

Online Supplement to “The Fall of Washington,” *Notre Dame Review*
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I wrote this essay, “The Fall of Washington,” about sixteen months before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. In that time, Auden only seems to have grown more relevant, and some of his lines—

*Unendowed with wealth or pity,
Little birds with scarlet legs,
Sitting on their speckled eggs,
Eye each flu-infected city.*

—sound even more prescient. The truth is that neither I, nor anyone, could have anticipated that the American system would verge on collapsing in the coming months.

Recently, I lost a close friend, [Pat Ehrlicher](#), of Chicago, who largely raised me as a child, to COVID. Given that other countries, such as Vietnam, have a population larger than Chicago’s (about 35 times larger, in fact) and have yet to record a single fatality from COVID, I can’t escape the thought that Pat’s death, like nearly all of them in the United States, was preventable. One recent [study](#), in fact, determined that between 70% and 99% of all deaths in the U.S. could have been avoided with appropriate measures, including earlier lockdowns, as other countries imposed.

My belief is that elected officials, who are almost uniformly beholden to financial interests, made a conscious choice to value those interests above the lives of their constituents. That choosing continues. As I write, literally now, sirens whirl by my window in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and people continue to patronize bars, mostly without masks. I don’t think it’s an exaggeration to say that every politician who abetted or created these conditions is liable for murder. That includes the leaders of my state and, of course, the President, Donald Trump, almost all of whom have been [explicit](#) that financial interests trump lives. It’s hard to describe their thinking—and that of many others, as well—as anything but a cult of death, and one bent on remuneration at the expense of life.

This death cult takes on many forms. Another family acquaintance, a girl named [Kristina Golovchanskaya](#), who is seventeen months old, lives in Voronezh, Russia and suffers from spinal muscular atrophy. To survive, she needs a single-dose drug called Zolgensma, which costs \$2 million and is the world's [priciest drug](#).



For the drug to be effective, Kristina needs to take it before turning two on Jan. 29, 2021. My wife and I have repeatedly pleaded with the drug's manufacturer, AveXis, which is owned by the pharmaceutical giant Novartis, to grant her free or affordable access. They have refused. They said that she could apply for enrollment in a global access program, which is determined through a lottery and, to our knowledge, has not selected a single applicant from Russia (AveXis disputes this, though they refuse to disclose how many Russians have been selected). The AveXis representative also implied that I should be grateful they offer such a lottery. Alternately, she told me, we could pay for the drug ourselves at a cost of \$2.2 million. In short, this multinational corporation, whose CEO, Vasant Narasimhan, earned a [reported](#) \$11.4 million in salary last year, has chosen to ransom this one-year-old's life and will in all likelihood murder her for the sake of maintaining its global revenue.

*Who can reach the deaf,
Who can speak for the dumb?*

*All I have is a voice
To undo the folded lie...*

Auden writes in [September 1, 1939](#). I would like to tell the representative from AveXis, who is herself probably tenuously employed, that lotterying human lives so that the corporation can grow richer is not an act of human kindness, just as I would like to tell the millions who voted for Mississippi's leaders and for Donald Trump that these leaders have forsaken their lives. But I wonder who would listen and what worth, as Auden asks, is a voice.

Note: If you would like to help save Kristina's life, please visit our [webpage](#) and consider donating so that she can purchase the lifesaving medicine.