

BARRERAS

Mami called us away from the roach trap line,
where novice factory workers, some from the island,
and I, back from a year abroad, poked
protruding yellow chunks of roach bait
into black traps with Q-tips we dunked in alcohol.

Another safety meeting. My first.
El jefe de la factoría faced us
and heard nothing but the silence
of women hablando y bochinchando
in Tidy-Bowl blue uniforms. “Safety shoes should...
Factory goggles are.... Hairnets must....”

All the Spanish he knew could have fit
into one of those trampas, too little to translate
what Flora, Aida, and Teresa needed to know.
A heavy box fell and crushed a few of Flora’s
dedos del pie. Alcohol splashed into Aida’s ojos.
The uncovered motor yanked out one of Teresa’s trenzas.

I broke rank and stood. “If safety is first, then why
aren’t your updates translated into Spanish?”
That uniform blue shrank away from me,
from the nasal ring in my voice,
from esa lengua que suena as if I were chewing
papas calientes o mucho chicle.
For once, though, mami was proud of my English.

El jefe told me
I could have been promoted to the shampoo line.

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