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## INDIRA SULTANIC

survived a war in her homeland, struck out on her own in the strange world of the American Midwest where she met her life mate—Andy Ullman, aka, Guppy Jo. Throughout her college career, Indira studied language and is now an assistant professor at VCU. But her greatest desire has always been the universal tongue—music. And she absolutely excels at it with a natural ear for beats and melodies, and a gift for making words fit together just right, words that illuminate our shared human experiences. *continued on page 12*





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**COVER IMAGE:** *Illustration by Rebecca D'Angelo*

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# Murals and Masonry

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

## MATT LIVELY'S NEW MURAL AT HOBNOB: IT'S ALL ABOUT FIFTIES

**M**ATT LIVELY really knows how to celebrate a birthday: on his natal day, he does what a Halfling might do—he gives gifts to others.

In early December, Matt Lively is putting the finishing touches on a mural that spans the entire south wall of HOBNOB on Hermitage Road. One of his signature beecycle murals already graces the north wall of the same Lakeside restaurant.

HOBNOB, co-owner, Tracey Thoroman joins us, steps back from the wall with arms folded across a black bib apron, and nods.

With brush still in hand, as he dabs a curl of white paint onto a daisy petal. Matt tells me he's celebrating his 50th birthday which is why he is painting 50 daisies on the wall at HOBNOB. What's more he's doing it in exchange for 50 HOBNOB gift certificates for \$50 each which will go to 50 area nurses, recognizing the selfless and courageous work they have performed during COVID-19 pandemic.

"My mom was a nurse and I can't help think about my mom on my birthday, so I thought of nurses," says Matt, and then he turns to Tracey. "But you guys thought of nurses also, so it was the perfect combination," Matt says.

Turns out, Matt was the first Lamaze baby born in Richmond thanks to his mother who taught classes in that birthing technique up until the time Matt and his wife had their first child.

Matt describes what someone sees when entering the parking lot at HOBNOB. First, you see his mural of beecycles. "And the drive-through is great and it's got an umbrella and happy people come out to give you your food," he says. "But when you round the corner, when you come to HOBNOB, it used to be a gray wall here, so I thought that it would be good to have something else back here as you drive out.



Matt Lively and Tracey Thoroman



Victor Ayala

When I ask him the width of the mural, he says, "It's exactly fifty daisies wide."

"Do your beecycles ever visit this side to pollinate?" I ask.

"That will be on my fifty-first birthday," Matt Lively says.

Then, Tracey tells me that the response to the gift certificates for nurses was overwhelming. "We had a great response," he says. "About five hundred people got nominated. We wish we could have given them out to everybody, but we drew the fifty names on Monday afternoon and we've notified them all on Facebook and Instagram. They're the ones who are doing the really hard work during this pandemic. People like Matt's mother."

## VICTOR AYALA COMPLETES MASONRY ON BELLEVUE'S LATEST ADDITION

Victor Ayala, a master mason and owner of My Outdoor Project, just completed a project that will benefit the entire Bellevue community.

There's a small triangle of land at the corner of Fauquier and Bellevue avenues that is owned by the city. The parcel was overgrown with weeds and English ivy, privet and small holly saplings. For the better part of a year now, David Lydiard, past president of the Bellevue Civic Association, has been hacking his way through a jungle of red tape to get permission from Richmond that would allow the BCA to do

something with this small chunk of land. Finally, just a few weeks ago, the city gave its nod of approval.

"(Third District City Councilman) Chris Hilbert helped a lot to push this through," said David.

Almost immediately after approval, Victor Ayala was selected as the mason to do the project. "Victor gave us the most competitive bid," David said. The cost of the project was about \$8,500.

Several days before Victor finished the job, I talked with him onsite as his crew was shoveling in a bed of gravel, and raking it smooth. "We did a sidewalk of pavers along the curb and we will build a raised patio," he told me. "And then we're going to build a sitting wall, where can sit down and rest. It's gonna look nice."

Victor, over the years, has done of landscaping and hardscaping in the Northside and elsewhere in the Richmond metro area. "I'm real happy to be doing this project for the Bellevue community," he said. "Thank you, Bellevue, for giving me the opportunity to build this."

## MURAL REFLECTING NORTHSIDE'S VALUES OF INCLUSIVITY AND UNITY COMING TO MACARTHUR AVENUE

Aliza Sterling, owner of True North Yoga and Wellness on Richmond's Northside, is working in conjunction with artist Nico Cathcart to create a massive mural on the north elevation



Nico Cathcart with Liza Sterling



# A Farewell Message From Your 3<sup>rd</sup> District Councilman Chris Hilbert

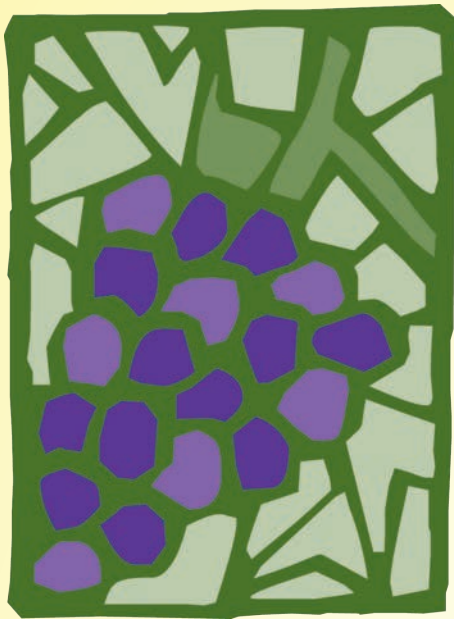


To the residents of the 3rd district and the City of Richmond, I wanted to express my deepest gratitude for your trust, support and counsel during these past 16 years that I have been your City Councilman. Thank you for the honor and the privilege to serve our community. It seems like yesterday that I began my first campaign and saw the real beauty of our district: from Bryan Park to Battery Park, the varied architecture of our homes and the tree-lined streets bursting with fall colors. I saw the potential of our neighborhood commercial corridors of Bellevue and MacArthur Avenues and Brookland Park Blvd. More importantly, I came to know an awesome group of folks who wanted the best for their neighbors, friends and children. They were ready to work hard to make that happen and indeed they have.

Over the past decade and a half, we've shared some good times. We have also witnessed natural disasters and personal tragedies. During these events, I saw people come together and support one another. Moreover, these events have revealed the common decency, the good character and the strong determination of Northsiders. We have some very difficult days ahead, but I am certain that these qualities that have been on display will carry us through to the other side.

Thank you for allowing me to play a part in our story.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris".



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of her shop on MacArthur Avenue that will extend from the sidewalk to the alley. Plans for this undertaking have been in the works for more than a year.

"Nico and I talked about a year and a half ago about doing a mural on the side wall of True North Yoga and Wellness," says Aliza.

The initial seed for the mural came to Aliza from a song. Words from Ani Di-Franco's "Overlap" planted themselves deep in her brain, and she would repeat them inwardly almost like a mantra. "I know there is strength in the differences between us. And I know there is comfort where we overlap." This strand of syllables seemed to capture the strange place we find ourselves in during this here and now, where common ground seems to be disappearing like a shoreline on a neap tide.

"The idea is that it would be talking about unity," says Aliza. "I think that that's a very important topic right now, and we're trying to figure out the exact mural that feels right for the Northside community and show a unity among our community."

Aliza and Nico are standing on the sidewalk outside True North, and move to the northern edge of the building. They invite me to imagine a sweeping mural that will run from the front of the building all the way to the back.

Nico talks about some of the visual concepts for the mural she and Aliza have been mulling over. "We had been talking a lot about incorporating a rainbow to represent the LG-BTQ community, and actually using the word unity in the mural," Nico tells me. "I'm also probably going to use some of my birds." Nico pauses for a moment, and then says, "I'm actually an artist who's going deaf. I'm hard of hearing, and I often use birds as a way to talk about my disability, so we are going to incorporate a bird or two in there."

Later, Aliza tells me that the mural will also include a reference to the Black Lives Matter movement. In the end, the mural will reflect the diversity and inclusivity that define the Northside community. "I couldn't be more excited for this mural and about working with Nico," Aliza says. "But we need the support of the community in a big way to make this idea a reality." **NJ**

*You can help make this dream become a reality by visiting their GoFundMe link at: [gofundme.com/f/mural-for-unity](https://gofundme.com/f/mural-for-unity)*





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**JUSTICE**

# Bending the Arc with \$25 Million for Historic Justice Initiatives

**V**IRGINIA IS BENDING the arc of the moral universe toward justice thanks to a new budget item proposal from Governor Ralph Northam

On December 11, Governor Northam announced a proposed budget that will include nearly \$25 million to transform historic sites and advance historic justice efforts.

“These investments will ensure a more diverse and inclusive retelling of our history,” said Governor Northam. “At a time when our Commonwealth and nation are grappling with how to illustrate a more complete picture of the past, we must work to enhance our public spaces and shine light on previously untold stories.”

This investment will include nearly \$11 million to support the efforts of transforming Monument Avenue. This funding will enable the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts to hire staff and launch a community-driven effort to redesign Monument Avenue.

“For too long, Richmond’s Monument Avenue told an incomplete and inaccurate story of the city and Virginia’s past,” Alex Nyerges, director and CEO of the VMFA, said. “The funding to transform Monument Avenue will allow us to re-envision an inspirational, forward thinking, inclusive and healing place for everyone who lives in and visits our city and state.”

“On behalf of many neighbors - this news is exciting and hopeful. We welcome a future on Monument Avenue that includes a visual expression and experience that is welcoming and inspirational to all people,” said Monument Avenue resident Alice Massie.

This investment includes an additional \$9 million for the development of a Slavery and Freedom Heritage Site, and improvements to the Slave Trail in Richmond, as well as \$100,000 to support the Virginia Emancipation and Freedom Monument project on Brown’s Island. This funding will support efforts to preserve the site known as the Devil’s Half-Acre, or Lumpkin’s Jail, in Shockoe Bottom as a historical site.

“Hundreds of thousands of enslaved persons were forced to pass through Lumpkin’s Jail on the Richmond Slave



*Lumpkin’s Jail, otherwise known as The Devil’s Half-Acre.*

Trail,” Delegate Delores McQuinn said. “It is far past time to develop a new Slavery and Freedom Heritage Site at Lumpkin’s Jail and invest in improvements to the Slave Trail, so that this important history is not forgotten.”

“The Emancipation and Freedom Monument on Brown’s Island will commemorate the abolition of slavery and recognize numerous African American Virginians who were devoted to advancing freedom and civil rights,” said Senator Jennifer McClellan. “This funding will move this important project another step closer to becoming a reality.”

“This constitutes a massive investment in centering stories of trauma and resilience that have been sidelined by proponents of slavery, the Lost Cause, and segregation,” according to Mayor Levar Stoney. “The Commonwealth’s support is the tool we need to commemorate and communicate Richmond’s real history and honor unjustly silenced voices.”

This investment will also include \$5 million to support Project Harmony, an environmental justice project to address the repatriation of tombstones

from the former Columbian Harmony Cemetery and the creation of the Harmony Living Shoreline memorial. These headstones were removed from Columbian Harmony Cemetery—a historic African American cemetery in Washington, D.C.—and relocated in 1960 to make way for commercial development. While some headstones were moved to a new cemetery in Landover, Maryland, others were sold off by the developer, including those that were used to create a riprap along the shore of the Potomac River.

“I was horrified when I discovered the headstones from Columbian Harmony Cemetery scattered along two miles of shoreline on the Potomac. With the help of this funding, we will be able to return many of these to a better and more respectful resting place while creating a memorial to remember those that we are unable to remove,” Senator Richard Stuart said.

“These are not just investments in physical space, but in the telling of our shared history,” said Delegate Lamont Bagby. “These initiatives will help us continue the effort to uncover the truth of the past. We must finally get this right.”



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# Santa Claus Was Not White He Was a Person of Color

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

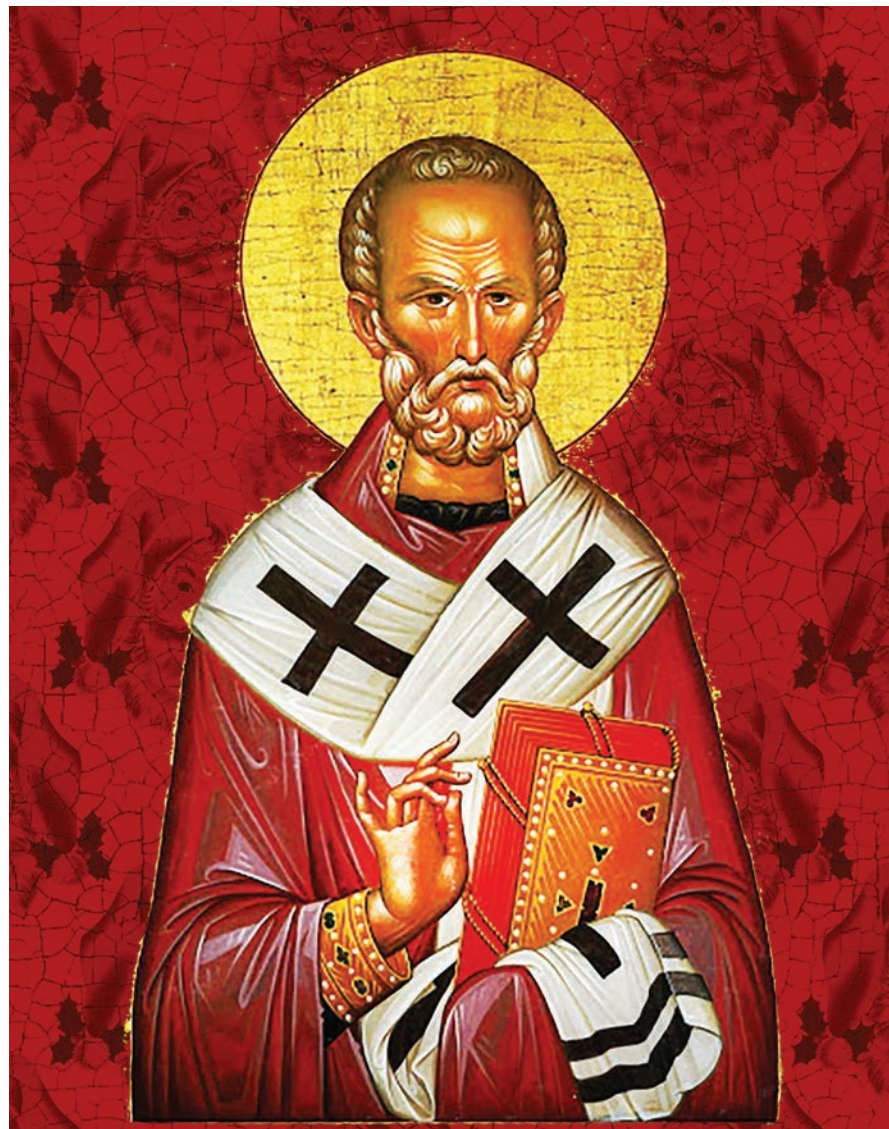
**E**MBOLDENED BY A president who was endorsed by white supremacists (the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi Richard Spencer, among others), chowderheads, back in December of 2016, on around the feast day of Saint Nicholas, commenced a racist firestorm on social media and even tried to shut down that nightmarish entity of Minnesota origin—the Mall of America. The tender feelings of these delicate snowflakes were injured by the sight of a Black Santa Claus at this mega-mall actually taking white children up on his lap. To them, it was anathema of the most odious order, for Santa Claus, they believed, always was and always will be white as the driven snow.

And just this past month, Arkansan racists went ballistic. This time it was over a Christmas display in a North Little Rock neighborhood. The offense was an inflatable Black Santa, and the man who had the audacity to decorate his front yard with this abomination received a letter from one of his neighbors. It read like this: “Please remove your n---o Santa Claus yard decoration. You should not try to deceive children into believing that I am a n---o. I am a caucasian (white man, to you) and have been for the past 600 years. Your being jealous of my race is no excuse for your dishonesty. Besides that, you are making yourself the laughing stock of the neighborhood. Obviously, your values are not that of the Lakewood area and maybe you should move to a neighborhood out east with the rest of your racist kind.” It was signed Santa Claus.

Well, guess what Virginia (and every other state in the Union for that matter, including Arkansas), Santa Claus was real and a man of color, not the Nordic manifestation given life and form in the 19th century by two very white men—Clement C. Moore and Thomas Nast.

Here’s the real story.

Saint Nicholas, aka Santa Claus (santa, incidentally is of Latin origin, the root for the word “saint”; and Claus is simply an abbreviated version of Nicho-



las), was born more than seventeen centuries ago in the seaport of Patara, Lycia which is in present-day Turkey. Though his family was wealthy, Nicholas divested himself of his fortune after both his parents died during a pandemic that swept through his native village. He gave everything away to help those in need, and became a monk, later a priest and finally Bishop of Myra. He had a deep space in his heart for children, people without money, prisoners, thieves, and the disenfranchised of any sort. Quite a guy, and above all else he was deferential.

Perhaps the most famous story about this humble man involved three girls of less than modest means. Because their family was in dire straits, the three girls were destined to live out their lives as prostitutes. But Nick intervened. At night he dropped three sacks of gold either through a window

or down a chimney to provide the girls with a dowry. The girls’ father, an elderly man, was elated. Those three sacks of coins morphed into golden balls that became the emblem still used today by pawnbrokers the world over. Which is why Nicholas is patron saint of pawnbrokers, among other things. He is also venerated as the patron of sailors, merchants, archers, thieves, prostitutes, children, brewers, bakers, unmarried people, students, and even wolves. Oh, and the way Saint Nicholas left these three gifts surreptitiously in the middle of the night, tossing them in through an open window or down the gullet of a chimney gave us St. Nick’s customary entrance into our home every December 25.

Miracles, of one kind or other, do a saint make.

When Nicholas was studying to be-

come a priest, he boarded a sailing vessel bound for the great library of Alexandria in Egypt. Halfway across the Mediterranean, a storm rose up and with it fifteen-foot seas. The deckhands reefed the sails, but the ship listed hard to port and it seemed certain she would founder. Nicholas, who had been down below, climbed up to the deck and raising his arms to the pewter skies implored the wind to die down. And it did.

There are numerous miracles ascribed to this saint, so many in fact that he became known as Nicholas the Wonderworker. Many paintings of the saint show him standing next to three young boys huddled together in a wooden barrel, a reference to the oddest miracle of them all, one that calls to mind Sweeney Todd and Hannibal Lechter.

The story goes like this: Three boys, sons of shepherds, wander into a village and are having trouble finding their way back home so they enter a butcher shop and ask the proprietor for help. The owner lures them into the basement, kills them, cuts them up like slaughtered pigs, and lowers their body parts into a massive barrel filled with brine. He plans to sell their remains as ham or other cuts of swine meat. Nicholas hears about this, enters the butcher’s shop, insists on seeing the barrel, and then performs something like the Isis/Osiris resurrection. Nicholas reassembles the body parts of the three boys and raises them from the dead.

In appearance, the real Santa Claus, outside of his beard and a red bishop’s robe, doesn’t in the least resemble the Santa popularized by Coca-Cola in the 1931.

To begin with: Saint Nicholas was in no way overweight. In fact he was lean with a prominent forehead, and a receding hairline. He did wear the red robe of a bishop, but it was not rimmed with white fur, and there were no pants and no black belt. He did not wear black boots either; he wore sandals. And above all else he was definitely not white.

Merry Christmas! **NJ**



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# INDIRA SULTANIC WITH GUPPY JO

## ON THE UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE

**INDIRA SULTANIC** was born in a small town called Konjic, a sort of hyphen, midway between the cities of Sarajevo and Mostar. When she was just eight years old a war broke out in her homeland that would last for three years, a devastating civil war with a signature of ethnic cleansing, and even after the truce, recovery was slow in coming.

“T

**HEY CALL US THE ‘AND’** or the dash because we are right in between the two cities everybody has heard of in Bosnia-Herzegovina,” Indira tells me. “It’s a relatively small town, kind of nestled between mountains in a valley on a river. It’s pretty small.”

We’re on my front porch, socially distanced by twelve feet. Indira is sitting next to her husband, Andy Ullman, at a glass-topped table. By her side is a guitar, and Andy, who is also known as Guppy Jo, holds a goblet drum between his thighs. They had just finished playing one of Indira’s latest compositions, a song called “Untethered” that rings with a melancholic defiance, a will to sever the tethers to our past. Her words and rhythms, and the emotional depth of her vocals make me think of Sara Bareilles and Jason Mraz and a handful of other contemporary songwriters who manage to seamlessly blend folk with pop, where neither form outweighs the other.

Indira is remembering now what it was like growing up in country at war with itself, a war that would ultimately claim the lives of about 100,000 people,

and see the rape of almost 50,000 women. It was the most massive European conflict since the Second World War.

“I was a kid,” Indira says. “I saw it all through a child’s eyes. When you are a kid you know that you should be afraid because your parents are afraid, but my parents were really good at making sure we had everything we needed.” Almost daily they could hear artillery fire, its crackle and roar like a distant thunder. “It was scary,” she says. “But I was a very curious child and a bit of a daredevil, so we would wander off and play with our friends during a ceasefire and do all the things that you would normally do.”

Not long ago, shortly after COVID-19 began changing the way we live, Indira walked into a grocery store and noticed the rows of empty shelves. Walking past those naked shelves as the squeaky wheels of her shopping cart and the clack of her own shoes made a faint noise, Indira’s ears pricked up at the low register of a hollow echo that took her back to her own childhood.

“It was kind of re-traumatizing at first because peo-

by **CHARLES MCGUIGAN**  
photos by **REBECCA D’ANGELO**





ple were hoarding supplies, and hoarding food,” she says. “It felt like wartime. It just kind of reminded me of that. I was a kid during that war. Now I’m in my thirties and processing what happened to me during the war. During the war in Bosnia, when there was no food, you couldn’t really get more of any supplies that you needed unless humanitarian aid came in and distributed that.”

Part of her was slightly amused by the fervent stockpiling of a particular item. “I think I know how to make due with some things because I have lived through that war,” says Indira. “If we were out of toilet paper, we still had running water, we still had soap. There are other ways to do things. Because we’re so accustomed to all of the modern day luxuries, I think people forget that you can still make due even if you don’t have these things.”

Indira remembers her education during the war. “Everything was kind of accelerated,” she says, “We would finish a grade in three months, and we would go to these little barracks, a makeshift school that they had to put together, and that’s where we had our classes, and everything was shortened. I don’t even know how we managed to get any education, but the teachers were amazing and everybody was continuing with life and trying to keep things as normal as they could.”

These days, she shares her own experiences of priva-

tion with her students at VCU where she is an assistant professor of Spanish translation and interpreting studies in the School of World Studies. “I told them I lived through a war, and the point was to survive,” Indira says. She moves closer to the microphone, centering it before her moving lips, as if she is about to divulge a secret, and she lowers her voice. “I told them that they’re experiencing something that’s affecting them, something they can’t control.”

Indira pauses, considers what she has just said, and again moves closer to the mic. “I lived through a war,” she says. “This is what I tell my students. The idea is to stay safe and live through all of this. We don’t really know what’s going to happen. We never do. I think the difference is that with the war, you could hear the shelling every day. There was this enemy and you knew something was going on. You knew that there was danger and you could hear it as opposed to COVID. You can’t see it, you can’t really hear it, you just hear about it on the news, and it’s invisible. It’s this sort of invisible killer, dangerous in a different way.”

There are other dangers Indira senses that remind her of her native land and what drove it to war, and what persists there even now. “In terms of the nationalistic rhetoric and some of the same propaganda that led to the war, it’s still present and there’s a lot of fascist and nationalistic kinds of behaviors and rhetoric,” she says. “When it comes to any of the forces

that drive conflict, I think it’s very much here, and it takes a public figure to openly state these things and then give permission to everyone else to act on these beliefs and thoughts. ‘I hate my neighbor secretly, but I’m gonna now act on it because this person that I bow down to told me I could.’ There are acts that are isolated and hateful”

When the tides of war receded, life in Bosnia began returning to normal. “At that time we had moved back to the city and it was as normal as it could be post-war,” says Indira. “We were going to school and hanging out with friends and recovering. Life was as normal as it could be. We started resuming a lot of the normal activities. There was a lot of after school programming that was happening that we didn’t have during the war, so it was really nice to participate.”

One of her favorite activities before and after the war was music. Her parents, Bajro and Naila, and two siblings, Omar and Adisa, all sang. “I’ve always sung,” Indira tells me. “I’ve always enjoyed it and everybody in my family sings. My mom’s side of the family is especially musical and we used to sing traditional Bosnian songs.”

After some gentle urging, Indira agrees to sing one of these songs. She performs it acapella with a background percussion supplied by Guppy Jo. It’s called a *sevdalinka*—a sort of sad love song. There’s a deep yearning in these songs frequently about hopeless or doomed love, peppered with regret and resignation. As I listen, with eyes shut, I am transported elsewhere. This music is definitely eastern, which makes sense—Bosnia after all, was part of the Ottoman Empire until the first years of the 20th century. When various towns and cities in Bosnia became centers of Islamic culture, the locals adopted eastern religious melodies known as *ilahije* and fitted them out with new lyrics. The melody of the song Indira is performing is haunting and mystical. When she finishes the piece, I ask



her for a rough translation.

“A woman is calling to her lover,” says Indira. “She’s saying, ‘Where are you going, and why aren’t you taking me with you?’” And then the woman says something really strange.

“She says, ‘Take me along with you and take me to the market and find the silversmith and sell me to him and take money for me,’” Indira explains. “That’s how I understand it.”

Like many Bosnians, Indira and her family are Muslim. “I wouldn’t say we’re practicing Muslims though,” she says. “We were born into it and there are certain customs and things that we observed, and holidays that we celebrated. I’m not a practicing Muslim, but it’s part of my heritage and there are certain aspects of it that I still observe to a degree because I have great respect for it and it’s part of my upbringing. We celebrate some of the holidays even here by recognizing and acknowledging them and indulging in baklava, but because I don’t have family here we really don’t get to go visit and enjoy the holidays in a way that they’re celebrated in Bosnia.”

As a teenager in Bosnia, Indira had one dream. “In high school I was going to be a rock star and conquer the world,” she says. “I competed in a lot of local competitions. I was in choir in middle school and high school, and I have a lot of musical friends.” And her native town of Konjic was filled with folks who possessed great musical talent, some of whom were nationally renowned.

Back in 2001, Indira won a local singing contest. “It was kind of like The Voice of my hometown,” she says. “And with the prize money I received, I was able to get a passport for myself.”

That same year she met a professor who taught at Bluffton University in Ohio. His name was Jim Satterwhite and while visiting an English professor in Kojic, he dropped by the high school Indira attended. From this man, Indira received a college application to Bluffton University. It was on her 18th birthday, and she had wanted to immigrate to America for many years.

“Mom even to this day jokes, that during the war I was telling them, ‘Let’s go to America, everybody’s going to America,’” she says. “We were hearing the news of people fleeing the country, and I was like, ‘Why are we here? I want to go to America.’ And I think even after the war I al-

ways loved English and I was always drawn to the language and I really liked American English.”

When she received that application from Jim Satterwhite, she felt her fate was sealed. She called her sister, Adisa, who had recently emigrated from Bosnia to Sweden.

“I’m going to America,” she said.

“What do you mean you’re going to America?” Adisa asked.

“I got an application to Bluffton University.”

There was pause, and then Adisa said, “So, you got an application; you’re not going anywhere.”

That sisterly rain on Indira’s parade lifted quickly enough. Indira applied, was accepted, and what’s more received a full-tuition scholarship. “But I didn’t pursue music,” Indira says. “I studied English in college, and Spanish and ESL.”

Now Bluffton was not the sort of town Indira had envisioned. “It’s always interesting to think about the version of America that you are sold when you don’t live in America,” she says. “People think LA, New York, San Francisco, beaches and coastlines and palm trees.”

Bluffton was quintessentially Midwestern small town. With a population under five thousand, this village in northwestern Ohio was Main Street USA with one main drag flanked by a bank, a coffee shop, a restaurant, a drugstore and the flagship store of Ten Thousand Villages. But for Indira, it was not disappointing.

“It was a beautiful experience,” she says. “I think having that small community was great because it was nurturing and it was safe. People even left their houses unlocked. It’s that America where all the neighbors know each other, and everybody’s really friendly.”

And Bluffton University was not like other schools Indira had attended. “It’s a Mennonite school, and coming from a different background it was my first introduction to a faith-based institution that had a really strong mission,” she says. “I got to learn about Christian ethics and took classes in biblical literature. It was a great experience. You take a girl from a small town in Bosnia and put her in to a small town in America. You get to learn a lot of different things that perhaps you never would have otherwise.”



*Guppy Jo and Indira on a front porch in Northside.*

After earning her bachelors from Bluffton, she received a masters in Spanish translation from Kent State. She then moved to Cincinnati and took a job as a project manager in a translation department, a position she held for the next three years.

And then she decided to further her education. “I knew I wanted to eventually go back and get a PhD because as people say in academia, ‘We’re all masochists and just like to constantly have to prove ourselves and be told we’re not good enough.’ I went to Kent State for my PhD. I got in their program and was offered the assistantship in translation studies.”

That was in 2011, and a year later, Indira’s would change for good and all.

It was in July and Indira, who had taught herself to play the guitar, was writing a song. She was at strange place that had formerly been a bank. At that time it was a beer and wine shop, and a guitar shop, a rehearsal spot for musicians, and it even had a small live stage surrounded by fifty or sixty theater seats, where musicians like The Schwartz Brothers would come to perform. On open mic night, Indira would perform some of her latest songs.

On that July afternoon, Indira met members of a band that called itself The Devil and Me. The drummer was immediately attracted to Indira. His name was Andy Ullman.

“And we just started talking and I asked if she’d ever played with a drummer before and she said, ‘No,’” Andy tells me. “She had her guitar with her, so we went up to the rehearsal space and played a few songs that I actually recorded on my phone. I was smitten with her right off the bat. You know how it is.”

At the time, Andy worked with a guy who hailed from Serbia, and when he discovered that Indira was from Bosnia, he tried to wow her with his knowledge of Bosnian vulgarity. She didn’t seem to be impressed. She would roll her eyes when he suggested another dirty word.

What caught Indira’s eye though was Andy’s manner of dress.

“It was just band practice,” says Andy. “So I was wearing Adidas running shorts that were way too short for me and a white T-shirt. And I’ve got a salty face after a two-hour practice. Things aren’t crisp and clean.”

Now Indira is laughing and her smile is broad and gentle. “He was wearing what was jokingly called the Bosnian uniform,” she says. “The stuff that’s stereotypically young eastern European or Russian men wore at the time. A dirty wife beater, running shorts, and his hair is in a ponytail and super long. He’s sitting there a Bosnian uniform.”

There was something else that caught her attention about Andy. He knew more about music than any one she had ever know. He was a walking encyclopedia of it.

Indira reaches her hand across the table and place it on her husband’s hand. “You started talking about the greatest rock bands of all time from all around the world,” she says to him. “And that was before you even knew I was Bosnian. So you started talking about Bijelo Dugme (White Button) as one of the greatest bands of all time. It was fascinating that you knew that.”

The following Tuesday, Indira and Andy played again, this time with Gary Jungeberg, a member of the Devil and Me, which would soon disband when the lead singer and bass player moved to Cleveland. “Gary is very creative



and he's a brilliant guitar player," says Andy. "Gary and I would eventually call ourselves Guppy Jo, which was the nickname of a woman who used to work in the bank that later became our practice space."

Within a month after meeting, Indira and Andy began dating. Andy tells me that he has an old iPhone 4s recording of the music he made together with Indira right after they first met. "That recording was made two hours after we met each other," says Andy. "And I'll post a little snippet from it on Facebook when the anniversary date of that day comes around."

Indira and Guppy Jo began playing as a trio at coffee shops in Ohio. They would practice two times a week, and their sound had become tight. "With every practice I would bring a more developed idea and then Gary would start building around that and so the songs came together," Indira says. The couple were married in 2015 and then moved to California where Indira had accepted a position as assistant profes-

sor at Fresno State University.

Before they left, at Gary's urging, they spent six weeks recording what would become their first album which has eleven tracks. "I did all the vocal tracking," Indira says. "And Gary did all the engineering. All the credit for producing and editing and mixing and mastering goes to Gary."

Before leaving for the west coast they staged a final concert on July 4, playing to a packed house.

Their time in Fresno was brief. Less than a year after moving there, Indira was offered a job at VCU here in Richmond.

Since moving here two years ago, Indira and Guppy Jo have been developing a pretty loyal following, and Indira continues to write songs. "We probably have enough material to release another album," says Indira. "We started working with a producer from Northern Virginia named Austin Bellow who's amazing, and for now we're just doing singles. It's been really great collaborating with someone like Austin."

Where her songwriting is concerned, Indira is a perfectionist. "I'm very critical of my work," she says. "And I won't show it to anyone unless I think it's good."

The song must be authentic so that she can put her emotion behind it when she performs. And the words matter, on every conceivable level. "I spend most time on the lyrics and revising the lyrics and thinking about how the words fit into the melody," Indira says. "Because I play guitar and accompany myself and write my own songs I don't play the melody, I sing the melody. So if I'm playing a chord progression, I start to build the melody around it, or the lyrics."

Inspiration comes from almost anywhere. Take her most recent song, Little Situation, soon to be released. "We had just learned a couple we know were going to be getting a divorce, and I thought, 'We got ourselves a little situation,'" Indira explains. "And that's exactly how the chorus goes. The whole song was built around that."

But Indira got stuck. "I couldn't finish

the second verse," she says. It plagued her day and night. She wrestled with it, but nothing would come. Then she read Glennon Doyle's book, "Untamed", and something clicked. "Reading that book inspired me to finish the second verse of the song," says Indira.

A well-composed song, whether or not you understand the language it is written in, should be able to evoke the appropriate emotion. "You can hear the emotion and you can tell if the song is sad, even with just the composition and the chords," Indira says. "The minor chords can tell one story. There are just so many different things that come into play, which is why it's considered the universal language. It makes you happy, or it makes you sad, or it kind of moves you in a way even though you may not understand the lyrics."

Indira Sultanik looks at her husband Guppy Jo. "Andy and I are a couple and we are married and we live together. We have this rhythm. We play together as a unit." **NJ**

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## The U.S. Presidency: The Worst of the Worst!

by JACK R. JOHNSON

**W**HEN WE TALK about the worst presidents in U.S. history, it's a pretty tight club. Not surprisingly, the presidents chosen share a few characteristics: insolence, narrow ideological fervor coupled with pride, obstinacy and short-sightedness. For years, the consensus among historians was relatively straightforward—a horse race between Franklin Pierce, James Buchanan and Andrew Johnson for the race to the bottom, with Warren Harding and his Teapot Dome scandal occasionally thrown in for good measure.

Franklin Pierce earned a spot on the worst list because of his reckless passion for expanding U.S. borders disregarding the sensitive issues surrounding slavery. The Mexican War veteran believed ardently in national expansion even at the cost of adding more slave states. To that end, he vigorously supported the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which, along with the earlier Compromise of 1850, effectively repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820.

Not happy with merely queuing the nation up for the bloodiest war in its history, Pierce also managed to secure U.S. recognition of a colonial regime in Nicaragua, presided over by an American proslavery adventurer, William Walker, who had instigated an insurrection and installed himself as president. The repercussions of this act were felt well into the 1980s with the Sandinista revolution and subsequent Iran/Contra affair that tainted Reagan's administration.

Theodore Roosevelt later wrote of Franklin Pierce that he was “a servile tool of men worse than himself ... ever ready to do any work the slavery leaders set him.” Not even the talented Nathaniel Hawthorne, his erstwhile biographer, and college bud, could rehabilitate the mischief Pierce created during his four-year stint.

**FOLLOWING HARD ON THE** heels of Franklin Pierce was the often cited candidate for worst president ever, James Buchanan. His term began March 4, 1857 with tensions simmering over the new territories and how they should be allowed into the Union.



Then, shortly after Buchanan's inauguration, the Supreme Court infamously ruled in the Dred Scott case that Blacks were not and never could become U.S. citizens, and the federal government couldn't outlaw slavery in its territories. Buchanan allegedly influenced the case's outcome and thought it would permanently put the slavery issue to rest. But the effect was quite the opposite. James Buchanan refused to challenge either the spread of slavery or the growing bloc of states that would later secede.

Historian Jean Baker argues that Buchanan's failure as a leader stemmed from his ideological roots. “He really worked quite conscientiously to support what became the Confederacy,” Baker wrote.

Baker's final observation on Buchanan might prove instructive about another contemporary president, “He failed miserably to understand an important thing, which was that the South was becoming a minority. That's why they were behaving the way they were. They saw more and more that they were going to lose the Electoral College and indeed they lost it in 1860 to Abraham Lincoln.”

In response to Lincoln's presidential victory in November 1860, seven Southern states seceded from the Union and formed the Confederacy. Buchanan did nothing. He claimed to

have no authority to block them, thus leaving Lincoln to contend with the newly formed Confederacy and a bitterly divided country.

**THE LAST 'BEST' WORST** president usually cited is Andrew Johnson. Never formally elected president, Johnson took the helm after Lincoln was assassinated. Originally, a Democrat who switched sides to be on Lincoln's ticket, Johnson fought with his own Republican Party about allowing secessionists back into the U.S. Government, favoring a leniency that was not popular after four of the bloodiest years in American history.

He released leading members of the Confederate cabinet from government custody, up to and including the former Confederate vice president, Alexander H. Stephens. He appointed governors in Southern states and allowed their legislatures to meet. Dominated by secessionists, these governments passed “black codes,” allowing slavery in all but name to continue in many areas. Although Johnson had supported an end to slavery in the 1860s, he was still very much a white supremacist, writing in 1866: “This is a country for white men, and by God, as long as I am President, it shall be a government for white men.”

In addition to vetoing renewal of the

Freedman's Bureau and the first civil rights bill, he encouraged opposition to the 14th Amendment itself, earning him the fury of the entire Republican Party.

As if his ideological blindness wasn't enough, he also had a grating personality. According to historian, David Priess, “He routinely called blacks inferior. He bluntly stated that no matter how much progress they made, they must remain so. He openly called critics disloyal, even treasonous. He liberally threw insults like candy during public speeches. He rudely ignored answers he didn't like. He regularly put other people into positions they didn't want to be in, then blamed them when things went sour. His own bodyguard later called him “destined to conflict,” a man who “found it impossible to conciliate or temporize.”

“Is there no way,” declared leading radical Senator Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania just months after Johnson's inauguration, “to arrest the insane course of the president in Washington?”

Johnson vetoed bill after bill regarding reconstruction that came from the Republican dominated legislature. The legislature in turn, overrode those vetoes in an historic snub unequalled in U.S. History. Ultimately, they turned back the president's rejections of bills a stunning 15 times—a record to this day. The overrides themselves even



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became popular: Priess noted that The Civil Rights Act's veto override in the House prompted a spontaneous outburst of applause among both representatives and spectators; the speaker found it impossible to restore order for several minutes."

The impeachment of Johnson probably came as no surprise, and his lack of a conviction at the Senate impeachment trial by a single vote probably had more to do with the fear of who might succeed him than any favor he might have drawn from the legislative body.

The one power left to him of any real consequence was the presidential pardon, which Andrew Johnson, like another contemporary president, used to great excess.

Andrew Johnson issued more pardons than all other presidents to that point combined. Overwhelmingly he pardoned Southern secessionists and those who had supported the rebellion against the Union. Johnson even pardoned a few of the men convicted in the conspiracy to kill President Lincoln. If Johnson thought the pardons would earn him favor with the Democrats, he was sorely mistaken. They passed him over as nominee for their party's presidential candidate and went instead with a little known partisan named Horatio Seymour, "a man who didn't even want the nomination."

**IN RETROSPECT, ALL OF THE** nominees for 'worst' president have similar character flaws and a singular blind spot: a lack of clear understanding about the nature of the nation and the presidential office. The U.S. presidency is meant to represent all of the nation, of course, not just those with whom you are in ideological agreement. This rancorous partisan blind spot is likely what doomed the worst presidents, and no doubt, we'll be adding to the bottom of this list shortly with the name of a president who is equally acrimonious and petty, who, like Johnson openly called critics liars or disloyal, and even treasonous. He is yet another single term president who deliberately sought to divide the country and who "found it impossible to conciliate or temporize." The only real question is how low will he go on the worst list? I suspect history will not be kind. 

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## BOOK REVIEW

# Unbreakable Bonds Forged In Bondage

by FRAN WITHROW

**“W**HITE

Chrysanthemum” is the gripping story of two girls living through the Japanese occupation of Korea in 1943. Hana, her sister Emi, and their parents make their home on a small island off the coast of Korea. The children are warned to avoid the Japanese who control the area, but one day Hana notices a Japanese soldier about to find little Emi, who sits on the shore while Hana and her mother are diving for fish. Fearing for Emi’s safety, Hana distracts the soldier, who kidnaps Hana and forces her to become a “comfort woman,” or sexual slave, for the Japanese army.

Hana is housed with other young girls and women in appalling conditions, and all the women are forced to service any soldier who is interested in them. Despite battling hunger, exhaustion, and beatings which bring their bodies down, most of these young women never give up hope and remain determined to survive. The incredibly resilient Hana, for example, ceaselessly plans what will surely be a life-threatening and dangerous escape so she can return to her beloved mother and sister.

The story skips back and forth between Hana in 1943 and Emi in 2011. After Hana is stolen, Emi and her parents face their own traumas at the hands of the Japanese, and Emi’s world is forever altered by an unfortunate encounter with one particular soldier. Yet Emi—like Hana—is a strong character who never breaks down or crumbles. Her courage after witnessing her father’s murder and finding out who is responsible for her mother’s death is nothing short of remarkable.

In 2011, Emi, now an old woman, continues her relentless search for her sister, but knows that time is running out. How the author resolves Emi’s search as well as Hana’s desire to escape sexual slavery is poignant yet brilliant and will leave you nodding your head in satisfaction.

Author Mary Lynn Bracht is of Korean descent, and this personal connection



led her to craft this story. She brings to life in unflinching detail the horror of sexual slavery and the despair faced by women whose bodies are seen as the only valuable thing about them.

Bracht’s historical notes are compelling to read as well. Currently only about forty survivors remain of the thousands of women and girls who suffered Japanese slavery during the war. It was not until 2015 that South Korea and Japan reached a truce of sorts over the issue of “comfort women.” However, the “halmoni” (grandmothers who survived the enslavement) have not accepted this truce and continue to work for an acceptable resolution to the issue.

War is hideous and there are always atrocities committed on all sides. Bracht explains that she focused on individuals rather than nations in her story for this reason. She has written a compelling, fascinating tale that is sure to raise the reader’s awareness about the desperate plight of women in sexual slavery. Her story is also a testament the unbreakable bonds that women forge with those they love, and their willingness to risk everything to save those they hold dear. **NB**

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**L**EWIS GINTER'S popular seasonal light display will run through January 10, 2021. The light show will be closed Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

Safety is the top priority as the Garden makes appropriate adjustments to GardenFest during this time of COVID-19. This year's GardenFest is designed so small groups of friends and family can relax, have fun, and make special memories in a magical outdoor setting.



"Our staff and volunteers know how important Dominion Energy GardenFest of Lights is to the community," says interim Executive Director Kim Dove. "Although it's a challenging time, we're committed to offering the best display and experience possible given the challenges of COVID-19 and the Garden's focus on safety."

All tickets, which are available online, must be pre-purchased. Tickets are limited and have a 30-minute arrival time window. Masks are required for all guests over age 10. There are separate entry and exit points, and social distancing protocols must be followed.

Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden  
1800 Lakeside Avenue  
Richmond, VA 23228  
(804) 262-9887  
lewisginter.org


## HERMITAGE RICHMOND HOSTS ITS FIRST "ILLUMINATION ON THE LAWN"



**THIS HOLIDAY SEASON,** Hermitage Richmond invites everyone to enjoy a little physically distanced fun and holiday magic at their inaugural Illumination on the Lawn.

From December 5 until January 6, the grounds at Hermitage Richmond in historic Ginter Park will be transformed into a spectacular winter wonderland display of holiday lights and reindeer. The ongoing event is free to attend and guests are asked to wear masks and practice physical distancing.

"While our holiday celebrations and traditions have taken on a different look during the pandemic, our community wanted to offer a celebration of the holiday season that minimizes contact yet maximizes fun and inclusiveness," says Chris Henderson, CEO of Pinnacle Living, which operates Hermitage Richmond.

"We're all craving an activity for the whole family that is safe and physically distant," says Marcia Robertson, Hermitage Richmond's marketing director. "We hope this spectacular display is one that brings joy and light to not only our residents but to the community as well." 

Hermitage Richmond is located at 1600 Westwood Avenue, Richmond, VA 23227.



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## ART

# Natural Bridge In American Art at VMFA

**T**HE VIRGINIA Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) is excited to announce its upcoming exhibition, *Virginia Arcadia: The Natural Bridge in American Art*, an exploration of the artistic portrayal of this spectacular and seemingly miraculous natural landmark. The exhibition, free to visitors, will be on view at VMFA in Richmond, Virginia, from February 6 to August 1, 2021.


“VMFA is pleased to recognize Virginia’s very own natural landmark through this exhibition,” said VMFA Director and CEO Alex Nyerges. “We hope Virginia Arcadia inspires appreciation for and interest in rediscovering the wonderful natural world here in our state, and also recognizing that the environment is a precious source of inspiration.”

The majesty of the Shenandoah Valley’s Natural Bridge, a 400-year-old geological formation, has inspired artists, writers and explorers over the centuries. It has served as an ethereal example of the American landscape, an icon of natural history and a witness to human civilization. One of the most depicted sites in American 19th-century landscape painting, this formation captured the imaginations of artists like Frederic Church, David Johnson, Edward Hicks and Caleb Boyle, as well as many decorative artists.

“Consider a time when our very landscape sparked wonder and inspired myth,” said the exhibition’s curator, Dr. Christopher C. Oliver, VMFA’s Assistant Curator of American Art. “Artists were moved to not only capture its picturesque splendor and breathtaking sense of place, but also all that the Natural Bridge represented and idealized — the sublime divinity of the natural world, the excitement of discovery, the harmony between nature and civilization and the abundance of pastoral beauty.” The Natural Bridge is also historically relevant to western expansion, slavery, natural history, tourism and ecological conservation.



*Jervis McEntee (American, 1828-1891), Natural Bridge, 1877. Collection of Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.*

Virginia Arcadia examines the Natural Bridge through more than 60 paintings, prints, decorative art objects and photographs made between the late 1700s and the early 1900s. Highlights of the exhibition include works from VMFA’s collection including one of the earliest illustrations of the Natural Bridge, an engraving from 1787 by Baron De Turpin, a French engineer sent to document the site, one of three such engravings featured in Volume 1: *Travels In North-America in the Years 1780, 1781 and 1782*. Joshua Shaw’s oil painting *Natural Bridge No. 1* (ca. 1820) captures the view from atop the arch of the bridge looking down into a nearby creek in Rockbridge County, Virginia. Several works in the exhibition are on loan from institutions across the country including the Chrysler Museum, the Fralin Museum of Art at the University of Virginia, the Mead Art Museum at Amherst College, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, the Virginia Museum of History and Culture, and the Yale University Art Gallery, as well as from private collections. 





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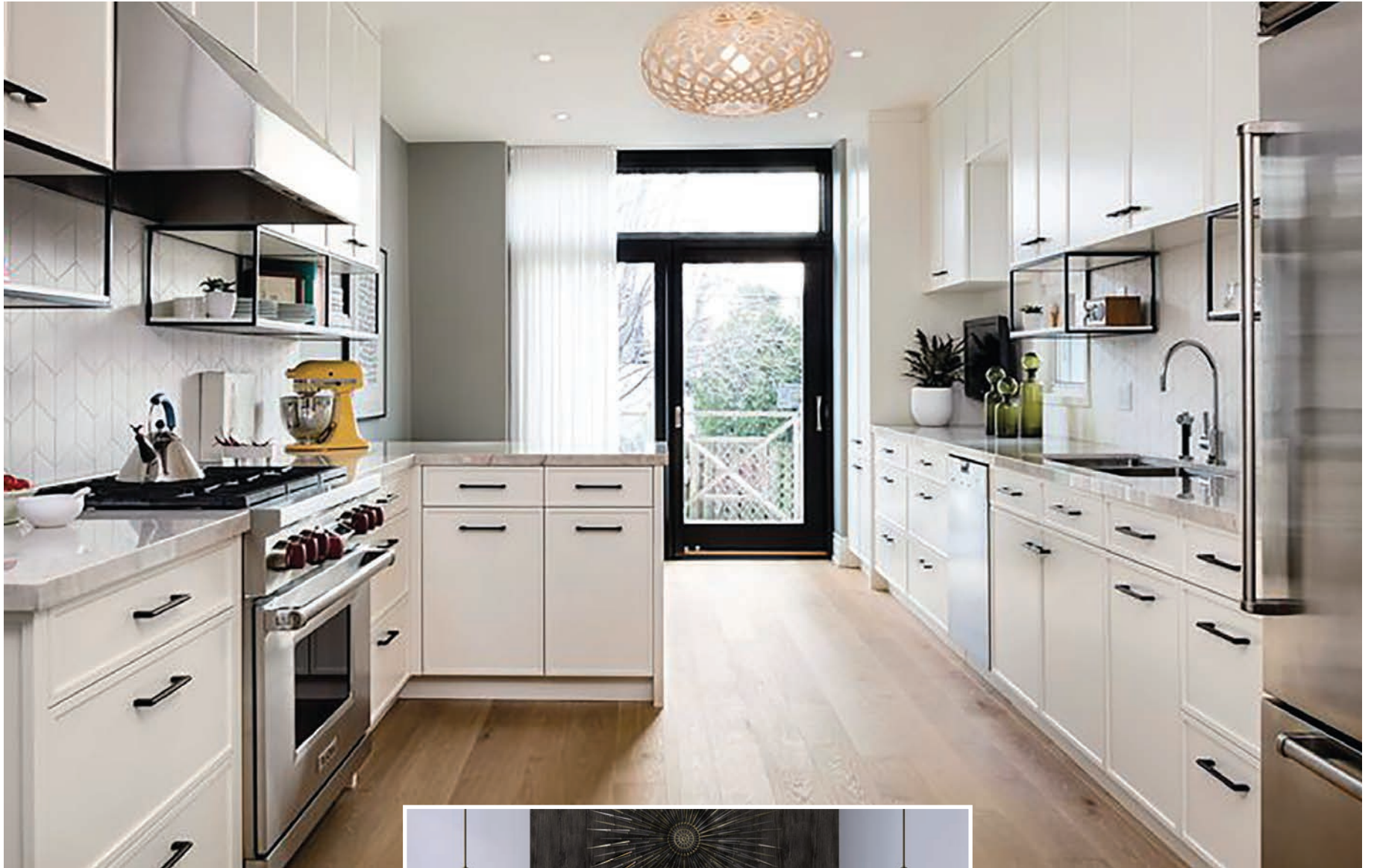


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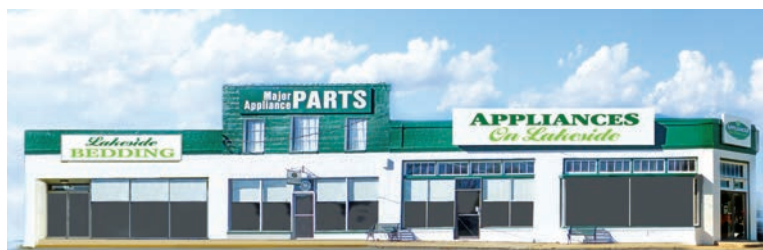


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