

## Creative Nonfiction

In this issue of *Voices de la Luna* we begin publishing “*Fulfillment: Diary of an Amazonian Picker*” by Paul Juhasz. This work of creative nonfiction describes the author’s stint as a “picker” for Amazon. It is both hilarious and eye-opening: think *Catch-22* meets *The Jungle*. We hope you enjoy it!

Looking for the next installment of *Mo H Saidi’s The Marchers?* The whole novel is available online at [www.voicesdelaluna.org/marchers/](http://www.voicesdelaluna.org/marchers/).

### Fulfillment: Diary of an Amazonian Picker

Paul Juhasz

“Look here, Al, I’ll tell ya one thing—the jail house is jus’ a kind a way a drivin’ a guy slowly nuts. See? An’ they go nuts, an’ you see ‘em an’ hear ‘em, an’ pretty soon you don’ know if you’re nuts or not. When they get to screamin’ in the night sometimes you think it’s you doin’ the screamin’—an’ sometimes it is.”

—John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*

#### Introduction:

In George Lucas’s seminal sci-fi epic *Star Wars*, Obi-Wan Kenobi stands on a rugged cliff on the desert planet Tatooine. Beside him is his soon-to-be Jedi apprentice, Luke Skywalker. Below them lies the port city of Mos Eisley. Kenobi turns to Skywalker, gestures toward the city below, and declares, “You will never find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy.”

Obi-Wan has clearly never worked at an Amazon fulfillment center.

I, unfortunately, have.

In May 2013 the community college at which I was teaching accepted a grant from Wal-mart, the terms of which mandated how I was to conduct my freshman composition class. Assignments, course content, and lesson plans were now determined by the terms of the grant, not by me. Unwilling to accept these conditions, I quit. After a fruitless three-month job search, I decided that some income was better than no income and began a seven-month stint as a night-shift picker at an Amazon Fulfillment Center in Breinigsville, PA.

The Fulfillment Center is a massive building, stretching well over a standard city block. At either end are the Mods—each several football fields in area—consisting of three floors of rows of bins in which most of the products Amazon sells are stored. Throughout this expanse, pickers scurry about, 10–12 hours per shift, incessantly searching for purchased items. Constant motion is a requirement. Shift expectations are 1200+ picks, or a pick every 30 seconds. Each picker has a hand-held scanner that assigns a computer-generated pick path and counts down the time that same computer program has calculated is necessary to travel to and locate that pick. If you fail to hit this mark, the countdown on the scanner flashes red, the Process Assistant (P.A.) Managers are notified, and you are frequently called to account for your slow pace.

The standard minutiae of most Americans’ work days are absent here. Reflexive acts, like going to the bathroom when you wish, talking to co-workers, or tying one’s shoes, are risky. From management’s perspective, these deviations from one’s pick path are termed Time Off Task (TOT), and will eventually lead to a “Come to Jesus” summons from whichever P.A. is on duty. Because the computer program that calculates rate cannot predict how items will pack in a tote or when carts need to be offloaded onto the conveyors, pickers frequently get TOT for simply do-

ing their jobs. Pickers who do not “make rate”—that is, achieve 100% efficiency—are soon fired.

The products not stored in a Mod are kept in a netherworld known by pickers as Palletland. Here one typically finds new release books and DVDs, bulk items, and products—like food processors or gallon jugs of peanut oil—too large for Mod bins. Generally, pickers struggle in Palletland; fewer items fit into totes and there are no conveyor belts to rush product up to the Pack department. When totes are full, pickers must push the oversized, harder-to-maneuver, carts into the nearest section of the West Mod and offload there. Because of the nature of Palletland and its negative impact on rate, no picker is supposed to be assigned to Palletland for more than one quarter shift. This policy is rarely honored.

At the end of a normal shift, pickers have walked, non-stop, at least 15-18 miles each night. Physically exhausted, they must then go through metal detectors and security pat-downs before they are excused to go home. Most block schedules are for 4-5 consecutive days, so one’s body rarely has time to heal from one shift before the next one begins. As the physical toll on the body escalates, rate suffers, and unemployment usually follows. One P.A. brazenly characterized the situation thus: “There are so many people waiting to work here (for Amazon typically pays slightly more than surrounding industries), we’ll just use you guys up and when you’re spent, we’ll replace you.”

The working conditions, as one would expect with managerial views such as this, have become somewhat notorious. In the summer of 2011, the local newspaper in the Lehigh Valley broke the story of a wave of heat stroke among the employees. With temperatures frequently topping 110 degrees in the warehouse, management refused to open loading bay doors to allow air to circulate. Instead, they contracted with a local ambulance company to have a line of vehicles parked outside, waiting to haul overcome workers to local hospitals. It was only after OSHA enforcement that air conditioners were installed.

And this was the world I had just decided to enter. When I made this decision, I had unknowingly entered a tightly secured world that was part *Blade Runner*, part *Lord of the Flies*, and part *Monty Python*; a world of systemic exploitation, depersonalized cruelty, unimaginable bizarreness, and impossible people. While there, I keep a journal, either furtively scribbled in whenever I was far enough ahead of rate to be able to spare the time, or at home at the end of the shift. This journal is a testimony to the inconceivable weirdness that became my daily medium, to the casual exploitation of thousands of people, to the hidden costs of the instant gratification of free second-day shipping and the immediacy of consumer wish-fulfillment offered by a limitless virtual warehouse.

But mostly, since I quit a job where I was an overworked, fully exploited, dehumanized worker smothered by the incomprehensible dictates of an overreaching corporation, only to take a job where I was an overworked, fully exploited, dehumanized worker smothered by the incomprehensible dictates of an overreaching corporation, this journal is proof that I am not a very bright person.

#### Day 1:

I have, I fear, entered an odd, incongruous world.

This fact became apparent a few hours into the new employee