

THE ERRAND

That alarm bell from the house barely carried through
the columned shade of six foot high vines, sleeping babies,
conversation and radios loud to the Spanish stations.

I have no memory of the year or day, only that it was late
summer, and as usual, then, I was far from the house,
in the trellised bean fields with whole Mexican families
picking the thin green pods by hand for the cannery,
shouldering 100 pound sacks down long rows to the scales.

The mile to the house goes slow on foot, in heat, deep, loose dirt,
irrigation mud, rows and rows of shoulder-high corn, acres
of spent strawberries. Finally I reach the firm home pasture sheltered
by oak and maple, where I stop to breathe. The horses, usually
dozing by now, instead are trembling, alert, ready to run from
the strobing lights on the sheriff's car, the ambulance, the media vans.
Near the house, I try to quiet my horses, tell them everything's fine.

Our large kitchen is filled elbow to elbow, Our cousins' parents,
distraught and our mother, so many uniforms milling. The unfamiliar
faces don't seem to notice me, or our cousin's small arm not
quite covered by the red-stained sheet on the hall carpet.

An officer holds with a cloth the .38 mother has always kept loaded
high on the china cabinet, for safety between pay days. A clergyman
I've never seen sits in the backyard with the other boy who is hitting his
head on the ground—Those cousins always played war behind the sofa
and chairs aiming and ducking, making the noises for gunfire and bombs.

Now in the house there are only the sounds of strangers moving
past each other, avoiding the sheet in the hall, the soft moaning,
the shrill wailing now and then like caught rabbits or fawns,
the whispers, truncated words. All of us in suddenly cast-stone faces
that I'm told I have never fully lost—as if I were in some way accountable
for this, could take it back. Or even as if, I could have chosen not to see
and hear our cherub cousin who appeared to me hours later, in my fits of
sleeping. His angelic face alive with light, he charged me clearly to
"Tell them it's nice here. Tell them not to worry, Tell them it's all right,"

I see and hear him still—*that message is everything I ever need to know.*
But I can't remember now if I ever did the telling—I m so afraid that
such a simple errand remains undone. That I will still keep it safe and
secret, as if to save myself alone.