

The Atlantic

Lora1 Strum <lstrum@theatlantic.com>

Searching for the American dream in a Kansas meatpacking plant

1 message

The Atlantic <newsletters@theatlantic.com>
Reply-To: subscriber-newsletters@theatlantic.com
To: lstrum@theatlantic.com

Sat, Jul 3, 2021 at 11:47 AM

The Atlantic

This is *The Atlantic's* weekly email to subscribers, a close look at the issues our newsroom is watching. As always, you can talk with us by replying directly to this email.

When I started to read Michael Holtz's story about **the six months he spent inside a Dodge City, Kansas, meatpacking plant**, I was stunned by his opening image of a steer, half-dead from an incident in the slaughter process. But Michael's firsthand account of life on the line moves beyond the gruesome. "In a state where cows outnumber people two to one ... and where many families—including mine, when my three sisters and I were younger—fill their deep freezer once a year with a side of beef, it's easy to take a steak dinner for granted," he writes, while opening a window into an industry responsible for so much of what Americans eat. He also offers heartfelt portraits of the people who do this work, and how they support one another in pursuit of their own versions of the American dream. I cheered on his coworkers—especially Billion, dubbed by another reader as "**a Goddam [sic] American hero.**"

I had to know more: How did a writer come to risk his life in a meatpacking plant at the height of the pandemic? What does it mean for such backbreaking work to become so routine?

— **Lora Strum**

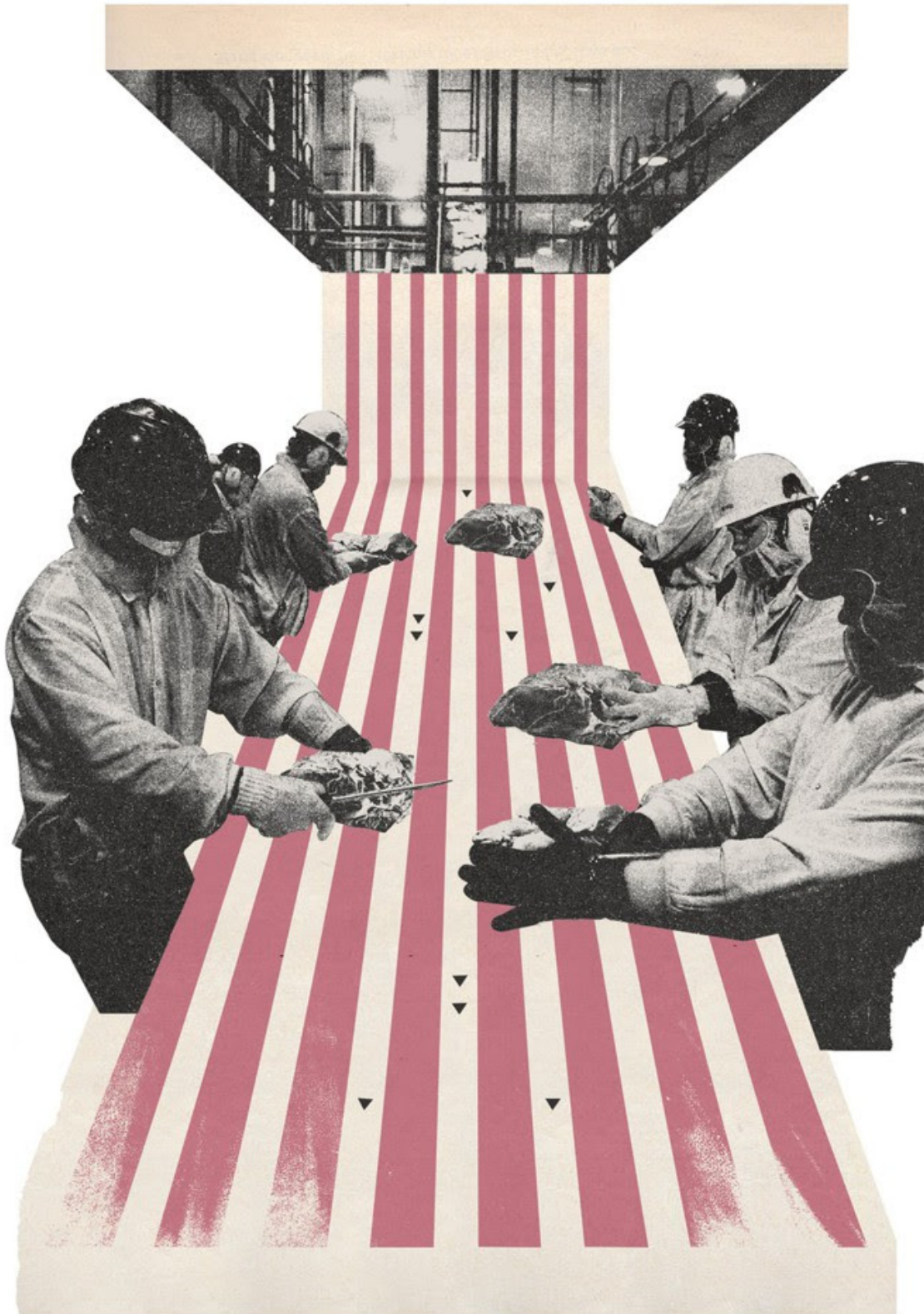


Illustration by Mark Harris; images by USDA Photo / Alamy; ItalianFoodProduction / Getty

This email interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

Lora Strum: Your co-workers didn't know you were a journalist and, at one point, one suspected you were an undercover boss. What brought you to this plant in the first place?

Michael Holtz: I was working on a story in India when the pandemic started and decided to fly home to Kansas in March of 2020. At the time, COVID-19 was **ravaging meatpacking plants** across the country. Many had become hotbeds for the coronavirus, and I became interested in figuring out why. I spent a few weeks trying to find workers to interview—mainly through Facebook—but many of them were too nervous to talk to me. That's when I decided to apply for a job at the Cargill plant in Dodge City. I wanted to see for myself what it was like.

Lora: What attracts someone to this job?

Michael: The same reason my maternal grandfather, the grandson of Irish immigrants, went to work at a slaughterhouse in the 1930s: to make enough money to support themselves and their families.

Lora: How did you choose which of your co-workers' stories to tell?

Michael: Billion [a supervisor at the plant] was an obvious choice. As I got to know him, I came to appreciate how thoughtful and hardworking he was. I also admired his resiliency. Here's a guy who grew up in a refugee camp and is now working 50 hours a week in a meatpacking plant halfway around the world.

What really caught my attention were the unspoken ways in which the people who work [in plants] preserve their dignity and their humanity. It was both inspiring and heartbreaking to witness.

Lora: There's a scene that takes place before the election was called, during which a Haitian-born co-worker flips off a cable-news report about Donald Trump. Was there a lot of political talk on the line?

Michael: One of the things that surprised me most about my time at the plant was the lack of collision between these two things. For [my co-workers], politics was something that happened far away, and was

out of their control. They had other, more immediate, more tangible concerns.

Lora: Some scenes about life in Dodge City were cut from the final piece. What did you do during your time away from the plant?

Michael: Some highlights include a gunfight reenactment at the Boot Hill Museum, a rodeo, and an expo hosted by the Wild West Republican Women's Club. Then there was the play I attended in the nearby town of Meade. It was a murder mystery. I used one of my two personal days so that I could go.

Read “Six Months Inside One of America’s Most Dangerous Industries,” from our July/August 2021 issue.

POPULAR WITH SUBSCRIBERS

1. [Inside William Barr’s Breakup With Trump](#), by Jonathan D. Karl
2. [The Left’s War on Gifted Kids](#), by David Frum
3. [The Senator Who Decided to Tell the Truth](#), by Tim Alberta
4. [A Grisly Skin Disease Is Creeping Into the American South](#), by Agostino Petroni and Undark
5. [Why No One Is Sure If Delta Is Deadlier](#), by Katherine J. Wu

Have a question about your print subscription? Email support@theatlantic.com.

Did you like this? Forward it and tell a friend to [subscribe to The Atlantic](#).

This email was sent to lstrum@theatlantic.com

You've signed up to receive newsletters from *The Atlantic*.

If you wish to unsubscribe *The Atlantic* newsletters, [click here](#).

To update your Atlantic Media email preferences, [click here](#).

7/1/22, 11:34 PM

Atlantic Media Mail - Searching for the American dream in a Kansas meatpacking plant

Atlantic Media · The Watergate · [600 New Hampshire Ave NW](#) · [Washington, DC 20037](#)