

THE CHURN

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Creative destruction in a border town.

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Last August, in a corner of South Texas where local newspapers still call businesses “corporate citizens,” an emergency vehicle paid a visit to a highly fortified underwear mill. The hundred-and-fifty-three-year-old Fruit of the Loom company, owned by Warren Buffett’s Omaha-based Berkshire Hathaway, had just announced that its Cameron County factory would close by the end of the year. Much of its production would be shifted to Honduras. The news brought the county government’s mass-layoff response squad to the scene.

The first task of the Rapid Response Unit (actually, one spiky-haired twenty-six-year-old named Mario Maldonado) was to buffer the shock of the eight hundred workers who, only weeks before, had been sure that their jobs were safe. The second task was tougher: to convince those workers, in the face of double-digit unemployment and thirty-three-per-cent poverty rates, that this economic equivalent of an axe blow was in fact a main chance.

Rapid-Response Mario, a local himself, had grown deft at drawing out this line of reasoning. The factories that had closed here in the past four years evoked an informal history of middle-class sartorial choice: Levi’s and Wrangler jeans; Carter baby clothes; Converse sneakers; Dickies uniforms; Vanity Fair lingerie; North Face parkas; self-belted Haggar slacks. Mario exudes solidity, from his broad chest to his black, unflinching eyes, and though he suspected that many of the workers would never again have jobs as good as the ones they were losing, sentimentality was not part of his commission. He was here to help workers figure out what happens next.

Fruit of the Loom had chosen a few veteran laborers to go, briefly, to Honduras to train the cheaper workers who would replace them. Some of the others would board the meat- and poultry-industry buses that idled outside the county employment office, luring those sufficiently desperate to take short-term slaughterhouse jobs in the Ozarks. But, as Fruit of the Loom’s cutting machines and bleaching vats were cranked up on pallet jacks, loaded onto flatbeds, and hauled to the Port of Brownsville, many of the company’s workers pocketed a month’s severance and filed into Mario’s van. They applied for unemployment assistance equal to roughly half their former wages, took aptitude tests, and studied the twenty training brochures that were taped to the van’s walls. And thus they joined the Rio Grande Valley’s eight thousand other former inseam, watch-pocket, and waistband experts in what economists call capitalism’s necessary churn.

Mario knew a little about revising life expectations, having taken this job when he could no longer afford tuition at the University of Texas. He and his wife had just had their first child, a daughter. If he occasionally felt his resourcefulness flag as he helped middle-aged men with six children type up résumés that said, “Willing to take entry level,” he consoled himself with the thought that Fruit of the Loom, a factory nearly the size of Madison Square Garden and one of the county’s largest private employers, might be globalization’s final local casualty. “Honestly,” he said, “there’s not much left to close.”

Cameron County, which has a population of three hundred and thirty-five thousand, sits at the southernmost tip of Texas and consists of a smattering of small towns and two cities, Harlingen and Brownsville. The shuttered factories bear polite signs on their doors: “At this time we are not accepting applications.” Its laid-off workers still speak of their former employers with affection—their loyalty reiterated on the back pockets of their jeans, the neckbands of their T-shirts, and in the form of pet Chihuahuas named Chuck Taylor and 501. But Cameron County’s textile workers are now, as units of labor, generic. After forty-one straight months of job loss in the American manufacturing sector, they are a class of obsolescents in need of repurposing.

Lupita Sanchez is a veteran member of the obsolescent class. Her mother stole across the Rio Grande when she was nine months pregnant, in order to bear a daughter with American citizenship and improved odds of a tolerable life. In due course, Lupita, who is now thirty-three, fulfilled this maternal ambition. Raised on both

sides of the border, she grew up to be a decently compensated seamstress, and then a quality-control supervisor, at a Brownsville mill that made Mickey Mouse and Little Mermaid T-shirts for Disney. The stability of this work had given Lupita's daughter Silvia, now thirteen, a sense that she belonged to the American middle class. On the summer day that the Fruit of the Loom announcement marked the end of the county's textile era, Silvia sat erectly at the dining-room table of her parents' small frame house, a ponytail loose at her neck, trying to master Bach's "Bourrée Anglaise" on her secondhand flute (thirty-three dollars a month on an installment plan). Silvia seemed unaware that the demise of an industry might in some way affect her well-being—an outlook that her mother wanted to preserve.

Lupita has a round, open face and a purposeful way of walking even when she has nowhere to go. Before her factory closed, in 2001, she and her husband, a pipe fitter's helper named Sergio, had together earned thirty-five thousand dollars a year, plus benefits. That amount, combined with shrewd home economics, was enough to raise their children—Silvia and her younger siblings, Sandra and Luis Ángel—and treat them to a weekly blowout at Peter Piper Pizza. In August, 2003, the family's income, without benefits, had fallen to thirteen thousand dollars, well below the poverty line of \$21,959 for a family of five.

After she lost her job, Lupita had tried to reinvent herself in accordance with market imperatives. First, she earned a G.E.D. and a certificate at the local branch of the University of Texas, as a "Microsoft Office Specialist." When she discovered that this certificate provided her little entrée into actual offices, she took out a thirty-five-hundred-dollar loan and trained to be a certified medical assistant—taking vital signs, scheduling appointments, and drawing blood (a task at which, given her dexterity with a needle, she excelled). Although few people Lupita knew had health insurance anymore, health-care occupations still accounted for nearly half the job vacancies in the county, a statistic manifest in the classified ads that she read every morning before turning to her current occupation—rolling out tortillas and grilling two hundred fajita lunches to peddle at local construction sites.

She took home thirty dollars a day from this private enterprise, which was just about what she had earned the last time she worked outdoors. Two years after her father's sudden death (when she was seventeen), she left home to do migrant farm labor in Michigan and Indiana. The work had been predictably dismal, but she had embraced the consolations at hand: the clean rivers, and Sergio, who had followed her North from the border. When she was nineteen, she married Sergio; two years later, they had Silvia, and two years after that, a second daughter, Sandra. Lupita was tormented by the thought that her daughters might grow accustomed to life in migrant barracks. Between picking seasons, she returned to Brownsville, put on her best blouse, walked into a local textile mill, and asked if she might learn to sew.

Since the nineteen-sixties, low-slung steel-and-concrete factories had been springing up all over the county's farmlands and chaparral flats, their owners lured by mild weather and cheap labor. To workers, the mills possessed a clear-cut hierarchy. Fruit of the Loom (whose entryway for a time bore a cautionary banner, "Wear the Union Label—Unemployed") was a better place to work than Vanity Fair or Hagggar, but it was not as good as Levi's, the sole union shop, which paid the highest wages. Most of these employment options had come at the expense of millworkers in places like Lowell, Massachusetts, or Henderson, North Carolina; but until recently few South Texans had given much thought to this correlation. In the race for a cut-rate, docile labor force—the Great Unregulated Place—Cameron County had, only a decade ago, been in contention. But, as economic boundaries extended far beyond the North American continent, this community no longer rated.

Cameron County is full of geckos, free-tailed bats, twice-fried-food franchises, and audacious contradictions. A replica of the Statue of Liberty is attended not by the “Give me your tired, your poor” inscription but by a notice that the spot is under twenty-four-hour surveillance. Anglo sons of the Alamo wear cowboy hats with guayaberas made in China. The United States’ richest diversity of birds shares the sky with the smoke trails of eight hundred thousand smoldering tires from a dump just over the Mexican border. And, while the rhythms of daily life often seem to have two speeds, slow and stop, the county has negotiated American economic history’s two greatest transitions—from farming to manufacturing and, now, from manufacturing to service—in the space of forty years.

Lupita’s neighborhood, an unincorporated scrap of Brownsville called Cameron Park, has been an axis of both transitions. According to the 2000 census, it is the poorest place in America. Its six thousand residents have a per-capita income of forty-one hundred dollars, and its roads have only recently been paved. There are no street lights, and the scents and sounds of roadside corn-cob vendors and feral cats evoke the homeliest of Mexican villages. Still, the lives unfolding here testify not just to economic hardship but to a strain of what used to be called American exceptionalism—the elasticity of economic class. Once a landing point for indigent, illegal farmworkers, Cameron Park is now populated mainly by working (and voting) second-generation citizens whose emotional investment in their homes and their community is intensified by their itinerant pasts. Secondhand double-wides have been enhanced with pastel paint jobs, oval windows, and bevelled-glass doors. Yards are gaudy with plumbago, the circular driveways enclosed by wrought-iron fences. The local Catholic church is the neighborhood social center, and the middle-school chess team is nationally ranked. But, these days, the forces of social mobility press downward.

Lupita, like many other Cameron County natives, knows the script that outsiders have in mind now when they visit: the ways in which plant closings wrench the heart from a community. But in twenty-first-century America, where even the bleakest corners have absorbed the cultural authority of Sarah Jessica Parker and Bed Bath & Beyond, the mourning is not for a vanished way of life; and the crippled hands endemic among veterans of twenty thousand inseams stanch a good bit of nostalgia. What’s mourned is material and specific: the Tommy Hilfiger watches and the college educations that your teen-agers asked for, health insurance, the decent car, the white kitchenette set you coveted for the house whose loss you’re now struggling to forestall—the stuff, immense and absurd, of family stability.

Since the turn of this century, three million American manufacturing jobs have disappeared. Some economists and politicians attribute this loss to global trade deals. Others credit improvements in production efficiency. But, however the responsibility is apportioned, most people agree on one point: the need to retrain displaced workers. Under a popular, expanding federal program called Trade Adjustment Assistance, workers who are judged to have lost their jobs because of foreign-trade policy are eligible for the sort of expensive, generously conceived assistance that has become a rarity since Great Society strategies fell out of fashion. Beneficiaries like Lupita receive up to two years of aggressive training in “demand occupations”—jobs identified by government and business officials as growth areas—as well as unemployment compensation and subsidized health care while they learn. It has been estimated that this assistance can cost up to twenty thousand dollars per worker.

The state of Texas, which was disproportionately affected by the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement, has in the succeeding decade become a national model of this market-driven worker reeducation. Since 2000, it has received forty-eight million dollars in federal retraining money, not including a \$1.6-million “national

emergency grant” awarded after Fruit of the Loom announced its closing. With that financial support, closed banks, mills, and military facilities have been reincarnated as centers for the development of what administrators call “the twenty-first-century workforce.”

Across the street from Lupita’s closed factory, former textile workers study computer maintenance in a shopping mall whose stores have moved away. In one aisle, a red-white-and-blue poster, near a pile of mannequins from an erstwhile J. C. Penney store, reads, “Creating Higher Skill, Higher-Wage Job Opportunities in Your Community: George W. Bush.” At a long-shut United States Air Force base, women who were about to graduate from a business-computing course looked one day like a congeries of Whistler’s mothers: clad in black plastic hairdresser’s capes with white tab collars, they waited tight-lipped for their waist-long hair to be snipped into blunt cuts and bangs. An instructor in high heels told them, “It’s like in that show ‘Queer Eye for the Straight Guy’—a little polish can make a huge difference, especially in the office environment.”

There was a local saying about rich Anglos that always made Lupita laugh: “They see lightning in the sky and think that God is snapping their picture.” Although she had graduated from her medical-assistant training with honors—a feat for someone who hadn’t been in a classroom since the seventh grade—she had no time to be smug. In the three weeks since finishing, she had applied for twenty-nine openings and had three interviews, which struck her as a reasonable rate of return, though none had led to a job. According to the numbers, mass reëducation in Cameron County was progressing well. In the past five years, more than a thousand displaced manufacturing workers had been retrained as medical assistants or air-conditioning repairmen or computer-maintenance technicians. Ninety per cent of them mastered their new skills and graduated, a ringing success rate by historic standards, and particularly striking given that many of the students are eighth-grade dropouts who once spoke no English. Reëntering the job market, they were assisted by advanced search technologies, the diligent and personable Rapid-Response Mario, and a state public-assistance program that makes not working virtually impossible. “What happens next,” the teachers told them, “is up to you.”

Lupita, having had no success with her medical-assistant job applications, tried to focus on the benefits derived from spending more time with her kids. She was beginning to comprehend the Italian musical directions—“vivace,” “allegretto”—that rolled off her elder daughter’s tongue. She liked to eavesdrop when Silvia and Sandra, who is eleven, discussed what they would be when they grew up. Lupita had no memory of her own early ambitions. “I suppose there was so much actual doing of work, from a very young age, that I had to exile from my mind what I wanted to do,” she said. Shy, long-limbed Silvia hoped to be a doctor: she was strong in science. Sandra wanted to be a doctor, too, as well as a supermodel and a convenience-store clerk. Both girls were smart, but Sandra was the wild one—barrelling through the front door, which was crowned by a crucifix of palm fronds, to hold impromptu dance performances in the gravelly front yard. She waited impatiently for the day (not soon in coming) when her mother would allow her to dye her hair pink.

Lupita had once danced, too, but motherhood had made her more fearful. Before conceiving her youngest child, Luis Ángel, who is now three, Lupita sought permission at the neighborhood church, San Felipe de Jesús, whose perceptive clergy compensated for aging linoleum and a lack of pews. “I wanted Father Mike’s opinion—the real, blunt truth I asked from him—of whether we were doing well enough as a family to have a third,” she said. She resisted taking out the loan for medical-assistant training until she’d planned the family budget two years into the future.

From her own improvisatory childhood, Lupita knew the tricks of low-budget householding: when even Wal-Mart is out of your price range, secondhand clothes can be purchased by the pound, the pallet, or the bale; the Port of Brownsville contains enough fresh crabs for three days' dinner, if you have a bit of raw chicken and some string to fish them out. But, as the fall of 2003 progressed, her unemployment and health benefits had expired, her 401(k) from the textile factory had been cashed out, and she was still selling lunches. The state workforce commission had predicted that twenty-five medical-assistant jobs would open in Cameron County in 2003, but it would be difficult to secure one. In one class of laid-off textile workers alone, eighty-five people had been trained for the profession.

Other Cameron Park job-seekers sustained their hopes by lighting "miracle candles" sold in local grocery stores—candles emblazoned with messages like "Select Me for the Company" or "Increase the Wages Offered." Lupita's strategy was to engage in severe self-correction. She lay awake many nights reappraising job-interview performances: errors in grammar, scandalous open-toed shoes. "Since I have no experience, I need to dazzle," she told her younger brother Lázaro, her confidant, who lived around the corner. "But what is it that makes this person or that one dazzle so?" She thought it might be a matter of self-expression. The problem wasn't her facility with English. She spoke the language well, and certainly better than Sergio did. He was still learning, moving his lips as he watched Spider-Man cartoons with Luis Ángel. Her difficulty came from a habit of reticence that had once been a strength. For a pretty young woman in migrant camps, silence was the best defense against the nosy and the predatory; it allowed her a sliver of privacy. But the stillness of a thirty-three-year-old woman being interviewed at a downtown Brownsville chiropractor could easily be mistaken for stupidity. Lupita longed to have at her command, in any language, "those big round words that explain better what goes on in your mind, and which help people know who you are. I mean, those proper words that come from the deeps of a person, and that burn a little when they're spoken."

Like others in Cameron Park, she had heard some unsettling after-training stories. Karla Chávez, from Levi's, who had retrained in small-business management, allegedly began to direct an immigrant-smuggling concern—an enterprise that ended summarily last spring, when nineteen of her clients suffocated in a locked tractor-trailer. The tales that really shook Lupita, though, were the "successes": hyperefficient Mary Frances, for instance, who, after being turned down by every hospital in the county, started at "A," under "Physicians" in the phone book, and reached the "W"s before she got her first job offer as a receptionist—for forty-five per cent of what she'd earned at Levi's. She took it gratefully. And Mary Frances had been in personnel management.

In their days of relative wealth, Sergio had built the family's home himself, and didn't now fixate, as Lupita did, on how the lemony paint they'd chosen to brighten its low ceilings and bare Sheetrock had faded into the general murk. He frankly preferred the busy, confident Lupita—the one who laughed when he contended that a Friday night of sin made one saintly for the rest of the week—to the one who agonized over finding a job. "Lately, I think Sergio likes being a father more than being a husband," she said, "though I suppose I wouldn't have it the other way around."

Over the years, the fringe of hair around Sergio's handsome face had developed a delicate upward curl, the accidental styling of perpetual sweat. Before finding pipe-fitting work, he had been a roofer, a laborer at a large nursery, a tile layer, and a bird tender at a Brownsville breeding farm, charged with shampooing uncoöperative ostriches with Downy soap. Now he worked for the American subsidiary of a Singapore conglomerate that had an outpost on the Brownsville waterfront. As a pipe fitter's helper, he earned seven dollars and twenty-five cents an hour. The word "helper" did not mean that he would progress to the better-paying real thing, even

though he had taught himself to read blueprints, which was a requisite of promotion. The state had predicted only a few pipe-fitter openings for the coming year. Still, Sergio felt that he could handle the bills alone for a month or so if he worked as many extra hours as he could get.

In September, olive trees and bougainvillea were peaking across the county, and the famed multiplier effect of manufacturing—one factory job can produce six ancillary ones—was humming away in reverse. Food-stamp applications had increased fifteen per cent in the past year. The number of people visiting the local soup kitchen, Loaves and Fishes, had grown by half. For George John, the seventy-nine-year-old director of Loaves and Fishes, another figure was more striking: the number of people seeking help in finding a job had risen a hundred per cent. Even the county's greyhounds were underemployed, Valley Race Park having forsaken live racing for most of the year in favor of simulcasts from Phoenix and Tucson. This bothered veteran bettors, who couldn't watch the dogs relieve themselves before the races, a supposed indicator of their eagerness to run. It was harder on the greyhounds. Some people said that it would have been more humane to do what they've done in Juárez, across the border—just build an incinerator next to the track.

Life often looks unpromising at the end of a Rio Grande Valley summer, with its flooding, swarms of virus-bearing mosquitoes, and the particular pungency, when the air is still, of the eight hundred thousand smoldering tires. The economy usually improves in late fall, when thousands of working-class retirees from the Midwest and Canada arrive to hook up their R.V.s at parks named Sundance and Sunburst and Sunny Side and Sun Valley. These "Winter Texans" fleeing Northern climates are crucial to Cameron County's economy, though few are affluent enough to pay for hotel rooms. Being elderly, they often seek medical treatment and sometimes wind up in adult day care, one industry that is booming in the Valley, with at least two hundred facilities in operation.

Despite billboards along Interstate 77 proclaiming Cameron County's affection for Winter Texans (and alternating billboards that say, "Open MRIs!," "Action Physical Therapy," and "Your Heart, Your Life, Our Passion"), once crowded R.V. parks were forty per cent empty this season. The old union workers whose retirement packages allowed them three months of leisure were dying off, and the next generation of retired workers seemed to be going elsewhere, or staying home. Winter Texans could still be glimpsed across the county, dancing in natty suits and spangled dresses. But they could also be seen behind the register at Circle K or Wal-Mart—the older ex-factory workers competing with younger ex-factory workers for jobs.

Fewer Winter Texans meant fewer medical-assistant opportunities for Lupita Sanchez. Even Valley Baptist Hospital, one of the county's largest and steadiest private employers, had unexpectedly begun to reduce staff. But Lupita, taking Sandra to the doctor one day, was buoyed to see one of her former classmates working in the office. The two women compared notes, identifying two other medical-assistant graduates who had found jobs in their field. One was hired by a doctor friend. The other found a job by moving to Austin.

More than half of the county's former textile workers had turned down the offer of retraining—many because they couldn't feed their families on the unemployment benefits they'd get while going to school. Texas is known for its austerity to the unemployed; a laid-off textile worker with three children might receive only a hundred and sixty-six dollars a week in benefits. If his benefits expire before he finds work, he can temporarily collect welfare; at an average of forty-four dollars a week, it is one of the lowest assistance rates in the nation.

Lupita's friends who did make the necessary financial sacrifices to educate themselves were increasingly worried that their investments might fail to pay out. Alicia, one of Lupita's former co-workers, completed computer training and went to work as a grocery-store cashier—part time, no benefits. Aracely, a medical-assistant classmate, took a restaurant job. Becky, from Levi's, worked at a hospital, cleaning floors; Roberto, also from Levi's, went back to Mexico to fix up and sell junk cars. Another former co-worker sold picture frames door-to-door. And Lupita was loading two ice chests' worth of food into the family's Dodge Intrepid, to sell to other low-paid laborers who wanted a cheap, home-cooked lunch.

The construction sites that Lupita visited were piled with tile and plywood, and were tricky to negotiate while lugging the ice chests. But there was one site where she barely felt the physical strain: Behind a tall iron fence rose beautiful red-roofed *españolas*—homes with verandas and soaring vaulted doorways. And behind those *españolas* lay another fortified gate, which opened out into a congregation of half-built, four-story homes that soared even higher. Lupita's brother Lázaro, coming once to gawk, had been quickly driven off by the police. But someone peddling lunch to the laborers had license to look. The homes had twenty-five-foot windows, wrought-iron balconies, and verandas on every side and at every level. In front of one house, thirty-two Christmas trees edged the lawn. Houses for surgeons and lawyers, Lupita imagined.

The houses, among the finest in the county, made Lupita ponder something the priest had said one Sunday at Mass: "We think too much about what we want, and too little about what we need." She and Sergio had wanted to build a room for their son, who shared his parents' bed. The family could survive without a separate bedroom for Luis Ángel, Lupita thought, so it wasn't, technically, a need. It was just the faintest of wantings.

In Cameron Park there's a saying: "I need to make enough to hold my house." Family and home are sentimentalized here—a consolation for labor-market caprice. The neighborhood, four blocks from the construction site, might lack street lights, but it had impressive houses, too. The nicest belonged to a woman named Elida Greenwood, who, in addition to owning the buildings that house two adult-day-care centers, was the neighborhood's leading buyer and seller of land. When she sold a plot, she negotiated the mortgage-payment terms and schedules, without the involvement of banks, in an arrangement known as "seller-take-back." In a state where seventy-one per cent of the residents don't have a checking account, let alone good credit, seller-take-back is a crucial niche in the real-estate market—one that had been of service to Lupita's mother, María Villarreal.

María's husband had died of a heart attack a week after the birth of their eighth child. Now, at fifty-nine, she was working as a maid and earning six dollars and twenty-five cents an hour, while helping to support her own mother, who was still working at the age of eighty. María was also raising three grandchildren, who had been orphaned when Lupita's sister died, of cancer, at the age of thirty-six. To house her family, María, in 1992, had bought a tiny lot from Elida Greenwood. The price was nine thousand dollars, with a twelve-per-cent interest rate. On María's land, Sergio and Lázaro installed a small wooden house, which they painted periwinkle blue.

María's work came through a temporary agency that provided housework assistance for the elderly. Between assignments, she met her monthly obligation to Elida by doing odd jobs or by leaving her grandchildren with relatives and heading to Arkansas to work at a Tyson-chicken slaughterhouse. After years of this, her face was drawn and bunions protruded from her cheap canvas shoes, but she was four thousand dollars shy of owning her

land in full. Then, during a yearlong stint at the Arkansas slaughterhouse, she fell ill—a “big pulling,” she described it, in the heart. Sergio and Lázaro found her in an Ozarks hospital and took her home.

Eventually, María returned to her maid’s schedule, but for at least two years she did not make mortgage payments to Elida Greenwood. Lupita and her siblings, María knew, had monthly land payments and financial hardships of their own, and she kept her difficulties to herself. So Lupita learned of her mother’s straits only after Elida had taken back María’s property, which left María and her grandchildren living in a house on land they didn’t own. Lupita went to see Elida Greenwood. She no longer had savings, so she had no choice. Taking out another seller-take-back loan, she helped buy back the land, at twice the original price. She blamed herself for not anticipating her mother’s predicament. In Texas people say, “He who has, gets.”

Social meliorists sometimes indulge an idle thought: Wouldn’t it be fairer if the worst jobs paid the most—if toilet cleaners and garbagemen earned more than restaurant critics and ambassadors to balmy islands? Manufacturing jobs—hard and monotonous but decently remunerated—are as close to this notion as modern American labor gets. But in the past five years nearly twenty per cent of those jobs have vanished from the United States economy.

The early-twentieth-century economist Joseph Schumpeter, whose parents owned a textile factory and profited handsomely from it, coined a term, “creative destruction,” that has become an *idée fixe* in contemporary American economics. Only by dismantling outmoded industries like textiles and diverting workers to creative new enterprises will America increase its wealth, and Americans improve their living standards. As Schumpeter recognized, the continuous process of creative destruction is attended by considerable stress, especially for laborers on the destruction side of the equation.

But in Cameron County worker stress didn’t necessarily lead to political support for tariffs and import quotas—or to resentment of the countries where the jobs went. The county’s Fruit of the Loom workers made about four hundred dollars a week. Honduran textile workers make less than seventy-five dollars a week, and protest at their peril, because Chinese textile workers make seventy-five dollars a month. Cameron County residents tend to accept the ineluctability of this math. Many have seen their own relatives in Mexico improve their families’ living standards while earning in a week what American workers earn in a day. And, by the time a community has been whipsawed by the decision-making of a dozen of what John Kerry calls “corporate Benedict Arnolds,” those companies stop looking like traitors and start to look like American business archetypes.

Workers’ distress stemmed instead from their experience of the bipartisan retraining solution: too many displaced workers were being trained for too few decent jobs. This disequilibrium helps explain an unsettling finding by Texas state evaluators: The most common employment found by those who receive intensive federal training is temporary work—which also happens to be the most common employment found by displaced workers who receive no training at all.

But, as George Bush explained to a group of North Carolina’s displaced textile workers one day this past November, the Schumpeterian process requires patience: “As the economy changes, as technology changes, the slowest part of change is the workforce. And we’ve just got to understand that we’ve got to make sure our workers—who are the most productive in the world, the hardest-working people in the world, the finest people in the world—have the skills necessary to move on with their lives. . . . There’s a wonderful, wonderful future ahead for people who at this moment may think the future is a little dark.”

As if on cue, a happy prospect arose in Cameron County, courtesy of Boeing, the American aviation company. Boeing, which is based in Chicago, had announced that it would begin manufacturing a superefficient new jet, the 7E7 Dreamliner, and Texas wanted to be the place where it was made. Governor Rick Perry was offering incentives, and San Antonio and Houston had been suggested as suitable spots. To the astonishment of all concerned, Boeing asked for more information about only one place in the state: Cameron County, which had the advantages of ship ports and airports and the least expensive labor.

It seemed odd to some that Boeing, which over the previous two years had laid off thirty thousand people, might resuscitate a city fifteen hundred miles away. But desperation supplies its own plausibility. Plotting grew thick at the Las Vegas Café, where the mayor of Harlingen, Connie de la Garza, and other players in county politics met five mornings a week at dawn—all wearing clothes with “Made in America” labels—for gossip and huevos rancheros.

Mayor de la Garza, who is sixty-one, had recently fallen out of a deer blind, badly injuring his arm, but even in pain he managed to maintain a cheerleader’s mien. (“Our new call center will bring us a thousand new jobs, and good jobs. Right now is an exciting time to be in South Texas!”) Still, Valley men pride themselves on their ability to make ass-elbow distinctions, and the Mayor, a native of the county, let the bluster drop when he was with his breakfast buddies. These were disheartening times, and the county needed something like Boeing.

At the Mayor’s side was David Alex, who had headed Harlingen’s chamber of commerce for decades. A former high-school football star with a bald head and a late-Roman girth, Alex, who is sixty-seven, had in the old days lured Fruit of the Loom, Levi’s, and many of the other mills to the Valley. The closing of those factories didn’t affect the personal finances of Mayor de la Garza or Alex, as creative destruction generates profitable turnover in real estate, a profession they shared. In fact, Alex, who would soon get the listing for the Fruit of the Loom factory, was having his best year ever, despite a break for heart surgery. Nonetheless, the mill closings distressed him: “The twelve-per-cent unemployment hurts, but the statistic that gets under my skin even more is that forty per cent of the people who have jobs are underemployed.”

The Mayor and his friends had been pursuing biotech and other forward-looking industries. But although industrial real-estate prices had fallen, none of the former textile buildings had found a job-generating new occupant, even one of a backward-looking stripe. When county economic-development specialists sought strategic advice from officials in cities that had lost factories in the nineteen-nineties, they came away further distressed. The leaders of cities like Buffalo and Lowell and Canton were still looking for answers themselves.

A few years back, when Alex made the case for opening a factory in Cameron County, he knew whom he was trying to beat: first, the Northeasterners, then the Carolinians, then the Mexicans. But now the potential competition included China, Pakistan, Slovakia, Nicaragua, and Bangladesh. Boeing represented a reassuring restoration of old rules. Since the company relied heavily on Pentagon contracts, it was politically obliged to keep its jet manufacturing in the United States. Thus Cameron County could use its economic distress as a bargaining chip. By any standard, it had one of the youngest, most underutilized workforces in the nation.

High-tech corporations had once countered that the area’s willing workers were illiterate in two languages. But thousands of retrained workers like Lupita Sanchez gave the Mayor and his men crucial evidence to the contrary. The Mayor said, “We used to have to say to Lockheed Martin and those other corporations, ‘Look, just take a chance on us,’ but now we’ve got the statistics right here.” With his good arm, he rapped the table. “These are adaptable, trainable people. And loyal—look at all those folks who worked at Levi’s for thirty years.

Once you hire them, they're yours." In addition, Cameron County schools seemed to be producing more able graduates than they had in the past. This is in part because, in an unstable economy, teaching has become a sought-after and relatively lucrative job, although the loss of the tax-paying mills was forcing those teachers to do more with less. Many students, upon graduation, enter the military. (Last year, three soldiers from Cameron County were killed in Iraq.) Others find a way to attend a four-year college, but most promptly join the local labor pool.

"The low cost of living—that's the other thing we have that other U.S. cities don't," Mayor de la Garza was saying. "Low crime, too, and good quality of life. We're an easygoing people, we're a good place for outdoor types, the food is great, we have local theatre, and sometimes travelling companies come from New York." His companions stared at their eggs. "Well, we're not Chicago," the Mayor conceded. He rose from the table—he had real-estate business to attend to. "Anyway, the model that's relevant is San Antonio"—two hundred and fifty miles away. "They got Toyota to come there, and only two years later we can feel the effects all the way out here in the Valley. One company, just one, and the whole region feels completely different."

In downtown Brownsville, in December, signs on telephone poles read, "Telephone poles for sale." Lupita found a five-dollar-and-fifteen-cent-an-hour job—temporary and minimum wage, but more than she was making in her lunch business—stocking shelves and working the register at a dollar store during the Christmas rush. Middle-class Mexicans once came to Brownsville on weekends to spend their disposable income, but declining Mexican wages and a steady devaluation of the peso have cut into sales. Moreover, a Wal-Mart superstore has opened across the border, in Matamoros, offering the same merchandise you can get in the States, but cheaper, plus thirty-four varieties of tequila. This was grim news for downtown Brownsville's already depressed array of commercial establishments (the Superior \$1.00 Mart, the Everything's \$1.00 Superstore, and the Superior 99-Cent Place), but the store where Lupita found work, which specialized in Chinese-made children's toys, household goods, and Christmas decorations, had a loyal clientele.

In addition to the chatter of a thousand daily customers and carols blasted from loudspeakers behind the cash registers, Christmas lights played demonically overlapping versions of "Jingle Bells." Lupita, her glossy hair in a twist and with a roll of masking tape on her wrist, hustled through aisles trying to restore Super-Cyberheroes and Happy Family doll houses to their rightful shelves. She was coming down with the flu, and the pockets of her dark slacks were stuffed with Kleenex. She'd had no response from the last four places she'd applied to. She had just received a ticket for expired license tags on the Intrepid, which would consume every cent of the next two weeks' pay. But these miseries weren't what really shook her: the week that she found this job, Sergio announced that he had been laid off.

Compared with downtown Brownsville, the Port of Brownsville was prospering. Steel was coming in from Venezuela and Brazil and Japan, and iron ore, too—3.65 million tons of cargo a year. The port's largest employer is Amfels, an American subsidiary of a Singapore-based conglomerate. Amfels also took on military projects whose details seemed to be known by every aspiring blue-collar worker in Cameron Park, and a rough indicator of its corporate health could be sighted from miles away. Suspended from a hydraulic hoist two hundred feet off the ground—circled by white-faced ibis, Caspian terns, and low-flying pelicans—was giant oil-drilling machinery. An abomination to many environmentalists, oil-industry equipment in the sky was, to Sergio and his friends, the augury of a paycheck. Few were lucky enough to be employed directly by Amfels, but the temporary jobs with its many subcontractors were considered good. The urgency of getting oil rigs back to the Persian Gulf, or submarines back under water, provided laborers with twelve-hour workdays. But the hoist in the sky was empty now, which meant that the incomes of the temporary workers sank to zero.

Sergio went to see a previous employer, a roofing subcontractor. A prominent development company, Casa Linda, was hiring at one of the construction sites where Lupita had sold her lunches. The last time Sergio worked as a roofer, two years ago, the going rate in Cameron County was eighty dollars a day. Now Sergio had heard that the Casa Linda subcontractor was offering fifty dollars, in cash, and Lupita had been told by the workers that those cash payments could be erratic. Nonetheless, fifty dollars was better than the forty dollars that Sergio had been offered at another construction site. It was assumed that, if he wouldn't work for so little, there were many illegal immigrants who would.

Although the natural border between Mexico and the United States, the Rio Grande, was now so depleted that one could walk between countries without dampening one's shoes, the official border was more fiercely defended than ever. But the border guards were outmatched by a surging number of Mexican nationals seeking to escape their own depressed economy. NAFTA, which had given Mexico a preferential trading arrangement with the United States, had been superseded by global deals that favored China and other countries. And in just three years a quarter of a million Mexican manufacturing jobs had disappeared. Among those jobs were several thousand at Mexico-based Fruit of the Loom factories. One Fruit of the Loom mill, in the impoverished town of Valle Hermosa, appeared to be down to a single employee, a security guard, whose backup was a mutt named Elmer.

Lupita and Sergio, like many other residents, had considered leaving Cameron County; in a flexible economy, labor migrates with capital. The owner of a local Italian restaurant argued that there was money in Dallas. An architect who earned five thousand dollars last year thought Houston might be the place. Even Rapid-Response Mario—whose job with the county was not in the civil service but on a subcontract—felt that in Cameron County he had no chance of making what he had heard on the radio was America's median family income: forty-two thousand dollars. "I've got some education, so I'm luckier than a lot of people here," he said. "But when I think of my little girl I panic—it's like the Valley is a trap." He'd heard that things were better in Austin.

But in a family-centered culture it was hard to leave. There were elderly relatives across the border and down the street who depended on one's support. There was the flute teacher who noticed the passion for Bach in one's quiet daughter, and the parish priest who noticed everything else. And there was one's house, the repository of great investment and labor, whose sale in hard economic times would not be advantageous.

"I think if I was some big deal," Lupita said, "if I had a talent that could make a future with some bigness, it would be easier to say, 'Yes, we'll go.' And I confess there are times I get tired of my family here, having to be involved in every little thing. But to separate ourselves, and put the girls in a strange place when they're doing well here—to chase after an eight-dollar-an-hour job in a new place that might also disappear, leaving us to live in the same hard way?" Better to watch the television news vigilantly, so that Sergio might be among the first to apply when Boeing came to town. Like David Alex and Mayor de la Garza, she had invested in Cameron County for the long term.

One evening, after cooking for the construction workers and her family, Lupita ceded the kitchen to Silvia and two of her friends. Barefoot and intent, they boiled a stew of cornstarch and water, added it to individual pans that held the juices of grapes, tomatoes, pineapple, carrots, and oranges, then seasoned their concoctions with an eyedropper's worth of iodine. "First, we've got to titrate the ascorbic-acid standard," Silvia informed her mother; her science project was due the following week. Ordinarily, Lupita shuddered to see her girls at the sink and the stove. Though she had tutored them in the Catholic catechism and in dance steps for cumbia and

guapango music, she had withheld from them her domestic competence, for reasons that she didn't fully understand.

The girls soon retreated to Silvia and Sandra's bedroom to spread their data recordings out on a bed. Though most of the tiny room was a shrine to second-tier boy bands, one corner had been cleared for a Mexican computer—a remnant of more affluent days. From the hallway, Lupita watched the girls work for a minute, then reached for Luis, who was wearing cardboard Spy Kids glasses and complaining that he liked Silvia better when she played him Christmas carols than when she played with her friends. Lupita's neighbors sometimes gossiped that her children were growing up too innocent, unable to fend for themselves. About this, Lupita didn't worry.

As Christmas neared, the newspapers predicted a full-bore recovery, and the state of Texas, citing budgetary constraints, phased out subsidized health coverage for a hundred thousand low-income children. Texas has the nation's highest proportion of children and adults who lack health insurance, in part because of the prevalence of temporary work. It also has high death rates from diabetes, cervical cancer, and other treatable illnesses. Lupita's sister Juana died of cervical cancer a few years ago; in the two years between her diagnosis and her barely palliated death, she was shut out of the many for-profit hospitals and medical facilities in Cameron County. While federal law requires those hospitals to treat the uninsured in emergencies—gunshot wounds, heart attacks—the institutions usually decline to accept uninsured supplicants who need chemotherapy, radiation, or other longer-term treatments. Juana, like most uninsured patients with advanced cancer from Cameron County, had to travel back and forth to the state public hospital in Galveston. It is an eleven-hour bus trip each way.

Juana's death was another instance in which Lupita regretted her lack of eloquence. "I am angry at myself for not doing all I could," she said. "I am angry at Juana for leaving her children, and angry at the suffering my mother went through—so much anger I do not like to bring it to my tongue. But maybe if you could get these things out the right way they wouldn't so badly haunt and hound your head."

The Galveston hospital radically cut the number of uninsured patients it will see, while hiking fees for treatment. In such a health-care climate, flu is treated with tea from chaparral bushes; depression is addressed with a passionflower-and-skullcap herbal concoction that tastes like shoe polish, only worse. It is not unusual to find male residents buying pregnancy tests at the drugstore, for their own use. Rumors have spread that human growth hormone in men's urine is a sign of prostate cancer. A six-dollar pregnancy kit, which tests for the hormone, is cheaper than a doctor.

Over dinner at Lupita's one evening, Juana's daughter, who is fourteen, mentioned a favorite teacher. She said, "You know how Mr. Alonso is kind of crazy, always saying controversial things? Well, today he told us, 'What I wish for all of you is that, when you graduate, I never see you again.' And some of the kids in the class got all offended. But then he explained, and it was cool. He just wants us to go out and learn that there are places in the world that aren't like Cameron County."

By late fall, it was clear that Boeing's Dreamliner was unlikely to transform the county's economy. Two of the company's top officers departed after one of them was caught recruiting a Pentagon official who oversaw military contracts. It was the culmination of a bad year, in which it was revealed that the company had filched inside information on a competitor's bid and leased jet tankers to the government at exorbitant cost, while worker layoffs mounted. Just before Christmas, the new Boeing C.E.O. announced that Everett, Washington, had won the competition for the Dreamliner's manufacture.

When Lupita and her friends failed to get a job they wanted, they often internalized responsibility—pinpointing their own deficits of personality or skill. And so it was for the workers at Fruit of the Loom when the Levi's and Haggard and Converse factories were closing all around them. They began to cut and dye and dry faster—so fast that by the time the closing was announced their machines were overheating and breaking down. It was difficult for them to conceive that far away, in corporate offices, things had moved faster still: that Michael Milken had facilitated a leveraged buyout of Fruit of the Loom on behalf of a C.E.O. who a dozen years later pocketed forty million dollars in compensation while sales fell, moved headquarters to the Cayman Islands, and eventually filed for bankruptcy. When Warren Buffett subsequently acquired Fruit of the Loom, the news sparked applause on the Cameron County shop floor. Buffett, workers had heard, was smart. They did not anticipate that a smart businessman might consider the global market and the opinions of his shareholders and take their workplace out from under them. The newly unemployed Fruit of the Loomers didn't blame Buffett, whose company would soon report doubled profits. That was just the way the system worked.

Sergio had no complaints, either, although his fifty-dollar-a-day roofing job was wearing him out. Casa Linda, the site's developer, had hired two other subcontractors in addition to Sergio's unit, in the hope of creating competition. It was a practice common in Central America: the subcontractors who finished their homes fastest would get another home to do. After a week of racing across roofs, laden with shingles, Sergio was so spent that it took him a moment to register the contents of his pay envelope. He had received half of what he'd expected.

At this, Lupita's supple capacity for tolerance found its snapping point. "You were pale as porcelain once, but now such laboring has you red and black from the sun," she said to her husband. "And, believe me, this isn't about 'Oh, my poor Sergio, I love you so much.' Even if I didn't like you, this wouldn't be right. People know we are in need, and they abuse us because they think we will just take it. I know there may come a day when we have to bend to that pressure, but I can make what little we have last longer, and we will not bend today. We have to say there is a limit, and beyond this our family will not go."

But they still had to make monthly payments on both their land and María's land, and the sixty-six-dollar insurance policy on their house and on Sergio's life. And there were seven payments left on Silvia's flute. A week later, Sergio reported back to work.

In Cameron Park, the highlight of the holiday season occurred one weekday at three in the morning. In continuation of Mexican peasant tradition, and in defiance of a chilling rain, three hundred people gathered in the unlit streets outside San Felipe de Jesús Church to make a three-mile penitential march across the county. At neighborhood churches elsewhere, similar crowds embarked on similar processions, each group headed toward the patronal church at the center of Brownsville for a daybreak Mass. Local children anticipated the procession for the sheer deliciousness of running miles through the streets in the middle of the night. Teen-agers liked the shirtless Mexican musicians who led the march and whose ankle bells jangled as they pranced. But the faithful marched to honor the Virgin of Guadalupe, Lupita's namesake. The Virgin of Guadalupe was said to have appeared in a vision to a poor man on a Mexican hillside. Overcome by her tenderness, the man trekked across the city to the palace of the bishop to testify to the miracle he'd beheld. There, he was rebuked and disbelieved until the Virgin's image materialized on his cloak. At this, the bishop fell to his knees, ordering that a temple be erected in her name.

In the dark, the families of Cameron Park passed the gated community where Lupita sold lunches, and another community where trees had been espaliered and scissored into cubes and spheres, and where a halogen-lit

fountain shot streams of water up into the rain. Between the ankle bells and the thunder, the priest tried to tell his parish what he thought was the meaning of the Guadalupe story. “It’s not about getting yourself a temple,” he said. “It is about having the courage to bring what you’ve seen to the palace—to the powerful, to the institutions strong enough not just to hear your story but to address it.” The priest’s notion that some power, somewhere, might acknowledge and salve the sufferings of his flock did not, this wet night, catch a spark. The group shuffled forward, mouthing three hundred private prayers.

As the new year began, a skeleton crew of Fruit of the Loomers, aided by “confidential document destruction” workers from a company called Lone Star Shredding, attended to the factory’s final cleanout. George Bush called the pace of recent economic growth the fastest in nearly twenty years. The Cameron County employment agency laid off a sixth of its employees because of state and federal budget cuts, and Rapid-Response Mario decided to enroll at the local training college alongside many of the employees he had helped. Computer maintenance looked promising, he thought.

Silvia took first prize at the school science fair, and Lupita’s temporary dollar-store job ended just before the repayments on her medical-assistance-training loan began. She thought she could keep her skills sharp by volunteering to do blood-pressure testings after Mass. Sergio’s temporary roof job ended, too. Unable to find new employment that paid even minimum wage, he applied for work in Corpus Christi. The city was three hours away by bus, but Amfels had openings there, at nine dollars an hour.

Since they had married, fifteen years earlier, Sergio had left Lupita and the children only once, to do migrant work in Ohio. He was so lonely that he lasted only a month, a fact that had pleased his wife immeasurably. But sentiment had no value when you couldn’t hold your house. Sergio feared he would have to leave. Lupita tried to find the big, round words to tell the children.