

A REPORTER AT LARGE

BACK TO THE JUNGLE

Trump is helping a meat-processing titan leverage the pandemic to strip workers of protections.

BY JANE MAYER

On June 22nd, in the baking heat of a parking lot a few miles inland from Delaware's beaches, several dozen poultry workers, many of them Black or Latino, gathered to decry the conditions at a local poultry plant owned by one of President Donald Trump's biggest campaign contributors. "We're here for a reason that is atrocious," Nelson Hill, an official with the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union, told the small but boisterous crowd, which included top Democratic officials from the state, among them Senator Chris Coons. The union, part of the A.F.L.-C.I.O., represents some 1.3 million laborers in poultry-processing and meatpacking plants, as well as workers in grocery stores and retail establishments. Its members, many defined as "essential" workers—without the option of staying home—have been hit extraordinarily hard by the coronavirus. The union estimates that nearly thirty thousand of its workers in the food and health-care sectors have contracted COVID-19, and that two hundred and thirty-eight of those have died.

For the previous forty-two years, a thousand or so laborers at the local processing plant, in Selbyville, had been represented by Local 27. Just two years earlier, the workers there had ratified a new five-year contract. But, Hill told the crowd, in the middle of the pandemic, as the number of infected workers soared, the plant's owner, Mountaire Corporation—one of the country's largest purveyors of chicken—conspired, along with Donald Trump, to "kick us out."

Hill, who is Black and from a working-class family on the Delmarva Peninsula—a scrubby stretch of farmland that includes parts of Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia—was used to the area's heat and humidity. But, as he spoke to the crowd, behind dark glasses, his face

glistened with anger. "It's greed, that's what it is," he said. "It's a damn shame."

The jobs at Mountaire rank as among the most dangerous and worst paid in America. Government statistics indicate that poultry and meat-processing companies report more severe injuries than other industries commonly assumed to be more hazardous, including coal mining and sawmilling. Between 2015 and 2018, on average, a slaughterhouse worker lost a body part, or went to the hospital for in-patient treatment, about every other day. Unlike meatpackers, two-thirds of whom belong to unions, only about a third of poultry workers are represented by organized labor—and those who are unionized face mounting pressure. The industry, which is dominated by large multinational corporations such as Mountaire, has grown increasingly concentrated, expanding its political influence while replacing unionized employees with contract hires, often immigrants or refugees. These vulnerable workers are technically hired by temp agencies, relieving poultry plants of accountability if documentation is lacking. Trump has weakened federal oversight of the industry while accepting millions of dollars in political donations from some of its most powerful figures, including Ronald Cameron, Mountaire's reclusive owner. In 2016, Cameron gave nearly three million dollars to organizations supporting Trump's candidacy.

Founded in Little Rock, Arkansas, but incorporated in Delaware, Mountaire has operations in five states. It reportedly generated more than \$2.3 billion in revenue last year. Because it is owned almost entirely by Cameron—and because it supplies poultry to other companies that put their own labels on the meat—the company's public profile is virtually nonexistent. Cameron himself has received almost no media attention. "I've tried mightily over the

years to bump into him, but he lays low," Max Brantley, a longtime editor at the *Arkansas Times*, told me. According to trade journals, however, Mountaire has been spectacularly successful. *Arkansas Business* reported that the company's sales in 2019 were a billion dollars higher than they were in 2010, nearly doubling the size of the business. Information on profits isn't available, but as Mountaire's revenues have risen wages for poultry workers have fallen even further behind. In 2002, workers were paid twenty-four per cent less than the national average for manufacturing jobs; today, they are paid forty-four per cent less. On average, poultry workers now earn less than fourteen dollars an hour.

By long-standing custom, labor contracts are binding for at least three years, giving a union time to prove its value to members. But in April a laborer at the Selbyville plant, Oscar Cruz Sosa, raised a legal objection to the contract, arguing that he'd been forced to join the union and pay dues against his will. He wanted a vote on whether to decertify the union. Mountaire maintains that it played no role in Cruz Sosa's actions, and that the move to decertify the union was "entirely employee-driven." But Cruz Sosa has had some outside help. His case was supported by lawyers from the National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation, the foremost anti-union advocacy group, which is funded by undisclosed tax-deductible donations. Meanwhile, a mysterious group calling itself the Oscar Cruz Committee for Employee Rights sent out mailings, in English, supporting Cruz Sosa's complaint. (Cruz Sosa speaks only Spanish.) The return address was the Rehoboth Beach branch of MailBiz, which rents post-office boxes.

Jonathan Williams, a spokesperson for the union, suspects that Cruz Sosa was a stalking horse. "It's not hard to



Ronald Cameron, the head of Mountaire, which critics call a “brutal” employer, is one of Trump’s top donors.

find one individual, who may get special privileges from management, and who maybe is offered a future position," he told me. "It's very, very rare, though, when an employee does the research, contacts the Department of Labor, and goes through all this effort. Usually, someone is being coached." (Cruz Sosa didn't respond to interview requests.)

When the union reached out to Cruz Sosa, his lawyers filed a grievance with the National Labor Relations Board, claiming harassment. The specific legal dispute is abstruse. Mark Mix, the president of the National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation, has called the contract's language "illegal," claiming that it didn't make sufficiently clear that—as stipulated by law—new employees had thirty days to decide whether to join the union. The union argues that applications presented to new employees are unambiguous about the time frame, and says that the current contract has virtually the same boilerplate used in every contract with Mountaire since 1982.

After Cruz Sosa got thirty per cent of his co-workers to sign a petition, the National Labor Relations Board ordered an election at the Selbyville plant. When the union protested that this would vi-

olate the customary bar on overturning contracts before three years, the N.L.R.B. decided to broaden the case, reexamining the entire concept of barring challenges to settled union contracts. The move has shocked labor-law experts. By statute, the N.L.R.B. has five members and is bipartisan, but the Trump Administration has filled only three seats, all with Republicans.

Given the pandemic, the union argued that there was no way an in-person election could be safely and fairly held in Sussex County, where Selbyville is situated. Delaware's governor had declared a state of emergency on March 23rd, because of the surge in COVID-19 cases, almost half of them in Sussex County, which has many poultry plants. The union asked for a stay, but on June 24th the N.L.R.B. moved to proceed with the election, by mail. The ballots that were sent out must be received by July 14th. Meanwhile, the board will weigh the larger question of whether such elections are legal, potentially overturning a precedent that dates back to the New Deal.

"We're really being let down by the federal agencies," Williams, the union spokesperson, said. He also lamented a shift at the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the division of

the Labor Department that enforces workplace safety. Since OSHA's inception, in 1970, the agency has enforced federal law that makes it illegal to subject employees to "recognized hazards." But during the pandemic the *Times* editorial board has been prompted to ask, "Why is OSHA AWOL?" Democrats pushed for the agency to issue an emergency rule forcing businesses to comply with the Centers for Disease Control's health guidelines for COVID-19, but the Labor Department refused.

Instead, on April 28th, forty-eight hours after Tyson Foods, the world's second-largest meat company, ran a full-page ad in several newspapers warning that "the food supply chain is breaking," Trump issued an executive order defining slaughterhouse workers as essential. The White House had appointed Cameron to an advisory board on the pandemic's economic impact. The executive order commanded meat-processing facilities to "continue operations uninterrupted to the extent possible." The Labor Department released an accompanying statement that all but indemnified companies for exposing workers to COVID-19. It assured employers in essential industries that the agency wouldn't hold them responsible if they failed to follow the C.D.C.'s health guidelines, as long as they made a "good faith" effort.

Meat and poultry workers had to keep working and risk infection—or lose their jobs. By July 7th, OSHA had received more than six thousand coronavirus-related workplace complaints but had issued only one citation, to a nursing home in Georgia. David Michaels, a professor of public health at George Washington University, who headed OSHA during the Obama Administration, told me that the agency was "saying that the Labor Department would side with the employers if workers sued," and added, "That would be unthinkable in any other Administration. OSHA's job isn't to protect corporations—it's to protect workers!"

The prospect of food shortages understandably caused concern in the White House. Yet reports show that in April, as Tyson and other producers were warning that "millions of pounds of meat will disappear" from American stores if they had to shut



"Can I get my badge now?"

down, exports of pork to China broke records—and Mountaire's chicken exports were 3.4 per cent higher than they were a year earlier. The next month, the company's exports were 10.9 per cent lower than in 2019, but its exports to China and Hong Kong grew by 23.1 per cent in April and by fourteen per cent in May, according to statistics provided by Christopher Rogers, an analyst with Panjiva, which tracks the food-supply chain. Tony Corbo, a lobbyist for Food and Water Watch, a progressive nonprofit advocacy group, said, "They were crying about shortages, and yet we're still exporting meat. The shortage was phony."

Meanwhile, coronavirus cases exploded in the meat-and-poultry industry. Initially, Mountaire released statistics about employee infections. At the end of March, the company told the union that there had been forty-one cases in Selbyville. However, Hill's shop steward, Manuel Rosales, told him not to trust this number. "Half the plant isn't there," he explained, either because the workers were sick or because they feared becoming so. A month later, a television station in North Carolina reported that a Mountaire plant, in Siler City, which employs some sixteen hundred workers, had at least seventy-four positive cases among workers and their families. After that, the company stopped sharing its COVID-19 numbers. Mountaire became so secretive, Hill said, that workers "were seeing people disappear, and they didn't know *what* the hell was going on." In many cases, a "co-worker had tested positive, but the company wouldn't tell anyone." Rosales, who works in the deboning department at the Selbyville plant, told me, "People are coughing and they don't look well, but they just want to keep the chicken coming. It's all hush-hush."

Cathy Bassett, the communications director for Mountaire Farms of Delaware, confirmed, "We're not releasing any numbers," adding, "I don't even know those numbers. We've told our workers that if you've been exposed we'll notify you." According to Hill, the company argued to the union that it was protecting employee privacy. "They were hiding behind it," Hill told me. "We weren't asking for private health information—we were just trying to report the numbers."

Corbo said that, after "the President said these plants had to stay open," the meat and poultry companies "clammed up." Trump's executive order was interpreted as superseding state and local health departments. In a private conversation with the union, Delaware's governor, John Carney, a Democrat, admitted that he had wanted universal testing in the plants, and had considered ordering them shut, but felt "hand-cuffed" by Trump's order. The result has been an extraordinary blackout of public-health information. "I can look online and find the number of COVID-19 cases in nursing homes," Corbo said. "But not in the poultry industry. If you walk into a poultry plant, you don't know whether the person next to you has got it. It's unconscionable."

The union also maintains that Mountaire charged employees for the protective equipment necessary for them to work safely. The company denies this: Bassett told me that Mountaire has distributed cloth masks to workers, although not N95 masks, and, "where possible," has erected Plexiglas shields between employees, along with instituting daily body-temperature checks. But Williams, the union spokesperson, sent me a screenshot of a Mountaire paycheck stub that shows deductions for "plant supplies." Williams said that the supplies in question were "gloves and aprons and such," adding that deductions like these were illegal. At the rally, Hill protested that, if Mountaire's owner could afford to give "two or three million dollars—or whatever it was he gave—to Trump, they shouldn't be stealing money from workers' paychecks." Noting that Cameron is "Trump's buddy," Hill added, "I guess they feel like they can do whatever they want."

The union's struggles with the Labor Department are part of a much larger reversal of federal protections for workers, consumers, and the environment under Trump. In 2016, the President promised to "dismantle the regulatory state," as Stephen Bannon, his former White House strategist, often put it. Given the complexities of fed-

eral rulemaking, this proved somewhat difficult in the first three years of the Administration. But the pandemic has offered Trump an opportunity: now that he can invoke an economic emergency, he can relax, rescind, or suspend federal regulations by fiat. In May and June, Trump issued a pair of executive orders directing national agencies to

ignore federal regulations and environmental laws if they burdened the economy—again, in many instances, the companies were told that they just had to act "in good faith." As the *Times* and the *Washington Post* have reported, these moves have weakened regulations on all kinds of businesses, from trucking

companies to oil and gas pipelines. In Corbo's view, many in the media have missed one of the biggest aspects of the COVID-19 story. "Everyone is looking at the shiny object—the pandemic," he said. "Meanwhile, the government is deregulating *everything*. It's unreal."

In April, for instance, the United States Department of Agriculture granted fifteen waivers to poultry plants, including a Mountaire facility in North Carolina, authorizing them to increase the number of birds per minute—or B.P.M.—that workers must process. The waivers enabled companies to accelerate the pace from a hundred and forty B.P.M. to a hundred and seventy-five. Angela Stuesse, an anthropologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who has studied the poultry industry, told me that, in the chicken business, "you make pennies on a pound." Among the few ways to increase profits are squeezing labor costs and accelerating line speeds, which are set by the U.S.D.A. to accommodate federal inspectors, who are supposed to assess every bird. The regulations have long been a point of contention between poultry-plant owners and unions, because as the line speed increases so do injuries and other stresses on workers' bodies. "They move the birds so fast, you have to be really close together to get every bird," Williams, the union spokesperson, told me. "It's like the 'I Love Lucy' episode at the chocolate factory." Even though the C.D.C. has





emphasized that social distancing is necessary to maintain safety, faster production lines require more workers, who must then squeeze closer together. In many areas of a plant, poultry workers already stand two feet apart at most, often facing one another. Nonetheless, the U.S.D.A. has now indicated that it plans to permit faster line speeds throughout the poultry industry. The National Chicken Council, the industry's trade group, had lobbied for precisely this change. Williams fears that "these policies will result in the deaths of many more workers."

Debbie Berkowitz, a program director at the National Employment Law Project, a pro-labor group, who previously headed the health-and-safety division of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, told me that, thanks to the pandemic, "the Chamber of Commerce is getting everything they always wanted." An analysis of public records by her group found that, of the fifteen poultry plants granted waivers to increase line speeds in April, eight had COVID-19 outbreaks at the time. "If you're a worker in a plant bursting with COVID-19, it's a shitshow for you," Berkowitz said. "The industry is getting away with murdering people."

Michaels, the former OSHA head, told me, "We're very much back in Upton Sinclair's 'The Jungle'—the

1906 novel that exposed abuses in the meat industry. The book so shocked Americans that President Theodore Roosevelt ordered an immediate investigation of slaughterhouses. The result was landmark consumer-protection legislation that formed the foundation of today's Food and Drug Administration. But, for the past four decades, wealthy donors to the Republican Party have pushed hard for the dismantling of Progressive Era reforms and later curbs on corporate power. The 1980 platform of the Libertarian Party, which was underwritten by the billionaire conservative donors Charles and David Koch, laid out a road map, calling for the abolition of almost every federal agency, including the F.D.A. Although Trump claims to be a defender of the working class, he has delighted wealthy donors—and their pressure groups, such as the Club for Growth—by reliably serving their agenda. Michaels told me, "Mountaire and others are taking advantage of the COVID-19 crisis to say, 'We need more chickens.' The Trump Administration is aiding and abetting this. They're saying, 'Produce more food,' regardless of the cost to workers. If companies cared as much about their workers as they do about their chickens, we'd be a better country."

The union rally in Delaware wrapped up with a surprisingly impassioned endorsement from Chris Coons—ordi-

narily a moderate in the Senate and a booster of the state's poultry industry. Coons, who studied at Yale's divinity school while getting a law degree there, later told me that supporting the union had become a moral imperative. Addressing the rally, he explained that the labor showdown had brought to a head three crises: "We've got a pandemic that's already taken more than a hundred and twenty thousand American lives. We've got a recession that's already knocked forty million people out of work. And we've got a nation where millions of people have taken to the streets in the month after George Floyd was murdered by a police officer." Coons concluded, "All three of those come together in this moment, in this vote tomorrow, because the plants of the Delaware poultry industry only work because of Black and brown workers, and they only have safe conditions because of organized labor."

As the temperature in the parking lot climbed into the nineties, the rally dispersed. The participants drove in a convoy to the Selbyville plant, in a show of support for the upcoming vote. The facility is a hulking mass of industrial tanks and largely windowless buildings crisscrossed by a maze of metal pipes and ventilation shafts. Surrounded by concrete barriers and chain-link fences, the complex has the feel of a prison.

A few miles away, at the Oasis truck stop, I met with an employee from the Selbyville plant. A feisty mother with three kids still at home, she explained, with a laugh, that she had put on her "Tina Turner wig" for the occasion.

She had worked in Mountaire's chicken plant, off and on, for years, after attending a local high school. Although she and her co-workers had felt frightened as more and more colleagues disappeared after contracting COVID-19, she was grateful to the pandemic for one thing. "I've wanted to speak out for so long—I thank God that this pandemic happened, so that my voice can be heard," she told me. "It's terrible in there. I want these people exposed."

She asked to speak anonymously, because she feared retribution both from Mountaire and from local racists, who, she said, seemed more aggressive re-

cently toward African-Americans like her; when out shopping, she had noticed more Confederate-flag paraphernalia on public display. But she was eager to describe working conditions so exploitative that, as she put it, “it’s slavery, baby.”

Typically, her shift begins at 8:18 A.M. and lasts until 4:54 P.M. Since her youngest child is still a toddler, she works less than full time. As a result, she has lost her seniority, and gets only one week of vacation a year; workers don’t get two weeks until they’ve been employed for four full years. “You know what they give us for Christmas?” she said. “You think I *ever* got a bonus since working there? They give us two whole chickens and a bag of potatoes. Every year, that’s all we get.” She was paid about thirteen dollars an hour until the pandemic hit. Mountaire then instituted a hazard-pay raise of a dollar an hour, but in June the raise was cancelled. Even local convenience stores, she noted, gave workers a three-dollar-an-hour raise. “And then Mountaire took it back!” she said, shaking her head. “Why are they giving us a one-dollar raise and giving two *million* dollars to Donald Trump? What are we, animals?”

She works in the refrigerated side of the plant, handling eviscerated carcasses. The temperature, she said, is so cold that “it’s unbearable.” Although she is under fifty, she said that she already has arthritis. “Listen, girl,” she said. “My body *hurts* from that place. My hands. The cold air. Imagine you got to put your hands on that cold meat. I mean, sometimes it’s so cold I have to go home.”

She and other workers complained that, even before the coronavirus struck, their respiratory systems had suffered from inhaling harsh antimicrobial chemicals, such as peracetic acid, that are used to protect chicken from contamination. When she walks through some parts of the plant, “I hold my breath,” she told me.

When the pandemic hit, she said, “a lot of people died.” She wasn’t sure how many fatalities there had been, because her bosses were “not talking about it.” One co-worker she considered a friend—an elderly man named Hyung Lee, who was known as Pop Pop—disappeared. “Everything was hush-hush,”

she said. “It was just ‘Go in there and do your work.’” Eventually, Lee’s son called to say that Lee had died from pneumonia brought on by COVID-19, and that Lee’s wife was now “fighting for her life.”

The employee said of Lee, “God, it took him out. I’m hurt. I cried my ass off.” But management was silent. “You think the owner cares about people dying in that hell?” she said. “No! You think they posted *one picture* of a person who died, in memory of somebody? Nothing. Not one picture.” A co-worker confirmed this account and added, “They didn’t even take up a collection for the family.”

Soon afterward, the employee said, she warned her supervisor that another friend at the plant, an émigré from Guatemala, seemed sick. The supervisor sent the woman to see the company nurse. The employee told me, “The nurse sent her right back on the God-damned line to work. The nurses aren’t worth shit in there.”

The Guatemalan woman eventually stopped showing up for work. One day, one of her four sons called and said that his mother was sick with COVID-19 and

was on a ventilator. “That woman worked *right by me!*” the employee told me. “I prayed for her.” The Guatemalan woman recovered, but vowed not to return to Mountaire. The employee told me, “It’s an evil company.”

According to the *Washington Post*, in April and May at least twenty-two hundred poultry workers on the Delmarva Peninsula contracted COVID-19, and at least seventeen died. Delaware health officials began testing workers outside poultry plants, and at one plant thirty per cent of the results were positive. The paper reported that one infected Mountaire worker, in an effort to protect her family, tried to quarantine herself for two weeks in a windowless bathroom, sleeping on a foam mat. After the company provided two weeks of partial sick pay, it paid her nothing during the additional month it took her to recover. At the Oasis truck stop, the employee said of Mountaire, “They have all these signs that say stuff like ‘In God We Trust.’ But how, in a pandemic, can you treat people like this?”

Bassett, the Mountaire spokesperson, said, “This has really been a challenge for everyone. We tried to follow



“Oh, good! You’re moving out!”

the C.D.C. guidelines, but they changed." At first, the C.D.C. had advised that anybody exposed to the virus should quarantine for two weeks. But, Bassett said, "at some point the C.D.C. realized essential workers were being sent home for fourteen days." Williams alleges that the C.D.C. rolled back its recommendation "after interventions from lobbyists and Trump." As Bassett acknowledges, employees were henceforth permitted to quarantine only "if they were symptomatic."

In a filing to the N.L.R.B., Mountaire conceded that it did not conduct its first plant-wide testing in Selbyville until May 27th. Thirty-four workers, it says, tested positive, and none were symptomatic—underlining the inadequacy of sending home only people with symptoms. Another surge appears to be coming: in late June, word spread through the Selbyville plant that fifteen more workers had been sent home because of the virus.

Bassett emphasized that, when the pandemic hit, Mountaire began offering paid sick leave even to contract workers, who ordinarily got none. The company also temporarily suspended a point system, detested by employees, that penalized them for missing work. "Managers in our plants have good relationships with our workers," Bassett said, adding, "We are blessed, because there is medical care on the premises."

The employee I met at the truck stop scoffed at this notion. She said that Mountaire had offered workers just five days of paid sick leave, and only at sixty per cent of their regular pay. Sick employees, she noted, couldn't afford to stay home on such reduced wages: "People have to feed their families." She paused. "It's miserable," she said. "The struggle's real, but I'm thankful for what I've got. I wish I could have a whole lot more. But I'm thankful."

She and her husband, who is self-employed, can't afford the health-care plan offered by Mountaire. They rely on Medicaid, and on food stamps. Moreover, the quality of the company's on-site medical care, she said, is poor—an opinion validated by OSHA, which, in December, 2016, levied a forty-thousand-dollar fine against Mountaire, which was partly for medical mismanagement. (Mountaire contested the

THE FIELD

Two people are asleep in a field.
The light is not yet up. The air is cold, even though it is summer.
I cannot get closer than where I am. I know only so much about them. I know they are not dead.
I know they are asleep because one of them has moved, just enough to show it is a movement you make in sleep, an adjustment of resting weight. I don't know if it is romantic that they are in this field. Or if it is drunkenness or despair.
From this distance their clothes are black.
They are two men, or a man and a woman, or two women. I am not near enough to learn what their bodies are, or how proximate or distant from each other.
It is the corner of my eye that has seen them, walking quickly past. It is a corner of my mind that has seen them, a startled glance, then that glance widening.
They have no belongings, no things that speak of displacement.
The field is askew with untended grass, except where they have flattened it. Have they been here the full length of the night, or just the previous hour?
Who are they for whom the grass is a bed? Who are those others, elsewhere, sleeping in the open back of a truck,

citations but eventually settled.) OSHA launched an inspection of the company after the tip of a worker's thumb was amputated. A second employee, it emerged, had also injured a thumb, and had asked to visit an emergency room; the doctor provided by the company's health plan sent him back to work. A week later, a hospital X-ray revealed an open fracture.

At the time, Mountaire had a licensed practical nurse offering first aid, in what the company calls its "medical department." The nurse had claimed to be making treatment decisions under the direction of a local doctor. But, when OSHA inspectors contacted the doctor, he said that he didn't work for the company, and had never set foot in the plant. "There was no clinical oversight," Kathleen Fagan, a retired physician with OSHA's medical unit, told me, after reviewing an internal report. The nurse's responsibility included keeping a log of worker injuries, as required by federal law, but OSHA found that workers were discouraged from complaining, and were unfairly accused of lying about health problems—likely in an effort by the company to avoid reporting injuries.

At the Oasis truck stop, the Mount-

aire employee told me that she was "praying for Local 27." She suspected that the company wanted to replace the union employees with contract workers, many of whom, she said, were "illegal, temp-agency" hires who came from other countries. She understood why such immigrants took the jobs, but the terms of employment were "highway robbery." She said, "Mountaire gives them less—no sick pay, no vacation. They can terminate you. *That's* what they want."

Before the employee drove off, she noted, "I've never seen the owner, long as I've been working at that company. I don't even know the owner's name. I just know that Little Rock is where the big headquarters is." She said she'd heard that the owner was "doing business with Donald Trump." She had a question: "How rich is Mountaire? They're rich, aren't they?"

The house in Little Rock where Ronald Cameron grew up was perched high on the best street in town, Edgehill Road. The road was dyed pink—nobody recalls why—but it might as well have been painted gold. The Cameron family, who owned an animal-feed business, had a house with two-story

or on the ground behind a guarded fence?
 I am walking in the countryside, so maybe they are people of myth.
 Or they are people of a labor I know nothing about.
 There are birds singing to the dawn. There is the sound
 of a big wheel rolling somewhere. There are trees,
 as tall as parents, but they have not slept under them.
 In the dark, alone, I went out to see the turn toward morning.
 Then I saw them. What the imagination would do with two people
 sleeping in a field is keep them where they are,
 unknowable, untouched. The imagination also wants them
 to stir, to wake them back into their stories.
 The day will be hot. The smell of yesterday's heat
 is still in the air, like the sweat of a body. What would bring me
 to a field in the night and have me sleep there?
 Whose hand would I be holding, out of desire or fear?
 My pants' hems are heavy with dew. I know how far away
 I am from everyone. Am I a child again, am I old?
 Or am I only who I am now, astounded at the transport of the body
 from one end of time to another.

—Rick Barot

pillars out front, and a porte cochère over which two Black servants lived. One was the cook, Lucille, who delighted the four Cameron children with her homemade chocolate pies; her brother, Robert, worked as the butler. When the Camerons spent summer weekends at a lake house, in Hot Springs, Lucille and Robert often accompanied them. A family friend remembers her squeezing fresh orange juice for breakfast, “just spoiling us.”

Ronnie Cameron, as he is still known today, was born in 1945, and was his parents' only son. His sister Amanda, who is five years older, told me, “My father was a very generous man. He always made sure I had everything. But the minute my brother was born—it was the South, he was the son—he was raised, reinforced, and groomed better. It was hard for me.” She said of her brother, “He was almost worshipped. He was raised to be the prince.”

The feed company, which later became Mountaire, had been founded in Arkansas in 1914 by Ronnie's grandfather, Guy Cameron. Guy's son, G. Ted Cameron, who took over in 1948, began not just supplying but also buying up chicken farms.

By the time her father was running

the firm, Amanda said, many of the workers were Black. She says that her father taught his children to show respect to everyone, but she acknowledges that racism was prevalent. In 1957, the governor of Arkansas deployed the National Guard to Little Rock, in an attempt to block nine Black students from integrating Little Rock Central High School. That year, Amanda's parents sent her to a new public high school on the wealthier side of town. Amanda recalls the choral instructor teaching that “Black people could never pronounce the English language properly, because of the construction of their mouths.” At the time, this didn't faze her: “I was a typical convertible-driving, self-centered debutante, whizzing through life.” It wasn't until she read James Baldwin, and married and moved away, that she realized how bigoted her upbringing had been and rebelled against the family.

After living in San Francisco, divorcing, and growing disenchanted with the counterculture, Amanda returned to her family's conservative roots. She said of her brother, “We have a horrible relationship, but I love him.” She added, “I support Trump, and am thrilled my brother is doing what he's doing.” Trump,

she believes, is the only thing standing between America and communism.

Ronnie Cameron followed a more conventional path. Blond, handsome, and well mannered, he left a good impression on schoolmates, but he, too, had a defiant streak. According to one of his best friends in high school, Bobby Duffy, who later became the culture editor of the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, Cameron was given a Ford Falcon at a young age, and was a “very reckless driver.” Duffy said, “It was white knuckles all the way—and if you told him to slow down he'd go even faster. Just like Trump, when challenged he'd double down.”

Cameron's father was a Republican, and by the time Ronnie enrolled in college, at the University of Arkansas, he was one, too. Patrick Hays, who joined the same fraternity as Cameron a few years later, eventually became the mayor of North Little Rock; he recalls Cameron telling him that he was the only Democrat to whom he'd contribute, because the mayor dealt with mundane issues, such as collecting garbage. The Cameron family was firmly anti-union, a sentiment that was evident in a telegram that Ronnie's father sent to President Lyndon Johnson in 1968—the year that Ronnie joined the family business. In the telegram, his father asked the President to intervene in a railroad strike, warning that it could ruin the Arkansas poultry industry. The strike, which lasted for five days, was settled the day after the telegram was sent, but the battle lines were drawn.

Arkansas had an ugly, racist history with organized labor. In 1944, legislators had proposed a so-called “right to work” amendment to the state constitution, which would prohibit making union membership or paying union dues a condition of employment. The Arkansas Farm Bureau Federation had pushed for the change, in alliance with a group calling itself the Christian American Association, which warned that unless the amendment passed “white women and white men will be forced into organizations with black African apes . . . whom they will have to call ‘brother’ or lose their jobs.” A similar drive in California failed that year, but in Arkansas, where Jim Crow laws and other forms of voting-rights

discrimination disenfranchised many Black citizens, the amendment passed, insuring that poultry workers, and other low-wage workers, would have little bargaining power. North Carolina, where Mountaire has two poultry-processing plants, is also a right-to-work state; Selbyville is the only location where the company has a slaughter plant at which workers have organized.

Mountaire prospered under Ted Cameron, but Amanda told me that he was an alcoholic, which “was hard on everyone, but especially Ronnie.” In 1978, five years after Ronnie succeeded his father as president, Ted was found dead, in his swimming pool. “Either a person succumbs to those hard family things or rises,” Amanda told me. “I think it made Ronnie a more private person.” She added, “Ronnie’s a tough cookie. He’s seen weaknesses in people, and just toughened up.”

Pratt Rimmel, who grew up down the street from the Camerons, recalls Amanda telling him bitterly, as an adult, that her brother “was in control of the family money.” She told me that it had been her choice “not to be part of it anymore.” Yet, she added, “the company was *given* to Ronnie.” The division of Mountaire’s shares isn’t public, and messages to its corporate headquarters went

unanswered. A. Larry Ross, who is a spokesperson for evangelical leaders, and who travels in Ronnie Cameron’s social circle, forwarded my request for an interview, but there was no reply. A well-informed source said that, in the past, Cameron had held at least sixty-nine per cent of Mountaire’s shares. The company’s other shareholders are believed to include a few top executives and family members. Cameron’s son-in-law Kevin Garland is Mountaire’s C.E.O.

Cameron has been married three times. According to Amanda, his first marriage, which started when he was quite young, didn’t last long. He then married a former Breck Girl model, Sherrill Heerwagen. Duffy told me that Heerwagen, with whom Cameron had two children, learned that he was divorcing her only after her mother-in-law read about it in the local paper. (Heerwagen died in 2018.) Cameron’s current wife, Nina, is the daughter of a fundamentalist preacher and, according to Amanda, is “very Biblically based.” Nina once appeared on a Christian program, describing her effort to convert an anti-religious patient in a nursing home. After Nina sensed a “prompting of the Holy Spirit,” she flew the woman’s son in to visit, and it melted the woman’s resistance to read-

ing the Bible. “She was seeing Christ in me,” Nina said. Cameron was raised an Episcopalian, but he and his wife now attend one of Little Rock’s biggest evangelical churches, Fellowship Bible. A hub of social conservatism, it lists condemnation of homosexuality as among its key beliefs, stating on its Web site that “Adam and Eve were made to complement each other in a one-flesh union that establishes the only normative pattern of sexual relations for men and women.”

Six years ago, Duffy told me, he ran into Cameron at a memorial service. They hadn’t seen each other in years, but, because they had been close in school, Duffy felt that he could speak openly about his life. “You know I’m gay, don’t you?” he said.

“Yes,” Cameron replied. “And I also know you’re going to Hell.” He turned his back and walked away.

“I was stunned,” Duffy told me. “I think he became very devout, and then, at some point, the devotion went to the right.”

Mountaire’s official creed says, “Good stewards of all the assets that God has entrusted to us.” Cameron increasingly began using his share of the company’s assets to influence American policy and politics by funding socially conservative and business-friendly candidates and advocacy groups. Low-level poultry workers have been described as cogs in a perpetual-motion machine, but big-donor politics can also be a kind of perpetual-motion machine—one that recycles profits to perpetuate profits.

By 2001, Cameron had extended his sphere of influence beyond Arkansas by becoming a director of one of the Washington area’s most secretive and best-connected religious organizations: the Fellowship Foundation, also known as the Family. Its public face is as the presenter of the annual National Prayer Breakfast, but it has also courted influential converts by offering dormitory-like housing for members of Congress in a mansion near the Capitol, and by hosting prayer sessions for V.I.P.s at another mansion, in northern Virginia. The Fellowship Foundation has purported to be politically neutral, but it was launched, in 1935, by a Seattle min-



ister, Abraham Vereide, who viewed the historic labor strikes spreading across the West Coast that year as satanic. At prayer breakfasts, Vereide helped mobilize powerful business leaders to crush the insurrection.

Defenders of the Fellowship Foundation argue that it does good by disseminating the teachings of Christ to those in a position to make a difference. But critics such as Jeff Sharlet, a journalist who has written two books about the group, see its blurring of church and state as a threat to democracy. Cameron has long been a major funder of the group, typifying what Sharlet sees as its conflation of big business and Christian nationalism. After Cameron, in 2009, retired from the board, another Mountaire executive, W. Dabbs Cavin, became the group's president, serving until 2016.

"It's like the Dead Poets Society—a club no one knows about that is vital to its participants," Eric Williams, the senior pastor of North Congregational United Church of Christ, in Columbus, Ohio, told me. A group that he led, Clergy Voice, has questioned the Fellowship Foundation's authenticity as a faith-based organization. "It's an old boys' club," he told me. "They think God favors the powerful, and that Jesus came as a leader of the rich and powerful, not of the powerless." He added, "They should just own up to what they are—the American Religion of Autocratic Capitalism."

Hays, the former North Little Rock mayor, recalls that Cameron once flew him to Washington, in a private jet, for the National Prayer Breakfast. "Ronnie's got a strong religious affiliation, certainly—he's a man of principle," he said. But his conservative views, Hays speculates, are also driven by his corporate interests: "He's business-oriented. It's about free enterprise, reductions of regulations."

For tax purposes, the Fellowship Foundation must skirt politics. But it has repeatedly stirred political controversy by cozying up to members of Congress and by forming ties with anti-democratic world leaders, including a Ugandan official who promoted the death penalty for homosexuality. In 2015, the Center for Responsive Politics revealed that the group had paid



"I am not now, nor will I ever be, bored enough for pinocle."

for the international travel of a congressman and his wife, and that Cavin, the Mountaire executive serving as the Fellowship Foundation's president at the time, had signed the expense forms. The congressman, Robert Aderholt, a Republican from Alabama, insisted that the travel had been strictly religious in purpose, but the payment provoked criticism because Aderholt was the chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, which has substantial influence over poultry policy. In an interview with the Web site OpenSecrets, Meredith McGehee, then the director of the Campaign Legal Center, asked whether the Fellowship Foundation had been used "as a conduit for a poultry company."

In 2016, Cameron reportedly discussed taking over the Fellowship Foundation. But some participants are wary of him, seeing him as an overbearing, hyperpartisan Trump supporter who is politicizing the group. Cameron's business practices should also be of concern,

according to Warren Throckmorton, an evangelical Christian and a psychology professor at Grove City College, in Pennsylvania, who has written about the Fellowship Foundation for *Christianity Today*. He said, "It matters how he treats his workers, because he's making money off the backs of these people and is donating it to Christian causes—so there's a moral connection."

Cameron's political activities extend well beyond the Fellowship Foundation. In 2004, he set up a private foundation, the Jesus Fund. Given the poverty of many Mountaire workers, the size of the fund is striking: according to the most recently available federal tax statement, the book value of the Jesus Fund's assets in 2018 was three hundred and twenty-seven million dollars. The sole donors were Cameron and his company.

The gulf between Cameron's spectacular wealth and his workers' meagre circumstances echoes the findings of a



recent study by two Harvard economists, Anna Stansbury and Lawrence H. Summers, the former economic adviser to President Bill Clinton and President Barack Obama. In the paper, “The Declining Worker Power Hypothesis,” Stansbury and Summers argue that, in the past four decades, the single largest driver of income inequality in America has been the decline in worker power, much of it stemming from the collapse of membership in private-sector unions. Since the fifties, the percentage of private-sector workers who belong to unions has declined from thirty-three per cent to six per cent. As a result, there has been an upward redistribution of income to high-income executives, owners, and shareholders. The economists argue that this decline in worker power, more than any other structural change in the economy, accounts for nearly all the gains in the share of income made by America’s wealthiest one per cent.

An outgrowth of this trend is the accumulation of enormous wealth and political influence by private foundations. The Jesus Fund has the same

address as Cameron’s corporate office, in Little Rock, Arkansas, and shares the same phone number. A Mountaire administrative assistant who works in Cameron’s office also answers the phone for the Jesus Fund. (Calls to the number were not returned.) I.R.S. filings name Cameron and a former Mountaire employee as the fund’s sole trustees. The fund sometimes makes relatively small grants to secular charities—in 2015, it gave five thousand dollars to the Arkansas Hospice Foundation—but it contributes overwhelmingly to conservative Christian groups. In 2018, its only grant was an eighteen-million-dollar donation to the National Christian Foundation, in support of unidentified “organizations that esteem traditional, Scripture-based values for government.” Cameron’s fund could have donated to such organizations directly, but this approach kept the ultimate recipients of its money from public view. The N.C.F. is a “donor-advised fund,” and such groups redistribute charitable donations from various sources to many causes, acting

as a middleman in a way that erases the fingerprints from any one gift. Donor-advised funds have become increasingly controversial, in part because they impede transparency. The N.C.F. has been ranked as America’s eighth-largest charity, and in 2018 it redistributed \$1.7 billion in grants to some twenty-six thousand organizations, ranging from the Boy Scouts to the Federalist Society. According to *Inside Philanthropy*, the N.C.F. has probably become the single largest funder of the anti-abortion movement. It is, for instance, a huge source of funding for the Alliance Defending Freedom, a group that facilitates lawsuits aiming to curb abortion and L.G.B.T.Q. rights, and also supports limiting insurance coverage for contraceptives—a position that the Supreme Court sided with in early July. The N.C.F. has supported twenty-three organizations that the Southern Poverty Law Center defines as hate groups, including the Alliance Defending Freedom.

In recent years, Cameron has also used his fortune to influence electoral politics. In a 2011 speech, Charles Koch praised him for being among a select group of backers who had given a million dollars or more to the Koch brothers’ political war chest, which became known as Freedom Partners. The next year, Freedom Partners gave a million dollars to the National Right to Work Committee, whose head, Mark Mix, had spoken at a Koch private-donor summit in 2010. In an illustration of how such contributions serve donors’ interests, Mix’s organization went on to represent Cruz Sosa, the Mountaire employee who is currently challenging the union.

By 2014, Cameron’s name was appearing on lists of the nation’s largest campaign contributors. He and his company spent \$4.8 million on Republican candidates and groups that year. He was the biggest corporate donor to the Freedom Partners Action Fund, a Koch political-action committee. When Mountaire gave three million dollars to it, Cameron told Politico that it was “time to stand up and put my money where my mouth is.” He said that he worried about attracting publicity—“I work very hard to keep my name out of stuff”—but noted that he was even

more worried about the possibility “that my grandkids could be living under Communism.” He told Bloomberg News that “Obamacare is a disaster,” characterizing it as an effort “to take over all of the private health-care services.” That year in Arkansas, Cameron heavily supported the successful Senate campaign of Tom Cotton, the arch-conservative former Army officer. And, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, Cameron helped Republicans get around campaign-finance restrictions in Maryland, where Larry Hogan, the Republican candidate for governor, appeared to be in trouble. The State of Maryland limits direct campaign contributions to candidates. The Republican Governors Association, which can spend as much as it wants, asked Mountaire for money. Late in the race, the company donated a quarter of a million dollars. The R.G.A. claims that it didn’t solicit the funds specifically for Maryland, but it went on to spend lavishly there. Hogan won, and on his inauguration day he blocked a proposal opposed by the poultry industry.

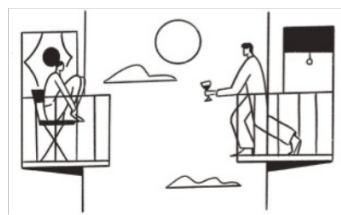
In 2016, Cameron made even bigger political contributions. After giving three million dollars in support of Mike Huckabee’s Presidential campaign—its largest donation—he gave two million dollars to Rebuilding America Now, a pro-Trump super PAC. He and Nina contributed an additional \$893,400 to Trump’s joint fund-raising committee. In the 2018 midterm elections, Cameron topped himself again; he and his company gave more than \$7.7 million to Republican candidates, campaigns, and groups. His biggest gift went to a Koch-related organization pouring contributions directly into House and Senate campaigns. Cameron’s cash didn’t save the Republicans from big losses, but it did win him an invitation to an Election Night party with Trump at the White House, where guests were reportedly offered hot dogs and hamburgers, but no chicken.

This year, Cameron and the Koch network have reportedly been at odds, because Charles Koch, a libertarian, has declined to back Trump, whose leadership he has criticized. The network is expected to spend heavily in support of Republican House and Senate candidates but to stay out of the Presidential

race, as it did in 2016. Cameron, who remains a strong Trump supporter, reportedly objected to the decision. He and Mountaire have already donated more than a million dollars in support of Trump’s reelection, and about five million dollars to Republican candidates and electoral groups.

Before the 2016 elections, according to a well-informed source, members of Mountaire’s executive committee met. They complained that the Obama Administration had too many regulations—and discussed how much better it would be for the business if a Republican were President. It appears that Cameron’s bet on Trump has paid off.

Mountaire’s Web site says that it is now the sixth-largest poultry company in America. By 2019, thanks in part to lax antitrust enforcement in recent decades, the ten largest poultry companies controlled an estimated eighty per cent of the chicken market. Two current lawsuits question whether those gains were achieved entirely legally. A sweeping class-action suit representing chicken workers alleges that fourteen of the largest poultry companies, including Mountaire, illegally conspired to hold down the workers’ wages. And a suit filed by Maplevalle Farms, which supplies food to restaurants, accuses many of the same poultry companies, including Mountaire, of having conspired since 2008 to fix chicken prices. Last year, the Justice Department halted



the discovery process in the price-fixing suit so that it could launch its own investigation into the matter—raising the prospect of criminal charges. In both cases, the companies have denied the allegations.

Williams, the union spokesperson, called Mountaire’s culture particularly “brutal.” In 2010, the company settled a lawsuit in which it was accused of racial discrimination and retaliation. Three years later, it settled a class-action

suit accusing it of charging workers for necessary protective clothing and of failing to pay them for the time spent putting it on; Mountaire denied the allegations but agreed to pay about eight million dollars. The same year, the company paid a fine of nearly fifty thousand dollars to resolve a retaliation case brought by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. At a Mountaire poultry plant in North Carolina, supervisors had allegedly discriminated against Haitian workers, denying them bathroom breaks, throwing chicken parts at them, and then firing a translator for complaining about this behavior.

Between 2010 and 2016, Mountaire had twice the number of OSHA violations per thousand workers as Tyson—a company with a workforce twelve times bigger. Since 2001, Mountaire has been responsible for a series of environmental and workplace violations in Delaware. The company currently stands accused of letting chicken-plant waste pollute the well water of at least eight hundred residents living near its plant in Millsboro, Delaware. Mountaire and state authorities reached a tentative settlement agreement, but the court hasn’t yet accepted it, and lawyers representing some of the affected residents are pursuing a class-action suit.

George Farah, a lawyer representing the poultry workers who are accusing Mountaire of fixing wages, told me that “it’s remarkable that someone committed to Christianity” would run a company the way Cameron has. “I think Jesus would have wanted the workers at Mountaire to be compensated more effectively and treated with more dignity,” Farah added. “But there’s a history in the poultry world where, every time a voice has stood up for the workers, they’ve been displaced by an even more vulnerable group.”

At the Oasis truck stop, the Mountaire employee expressed disgust that, in the middle of a pandemic, she might be replaced by someone paid even worse—a worker who had likely come from a foreign land to seek opportunity. “I’m telling you, Donald Trump wants to make this a Third World country,” she said. “Treat them like slave dogs. They come to the Land of the Free—but, honey, it isn’t free anymore.” ♦