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Dispatch from Postville

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Dispatch from Postville

Part of the journal section “Forum: (Re)presenting (Im)migration”



Elver Herrera, Translated by Jennifer Cooley “Dispatch from Postville”

1. The day starts like any other in Postville, a town in northern Iowa. Years ago, a slaughterhouse and processing plant for beef, turkey and chicken had opened. Its name: Agriprocessors. The typical routine for any worker of the sort that was employed there was to start by getting up at whatever hour their shift demanded. In 1996, when I first began, there were only two: the daily production line, and the nightly cleaning. Working there was like being in a concentration camp; you readers will soon begin to discover why. Essentially, “illegals” don’t have many job opportunities because they fear detention, arrest and deportation.

2. Once you push through the revolving door with its blackened metal bars you feel the security agent’s discriminatory gaze bore through you like an x-ray machine. You’re exhausted after just walking from the entrance to the place where they hand out your work gear. You’re back in that place where you don’t want to be; but there’s no other option. You have to work to subsist. After punching your time card in the old time clock in the hall

behind the cafeteria with a chas, you recall that you'll hear this sound again in about fifteen, sixteen, or maybe seventeen hours. Your sense of hearing quickly starts to familiarize itself with the squeaking advance of the production line that blends with sound of its motors humming. The smells of rotting flesh and raw meat seep into your nasal passages. Your physical immersion into this space triggers a sort of reflex. You are reminded that this is where you and the rest of the workers spend your existence from Sunday to Friday, six days a week. Dressed up like ghosts in our white work coats, we snake through the dark and damp hallways that look like horrific scenes from famous old paintings.

3. When you reach your assigned work zone, you start donning your gear: On the kill floor you wear work pants and a yellow shirt that give you a clownish look. You wear rubber boots and your hands are covered with ratty, discolored cotton gloves. You must protect your eyes with goggles and your head with a white hard hat. In the other areas, depending upon whether or not you use a knife, you might wear a white coat with a plastic apron over it. Those who run the saw that cuts carcasses in half or into four quarters use a thick apron and a metal glove.

4. From outside of your confines you hear the screeching brakes of the first semi making its delivery and the nervous cackling of the chickens foreseeing what will happen when they head through the small metal tunnel that leads them to the kill line where they will be decapitated. The conveyor belt on which the birds start inching toward their slaughter, covered with chicken droppings, emits the foul smell of manure. Once the first chicken is slaughtered, then a second, and a third, the belt will speed up to eight chickens per minute. You have to be fast and exacting. At every step in the slaughter process there are two workers and one rabbi. According to the tenets of the Jewish faith, the rabbi is the only person who can cut the chicken's neck. One member of the trio grabs the bird's feet and wrangles the animal over to his co-worker, who places the bird belly-up so the rabbi can decapitate it. Shiny metal hooks rattle past at shuddering speed overhead as the chickens lose their lives. Their blood forms a steady, scarlet stream. The lifeless birds advance through two enormous machines that pluck their feathers, revealing their pale, yellowish skin. Two women workers, their clothing soaked from the scalding water the plucking machines spew out, watch how the chickens proceed forward, single file. They cut the remaining feathers from the bruised and discolored poultry skins. The last rays of sun poke through the holes in rusted roof of the building and shadows of coworkers' robotic movements dance across their tired faces. Their arms are exhausted and their bloodstained clothing takes on an orange pallor as blood seeps through the protective layer of yellow fabric. It's a scene reminiscent of a zombie movie.

5. The now lifeless chickens continue on their journey. The next step is to make an incision on the backside of the bird thereby allowing a human hand to reach in and rip out the intestines. The birds, now stripped and eviscerated, spill off the belt into an enormous vat

filled with salt water. Next, they progress to a smaller holding unit. 80,00 carcasses drop, one by one. At this point, a worker picks them up and strings them onto the meathooks that hang from the chain so they can travel on toward the room where they will be quartered. The monotonous wobbly dance of chickens swinging by on hooks lasts 15-17 hours. The hands of those who cut the birds will come to resent those wings, drumsticks and breasts. But there is one task even more risky than cut-up: the saw, to which many fingers and hands have succumb. The company assumes no responsibility and to avoid problems with OSHA it seems best to simply fire injured workers. The saw operator working this shift knows he could be next as he assumes the challenge of sawing carcasses into halves or quarters. He's well aware that in exchange for risking injury he'll be able to pay for rent, food, police tickets and whatever he can spare to send back home to his family [in Guatemala].

6. Today the temperature inside the plant seems more frigid than yesterday, and when you work long hours in cut-up the cold penetrates the bones in your hands. The muscles in your legs ache from standing at your post for so long. After working four or five hours we know they'll give us a ten minute break, but this depends a lot on the supervisor's mood. Technically, the break should be 15 minutes, but in the end you're left with just 10 after you remove your protective gear and walk to the cafeteria, and then slip it on again before returning to the line. Occasionally at lunch (in fact, almost every day) the supervisor decides to give workers from all the production areas a break at the same time. In the cafeteria, chaos ensues: More than 200 hungry workers are jockeying around to position themselves in front of just 5 microwaves, sparring about who gets to heat up their food first. You'll have to eat fast because the line leader is already eyeing the clock and starting to summon you back to work. Today you'll have to gulp down your lunch cold. Break time is over and you never had a chance to sit down even for a minute because the mass of bodies squeezed onto the cafeteria benches left no room for you. Sometimes, without any warning, in the middle of lunch, raw sewage creeps out of the bathroom floor drains into the cafeteria and the stench permeates the air. There's nothing to do but keep eating, enveloped in that putrid cloud, because if you don't your body won't withstand the remainder of your workday.

7. As you return to your post you must put your bloodstained, soiled clothing back on. In four or five hours you'll have another break, but after that one there will be no more until our fifteen hour (or longer) workday is done. But it seems the line isn't producing enough to satisfy the supervisor today. That's when he starts to scream, "Hurry it up, you losers! Move it! You're here to work and if you don't want to, there's the door. Get out! There are 10 or 20 others like you out there who'd be happy to take your place!"

8. The supervisors want to sleep with the women at the plant. We all know it, but we do not and cannot say anything. These are well known secrets that no one ever utters. We realize what's happening when we see the supervisors coming up behind the women on the

line with the pretext of correcting their work, but instead grab their buttocks. We see them whispering in female workers' ears, telling them they will agree to have sex with their supervisor or risk being fired, and having their husbands and family members fired too. One supervisor tells a worker she'll have to pay \$300.00 to protect her job. Another option would be to purchase a car from the plant's general manager. Then along comes another problem: It's time to change your identification number so you won't have trouble with the government. The pink-colored identification card you have is now obsolete and the federal government is now giving out white ones. The supervisor's assistants tell us not to worry. The company will provide us with a new card and number. It will cost \$500.00.

9. And the assembly line rolls on at breakneck speed...



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