

READING 2

Chicken—‘Racing With the Machines’

A “modern” poultry plant is a violent machine that kills, eviscerates and cuts apart millions of chickens a day. Rosa—and tens of thousands of Latino men and women who work on the “disassembly line”—are disposable cogs in this apparatus.

Hung on hooks and stuck on conveyor cones, chicken carcasses stream by at a rate of hundreds per minute as workers—standing shoulder-to-shoulder, bundled in sweaters and aprons, and armed with scissors and knives—make repeated cuts, up to 30,000 repetitions per shift.

“I was dizzy from so many chickens that I saw pass by,” Rosa says. “No matter how fast you worked, that belt never slowed down. All day, it was full of chicken.”

Supervisors with stopwatches keep a close eye on the workers to monitor their productivity.

“Cutting wings, they would even check how many chickens we cut per minute, measuring us like machines,” said one Mexican woman who worked for Tyson Foods Inc. in Arkansas. “And you do it to not lose your job. You were racing with the machines.”

Working in a chicken factory is one of the most dangerous occupations in America. In the decade ending in 2008, 100 poultry workers died in the United States, and 300,000 were injured, many suffering the loss of a limb or debilitating repetitive motion injuries.

Marta, 45, recalls the day her nephew lost a hand in a machine that grinds chicken feet: “When he was taking out a piece to clean the machine, a crew leader pushed a green button and turned it on. And his hand got ground up. I heard him screaming.”

Even in the absence of an obviously serious injury like the loss of a limb or a broken bone, the pain is constant. Many immigrants rely on over-the-counter pain relievers imported from Central America, which some call “vitamins.”