesson. Which is to say, songs aren't already sung. You decide. You decide what's worth your singing.