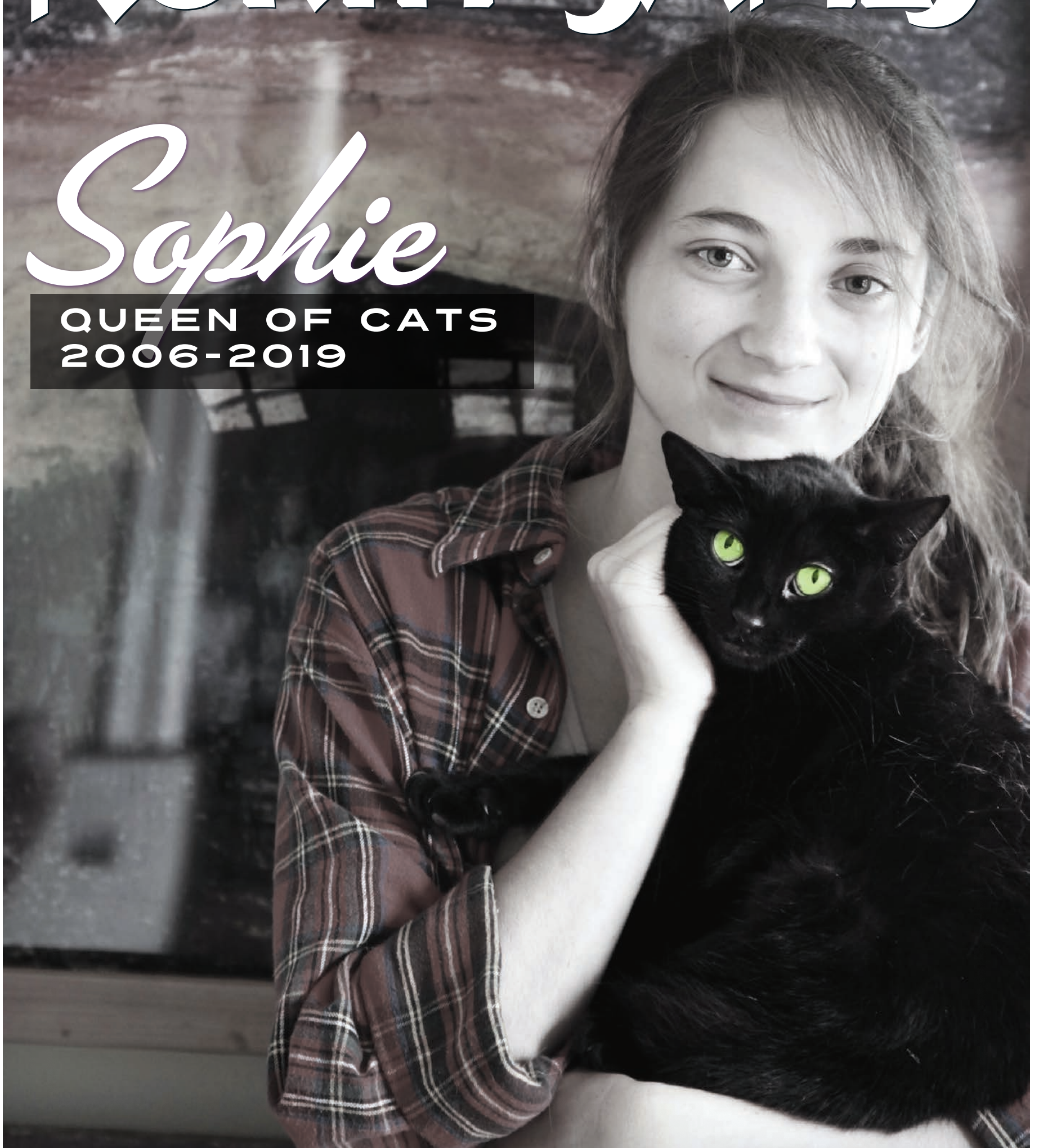


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I have become many things over these past forty-eight hours—a coffin maker, a gravedigger, a grief counsellor, a headstone fabricator. Even a priest. The acquisition of these skills, which I never apprenticed for or ever desired to perfect, has left me queasy and dizzy as if I've just stepped off a boat recently tossed on heaving seas.

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After I finished "The Seven or Eight Deaths of Stella Fortuna," I turned to the beginning again, wanting to refresh my memory for this review. Fifteen minutes later, I was still reading, charmed all over again by this engaging novel. Author Juliet Grames is a master storyteller, and I fervently hope her first foray into fiction is not her last.

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A Quest for Legacy in a Divided America

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

OBSSESSIONS aren't always a bad thing, though they're seldom entirely good. But that's not the case here.

Mechanicsville writer Ben Cleary spent four years living with, and half a lifetime studying on, one of the greatest military tacticians the world has ever known, a man who rode down the wrong side of history along a country lane in Hanover County that faces the modest rancher Ben has called home most of his life.

In his book, "Searching for Stonewall Jackson: A Quest for Legacy in a Divided America", Ben examines, in fairly minute detail, just about every facet of this enigmatic, and tight-lipped wizard of warfare, a man of glaring contradictions.

A mediocre professor of Natural and Experimental Philosophy (the equivalent of Physics in today's academic parlance), Jackson exploded like a supernova on the battlefield, outshining every other general in either of the two armies engaged during the Civil War. After losing one battle at Kernstown, Virginia—in large part because of bad intelligence—he went on to win every battle thereafter until the time of his fatal wounding at Chancellorsville. Robert E. Lee called him "his right arm". And though he was a harsh disciplinarian, his men adored him because he gave them victories.

Jackson owned enslaved blacks and fought for a confederacy of states that waged war against the Union to preserve that abominable institution. Yet, before the Civil War, he led a weekly Colored Sabbath School, where he taught enslaved African Americans how to read and write, which, in that era, was against the law. In Roanoke, Virginia, there's a stained glass window honoring Jackson at the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, an African American congregation. Rev. L.L. Downing, who served as that church's pastor from 1863 till 1937, had the window installed in 1905. Turns out, Downing's parents learned to read

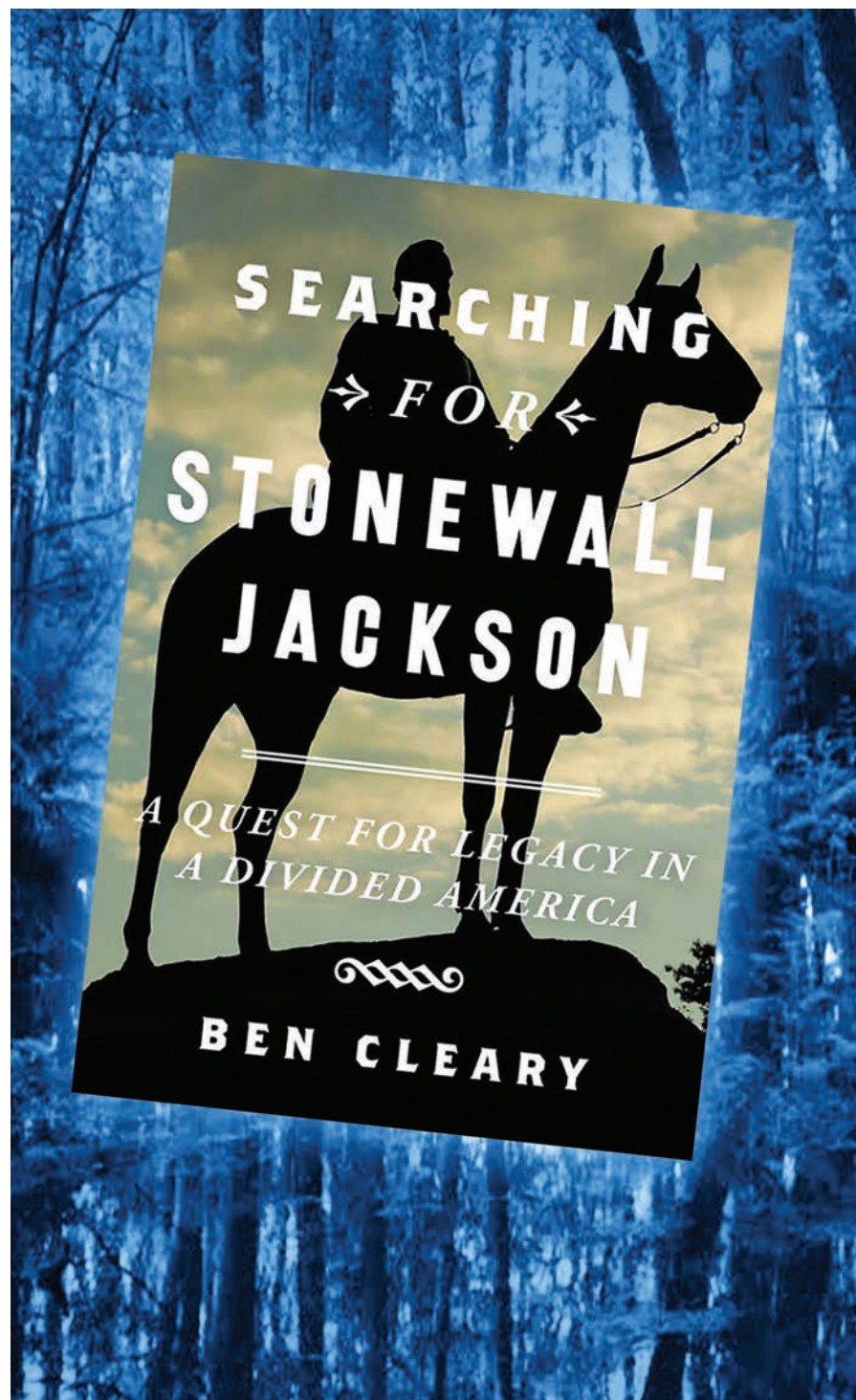
and write in Jackson's Bible school, and became Presbyterians under his influence. But Jackson's Sunday school teaching dovetailed perfectly with proslavery, white supremacist ideology. Their version of Christianity argued that black folk were incapable of managing their own spiritual lives; that they needed white folk to uplift them, to show them the Way.

Like a grandmaster of chess, Jackson had the uncanny ability to predict the next move of his opponent, and to read the terrain like a book. What's more, he could move his Stonewall Brigade at near lightning speed, constantly confounding the enemy, and striking where they least suspected. In his own words: "Always mystify, mislead, and surprise the enemy, if possible; and when you strike and overcome him, never give up the pursuit as long as your men have strength to follow; for an army routed, if hotly pursued, becomes panic-stricken, and can then be destroyed by half their number."

Ben's book, a work of creative non-fiction that glistens with literary devices, follows Jackson's Civil War military career chronologically, from First Manassas where he earned the sobriquet Stonewall, to Chancellorsville where he was accidentally shot three times by fellow Confederates.

His research is scholarly and extensive with a bibliography of more than one hundred sources, and endnotes topping six hundred. But he transforms what might otherwise be simple expository writing into a compelling narrative by actually retracing the footsteps of Jackson. And as he visits various battlefields and historic markers, often with his wife, Catherine, in tow, Ben relates his encounters with contemporaries in those settings, and juxtaposes the place as it was then with how it is now.

About thirty years ago, I spent a fair amount of time at Ben Cleary's house in Mechanicsville, sometimes house-sitting for Ben and his recently deceased wife, Catherine Patterson, a woman of beauty, grace, intelligence, and wit. On around that same period, I wrote a weekly newspaper out in Hanover, and Ben and I would of-



ten get together at the Mechanicsville Drug Store and sit at a booth near the lunch counter where we would spoon down bowls of thick ham and bean soup, drink coffee, and jaw and jape for an hour or more.

We were like kids back then, suddenly eleven again. Some days we'd canoe the Chickahominy, portaging numerous beaver dams, and skirting its wide, marshy banks littered with slabs of

concrete and old tires in some spots, and blanketed in thickets of green-brier and bramble and stinging nettle in other places. The floodplain of this river is as much as a mile wide, and when you stepped out of the canoe the black mud would suck your foot down and cleanse it of a shoe with a brief popping sound, and then swallow it whole. I understood then why MacLellan had called it "the confounded Chickahominy"; it served as

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BOOK REVIEW

natural moat around Richmond to the north and the east.

Other days, we'd hike along nearby Beaver Dam Creek, hopping from bank to bank of this shallow sandy stream that cuts through a Civil War battlefield of the same name.

And on more than one occasion, we would go to one of the quietest spots in the world, a place called Cold Harbor, and easily mount the remnants of earthen fortifications that had been constructed well over a hundred years before. Time, wind and rain had eroded them down so they could scarce give cover to a small dog, but on June 3, 1864, the earthworks were formidable, and the Confederates well-entrenched. It was some of the bloodiest fighting in the bloodiest war ever fought on American soil. By some accounts as many as 7,000 Union soldiers were killed or wounded during the first twenty minutes of fighting. They were just mowed down like cornstalks at Antietam, and after the battle, a small trickle of a brook that feeds into Gaines Mill pond would be christened Bloody Run. "I have always regretted that the last assault at Cold Harbor was ever made," Ulysses S. Grant would later confess in his memoirs.

Unlike Ben, I am not a student of the Civil War, though I have read my fair share of books on the subject, and have visited numerous battlefields from Bull Run to Fort Fisher, from the Wilderness to the Crater. And, of course, Antietam and Gettysburg.

The three finest books I've ever read on the subject include "Killer Angels," the second volume of Michael Shaara's Civil War Trilogy, a historical novel about the pivotal Battle of Gettysburg, which would go on to win a Pulitzer Prize. Shaara added meat to the bones of some of the "killer angels," notably Confederate General James Longstreet and Union General Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain.

The other two books are "Stillness at Appomattox" by Bruce Catton, part of another trilogy; and Shelby Foote's three-tome history simply called "The Civil War: A Narrative."

Alongside those books, I would now add Searching for Stonewall. Ben weaves a tight and contemplative narrative, focusing on one main character—Thomas Jonathan "Stonewall" Jackson—and in some ways, himself, the modern man of flesh and bone who walks with the ghost of a long-gone soldier across Virginia.



Ben is neither critic nor apologist for Stonewall Jackson. He is more of an archaeologist, piecing together fragments of a life that when viewed as a whole illuminates the nature of the war itself, and humankind's odd obsession with destruction.

A thread of gentle melancholy strings the pages together, generally embedded in Ben's reflections of Jackson's haunts in the here and now. Our fleeting mortality punctuates this entire volume, and reminds us that history, which is nothing less than packets of memory, outlives us all.

Toward the end of his book, Ben writes about the twelve years he spent teaching primarily African American teenagers in one of Virginia's juvenile prisons. "A day didn't go by that I wasn't painfully confronted by the consequences of poverty and neglect, the legacy of the slavery that Jackson was fighting to defend..." he writes.

On one of the rear corners of the field behind his house, Ben, those many years ago, showed me a spot that was rich in artifacts after every plowing or heavy rain. One spring afternoon while I was housesitting for Ben and Catherine who were down in New Orleans, I strolled down to nearby Topotomoy Creek to look at the wide almost pond-like expanse that in the summer would be covered with spatterdock and lily pads, where you could sometimes spot a snapping turtle or a water snake. Later, I hiked back up to the Cleary compound and made my way over to the back field.

I got down on my hands and knees and combed through the loose earth with my fingers. Within an hour I had found several shards of cobalt porcelain, dark brown pottery, and glass the color of amethyst. I'd also found the

skull of a small animal (probably a squirrel), a rusted belt buckle, several nails, and an arrowhead of white quartz. And then I found what I'd been hoping to unearth—two Minie balls. One was pewter-gray, splayed and flattened, as if it had hit a solid object, bone or wood; the other was pristine with a chalky, parchment-colored coating as if it had just tumbled out of a cartridge box the day before. Those artifacts have long since been lost in kitchen drawers. Except for the two Minie balls, the agents of war.

Not four miles from Ben's home stands Stonewall Jackson Middle School, which is just a stone's throw from Lee-Davis High School. Hanover County is a Civil War-haunted place, and in recent years has become a stronghold for the tea party. Their massive conspiracy signs with block letters of black and red on a field of canary yellow dot the landscape. Not long ago, a conservative delegate representing much of Hanover County was Cantorized by his fellow Republicans for failing litmus tests administered by the tea party. That same delegate had told me during an interview on the eve of the last presidential election that in the rural reaches of Virginia Gadsden flags now hugged poles where the Stars and Bars had once flown. "In areas of the state where prior to Obama's election there were Confederate flags, immediately after (the election) every single one of those became a yellow one because it was more politically acceptable," he said. "And that's a tribal issue."

More than fifty years ago, Hanover County made national news when its school board banned "To Kill a Mockingbird". A board member by the name of W.C. Boshier deemed Harper Lee's novel "immoral literature", and recommended the book's removal from all public school libraries. The resolution passed unanimously. That school board member's son, Bill Boshier, went on to become a teacher and a principal in Henrico County, and then superintendent of that district, and ultimately superintendent of public instruction for the entire Commonwealth of Virginia. As well as an educator and administrator, Bill was a reformer who earnestly believed that public schools had a moral obligation to educate all children equally, and to provide them with a nurturing and safe environment. When I interviewed him back in the late 1990s, he told me that "To Kill a Mockingbird" had always been one of his favorite novels. Some apples fall far from the tree that bore them.



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Ben's book bares Jackson's inconsistencies of character, and it reflects, intentionally or otherwise, the contradictions of the entire American experiment, where promised freedoms guaranteed for all have often been withheld from certain groups within our society, whether enslaved Africans, indigenous people, women, immigrants, or the disabled. And yet, in spite of these transgressions, including the two Original Sins of slavery and the extermination of native peoples, as a people we have inched always closer to a more perfect union.

Timing, as they say, is everything. The time couldn't be riper for this book, and in today's charged political climate, it was a risky one to write. In so doing, Ben exhibited an unflinching courage Stonewall would have praised.

When we most need a Lincoln to remind us of our common heritage and "to bind up our nation's wounds," we instead have a Buchanan who drives the wedge of division deep into the heartwood of our Republic. Fortunately, we also have history, and, if we're patient, it can instruct, and remind us of our former follies.

Early yesterday morning, a biting and bitter wind whipped along Franklin Street, as I made my way with a couple of reporters and photographers down to Capitol Square. As we neared 9th Street, the crowd thickened, and we each went our separate ways. For the next four hours I nudged my way through a mass of people, many of them wearing camouflage and facial coverings of one kind or other. And this, too: almost all of them sported beards—the old, the young, the thin, the stout. Most of them wore holstered sidearms, or brandished assault rifles. They pledged allegiance, and sang of a star-spangled banner, though many of them carried other flags, those of the three-percenters or the tea party or state flags or black flags or red flags. Flags seemed particularly popular. And on the corners and the sidewalks, men and women sold various items—T-shirts featuring the sitting president flipping twin birds, MAGA caps, scarves, face masks, and so on. It was a cross between Comic-Con with warrior cosplayers, and a state fair without amusements on the midway. But the comparisons ended there, because at the gun rally many people carried weapons.

To say the least, it was surreal. I walked three hours through this crowd, up 9th to Broad, back to 7th, over to Franklin and back to 9th, then up Grace to 7th, and over to Broad and down 9th again.

I would always stop at 9th and Broad streets to watch the protestors step down from the buses. Six buses would pull up on the east side of 9th in front of City Hall, and another six would pull up on the west side of the street. The passengers would file out and make their way over to Broad, where they were diverted west to 8th Street. When the twelve empty buses pulled off 9th street, another twelve packed buses would take their places. That went on for more than three hours, and by the end of it, almost 25,000 protestors had been deployed—about the same amount of men who were killed at the two battles of Cold Harbor.

Only one arrest was made during the gun rally, which was held on a day honoring one of America's greatest heroes who was shot to death in the prime of his life by a cowardly white supremacist who could not cut the muster in the U.S. Army.

Thankfully, there was no violence yesterday. But had it not been for the FBI, things might have turned out differently. Just days before the gun rally, the FBI arrested a number of white supremacists who had intended to disrupt the rally. One of them talked about using a thermal imaging scope on his rifle to ambush unsuspecting civilians and police officers. "I need to claim my first victim. If there's like a PoPo cruiser parked on the street and he doesn't have backup, I can execute him at a whim and just take his stuff."

Another said this: "We could essentially like be literally hunting people. You could provide over watch while I get close to do what needs to be done to certain things."

Still another looked on the rally as a powder keg that required just a single spark to ignite. "And the thing is you've got tons of guys who ... should be radicalized enough to know that all you gotta do is start making things go wrong and if Virginia can spiral out to [expletive] full-blown civil war."

In today's cultural wars, certain politicians cavalierly toss around the notion of an impending civil war. This sort of prattle is both dangerous and ignorant. No one familiar with the history of the Civil War and the fact that 620,000 were killed would ever suggest such a thing. Never before has it been so important to understand our own history, particularly the four-year slaughter that began at a railroad junction called Manassas. **NJ**

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by Ben Cleary
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HIDDEN HISTORIES

The 1953 Iranian Coup

by **JACK R. JOHNSON**

IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND the destruction of Iran’s democracy more than half a century ago, you need to “follow the money”, as the old reporter adage has it, or, modified somewhat for the Middle East, follow the oil.

You could begin with a British gentleman named William Knox D’Arcy who contrived to cut a deal with the Iranian monarchy in 1908. According to Stephen Kinzer writing in TomDispatch, the terms of the deal were wildly lopsided and simplistic, “D’Arcy was to own whatever oil he found in Iran and pay the government just 16% of any profits he made—never allowing any Iranian to review his accounting. After his first strike in 1908, he became sole owner of the entire ocean of oil that lies beneath Iran’s soil. No one else was allowed to drill for, refine, extract, or sell ‘Iranian’ oil.”

“Soon afterward, the British government bought the D’Arcy concession, which it named the Anglo-Persian Oil Company or APOC, later to be named Anglo-Iranian Oil Company or AIOC. It then built the world’s biggest refinery at the port of Abadan on the Persian Gulf.”

After World War II, in an era which sought to shrug off colonial yokes, Iran wanted rights to its own oil. On April 28, 1951, the Iranian Parliament elected Mohammad Mossadegh as prime minister on a platform of “oil nationalization”. Days later, Iran unanimously approved his bill, nationalizing the British oil company.

As Kinzer noted, “to the British, nationalization seemed, at first, like some kind of immense joke, a step so absurdly contrary to the unwritten rules of the world that it could hardly be real.”

The directors of AIOC stonewalled while the British government took a series of steps meant to punish Mossadegh economically.

“They withdrew their technicians from Abadan, blockaded the port, cut off exports of vital goods to Iran, froze the country’s hard-currency accounts in British banks, and tried to win anti-Iran resolutions from the U.N. and the World Court,” writes Kinzer. Finally, the British, under Winston Churchill turned to Washington and asked for help.”

For those paying attention, those economic ‘sanctions’ might sound simi-



lar to the measures the U.S. is taking against Iran today.

Back in 1953, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, encouraged by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, enlisted the CIA to help overthrow Mossadegh and install the previous ruler Shah Reza Pahlavi who was seen as more compliant to Western concerns (i.e., willing to abide by outrageously lopsided oil contracts). In fairness, the Shah initially opposed the coup plans, and supported the oil nationalization, but The CIA sent Major General “Stormin” Norman Schwarzkopf Sr. to persuade the exiled Shah to return to rule Iran. The Shah agreed to the coup after being informed by the CIA that he too would be “deposed” if he didn’t play along.

The Operation was called Ajax in the U.S. and Operation Boot by the British.

CIA officer Kermit Roosevelt, Jr., the grandson of former President Theodore Roosevelt, carried out the operation planned by CIA agent Donald Wilber.

During the coup, Roosevelt and Wilber, representatives of the Eisenhower administration—and probably with Eisenhower’s full knowledge—bribed Iranian government officials, reporters, and businessmen. They also bribed street thugs to support the Shah and oppose Mossadegh.


The next day, on August 19, 1953, with the aid of “rented” crowds arranged with CIA assistance, the coup succeeded. Iran’s nationalist hero was jailed, the monarchy restored under the Western-friendly Shah, and Anglo-Iranian oil re-branded itself as British Petroleum, or BP Amoco. General Schwarzkopf went on to train the security forces that would become known as SAVAK (The

Western acronym for Sazman-e Etelaat Va Amniat Keshvar, which translated from Persian means the Organization of Intelligence and Security of the Country) to secure the Shah’s hold on power for the next two decades.

SAVAK was brutal. It had the power to censor the media, screen applicants for government jobs, and “according to reliable Western sources, use all means necessary, including torture, to hunt down dissidents.” The Federation of American Scientists found SAVAK guilty of “the torture and execution of thousands of political prisoners.” The FAS list of SAVAK torture methods included “electric shock, whipping, beating, inserting broken glass and pouring boiling water into the rectum, tying weights to the testicles, and the extraction of teeth and nails”

After 1963, the Shah expanded SAVAK to over 5,300 full-time agents and a large but unknown number of part-time informers. Estimates are that some 10,000 dissidents were either killed or tortured in its wake.

The authoritarian rule fanned the flames of anti-Western sentiment, which reached a crescendo in 1979 with the final overthrow of the Shah, and the creation of the Islamic Republic to counter the West, the “Great Satan.” Operation Ajax, dreamed up in 1953 to control Iranian oil, and its subsequent profits, led directly to the rise of the Ayatollah Khomeini, and the bitterly anti-Western regime that has been in control of Iran ever since.

Years ago, a famous cartoon character named Pogo had this to say about foreign adventures—which still rings true today: “We have met the enemy, and he is us.” 

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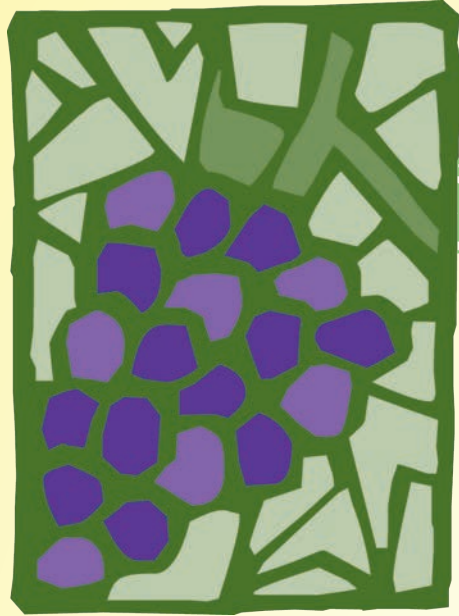
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Sophie

QUEEN OF CATS

I HAVE BECOME MANY THINGS over these past forty-eight hours—a coffin maker, a gravedigger, a grief counsellor, a headstone fabricator. Even a priest. The acquisition of these skills, which I never apprenticed for or ever desired to perfect, has left me queasy and dizzy as if I've just stepped off a boat recently tossed on heaving seas.

THIS STORY BEGINS more than thirteen years ago, on a rainy and chilly Saturday afternoon, a Valentine's Day, just four days after my daughter Catherine Rose turned ten. We were sitting in the car, parked in front of a towering façade of mortared brick. I turned off the windshield wipers, then cut the engine.

"You ready, sweetie?"

"Yes," said Catherine. I watched her in the rearview mirror, so small, seat belt strapped across her chest, hands folded in her lap.

"Just take your time deciding," I said. "We've got all the time in the world today."

The rain had let up considerably, so we didn't bother with the umbrella tucked in the well behind the backseat. We walked briskly across the parking lot, dodging puddles, mounted the steps, pushed through the front door of the Richmond SPCA, and entered a large and sparse lobby. A woman at the reception desk led us into a room filled with cages. Her hair was blonde and fit her head like a swim cap. She opened one cage door after another, reached in, picked up a kitten then lowered the small animal into the cradle my daughter made of her folded arms.

They were all adorable, and Catherine would hold each kitten for a few minutes, petting it and listening to it purr, before returning it to the woman. We must have looked at fifteen kittens over the next hour, and each one was cute and playful, but none of them struck that vital chord with my daughter. We were on our way out, standing in the lobby, when Catherine noticed a tall, free-standing cage with a single piece of driftwood in its center. Near the top of that little tree was a lean black cat that had lodged itself between two forked branches.

"That's the one," Catherine said.

The woman who had shown us the cats seemed ecstatic that Catherine had selected this particular kitten. She ran her finger along the edge of her ear, carving a curve in her cropped hair. "She's the oldest one

we have," the woman explained. "She's been with us six months. She was born last June."

And then Catherine had to sign several papers, promising she would always take care of the kitten. It was a kind of formal adoption procedure, and in the space for the pet's name, Catherine penned the word SOPHIE in large and legible block letters. I never learned why she chose that name, but her choice would prove to be prescient and fitting. Sophie, a word of Greek origin, means wise and skilled, and over the years, our cat would demonstrate time and again that she possessed both wisdom and skill in abundance.

What drew Catherine to Sophie and Sophie to Catherine I will never know. Perhaps it was because Sophie was somewhat older than the other balls of fur at the SPCA that morning. Maybe it was that Sophie was in the tall upright cage by herself, perched in the lofty crook of the driftwood tree. My daughter has always been a tree climber, and I would often find her sitting up in a maple tree at the end of our block with an open book in her hands.

It also might have been the cat's solid black coat with just one small white spot on her chest. Later, we would learn that not all her fur was black. There were chocolate brown highlights throughout it. You could see the brown only in direct and brilliant sunlight. "Sophie's a Bombay cat," Catherine would tell me one day.

I think, though, it was the eyes. They stared into one another's for a long time without blinking, for several minutes, at least, and all the while you could hear Sophie's loud and distinctive purr. Catherine's eyes are green as Sophie's, a trait our daughter shares with both her parents.

On our way home, we stopped off at Fin & Feather and bought a litter box, kitty litter, food, a bowl, two catnip-stuffed mice made of felt, and a wicker basket with a cushion that would serve as a bed Sophie never used. Laps were always her preference for catnaps, and nights, for the long sleeps, she would curl up next to Catherine, and they would slumber, face to face, sharing the same air.

At that time, my children shared a bunk bed I had

built the summer before, a massive structure made of two-by-sixes and secured by six-inch lag screws and carriage bolts. I fashioned the ladder of two-by-threes and one-inch dowels, and each night, after Catherine had climbed up to her loft, while Charles settled in the bunk beneath her, and as I began to read them a story, Sophie would enter the room, and deftly climb the ladder, her tiny paws claw-gripping each rung as she ascended. I'd never seen a cat do that before, and it became a nightly ritual that lasted many years, all the way up until the day Catherine moved into the dormitory called Rhoads Hall at VCU just a couple miles south of our house in Bellevue. After that, Sophie took to sleeping with Charles. As soon as I began reading to Charles, Sophie would leap into the single bed that had replaced the bunk bed and curl up against his back.

As much as she loved the indoors with her family, Sophie loved being outside even more, and we made the decision long ago to allow her to freely explore the world at large. Sophie, even from the youngest age, seemed to understand that our yard from alley in the back to curb in the front, bounded by Newport to the west and the yellow house to the east, this small rectangle planted with trees and bushes and flowers, was her world. She explored all of it, and every morning, the moment she rocketed out of the house, Sophie would walk the perimeter of the property along Greycourt and Newport, but never the alleyway. She would patrol this L-shaped border two times each day, and every so often would encounter a neighborhood cat, whom she would quickly scare off. Other times she would confront a dog walking down the sidewalk with its owner just behind it. Regardless the size of the canine, Sophie would sit in the middle of the sidewalk and wait for the dog. As the dog approached, Sophie would stand up and her back would arch and her hackles would rise and she would swiftly raise her paw and swat the dog right in the face, and she would not back off. I had seen her do it one time to a German shepherd, ten times her size, and the dog retreated with tail tucked between legs, and I apologized profusely to the owner.

BY CHARLES MCGUIGAN



Sophie's gravesite under the Saucer Magnolia.

"She's just overly protective of our house," I said.

"That cat's crazy," the shepherd's owner said.

I nodded, because, in a way, he was right. Sophie, believed she was the size of a panther and utterly invulnerable, yet some of the dogs she attacked could have swallowed her in a single gulp. She wasn't hostile to all dogs; some she would welcome, including one called Joy.

Sophie was also a relentless hunter. Outdoors she would prey on moles and voles and shrews, and, at least once, a young rabbit, whose life we managed to save. Mainly though, Sophie hunted birds. When she spotted a bird, invariably a starling or an English sparrow, Sophie would crouch low, hidden behind the tall grasses in our front yard, and her tail would begin to flick, and she would slowly crawl, her entire body flattened to the ground, and then suddenly, at just the right moment, would bolt forward and pounce on her quarry. She could have been a lioness stalking her prey on a distant savanna, and though Sophie may have hunted in part for sport, she also ate what she killed, licked it to the bone with her sandpaper tongue, leaving behind only feathers and beak and claws. With the small mammals she consumed, all that was left after her nourishment was the coil of a tail.

Where the Fan has roaches, Bellevue has camel crickets. Before migrating here from the Fan, I'd never really seen one of them before. They can be fairly large with antenna longer than their bodies, and when you encounter one, it will hop up onto you. They're not broad jumpers, they're pole-vaulters, and more than once I've brushed a camel cricket off my chest. When the first frost comes, they begin moving into our living quarters from the basement. As soon as Sophie became a resident in our home, the camel crickets were gone. They would still make their annual appearances, but it was always short-lived because they served Sophie as both indoor sport and snack item. She hunted down every one of them, would play with them for a time, and then, when they seemed unwilling, or unable, to play her cat-and-mouse games any longer, Sophie would munch on them contentedly. Their legs would sometimes become tangled in her whiskers.

Sophie possessed a duality of nature mirroring a human being's. She could comport herself regally as a queen, her posture perfect, her steps measured, head lifted high. But her wildness never left her. If she spotted a bird through one of the three lower window panes of the front door, she would scratch furiously at the glass, like squeaky chalk on a blackboard, until the door was opened and she was free to be her wild self once more. That was the beauty of

her. Which is the same with humans. When we tell stories about ourselves or others, they're not about the times we acted conventionally. Those stories are downright boring. The ones that shine are those that illustrate the inherent wildness of our species, when our actions are not governed by societal norms. It's when we shed our constraints, and act out of instinct of one sort or other, that we become interesting, or at least memorable.

Our black cat, in so many ways Catherine's familiar, was low maintenance and seldom wore jewelry. There was a time that we fit her with a collar that contained a single miniature sleigh bell. The idea was that the bell would tinkle when Sophie approached an unsuspecting bird and give it time to fly off and avoid death and consumption. Somehow or other, Sophie removed the bell. And the next day she removed the collar, which we would find years later under the front porch steps. We tried, on a couple occasions, to get her to wear an ID tag, a little brass wafer with her name, address and phone number stamped on it. But she would figure out how to get rid of the tag and the collar within a day or two. So we gave it up.

Sophie was never excessively needy, and was only vocal when she needed something, whether it was to go outside or to come back inside. And she would always let us know when she needed more food or water.

She was extremely intelligent, and early on learned the mechanics of hinged doors. As long as one was ajar, Sophie could slide her inverted paw in the gap between threshold and door, and pull it open, then close it behind her.

Over the years, we've hosted scores of parties in our home on Greycourt Avenue, and Sophie would always socialize, but when she'd had enough of our guests, she would retreat to the kids' bedroom, and shut the door behind her.

Whether or not there was a party in progress, there has always been music in our home, and music of every description, whether it was Tupac or cuts from The Capeman, the Lumineres or Mumford and Son, Bach or Dylan, the Rolling Blackouts or the Avett Brothers, Beethoven or Slipknot (Charles loves metal), Jimi Hendrix or John Prine, Louis Armstrong or Norah Jones, Patsy Cline or Ray Charles.

As with our home's other inhabitants, Sophie also loved music. A month after Sophie joined our family, Catherine noticed how she would sit on the back of the couch in our living room, her back to us, while she faced one of the two windows looking out over Newport Drive, and listen intently to whatever music was playing. Nothing particularly spectacular in that—all animals seem to respond to music. Here's the thing though: Sophie, when situated on the couch in this fashion, became a feline metronome. Her tail wagged in perfect time to whatever was playing. If the tempo of a certain song was fast, her tail flicked back and forth almost convulsively. If the tempo slowed to a crawl, her tail would follow suit. This would happen every time she sat on her couch perch and music poured from the speakers.

Sophie was a constant presence in our home. She would lead the way to the kitchen for her morning meal or her evening meal, and spring up to the win-

dow seat which served as her dining room table. Wherever she led you, Sophie would weave between your walking legs. And that sometimes caused trip ups.

Over the past two years, Sophie had become a little slower. She slept more, was not prone to leaping, and gave up hunting altogether, even for camel crickets. Every so often she would gallop like a kitten, or do this strange sideways walk, which she also did when she was much younger. In the main, though, she slept and purred and ate, rarely venturing outdoors, and when she did she confined herself to the front porch.

Two days ago, just after six in the morning, I opened my bedroom door, expecting to see Sophie who would lead me to the kitchen and her morning meal. But she wasn't there. I checked in Charles's room, the sunroom, the front porch, even the basement. From the basement I clambered into the crawl space, and searched for her on hands and knees all the way up to where the front porch begins. At one point, my hand touched something with fur on it, and my flattened palm went right through it. Whatever it was deflated like a puffball mushroom, and I could sense a small rush of cool air on my fingertips. When I pointed the flashlight downward I could see my hand embedded in what looked like the mummified remains of a possum or a large rodent. It was not Sophie.

I searched the house again for another hour or so, and then checked under my son's bed. Sophie lay on her side, eyes shut, breathing almost imperceptibly. I threaded my fingers under her small body and carefully lifted her out from under the bed. She was ragdoll-limp. I carried her to the kitchen and laid her down on the window seat, tried to get her to eat and drink, dipped my finger into the bowl of water and brought it to her open mouth, but she pulled away.

I took a quick shower and when I entered the kitchen, Sophie was gone. Again, I searched the house and this time found her under my bed, and her breathing had become loud and labored. I wrapped her in a towel, laid her in the passenger seat of the car and drove her out to Locke Taylor's veterinary clinic on Woodman Road.

A young vet tended to her. She was gentle with Sophie. She took her temperature, but when she tried to listen to her heart, Sophie's purring was so loud the vet had to hold a ball of cotton dipped in oil under her nose. The purring stopped immediately, and the vet listened, then prodded Sophie's abdomen.



Catherine with Sophie and Charles September 2008.

"They're not like us and they're not like dogs," the vet told me. "Cats don't tell us when they're in pain."

The vet stroked Sophie's back, then looked at me. "She's in a lot of pain," the vet said. The entire time that Sophie lay on the examination table, my fingers combed through the hair between her ears, something that had always calmed her. When the vet took blood, I held Sophie firmly down with one hand.

It seemed the vet was gone for more than an hour to have the blood analyzed, but when I checked my phone only fifteen minutes had elapsed. That's when the vet told me it would be a good idea to put Sophie down. I had not prepared myself for this, and the walls of the room contracted, and when I shifted my weight from one foot to another it was as if I was standing on a floor of foam rubber. The only words I remember the vet saying were, "A large mass."

My eyes flooded with tears and for several seconds I could not speak, I could not catch my breath.

"I need to go outside."

The vet nodded. As I removed my hand from between Sophie's ears, her hand replaced mine.

Outside, a hot wind rustled through the dry leaves of a tree that created a small pool of shade. I stood there for a moment and then called Catherine, but she didn't answer her phone and this was going to require something more than a text. I knew she was busy with last minute details because the following morning she was scheduled to fly to Nanchang, China to visit, Ty-

ler, who had been studying at a university there since February. I called Joany, Catherine's mom, and when I explained the situation she recommended that I not tell Catherine. Our daughter was already nervous about a twenty-hour flight to China, and Sophie's passing would only increase her anxiety, Joany reasoned. I halfheartedly agreed.

Back in the examination room, the vet had prepared a syringe, and as I held Sophie firmly down, she injected her with pentobarbital.

"Look right into her eyes," she told me. "You'll be the last person she sees."

I crouched down so that I was at eye-level with the examination table and stared directly into Sophie's eyes, and she stared back. As the drug began taking effect, her fully dilated pupils slowly contracted to slits. A very long two minutes after the injection, Sophie's eyes became vacant as a doll's.

"She's gone," the vet said.

And just like that there was no life left in her, yet she had purred up until that very last second.

"We'll prepare her," the vet told me. "You're welcome to leave and come back later this afternoon."

By the time I got back to our house, the temperature had climbed into the nineties, with the humidity in a nose-to-nose race. I spoke with Charles, and asked him not to tell Catherine about Sophie.

"Why?" he asked.

I explained that she was already nervous about her trip, and this would just

increase her stress. "We'll tell her when she gets back," I told Charles, but I still had my reservations.

By the time I got back to the animal hospital, Sophie had been wrapped in a lime green cloth—a sort of death shroud—and placed in the bottom of a small coffin. It was shaped like a coffin, but it was just a cardboard box, and a fairly flimsy one at that. When I lifted the casket I almost flipped it over my shoulder because it was so light, offering no resistance whatsoever, and I remembered the vet having told me earlier that Sophie weighed a scant six pounds. I drove home with one hand gripping the steering wheel. The other hand rested on the cardboard casket in the passenger seat.

Even with the two small window units going, the air in our house, when I returned, was warm and humid so I decided to put the casket in the freezer. I removed the ice trays and the wire rack, then slid our encoffined Sophie into the freezer and shut the door. There was a gasp of suction and a brief fog that faded in an instant.

The sun seemed hotter now at six than it had in the early afternoon. Beneath the saucer magnolia in our front yard, where Sophie had often hunted, I began digging along the lines of a rectangle I had inscribed in the earth with a trowel, an outline I had made of Sophie's coffin before I put it in the freezer. I thrust the pointed tip of the shovel into the dirt and then rode the shovel like a pogo stick. The first three inches of soil were easy to remove, but then I got to the roots, and every six inches or so there was another network of them, and I would use the shovel as a cutting tool, severing them. The deeper I got, the harder the digging became. I penetrated a thick layer of hardpan, presumably fill dirt, and then struck red clay. By the time I finished, the hole was four and a half feet deep, the deepest hole I'd ever dug in our yard. I retrieved the coffin from the freezer and lowered it into the hole, then guided the dirt back into the hole with the shovel. My work was done by about eight o'clock that evening. I dripped with sweat and was smeared with dirt when I went back into the house and fixed myself a gin and tonic. As I took the first sip, my phone rang. It was my daughter. She was crying.

"You nervous about tomorrow?" I asked.

All I could hear was her sobbing. Then she said, "How's Sophie?"

I was silent.

"How's Sophie," Catherine asked again.

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I didn't know what to say, so I maintained my silence. I took a full swallow of my drink, I raked my hand through my hair. "Look," I said, but I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"I talked to Charles," Catherine said.

That's when I told her in detail all that had happened, and promised a proper burial for Sophie in the morning before we had breakfast and I drove her to the airport. We talked for the next hour, remembering little things about Sophie. We talked until Catherine began to yawn.

By then it was well after nine and I knew what I had to do. I was planning to drive up to WalMart, the one on Parham. I would find a gift box of some kind and make a proper coffin. On my way out of the neighborhood I drove past Once Upon a Vine, and though they were closed, there was still one car parked out front. Pete was still there, closing out the register. I told him my predicament and he gave me a wooden crate that fine French wines come packaged in. He gave me another one, just in case I need more wood to seal the coffin.

Back at the house, I cleared the peninsula in the kitchen, broke the boxes apart with pry bar and hammer, and reconstructed a single coffin from the small boards. On the lid I painted two large, almost perfectly circular eyes, each with a black, vertically-slitted pupil. I used Charles's green and yellow acrylic paints and poured some silver glitter into the mix. I even added the small orange blemish in her left eye, the birthmark Catherine had often stared at. Above the eyes I painted SOPHIE. By the time I finished this construction, it was just past midnight.

Armed again with the shovel, I dug up Sophie's grave, and removed her flimsy cardboard coffin, brushing away a paste of moist clay. The cardboard had absorbed ambient moisture from the ground so it was limp, and the lid had caved in. I carried the casket to the kitchen and set it alongside the coffin I had just built. I took the new coffin (which was considerably larger than the original) out to the front yard and scored the earth again, then began digging again, enlarging the hole to accommodate the new coffin. As I dug, shaving away thin layers from the walls, then scooping the dirt out of the hole, a couple walking their dog stopped for a moment and watched me from the sidewalk. And I wondered what they might be thinking. "What the f***'s he doing now? Grave-robbing?" I could hear a chain rattle, then the dog's toenails scrape the concrete, and the couple moved along the



Sophie in her window perch.

sidewalk, their dog in the lead. The moon was nearly full that night so the light was good.

I finished digging at about two and then took Sophie out of the cardboard coffin and deposited her in the wooden one, then set it in the middle of the peninsula. Behind the casket I placed a vase containing the bouquet of flowers Catherine's mother had brought two weeks earlier for Catherine's graduation party. The flowers were still in perfect shape. I covered the top of the coffin with the single loose board that would be sealed just before Sophie's burial. I pulled two stout white candles out of the pantry, set one on either side of the casket, lit them, and let them burn as a vigil through the night. I flipped off the light in the kitchen and slowly fell asleep on the couch in the living room, where I could see the flicker of the candles making shadows in the dining room.

Three hours later I was up. I showered and composed a prayer for Sophie's funeral service. After picking up Charles from his mother's, I met Catherine back at the house. Her face was puffy, her eyes red. After a brief viewing, I read the prayer. Here's how it went:

"God, we give thanks this day for our sister/daughter Sophie. She was the rarest of your many creations, and we were blessed to call her part of our family. Sophie was kind and loving and joyful. Sophie sprinted through life. She was agile, stepping softly on catspaws, and relished all the natural wonders of the world. And sometimes ate them. We so miss Sophie, we so love Sophie, and our house feels less full. But we know she is with you, and your house has grown fuller, and rejoices in her presence. Please, God, stroke her gently and let her know how much her family misses her. We will always love you, Sophie. We de-



Sophie's coffin.

liver your body to Mother Earth and your soul to our Heavenly Father."

I fitted the cover over her coffin and secured it with eight flat head nails, and we carried the small casket out onto the front porch, down the steps, and to the edge of the rectangular hole I had dug beneath the saucer magnolia. We lowered Sophie into the earth, tossed flowers onto the coffin, then began pushing and shoveling the mounds of earth into the hole. After tamping the earth down, we did what people often do after burying a loved one—we went to get a bite to eat, a hearty breakfast at Dot's Back Inn, where both my kids had eaten their first meal in a restaurant. After breakfast, I dropped my son off school, then drove my daughter out to the airport.

I spent the vast majority of the afternoon constructing a headstone, and I made it the way the Gullah of South Carolina's Low Country and Sea Islands had made theirs for generations. I had the great fortune of spending part of my boyhood in the Low Country, and several years ago, as part of a media tour, spent the better part of a week on one of the Palmetto State's Sea Islands. It was on that island I came across an old family cemetery that contained more than a dozen graves. These were the final resting places of a Gullah family—the earliest dated back to the 1870s. Descendants of enslaved Africans, the Gullah did not have the money to buy marble or granite headstones. Instead, they crafted them out of a sort of concrete made of sand and crushed shells, and ornamented with pebbles. Adorning the center of each tombstone, which faced east toward the motherland, was either an eating utensil or a plate, cup or bowl—an item that had been used at the last meal of the deceased.

And so I bought a forty pound bag

of cement from Lowe's, built a simple form of scrap lumber and plywood, mixed and poured the cement, laid in four thick sticks of rebar, and, after inscribing Sophie's name and the years of her birth and death with a twig, pressed her food bowl into the unset cement. A little after nightfall, I broke the form away from the headstone and carried it to the front yard where I set it at the head of the small mound that marked Sophie's grave.

But my work was not finished. After setting the headstone in place, I walked down the side of the house and into the backyard, and found the spot where the shells were. I began picking up a dozen whelks that bordered two sides of the vegetable garden. These shells, sun-bleached and chalky white, were things Catherine's mom and I had collected the day after an October nor'easter twenty years ago near my parents' house in Bethany Beach, Delaware. I carried the whelks to the front yard and lined them around Sophie's grave much like the Gullah had done a century ago around the graves of their ancestors in the Low Country. The Gullah did this so the soul of the departed would have a series of chambers where it could rest, an ancient belief from the rich cultural heritage of the Bakongo people who call Angola home. Now Sophie's soul had many rooms to inhabit before she left the world for good and all.

There's a kind of caveat that comes with pet ownership. You will probably outlive your animal, unless you happen to be very old at the time of adoption, or if your pet of choice is either a Galapagos tortoise or a Greenland shark. Understanding this proviso, though, doesn't diminish the sense of loss experienced when a family pet dies.

We would all miss Sophie, and there would be a palpable absence in our home, and it was as if we were losing a family member. Yet it wasn't. As clever and sweet as she had been, Sophie was not a human being, and it was not as if we had lost a blood relative or a dear friend.

My son and my daughter, who began their lives with Sophie as children, had become young adults by the time of her passing. Over the course of those thirteen years, she was a constant presence in our home, and as the children grew, Sophie seemed impossibly to remain the same. She didn't get larger, and her coat did not whiten. Photos of her taken shortly after her arrival in our home, and those taken weeks before her death show the same exact cat. She seemed ageless, as everything around her grew older, and then one day she was simply gone. **NE**

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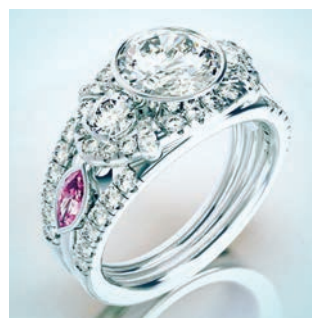
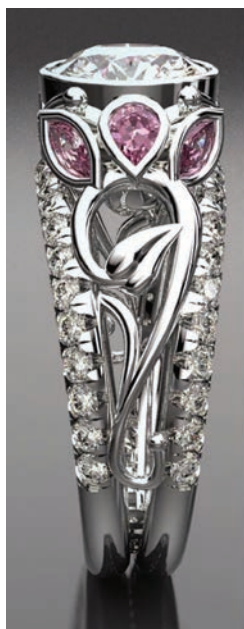
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BOOK REVIEW

One Life Shy of a Cat

by FRAN WITHROW

AFTER I FINISHED “The Seven or Eight Deaths of Stella Fortuna,” I turned to the beginning again, wanting to refresh my memory for this review. Fifteen minutes later, I was still reading, charmed all over again by this engaging novel. Author Juliet Grames is a master storyteller, and I fervently hope her first foray into fiction is not her last.

Stella Fortuna is a beautiful girl who grows up in Italy, and, though her name means “Lucky Star,” you will have to decide yourself just how fortunate she is. Throughout her life, she has near misses with death: everything from a catastrophe involving an eggplant (death number one), to a strange encounter with a pig, to a “stupid doctor.” Her father, who is a nasty human being, is absent for much of her childhood. He eventually settles in America, and, many years later, insists that his wife Assunta, son Luigi, and daughters, Stella and Tina, join him there. On the cusp of World War II, Assunta feels she has no choice but to leave her beloved Italy, so the family travels to Connecticut, where Stella’s brushes with death continue.

Stella and her younger sister Tina have a close relationship, and Tina is always nearby when one of the catastrophes happens. Is this a coincidence? It becomes more puzzling when we realize Tina is actually the one who relates Stella’s story to the narrator of the book.

Our captivating narrator relates the story with rich color and vivid images, a tale so beguiling you don’t want it to end. Pondering the meaning of love, the courage of women, and the ties that bind us all together, the book is seamlessly written and beautifully laid out.

For Stella, life goes on after each near fatality. She tries repeatedly to stand up to her domineering, wicked father, but women at that time had few rights. Despite her resistance, she is forced into marriage, and has child after child, always supported by her mother and her loyal sister Tina. When Stella



chokes on a chicken wing (death number seven), Tina saves her, and Stella says, “Tina, I almost died.” “I know,” says Tina. “It’s been a while.” The constant undercurrent of dry humor adds even more life to this book.

When Stella undergoes emergency brain surgery which alters her personality (death number eight), she is convinced Tina has always been the one sabotaging her. Is that true? Or is there a ghost who has been trying to kill Stella all her life? As a consequence, she refuses to see her sister. In the end, the narrator visits first Stella, now in her 90’s, then goes across the street to see Tina. “I love her,” Tina says of Stella. “I always love her. Maybe you can write that.” “Yes, I will write that,” says the narrator. And then they focus on making little meatballs, because when life is perplexing, there is always food. **NJ**

The Seven or Eight Deaths of Stella Fortuna

By Juliet Grames

\$27.99

Harper Collins

464 pages

New Paintings by Vittorio Colaizzi



ERIC SCHINDLER GALLERY presents *Ground Cove*, new works by Vittorio Colaizzi, who holds an MFA in painting and a PhD in art history from VCU. He has held one-person exhibitions at the Eric Schindler Gallery in Richmond and Stump Town Gallery in Alma, Wisconsin, and has participated in group exhibitions in Richmond, Norfolk, Courtland, Minneapolis, and Brooklyn. He received a Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Professional Fellowship in 2006. His monograph on Rob-

ert Ryman was published by Phaidon in 2017, and he has also published essays on Trudy Benson, Joan Thorne, and Thornton Willis. Colaizzi is an associate professor of art history at Old Dominion University. The show runs from February 14 through March 14.

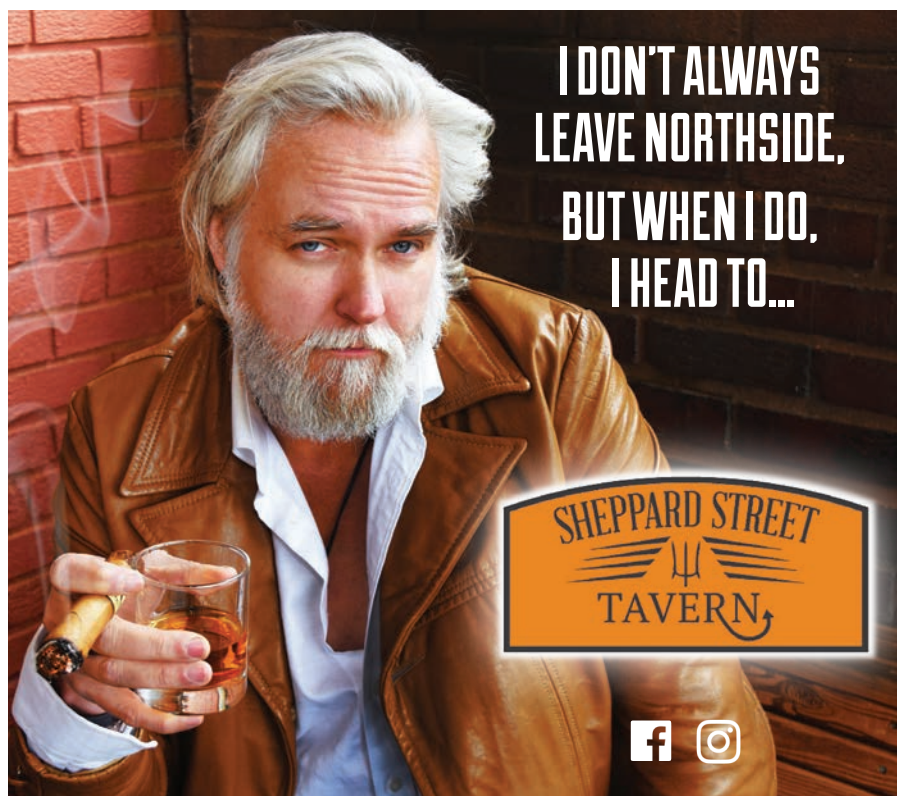
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Louis Draper and the Kamoinge Workshop



INSPIRED BY THE ARCHIVE OF Richmond native Louis Draper, VMFA has organized an unprecedented exhibition that chronicles the first twenty years of the Kamoinge Workshop, a group of African American photographers he helped to found in 1963. More than 180 photographs by fifteen of the early members—Antho-

ny Barboza, Adger Cowans, Danny Dawson, Roy DeCarava, Louis Draper, Al Fennar, Ray Francis, Herman Howard, Jimmie Mannas Jr., Herb Randall, Herb Robinson, Beuford Smith, Ming Smith, Shawn Walker, and Calvin Wilson—reveal the vision and commitment of this remarkable group of artists. Through June 14.



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MUSIC



Alfredo Rodríguez and Pedrito Martínez at U of R

PERCUSSIONIST PEDRITO Martínez and pianist Alfredo Rodríguez will perform at 7:30pm February 13 at the Modlin Center at University of Richmond. Both GRAMMY® Award-nominated artists first worked together on Rodríguez's 2012 release *Invasion Parade*. Rodríguez, who was trained in the rigorous classical conservatories of Havana, Cuba, is a protégé of Quincy Jones, who took him under his wing when he defected to the

United States in 2009. His riveting artistry is informed as much by Bach and Stravinsky as it is by his Afro-Cuban and jazz roots. Martínez's musical training came directly from the streets of his childhood neighborhood, Cayo Hueso in Old Havana, and he has subsequently performed with artists such as Sting, Paul Simon, and Wynton Marsalis.

Modlin Center
453 Westhampton Way, Richmond, VA
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Bryan Forrest Band At Stir Crazy Cafe

THE BRYAN FORREST BAND will perform 6 till 8pm February 20 at Stir Crazy. The Newport News-based group has performed at numerous Hampton Roads venues including Water Street Grille, Fat Tuna Grill, York River Oyster Company, Vintner's Winery, The Point at Phoebus, Upper Shirley Winery, White Dog Bistro, Grey Goose, Yorktown Days, Yorktown Wine Festival, Sly Clyde's Ciderworks, Cogan's Deli, Hilton Tavern, and That Damn Mary Brewery to name a few. In their live shows, the band performs cover tunes, instrumentals, and original songs in 'acous-



tic classic rock' style. They like to refer to their repertoire as "80 years of popular music"! **NR**

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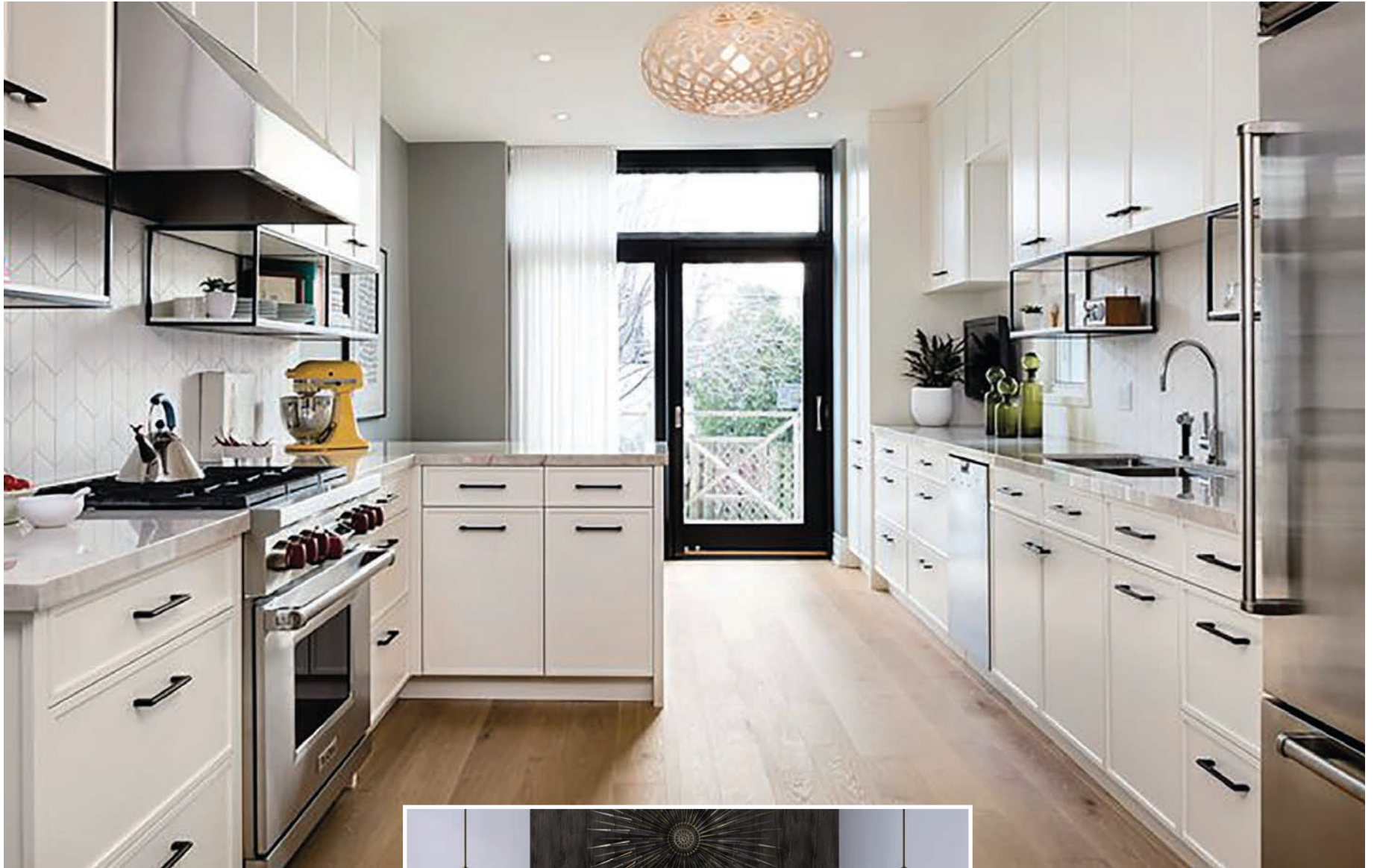
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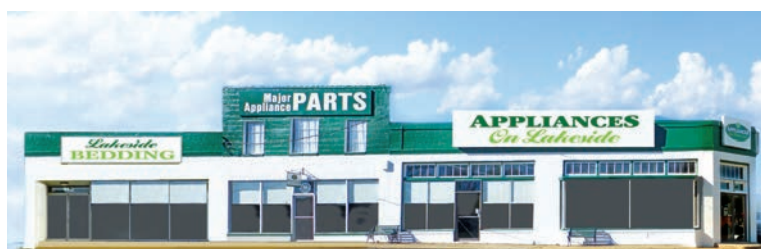


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