

MARIO CHARD

Caballero

Rigoberto Salas-López, 30, was charged with transporting illegal immigrants resulting in death. Eight of the 14 people in the Chevy Suburban died after it rolled several times on U.S. 191 a few hours before dawn Monday. Salas-López, originally from Guatemala, told investigators he swerved to miss a horse. He was arrested after fleeing into the desert in the Four Corners area of Utah, New Mexico, Arizona and Colorado.

—Associated Press, April 17, 2007

The passengers say no, he wasn't swerving to miss a horse, he was fondling a female passenger in the front seat of the vehicle.

—Sgt. Rick Eldredge, *The Salt Lake Tribune*

1

Say it was a horse.

That the horse watched
the three-ton van

roll until it stopped
where their bodies
stopped. That the horse

unlike a horse waited
until he stood. Say it was
the horse he followed

in the desert. Say it was
the desert, the sagebrush
that kept the horse. Say

it was the trail he left
the patrolmen followed.
That they never found

the horse. That he covered
the horse tracks in
the desert with his own.

2

The sergeant doesn't find the wreckage first. When he asks the survivors how many cars passed in the desert three hours before morning they tell him they remember only one, that someone moved the bodies from the road and drove away. In their language they say this road is a river nothing gathers. The sergeant asks to see their driver and one points to the desert. The rest point to the woman he reached for, a hole the body left passing through the windshield.

3

Son,
in Spanish you do not agree,
you must *be in agreement*,
estar de acuerdo.

Two people may agree or disagree,
like we do,
but they must also *be in one*
or the other.

If you mistake

cuerdo for
 cuerda

you will have said *rope*
or *cord*,
though both words divide and bind
some older form of

agreement.

As a boy I saw
a model of the spinal cord,
how the nerves run down, divide us
behind.

They named it *cauda equina*—
horse tail—buried
cord.

4

In his dream the sergeant takes a shovel to the river to hold the river back. He is told he will find nothing, to keep nothing he finds. The sergeant stands in the river until his feet freeze, until they lose their hold, until it is the shovel itself he holds to keep from slipping under. The river is choked with debris. It is a bird nest, finally, that passes, convincing him. Inside he sees small branches woven, then string, then needles, clothing, then hair. He untangles the nest to braid a rope.

5

Say the three names
he gave the
sergeant were true. Say

the names of the
eight bodies pulled from
the wreckage became

the numbers they first
labeled them by. Say
the eighth is no longer

nameless. Say they still
tie ropes to the caskets
of immigrants they find

in the desert. That a rope
saves time should
someone come looking.

Say they bury the ropes
for the dead to climb
back. Say their names.

6

Son, do not mistake

cabello with
caballo

hair with
horse,

that *caballero*,
though gentleman,
meant

horseman.

You've heard the Spanish
conquered Mexico
on their horses.

You've heard the conquered
could not tell
the man from horse
and ask me,

How do we know
the conquered knew?

They listened. The horses
never spoke.