Pig

I pulled into Galdini Sausage at noon. The workers walked out of production and swatted away the flies desperate for pork. Pork gripped the men and was everywhere, in the form of blood, in the form of fat, and in pink meat stuck to the workers' shoes. Outside, eighty-pound boxes of pork melted under the sun, and as the sun worked, the blood and fat grew soft, and the boxes, lined with wax, became like thin paper soaked in oil. Mack trucks came in with unprocessed pork and took out chorizo, linguica, hot links, and sausage: German, Sweet, Breakfast, Hot, and Mild. One man stood straight up into the sky, closed his eyes, and with his thumb and forefinger, worked out bits of meat from his eyelashes glistening like black grease under the sun. The air conditioner in Mr. Galdini's office made the papers from his desk float onto the floor. He gave me a hard hat, a smock, an apron, and a hairnet. "You're in there," he said and lifted the blinds of a window that partitioned his office from production. He stood, gut pushed out, and his whole body swayed with ease as we watched the workers walk out, humpbacked under the unyielding memory of pig.

Fingers

Because of the frozen meat and a silver ring, my index finger swelled and dimmed. The men held down my wrist and used a saw. I fought back the need to squirm and watched where the nicked-up teeth missed
and the scars began to form.
I remember the day Julio longed to go home.
Nothing passed time like work,
unconscious work when the bones pounded
and the muscles stretched.
So when the stutter jammed, Julio jumped on a stool,
lowered half his body into the machine,
and when his thigh brushed against the go button,
the blade moved an inch
and sliced off his index finger.
I wiped the blood and thought about Julio,
how he did not cry out,
how he asked for my smock
and held his hand against his chest,
how he pushed away those who tried to help.
How the finger was never found.
But most of all, I thought about myself:
would I have screamed, could I have taken the pain,
walked outside to the employee pay phone,
and, with good hand still held steady, dialed 9-1-1?

Mexicali

See it in the monsoon winds
that wrestle the night in the vacant lots.
In the masa slapped over the iron stoves
where the women and the chisme are always happy.
In the eye of a dead crow crying out,
"All life is delicate, all life is delicate."
At night, the wall disappears,
and the lights on top look like stars.

A man finds it in his chest and drums,
Boombababoombababoom, and his woman
sways her hips, "Andale," she says, "andale mi amor."
Make it yours, lean into the ocotillo,
and beyond the spikes and the petals of fire,
below the surface of the desert and the black roots,
hold out your tongue and wait
for the arched tail of the scorpion.

Empty Lot

My wife and I stand alone at the curb and stare
at the black numbers that mark our address.
We long for lumber, concrete,
copper tubing, stucco, and glass.
Empty fast-food cartons
tumble across the lot,
a crow pecks at the innards of a paper sack,
caws, dunks its head, and flies off,
a French fry in its beak,
this dirt the bird's home more than mine.
Twenty-five feet from the road,
my heel frames the front door, the entryway,
and dots a path toward
the kitchen and the gable window
where the sunlight will nestle on the sill,
on the backs of the dogs,
and in the cats' narrow eyes.
I want our house built:
a place for my wife to sit and read magazines,
to sip coffee at the table—
the books stacked, the door open,
ratcheting sprinkler head and water
the only sounds we hear.
Across the street, at four o'clock,
the construction workers open an ice chest
and sip beer in a truck.
Rancheras bounce on their radio.
I take my wife and dance.
My fingers cup the curve
that slides below her ribs,
and she squeezes my hands so that
it stays there where later
I'll rest my chin as we lay
along the creek listening to the current.
The men across the street
turn up the music and watch us dance.
This is the only floor we own,
a floor covered with dirt clods, weeds, and the ants
vanishing into the sacred
hallways of home.

Framework

At the lot, we walk through the entryway,
a dizzying lattice of pine 2x4s.
The air smells of timber and sawdust,
and the rooms are filled with
fog dripping onto the slab.
My wife doesn't like the mango I bought her.
It's soft, unsymmetrical, and the pulp is splotchy.
A wayward dove has built
her nest in my new house.
She has lodged her life among
beams where the roof will sit.
The nest's brilliance is delicate:
weeds, insulation, and twine.
I lean, macho-like, against a 2x4,
but it gives where nails have split the wood.

Roof

At lunch, I go watch the Mexicanos
who are putting the ceiling on my house.
They don't like me the moment
I park at the curb.
Extension cords crisscross the slab.
I nod at the fellow with the saw.
He's watching my feet,
nervous I'll trip and pull
the diamond-cut teeth
through skin, veins, and bones.
They have names for me: pocho, gringo.
The one with the nail gun nods
but before I look away
he punches three-pennies into a board:
I can take a hint.
Days ago, I saw a nest in the beams.
Now it lies on the floor,
a dove's refuge smashed under a boot.
Chicago Title

The rain is rising along the avenues
in downtown Selma, where my wife and I
are signing piles of paper thick as reams.
She is touching my wrist with her fingers
to stop me from going mad under the
office's fluttering fluorescent lights.
The print is impossibly tiny,
and I know I'll never read it all.
Still, I pretend to understand contracts,
raising my sweaty fist to my chin,
as I squint in a doubting way,
but all I need to see are "Terms."
What makes me madder is trying to get
how it works, how my signature ties
to my neck thirty years of debt,
how my name entitles me to the keys
that unlock the front door and lock out
the world rising and falling like water
along the busy sidewalks, so I give my
attention to a few other mysteries
as I sign away my life: how the rain
keeps me at an open window for hours,
how my wife still smells of her perfumes
even after she refuses to shower
and wastes the day under a blanket,
how all I need is hot chocolate and bread,
wine, grape leaves, and olives,
and how I enjoy snoring wet dogs at my feet.
Perhaps some mysteries are better left
unanswered: the joy of house keys sliding
across the table, or how my wife's fingers
touch my wrist on a rainy day in Selma.

Cowboy

As I walk into the Verona Café, I am profoundly happy.
My work boots clunk with each step,
and at the cashier's counter, I order black coffee.
I can't help myself, so I inspect the floor's workmanship,
and at once I see how sloppily
each tile was installed along the bottom of the counter.
When I take my change, the employee sees
my hands are covered with scratches and dust
and says, "Thank you, Sir."
In the café's brightest corner,
an old man lowers his newspaper.
We exchange manly nods—
the workingman's code for, "Hello."
Today, I installed the last tiles in my new house,
tiles I had avoided because
they had to wrap around the doorframes,
tiles requiring templates and hours to cut,
but they, too, are done—
slapped with thin-set and grout.
This afternoon, I love that I am wearing jeans,
that my T-shirt is gray,
that my leather work gloves are shoved into my back pocket,
and that the cold wind rushes against my face
as I merge onto Highway 99
and my Mustang roars.
Elwood

This morning, from the window,
I watched our gardeners roll out
4,000 square feet of hybrid Bermuda,
green as a jelly bean and so soft
that I couldn't wait for it
to tickle my wife's feet.

I dabbed my face with a towel
and felt good, since there was
no blood dotting my face,
put on a wrinkle-free shirt,
grabbed my bag—lecture notes done,
the week's reading fresh in my head—

and sipped coffee while I waited
for the car to warm up,
windows open, radio blasting.

But twelve miles from home,
the temperature gauge shot up,
and the steering wheel locked.

Roadside, I popped the hood,
and at first, I thought a rat
was caught in the fan belt,

but slowly the outline
of a larger animal became
distinct against the grease.

I leaned over the engine block,
listened to its gasping,
and thought, "I killed a fox or a coyote."

One hind leg was mangled and burned,
and after I used the tire iron
to work it free, after