

Cement

Esteban Rodríguez

After an afternoon of castrating acres
of summer crops, of branding a field full
of field workers with the same indifference
ossified to the ground, the sun puddles along
the plains, waits for the countryside evening
to clock it out, while my father, home
from being defined by a construction hat
all day, moves to the center of our yard,
where he bends his spine to an angle of overtime,
and squeezes his hands into a pair of gloves
worn from paving an unfinished driveway
he's repaved for months. From the slanted
porch steps where I sit, the truck radio sprinkles
trombones and trumpets like confetti in the air,
flings another chorus of Spanish lyrics
against my ears, and I'm reminded of the language
my last name claims I speak, but my tongue,
inflected with a different tone, has yet
to understand, as again, I'm left to translate
what I can from the beat of my father's boots,

from the shuffled gravel flaring around him
with a concentration my Anglicized attention
can only endure, wondering if the man
he embodied before this one is fossilized
near the border somewhere, still unemployed
by the world up north, and still trudging
kilometers upon kilometers of heat and mirages,
of hundreds of once-used pathways quilted
with tumbleweeds, cacti, mesquite and creosote
bush scorched enough to resemble narratives
in his back-pocket bible. I imagine squadrons
of buzzards – circling with symbolism –
eclipsing him and the nameless men below,
and I imagine the farther they spill into uncertain
terrain, the harder it becomes to haul backpacks
stuffed with bundles of unwashed clothes,
forged documents, and photographs of daughters,
wives, or sons who, given the growing
hallucination, resemble the young coyote
in front. Step after step, their shadows drip
on the ground, and as nightfall spreads
like a body bag above them, and they reach
the country's edge, I picture my father descending
into the mouth of that river again; patrol lights
multiplying around him, as slowly, he crawls
from the muddy bank and forges his way
through another morning, another time zone,
another Home Depot parking lot, and another
field where he picks, packs, and stacks crates
of strawberries onto the back of pick-up trucks,
stretching his exodus for decades across

the country, until he settles into the mindset of a father obsessed with extending his house, creating another project to keep him invested, but like all things that keep men invested, will never be what he envisioned when it's complete, and will keep him readjusting the dimensions of our driveway every evening, unaware of the darkness spilling over him like a batch of wet cement.