

MARGAREE LITTLE

Thanksgiving

1

In the hot bedroom half a mile from the border

I opened David's Catullus, the last lines of number sixty-three,

women mutilating themselves before a god, red pen marks

translating the Latin: *Drive other people crazy. Drive other people mad.*

We'd just come from mountains that were green for the first time in months,

as happens here in August, and the sun was going down

over the cottonwoods, Border Patrol trucks parked on the hills

as we drove up Grand Avenue and turned on Crawford by the liquor store,

where teenage girls were standing, and where one,

in a pink tank top that looked like silk, lifted her right hand to her left shoulder

to pull up the strap that had been falling down.

There could be poems in which he does not appear,

my teacher said. She meant the man we found. She meant,

I think, *go back to the world again.* But there are things with holes in them—

like the stone foundation where a house had been, where my sister and I played

when we were children, a house that must have burned,

though we never discussed it. Wild geese taking off from the lake.

Sister taking off her clothes. It was cold, and I think she wanted to see

how far she could go without minding, as at the end of the day, from indoors,

it can look like it's already gotten dark, but if you've been outside all day



you know this is the bluest part, deer putting their faces to the ground
to eat at the beginning of winter. No one could tell me how they knew to do that.
Or the bald eagles coming back, why they came back
not in Maine's far north but central Maine,
along the coast where people live, where I worked one fall
at a farm, and where I lived, thirty miles from the farm,
with a woman who sometimes filled the house with lilacs in glass jars.
In the evening, when she broke the jars one by one against the kitchen wall,
smell of lilacs, smell of beer, her hands didn't shake,
since the moon came in from the field outside, since beyond the field
were pines, then another field, we were alone, we could be anything there—

In the morning she'd wake me, light coming in through the green glass bottle
by the window by the bed, and I'd watch through the window
as she'd go out to the field, unstringing the electric fencing
for the sheep we kept. Some days she'd bring in basil
I'd planted in the yard, and how could I tell the difference
between the smell of basil, the sound of her voice slurred though it was still
morning,
and what the voice was saying, something about beauty, something about
what we'd be, those days in September, when she'd pull me down on the
kitchen table.



Later she'd go into her room. If I put my ear to the door
I could almost hear a sound coming out, like ocean stored
in the curve of a shell, her raincoat over the window
to keep out the light, the apple tree in the yard, its delicate branches,
in a certain light it appeared almost intact—

2

In June, walking all week from Sásabe to Tucson with fifty others who'd come because people are dying in this desert, people were dying as we walked, I made a list of things I'd tried that spring in exchange for which the man we found might not have died, such as not sleeping, such as lighting candles at specific times, such as praying. And this walk, carrying a plywood cross through the desert as the others did, each cross bearing in permanent marker the name of someone lost, though most, like mine, said *desconocido*, which means *unknown*.

If I tried hard enough, while I walked with the cross, I could begin to pretend that in another minute he'd walk toward us, Elias. And then, surely, he would walk past us, since what would I say if I saw him like that, light catching in the thin grass west of the highway. Gel combed in his hair. A tattoo, maybe, on his left shoulder, of a rose. And a name printed under the rose, the ink so faded to green that I couldn't read it, and neither could he, since he just saw what it used to be and not what it was becoming, something closer to the shape his mouth made of trying not to express pain, at seventeen, when he rolled back the sleeve of his blue and white school uniform and a man bent over him with a needle and ink. On the wall over both of them Elias watched a page torn from a magazine, photograph of apple trees in the orchards of Washington State, where a girl wore a tin ring the man with the needle had given her.

3

The phone call came the second week of September, a man named Andrés, calling from Washington, calling to say his sister was missing, left behind two weeks ago in the desert west of Tucson, from a small town in Guatemala, twenty-two years old, ninety pounds—

Sarah was the one who took the call.

Sarah, who'd turned to me last spring, her calm face, her voice saying, *I want you to know, the doctor went out to where you found the man, she found other bones, she thinks they're from another body*—Sarah's an RN, she knows things about the body—who'd said, weeks before that, *there's no space in ordinary life for grief*, which is what people say, only her face was a calm I wanted to put on, her long arm around me in her green windbreaker.

In September, after she took the call, I stood with her in the gravel parking lot.

The afternoon sun came down around us, and we discussed going that day or the next to look, though we didn't say the girl's name was *Santa* which means *saint*, at home on my desk a letter from my teacher, a bowl of oranges, a chair by the window where I'd go to wait, since we weren't saying it had been two weeks already, we weren't asking *at what point do you lose your name*—what Sarah said was, *let's go in the morning*.

So in the morning we drove out to Ironwood, the others who had come to help following in the jeep behind us, to Nation land west of 86, the place Andrés had described, which was also the place Sarah had found the other girl, who'd come from the same town Santa came from, who'd been coming, in a pink sweatshirt, to surprise her fiancé in Oregon.

He'd called and asked Sarah to look, so she did, and she found the girl in Ironwood, in a shallow dip of sand under a tree.

She has very long hair, the fiancé had said, and *she did*, Sarah was saying, *she did have long hair*.

Then we were walking under the power lines, looking for a trail on the land running flat and hard to the mountains west of us, past the thin dirt roads rutted next to mobile homes rotting out, the dust of their walls held together with formaldehyde, but only just.

Imagine living in a place like that, the windows like windows a child would draw, the child watching you get up every morning, prepare meals out of habit, as people who live in shadows must sometimes touch their foreheads out of habit, to make sure they are still there, and later their grandchildren notice it, one hand like a flicker at the forehead.

4

There's no secret to this. You look for a trail and then follow it,
though you have to know what to look for, and then try not to lose track of it,
when the sun, in the middle of the day,
begins to make things move around, when everything begins
to look like a trail, and the wind and even your own steps might be voices.
I wanted to ask Sarah if you get used to it, after a while,
the backpacks left under the trees in the wash. The empty gallon jugs.
Cotton shirts hung in mesquite trees, the fabric getting so soft and thin
you could almost see through it if you were to look.
But I didn't know how to ask, and we kept walking, two weeks since the girl
was lost,
two weeks of Andrés sitting at some card table in Washington State
while it rained in the orchards around him, praying, maybe, and maybe fingering
some light blue hair ribbon he was abstracting to all women,
if his sister was a woman, he was realizing then that she was,
though he used to know it in a different way when they both were children,



when they'd play the kind of game children play
though sometimes they'd go further and he'd forget it was her he was moving over
under the cedar trees at the edge of town, the roots of the trees
painted with lime to protect them. Then he was calling us from Washington
and we were stopping, we were standing in the thin shade of the power lines:
his sister had called, she was already detained, she was already
sent back to Guatemala, and Sarah said into the cell phone,
thank god she's safe.

My teacher who sent me back to the world,
it's October. Out walking last night after the first rain in weeks,
I saw three nylon jack-o'-lanterns swaying in the wind in someone's yard.
Fall here isn't like fall at home—
no lake, no geese taking off from the lake, no swallows in the trees.
Coming up to Annie's house last night after the rain,
I opened the screen door without knocking,
washed glasses in the kitchen, waited for her to come back from the desert
and put her arms around me. They'd found another man who died.
Today wasn't like before, she said. Today I felt strong, I knew what to do,
her voice getting high and thin in the night.
And I did what I knew how to do, though I didn't know I'd learned it,



brought sheets out of the closet, made a bed for her on the couch on the
back porch,

pulled a mattress close and lay down on it.

After a while she lay down, too. And after a while I turned off the light,

left the two white vigil candles burning. Then I pulled a blanket over her,

which is what they'd done for the man they found that morning.

5

I saw them when I got there at first light, the eagles, in the stand of pines

at the foot of a hill, settling into the shape of a crown in the branches.

I'd left when it was still dark, the woman asleep in the wide white bed,

I'd scraped frost off the windshield, driven out past the blueberry fields
toward the farm to work with the others, killing the turkeys John had raised.

The week before Thanksgiving. We pulled rubber gloves over our coat sleeves,

used our hands to break the ice in the tubs in the driveway,
where we'd put the birds we'd killed the day before—

you've got to stop the heat fast, John said, or they'll go bad—

it was up to us if they went bad or not. We pulled the feathers
out with knives, gutted them, bagged them,

weighed them in the shop. And when our hands got too cold

to hold the knives, we beat them on our legs and started again,
though later we'd wake and find they'd gone numb while we slept.

We worked until there was no more light. And before we drove home

in the freezing dark, the rain turning slowly to snow in the road,
we swept what was left, what we didn't need,

down the drain in the center of the floor in the shop,

so it ran to the trees where the eagles were waiting
for a river running toward them filled with food.

6

Strung out like one who bolts behind an unbroken ox

Catullus writes. *Where did I imagine I'd find you?*

When she doesn't tell me what she sees when she stays up at night,

my teacher, I think it's out of kindness. But later I think

maybe I didn't ask the question right, since maybe,

after so much practice, you start to see it just as well by day—

not the way his face was not a face, the man we found,

but how, at the end of the walk through the desert in June,

we came down from the West into the city, to a park,

and people were waiting for us, clapping. And then it was time

to put the crosses down, lean them

together against a tree, and mine went with them.