NONFICTION: "Hidden America," by Jeanne Marie Laskas

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"Nobody knows we're even here," says Joe Haworth, who retired a few years ago as an environmental engineer for the Puente Hills landfill, located on 1,365 acres about 16 miles east of Los Angeles. "People driving by on the highway think this is a park." They don't realize, author Jeanne Marie Laskas adds, that many, many dedicated professionals "have the preposterously complicated task" of making "all things sticky and gooey and gross" disappear.

In "Hidden America," Laskas, the director of writing at the University of Pittsburgh, takes us on the road -- to mines, migrant labor camps, gun shops, landfills, cattle ranches, oil rigs, air traffic control towers, truck stops and the pregame practices of the Cincinnati Ben-Gals cheerleaders -- to provide a richly detailed, revealing and often riveting account of workers who can be in plain sight, but remain invisible to us.

Like a skilled anthropologist, Laskas captures and conveys the complex (and sometimes contradictory) perceptions of workers. Forswearing overt political judgments, "Hidden America" humanizes its subjects and demonstrates that the men and women who make society function deserve our respect.

Even when the jobs seem dull, dirty or dangerous, Laskas' newfound friends (except for the air traffic controllers) indicate that they enjoy their work. Despite the extreme cold, isolation and distance from their families, Alaska oil riggers tell her that they are happy. And most of the men at the landfill, lifers who have worked their way up from paper pickers, play practical jokes (wrapping dead rats in tortilla shells and sharing the "lunch" with supervisors), like to crush cars with compactors and report feelings of pride, admiration and gratitude. "Why would anyone retire from a place like this?" one of them asks. "Why would you?"

Laskas gives these views their innings, but she seems skeptical. And so, some sadness -- and fatalism -- makes its way into "Hidden America." On the rig, Laskas can't help thinking about exhaustion, "surrendering to all that can never be," loneliness "so acute and thick," about "madness earned." TooDogs, who built the rig, she reveals, is eager to leave but not to go home, because Oooguruk Island is the only place where he feels safe and empowered. Against his better judgment, he takes a job in Pittsburgh, and on his first day as a manager, drops dead of a heart attack, at age 52.
Is Laskas trying to tell us, one wonders, that work and life, theirs and ours, is Sisyphean: that truckers keep hauling on America's interstates because it beats going back to the "real" world -- and that on the rig "the problems will continue, or not," there will always be another set of holes, "there is no finishing, never an ending."

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