BUTCH

I worked on the kill floor of Maple Leaf and guts, drowning in the nauseating moving briskly through the carcasses.

We're deep in the shadows. In the bowels of a building with walls that sweat gristle and blood. A modern-day plant, more like Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* than *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*.

We're standing in a semi-circle on the kill floor at Maple Leaf Pork in Brandon, Man. Twenty-five fresh recruits, our mouths agape. Mike, a short, squat factory-floor veteran, stuffed into a bloody lab coat, is leading our tour. Hundreds of hogs swing by on a conveyer line; flayed and shackled up by their hind legs, their heads dangling by a flap of skin, they smack together like bowling pins.

We stare at the blank faces of the men who thrust in and out of the hogs' bellies with knives, yanking out glistening tubes of red and grey entrails, bowels, hearts and livers that will eventually be chopped, packaged and shipped off for the dinner table.

"We'd harvest the farts if we could," Mike offers with a certain morbid glee. "Yup. We use just about everything. Only 3% of the pig goes to waste around here."

My tongue suddenly feels like it's caked with the stench of sweat and scared animals. My head begins to swing like a seesaw.

"Don't you dare puke," Mike snorts, grabbing at my helmet to take note of my name, displayed there in bold lettering. "Suck it up, Princess."

I'm praying for a miracle. That I won't toss my cookies.

HERED

Pork in Brandon, Man., drenched in blood stench. I was part of a new work force This is world class? By Susan Bourette

Photographs by Thomas Fricke

Or worse, be tossed out tush over teakettle my first day on the job. "It's the smell," I respond weakly. And then with all the moxie I can muster: "I'll get used to it."

With that, Mike cocks his head and inhales deeply before he begins a spiel he's surely mouthed dozens of times before. "You know what that smell is?" he growls rhetorically. "That," he says, leaning in for emphasis, "that's the smell of money."

Certainly, another man, Michael McCain, believed he could smell the money, despite the waves of nausea that swept over him as he toured his first company plant in the mid-'90s. One faction of the feuding McCain family had just bought a majority stake in Maple Leaf Foods Inc., following an ugly and very public fight over its French-fry empire. As company president, McCain had been tapped by his father, Wallace McCain, to stage a turnaround of Maple Leaf's moribund meat division.

From behind the bronzed glass of his elegant Toronto office, McCain cast his glance south of the border for lessons in how to fix the mess. It wasn't just *his* company that was fraught with trouble. It was the entire Canadian pork industry, sideswiped by the newly competitive North American framework.

"You didn't have to look far to see that inefficient plants, older assets and lack of scale made the Canadian industry significantly less competitive," explains Michael Detlefsen, an executive vice-president at Maple Leaf Foods. "We needed to build the scale to get the cost efficiencies that would allow Maple Leaf a competitive advantage in the global market."

"What are we waiting for?" McCain himself asked provocatively at a conference of industry colleagues. "Wal-Mart to come to town and put us out of business?"

McCain got down to work with his management team. They drafted a strategy to build a pork powerhouse, and gobbled up competitors such as Burns Foods Ltd., which had previously purchased Gainers. The centrepiece of the company's plan was a world-class processing plant in Brandon. The location would allow the company proximity to cheap grain to feed its pigs, space in which to raise them and a ready transportation route to the burgeoning Japanese pork market. In terms of sheer size, the Brandon plant's capacity would be staggering: capable, at full tilt, of slaughtering and processing 90,000 hogs a week. It was to be a technological marvel in a landscape of aging, lethargic plants across the country. But Maple Leaf also envisioned cost cuts that would herald a new era of rancour between the company and its workers.

At the same time the company was drawing up a blueprint for its state-of-the-art plant in Brandon, some 2,300 workers were on strike or locked out at Maple Leaf facilities across the country. It was the beginning of an aggressive drive to reduce costs through massive wage rollbacks—similar to the decade-long battles that had already played out in the United States. Not only had the U.S. industry undergone a staggering period of restructuring and consolidation, it had also tightened its grip on workers. In a campaign to slash costs, many American companies fought the unions very aggressively and drove down wages.



The author on site, in her bloodied company shirt

Two weeks after I apply, I'm hired. For $9.45 an hour, I will work the factory floor alongside some 1,300 other jawbreakers, pig chasers and kidney poppers

By the time the Maple Leaf facility opened its doors in Brandon in August, 1999, the company had negotiated a new deal with the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, slicing wages by 40% at the new plant, similar to what it had already done in other locations. Brandon's $150-million plant opened amid great pomp and pageantry, with both provincial and city officials extolling its benefits to the community. Everyone, it seemed, was happy. Everyone but the workers.

Now, more than four years later, the plant is struggling to keep its slaughter and dismemberment in full swing. In an industry just emerging from a worldwide glut in the meat market, the plant is churning out 45,000 hogs a week—a number it's racing to double in order to reach capacity by 2005. The bigger problem? Workers are fleeing the facility.

Against this backdrop, I arrive on the doorstep, application in hand. Two weeks later, I'm hired. For $9.45 an hour, I will work the factory floor alongside some 1,300 other jawbreakers, pig chasers and kidney poppers, in one of the most dangerous and gruesome jobs in the country. Eight hours a day, I'll be in "byproducts," slicing the cheeks out of hogs' heads.

How bad could it possibly be?

Monday. My first day on the job. Just past 6:30 a.m., and an orange orb hovers low on the horizon, casting a faded wash over this pretty patch of prairie also known as Wheat City, some 200 kilometres west of Winnipeg. A steady stream of pickups and rusted-out station wagons is already on the road. Their headlights bounce along a dead-end stretch of highway, toward a low-slung leviathan of pipe and steel situated in a field of hay bales, a 15-minute drive from Brandon.

The parking lot is already teeming, filled with dozens of young men in muscle shirts and women pinched into low riding jeans. They walk two by two, the sound of gravel skidding beneath their feet. In the distance, a truck is busy unloading today's hog kill. The constant drone of the engine muffles the sound of their collective squeal.

Juan Luis Zavaleta is already at work. Splattered in blood as he hacks away at a carcass to extract the bung—the hogs' intestines and anus. It's a task he and his brethren will perform 21 times each minute, 10,000 times a day.

Meanwhile, upstairs, high above the kill floor, 25 of us are gathered in a yawning room festooned with posters trumpeting Maple Leaf products: loins, hams, ribs and pork bellies. The floor beneath our feet is rumbling, set into motion by the thrum of the butchery below.

Robert Panontin, a 30-something Maple Leaf labour relations specialist who's dressed in a company shirt and canvas pants, arrives and pounds the table with a raft of documents. He's setting the mood by scaring the bejesus out of us. The statistics aren't pretty. He knows most of us will leave long before we reach probation, like some 4,000 other workers since the plant opened. Many because their hands had become too crippled from working all day with a knife. Or because the work is too dark and surreal.

The problem extends far beyond the Brandon city limits.

In fact, there's a revolving door of workers across the continent. Turnover rates of between 40% and 100% annually are common among U.S. industry behemoths such as Tyson Foods Inc., one of the companies that helped mastermind the low-wage scale.

How has the U.S. industry coped? Largely by tapping into a steady supply of immigrant workers from Mexico and Central America. It's become a hot button issue in recent years, inflaming two camps: those who feel that immigrants undercut American workers for jobs that once paid among the highest in the industrial sector; and others who say that immigrant workers are being exploited.

No single company has come under more scrutiny than Tyson Foods of Springdale, Ariz., with its 40% Hispanic labour force. Following a sweeping undercover investigation, Tyson was indicted by U.S. officials for conspiring to smuggle illegal immigrants into its work force. Though the company was acquitted of the charges in March, one issue continues to pervade its industry: that of the limited labour pool in North America for demanding, low-paying jobs. Faced with the same problem, Maple Leaf has also looked to Mexico and Central America for workers. Foreign workers now compose 6% of the company's labour force.

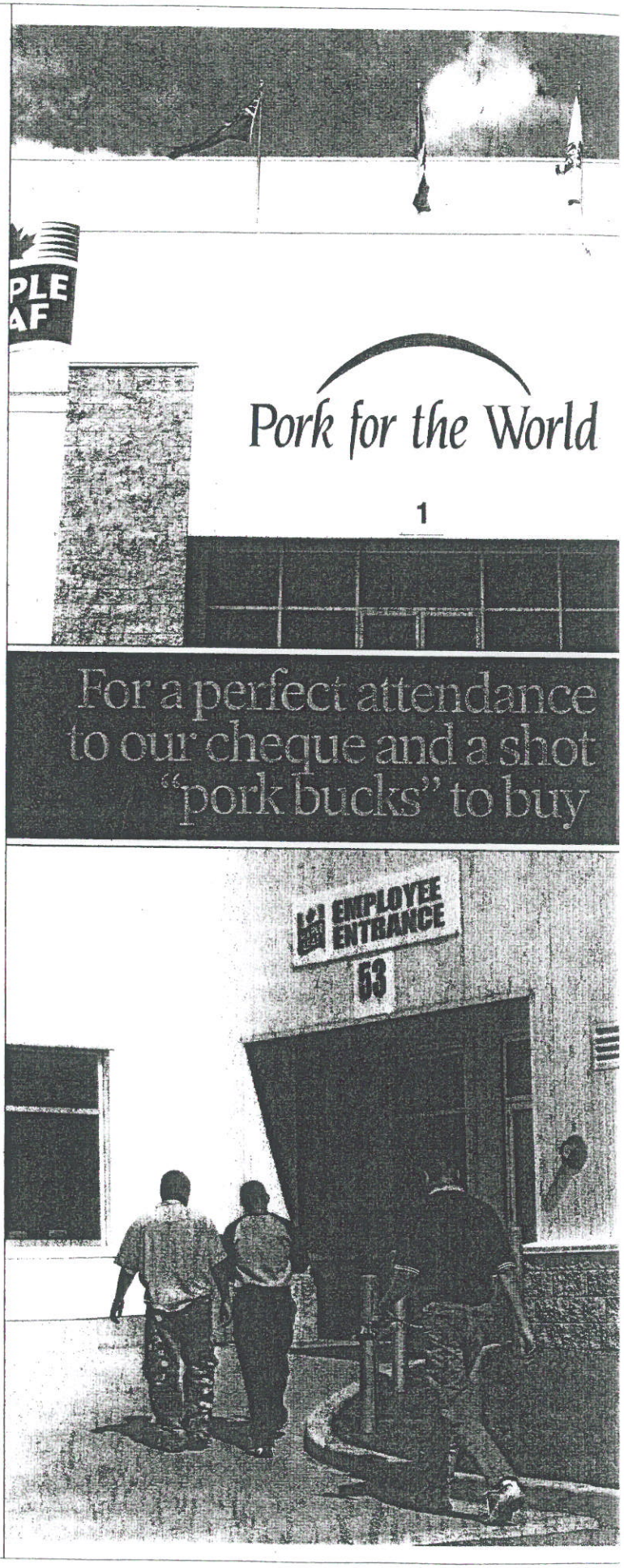
The idea does not sit well with Jan Chaboyer, president of the Brandon and District Labour Council. She believes immigrant workers are especially vulnerable because they are often too afraid to speak up in the fight for better working conditions. Some 100 staff, Chaboyer says, have come to work at Maple Leaf on a two-year visa, and she believes that "If they're good enough to work here, they should have landed-immigrant status."

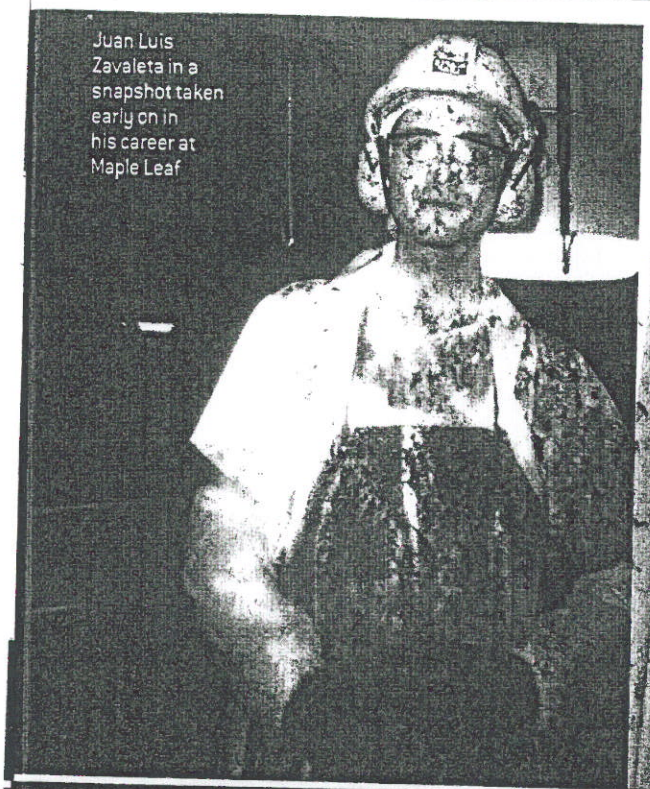
The struggle to find workers has "hit everybody across the entire meatpacking industry," says Kevin Grier, an industry analyst with the Guelph, Ont., George Morris Centre, which specializes in agribusiness issues. "It's not just Maple Leaf. It's also the major packers in Alberta. They're all facing the same problems." He says companies have been forced to pay low wages to compete in what is a commodity-based business widely affected by price shifts.

So far, Maple Leaf's immigrant recruitment strategy has met with mixed success. Of 57 Mexican workers hired since January, 2002, only 20 remain. Many fled because they had trouble adjusting to the Canadian way of life. Some because they believed that the $19,500 or so a year they earned as a starting wage—poverty level for a family of two—would stretch further than it proved to in Brandon. All the same, the company has had more success with workers from El Salvador. All but one of 44 recruited have stayed with the company, rather than face the prospect of returning to their impoverished and politically unstable country.

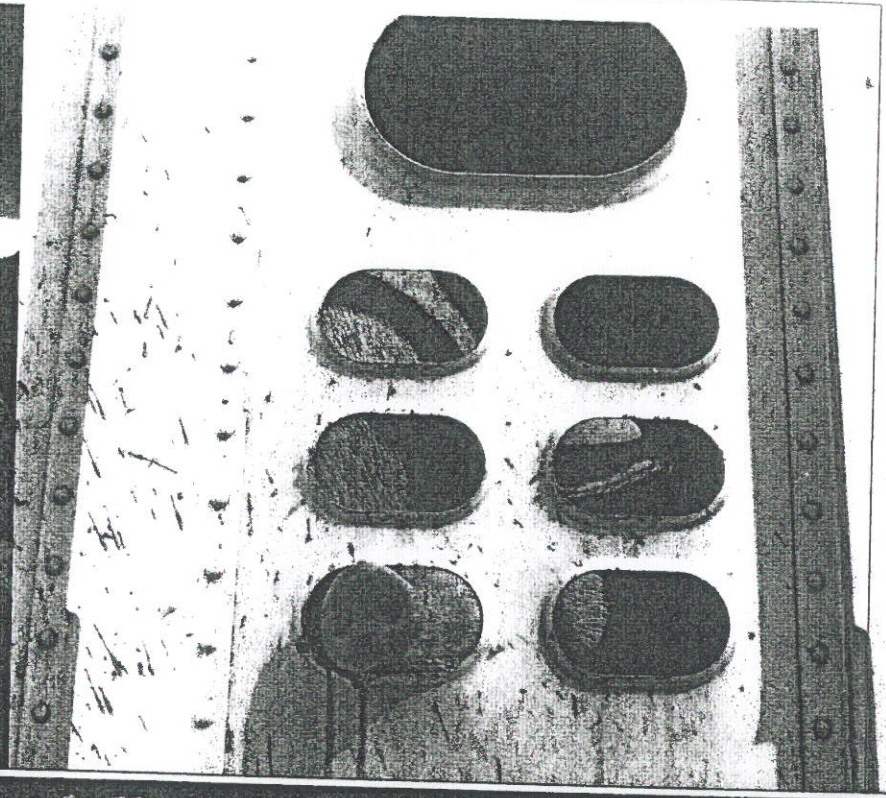
Steve LeBlanc, Maple Leaf Pork's human resources director for Manitoba, denies that pay scales contribute to the labour shortage. "Our wages aren't the issue," he says, adding that the company's turnover rate is expected to drop to 80% this year from the 100% it has been over the past few years. "They're actually very competitive as far as our local market goes."

Back in the training room, Panontin is busy working the floor, exalting the perks that will bulk up our pay packet and keep us punching the company clock. A perfect attendance record over four weeks? An extra dollar an hour tacked on to our cheque and a shot at a company draw for $1,500. We can also rack up "pork bucks," allowing us to buy our roasts and ribs direct from the factory floor at just a fraction above cost.





Juan Luis Zavaleta in a snapshot taken early on in his career at Maple Leaf



record, we get an extra dollar an hour tacked on at a company draw for $1,500. We can also rack up our roasts and ribs direct from the factory floor

Panontin eyes his unlikely group of greenhorns warily. There's Tina, a velvety-eyed 30-year-old mother of four, with hair sculpted like a porcupine. Her background is in retail. She stares at her hands, folded in her lap. At the next table, there's Jenn, mid-20s, a golden-haired anthropology graduate in wide-leg pants who smiles shyly. She looks least likely to fit in. But, in fact, she may be the hen most suited to the roost, having worked gutting bears at her grandparents' hunting lodge in Northern Ontario. At the back of the room, Joe, a transplanted Newfoundlander with big teeth and a know-it-all sneer, is fresh from working the oil rigs in Alberta. And there's Andrew, built like a boulder at 6 foot 2 and 270 pounds. Four years as a short-order cook have given him what the company values most: knife skills. The group also includes two Chads, Enoch, Phoebe and Tim, who's back after quitting eight months ago. He's been assigned to the overnight sanitation shift, cleaning up hog guts and gore.

Panontin hunches forward, resting his beefy hands on the table. A Listen Up posture. "I just want you to know we're watching you like a hawk," he warns, surveying the room to gauge whether his tone has invoked the intended effect. "You have signed an employee/employer contract with us. We've agreed to pay you a wage and you agree to come to work. We are looking for commitment."

It's simple. All we have to do is show up. When we can't, call in. Sounds reasonable.

With that, Panontin gathers his training materials and readies to leave. But he stops short of the door and swivels: "I just want you to know I have a really good friend in security at the mall. If I'm doing an investigation on you, I'll go down there to watch his security videos. God help you if I catch you goofing off at the mall on video."

We sit in silence, beholding our labour representative with a collective wince.

It's a revolving door of corporate types with pep talks and motivational videos until we're handed over to Randie Mulligan, our health and safety supervisor.

"Hi-ya!" she trills, entering the training room with her peasant dress in a whirl behind her, shoes click-clacking across the concrete. Her blissed-up demeanour clashes with the morning's lecture. With charts and handouts, she offers tips on good grooming and work-floor hygiene: how to keep the "product" free of our microbes.

"Your quality of life shouldn't change while you're working at Maple Leaf," she assures us in one breath, warning us in the next. Two-thirds of us, it's assumed, will get hurt from everything from minor cuts to full-scale injuries in the next three months on the job.

"It's really a bloodbath in there from a human's point of view," says Todd Scarth, director for the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives in Manitoba, who has studied the impact of increased hog production on labour in Brandon. "The newer plants are faster and far more dangerous. You combine that with a turnover rate of 100%, and that's a deadly combination."

Undoubtedly, with five times the national average of serious injuries every year, meatpacking is one of the nation's most dangerous jobs. Whether it's an accidental stab wound



Jesus [Jessie] Zavala, the author's mentor, at home with wife Marla Isabelle Balaquiz

he says, caused Zavaleta to take the matter up with his union. He protested with a formal complaint. The union and the company are investigating.

Meanwhile, the nurses' station is busy taking care of today's injuries. We pass by on our way for lunch at Hamlets, the company's main cafeteria. A half-dozen workers are slumped in chairs, waiting for treatment. Inside the caf, the din of the coffee cups is muted by the singsong of the chain-link belly belts that chime as the workers file in line for today's grub. The daily special? Pork chops, mashed potatoes and gravy.

Jenn's not hungry. She leans forward, head bowed, one hand on the table, another holding a cigarette. She doesn't usually smoke. But the anxiety has been building all morning. In a few minutes, she'll be on the factory floor, hacking away at a pig's head. She thought she was ready.

"I had a nightmare last night," she sighs softly and pauses. "I was being chased by hogs' heads. It's still freaking me out." She draws long on her cigarette, then snuffs it out abruptly like she's exorcising a phantom.

Soon, our posse is herded back to the training room, where we'll be fitted in the costume of the factory floor. Rubber boots with steel toes; whites still stained with the memory of yesterday's slaughter; a belly belt to protect the organs; earplugs, a hair net and helmet; and a mesh glove that extends to the elbow. I'm now dressed to kill, or at least butcher. I feel like a snow-white Darth Vader.

Zavala engages in a dance of kinetic perfection. With all the skill of a sculptor, he reaches forward, picking up a head by the esophagus, and begins chiselling

from a co-worker, or a fracture from a falling carcass, the slaughterhouse is rife with perils. Greasy, slippery floors cause many of the trips and falls. The most common injuries, though, are due to repetitive strain—the upshot of wielding a knife at awkward angles all day. It's little wonder: By one tally, a Maple Leaf worker may make up to six different cutting motions to 9,000 pieces of pork a day. That's 13.5 million cuts a year. Still, at Brandon, LeBlanc says, "We have four lost-time accidents for every 200,000 hours. That's better than average."

The first time Juan Zavaleta stared down at the conveyer belt, he knew his body would give out long before the machine ever would. With a chin affixed to a five-inch tuft of hair moulded into a swirl, his heavy-lidded eyes reminiscent of a Renaissance painter, the 32-year-old looks an unlikely slaughterhouse worker. In fact, Zavaleta is not only a trained Mexican butcher, but an accomplished artist who finds his inspiration in the blood and guts of pigs.

Zavaleta wants to stay on. He's just not certain he can, physically. "Every job at Maple Leaf is hard. It's messy, brutal work," he says. "You work eight hours a day, five days a week and your body is going to wear out."

In 18 months on the job, Zavaleta has already been injured three times—twice hurting his back, once breaking a rib—all from pushing into pig all day, he says. The week I meet him marks his return from two months of kitchen duty. But his back is flaring up again. He thinks it's related to long shifts and the equipment he uses on the line, and told his "lead hand"—his supervisor's assistant—as much. The response,

Jesus Zavala stands ramrod straight, hands clasped in front of him, looking like a no-guff factory-floor statesman. Jessie, as he is affectionately called, a Mexican-trained butcher, has worked his way up to trainer in less than two years on the job at Maple Leaf. He is to be our mentor.

Zavala leads us deep into the basement of the building. A crypt, really, where there is no clock, no window, no vestige of the outside world.

It's now 1:30, and with their bellies full from lunch, workers are busy single-mindedly hacking pork from shoulder bones. Men on the dressing floor are pulling bung, livers and hearts, which they place on a pulley of spikes behind them. If the line fails to keep pace, the kill men have to slow down, backing up the process. The quotas must be met or it will mean overtime—part of our collective agreement with the company. One hour. Two hours. Whatever it takes to get the job done.

Our first day on the line, and we learn we're in for an hour's overtime. There's a problem at the gam table, first stop for the freshly killed hogs as they topple from a tumbler to have their tendons slit and be skewered up by their hind legs. Several workers are off sick. Sherri, our floor supervisor, a pretty woman of grandmotherly vintage, arrives, clipboard in hand. Her heavily caked eyelashes flutter as she peers out from behind gold-rimmed glasses. "Four," she finally bellows in a husky voice. "I need four real strong guys on the gam table."

A half-dozen hands shoot up. Andrew, the quarterback-like former cook, is waving his arm feverishly. Sherri picks off the men individually: "You, you, you and you." Andrew

smirks, and falls into the parade of burly men that trail Sherri down the hallway. "I have no idea what the hell a gam table is. But it's gotta be better than the gore in there," he avers as he rumbles out.

It's showtime for the rest of us. Zavala clamps on his hearing gear, slips on a pair of goggles and motions us through. We enter a room reverberating in a chorus of hum and hiss, clang and thud. I step over strings of slippery, yellow gristle and pools of blood, past plumes of steam that rise from the floor to my workstation.

On the right, workers are hunched over a conveyer line of disembodied heads. Some are sawing off ears with pneumatic knives. Others are skewering heads onto spikes. The thrum of the line triggers the beasts' mouths in motion, as though they're in conversation. They round the corner, tumbling onto another conveyer belt. Piled three by three, they're headed straight at me.

Zavala is already in a dance of kinetic perfection. With all of the skill and artistry of a sculptor, he reaches forward, picking a head up by the esophagus, and begins chiselling. First slicing the cheeks out of the outside of the head, then the inside. He plops the flesh onto a smaller conveyer belt below, and thrusts the hog's head down a chute, on its way to rendering. "Now, you try," he says, handing me a razor-sharp knife and smiling with encouragement.

I grasp at a snout, and haul 20 pounds of head toward me. It's heavier than I imagined and I stumble. The head rolls from my carving station, falling face up on my boot. Mouth ajar, eyes still open, cheeks twitching, it stares up at me as if stuck in some sort of somnolent scream.

I do better next time. Soon, dozens of hogs' heads later, I can feel the blood trickling down my cheek and seeping into my bra. But what makes me really woozy is the sensation of warm, sticky flesh on the other side of my plastic glove each time I lay hold of an esophagus.

By quitting time, my carving hand is starting to give out. My back aches. But it's my cheeks that hurt the most from sucking in my lips all day, hoping to keep the blood and guts from getting into my mouth.

We gather around the sink to clean the little pieces of fat and meat from our tools. Jenn's hosing down a scabbard when she lets out a yelp. The hose has slipped from her grasp, and she's shooting a spray of scalding water into the face of a fellow worker. The water has soaked into her glove. Her hand is starting to blister up in welts.

They're both sent off to the nurses' station.

By 6:30, I'm standing in a hot shower, trying to wash it all away. By 7:30, I'm able to eat for the first time that day. By 8:30, I'm in bed, dreading the thought of tomorrow.

The next morning, we gather for roll call. There are three no-shows among the recruits. Jenn's been pulled from the line and assigned to kitchen duty while the wounds on her hand heal. Andrew's downing Tylenols. His body is throbbing from yesterday's work on the gam table. "It was crazy," he says, his face flaring red in exasperation. "I couldn't grab them fast enough. It's too fucking hard. I'd rather pull assholes any day."

Joe, the mouthy Newfoundlander, wanted a job on the kill floor, but he's been designated to work in rails, stacking boxes of meat. "First they tell me I'm doin' this, that I'm doin' that," he declares. "You don't take a piss unless it's on your scheduled break. This job sucks."

No one disagrees.

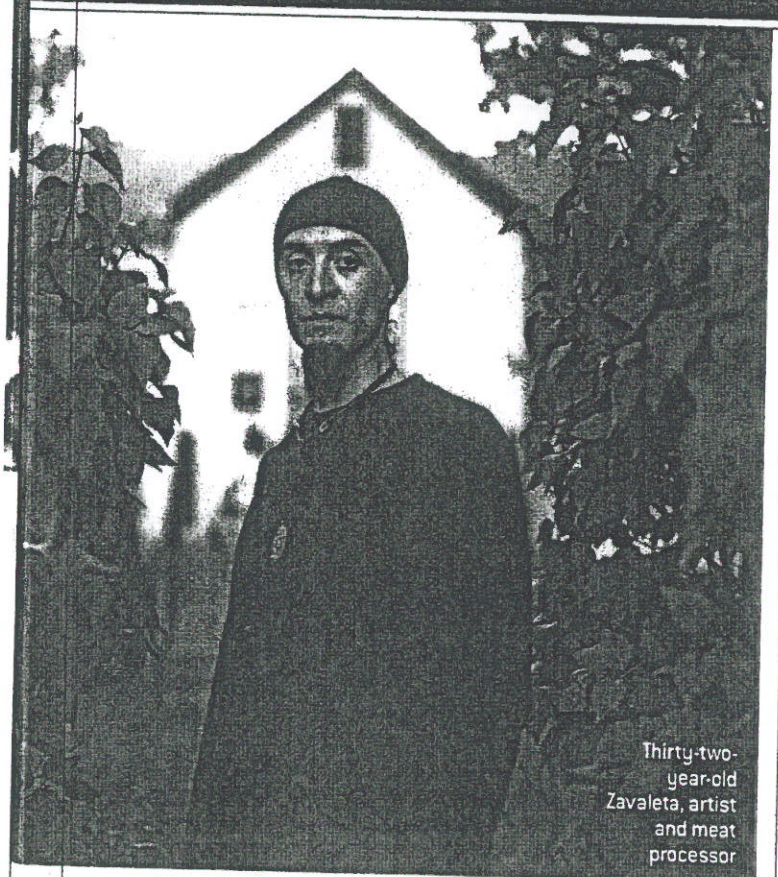
It's the last glimpse I'll have of most of my fellow trainees, many who have fanned out across the factory floor to fill in for both injured and absentee workers. For two more days, I hone my knife skills, carving into hogs' heads, until I'm both numb with pain and desensitized to what I'm doing.

By my fourth day on the factory floor, something odd happens. I'm suddenly feeling squeamish, ready to puke again at the thought of touching flesh dead just 42 minutes. For the next few hours, I slow my pace until I am miraculously granted a reprieve: I've been tapped to help out in packing for the rest of the afternoon.

I spend the next few hours picking diaphragms out of a giant tub and packing them, layer upon layer, into boxes destined for the Japanese market. I'm working as fast as a rookie can when I hear the lead hand behind me: "Come on," he roars. "You're holding us up. I need you to pack like a madwoman."

With that, I begin throwing the organs furiously into boxes

Two-thirds of us, it's assumed, will get hurt with everything from minor cuts to full-scale injuries in the next three months on the job



Thirty-two-year-old Zavaleta, artist and meat processor



"We'd harvest the farts if we could," Mike offers with a certain morbid glee. "Yup. We use just about everything. Only 3% of the pig goes to waste around here"

until the tubs that were once overflowing are empty. I leave at day's end alongside hundreds of workers who spill into the parking lot, carrying their lunch buckets. Some wait for the bus. Others clamber into their pickups. In a little more than 14 hours, they'll be back. Living it, hating it. I know I won't be returning. I can't stomach another day.

I leave thinking about *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair's muckraking exposé of the meatpacking industry, published nearly a century ago. In the novel, he chronicled the appalling conditions of the Chicago stockyards and the lives of a family of Lithuanian immigrants working in meatpacking plants. The book sparked an independent investigation into the industry and helped Theodore Roosevelt push both the Pure Food and Drugs Act and the Meat Inspection Act through Congress. The food became safe, but Roosevelt failed to improve the safety and well-being of the industry's workers.

I raise the comparison with Todd Scarth of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. "There are important differences between now and then," he says. "No matter how imperfect the health and safety laws are today, it's still much better than it was 100 years ago. But killing animals and chopping them up is dangerous and grisly. The *reasons* that meat processing is done this way haven't changed. People in North America want cheap pork. The cost of that cheap pork is exploited workers. Those kinds of market pressures haven't really changed."

Perhaps Juan Zavaleta, the Mexican worker, sums it up best: "It's a big paradox for the company. They spend millions training us...and we eventually leave."

It's a particularly exigent issue given that Maple Leaf is now gearing up for a second shift at Brandon in 2005, when it hopes to boost itself to 90,000 hogs a week and add 900 more jobs. HR director Steve LeBlanc says the company is confident it can find enough workers; Maple Leaf plans to continue to recruit heavily from local aboriginal communities, whose denizens now compose about 35% of its labour force. It also foresees bringing up to 12% of its work force from outside the country, a jump from the current 6%.

But will these be good jobs? Todd Scarth asks. "Are these jobs safe, secure, well-paying? Are they the kinds of jobs that would allow someone to support a family?"

Similar questions are circulating in executive offices in the U.S. Joseph Luter III, chairman and CEO of Smithfield, the largest pork processor in the world, stunned the industry last year when he advocated higher wages for workers. "Workmanship in the plant suffers when we have high turnover, and that's a result of paying low wages," he told a conference.

Even some industry analysts have begun to ponder the logic of Maple Leaf's pay scale. "Perhaps the strategy of paying relatively low wages is not so good or not so smart given today's low unemployment levels," wrote Shawn Allen of Investment-picks.com.

But there are bigger worries on the Street. Many are keeping a watchful eye on the company's tumbling profits. Maple Leaf, which this year swallowed rival meatpacker Schneider Corp. in a $515-million deal, saw its profit nearly wiped out in the most recent quarter ending in September. Earnings for the third quarter slipped to $299,000, or a loss of one cent a share, compared with $19.3 million, or a gain of 16 cents, over the same period a year earlier. The company blamed low pork prices resulting from an oversupply of meat proteins and sluggishness in the Japanese market, which accounts for about 8% of Maple Leaf's sales.

Michael Palmer, an analyst at Veritas Investment Research Corp., believes an uptick in pork prices can reverse the tide for Maple Leaf. Still, he believes the company had much higher hopes for the Brandon plant. "I think they're disappointed in its performance. I certainly hope they are embarrassed, because their projections are way off the mark."

Company vice-president Detlefsen says the Brandon plant is going through the same growing pains as any start-up: "We're tracking industry standards. The business is not performing to where we'd like it to be because of the protein glut...We're happy with the plant's performance at this stage."

Meanwhile, I don't bother calling in to offer my resignation. A few days later, I receive a registered letter in the mail from the company. It says they have decided to terminate my employment, effective immediately. "The company recognizes that this line of work may not be for everyone and that you may be suited to a different line of work," the letter reads. "You are advised that should you choose to reapply for employment in the future, when your situation has stabilized, your application will be given due consideration."

I crumple it up and toss it in the garbage. R