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Woody

is a survivor, her mettle first tested by extreme events when she was just an infant. Throughout her life, truth has been her quest. She burns away lies with an honesty that can sometimes be more than uncomfortable. Margaret's calling came to her later in life, though there were hints of it from the time she was a girl. It comes down to cleansing, to making new again, to preparing for something beyond. *continued on page 10*

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COVER IMAGE:

Photographed by Rebecca D'Angelo

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The Kamoinge Workshop Shooting with your Heart

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

JUSTICE CAN BE POETIC. At times, ironically fitting in the extreme. Consider that land at the corner of Grove Avenue and North Arthur Ashe Boulevard. It was once the property of a slave-owning banker. Later, part of it was occupied by the R. E. Lee Camp Confederate Soldiers' Home, and another portion by the Home for Confederate Women.

Ultimately, the site became home to one of the Commonwealth's greatest achievements—the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, an institution whose very contents propel society forward. For art conquers stupidity and inhumanity and ignorance every time.

Last June, the broad avenue bordering the east side of the VMFA was formally renamed Arthur Ashe Boulevard. It was a day for the ages as hundreds spilled onto the broad boulevard that now bears the name of one of Richmond's most beloved native sons—a true hero, who remains the only person to have ever won both the US Amateur and the US Open championships in the same year. He was more than that, though. Arthur was a teacher, a social activist, and a humanitarian. He was a major force in pressuring South Africa to end its despicable policy of apartheid, and a worthy recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Then, this past December, a thirty-foot tall bronze sculpture by Kehinde Wiley called *Rumors of War* was unveiled in front the VMFA with a commanding view of Arthur Ashe Boulevard. This iconic sculpture features a young, contemporary African American man astride a massive horse. It was inspired by Kehinde's encounter with the J.E.B. Stuart monument while he was in Richmond during an exhibit of his work at the VMFA three years ago.

"There is something moving in the culture," Wiley said at the unveiling. "There's something changing in these winds. I'm tired of the destruction. I'm tired of the strife. I think we can do better."

Which is pretty much what a group of African American photographers in Harlem were thinking about almost sixty years ago. They called themselves



Founding member, Adger Cowans.
Photo by Rebecca D'Angelo.

the Kamoinge Workshop. Kamoinge is a word borrowed from the Gikuyu language spoken by the Kikuyu people of central Kenya. Roughly translated, it means a group of people working together for a common cause.

On February 1, *Working Together: Louis Draper and the Kamoinge Workshop* opened at the VMFA (the exhibit runs through June 24). Organized by the museum's staff, this singular exhibition chronicles the first twenty years of the Kamoinge Workshop. They wanted to tell the real story of African Americans, not the stereotypical tale related by mainstream media and white photographers.

At the media opening a few days before, Alex Nyerges, director of the VMFA, took to the podium in a great marble hall. Among those in attendance were several of the artists from the Kamoinge Workshop.

"The exhibition is stunning with a hundred and eighty works of art," Alex said. "And when you look at it in comparison to the rest of the spectrum of twentieth century and twenty-first century American photography and art, it not only holds its own, but it goes on to its own new level."

He later introduced the curator of the show—Sarah Eckhardt.

Sarah recalled when she first saw some of the works of Louis Draper, one of the founding members of Kamoinge who was born in Henrico County, and attended the Virginia Randolph School and Virginia State University. Louis's sister, Nell Draper Winston, showed her brother's artwork to Sarah. "And I was amazed," Sarah said. "I couldn't believe that it hadn't had wider recognition."

Shortly after Sarah concluded her remarks, I met up with Adger Cowans, one of the founders of the workshop.

"We were tired of the images that they were showing of black people at the time," Adger told me. "Big red lips in a pot in Africa being cooked alive. Negative images of black people. Drug addicted black people. We just got tired of that stuff. Because we would not have America without black people. We decided to take a positive point of view on all this."

As with many other art photographers, Adger has always preferred 35 millimeter cameras. "I wanted to capture those moments in life that were fleeting, and I felt I had to have a 35 millimeter because it was so quick," he said. "You're shooting in the street. It's quick. If something is fleeting, you have only one chance to get it. You didn't use a four-by-five and put it on a tripod and say, 'Could you do that again?' It's not going to happen."

Like other members of the Workshop, Adger was both learner and teacher. He recommended that novice practitioners of the art, study visual art in its many manifestations. "I told the guys, 'Look you've got to go to the museums and look at the paintings of the masters to understand composition'" Adger said. "You can use that also in taking a picture."

He also imparted something he knew that was almost impalpable about the art of photography. "I would tell them that you take pictures with your heart, and not with your eyes," he told me. "If human feeling or emotion wasn't there, it didn't work. Just to have a beautifully composed picture, that's nice, but you had to have the emotions." **NJ**

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HIDDEN HISTORIES

Social Democracy and FDR's Second Bill of Rights

by JACK R. JOHNSON

IN 1944, JUST AS WORLD WAR II was coming to a close, and victory in Europe was in the offing, Franklin Delano Roosevelt outlined what he called the Second Bill of Rights. In his 1944 State of the Union Address, he argued that the rights guaranteed by the Constitution and original Bill of Rights were insufficient, or in his words, had proved “inadequate to assure us equality in the pursuit of happiness.”

From that premise, he pivoted to a Second Bill of Rights that he carefully enumerated in his speech. The main points were:

The right to a useful and remunerative job in the industries or shops or farms or mines of the nation;

The right to earn enough to provide adequate food and clothing and recreation;

The right of every farmer to raise and sell his products at a return which will give him and his family a decent living;

The right of every businessman, large and small, to trade in an atmosphere of freedom from unfair competition and domination by monopolies at home or abroad;

The right of every family to a decent home;

The right to adequate medical care and the opportunity to achieve and enjoy good health;

The right to adequate protection from the economic fears of old age, sickness, accident, and unemployment;

The right to a good education.

FDR explained that a “true individual freedom” cannot exist without economic security and independence. “Necessitous men are not free men,” he argued. “People who are hungry and out of a job are the stuff of which dictatorships are made.”

So the purpose of the Second Bill of Rights or Economic Bill of Rights was both economic and political. By guaranteeing a reasonable environment to ‘pursue’ happiness, he hoped to stabilize our democracy and banish the attraction of dictators and authoritarian strongmen who used economic distress to bolster their popularity.

Even though FDR urged Congress to consider vesting citizens with these eight new rights, a Second Bill of Rights was never formally introduced in Congress and never was interpreted by the Supreme Court. Promises of basic human



dignities historically have not blended well with raw capitalist economies.

As Jill Priluck writes in *Lapham's Quarterly*, “Elite American political culture traditionally has favored a form of Adam Smith individualism in which the pursuit of self-interest, the sanctity of private property, and the right to be left alone are paramount.”

Our less elite political culture sees to suffer a kind of Stockholm syndrome in this regard. Not only are they deprived of decent living standards and healthcare and retirement, they are told it's their own fault. Sadly, too many believe this cruel tripe.

Despite our gross negligence in this matter, other countries across the world took FDR's words seriously—and have benefitted as a result. These countries are largely what we now call Social Democracies. They include Nordic countries like Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark, and to a lesser degree Germany, Great Britain, Italy, France, Spain, Portugal and Greece. In fact, most of the western industrial world.

As Cass Sunstein notes in *The Second Bill of Rights: FDR's Unfinished Revolution and Why We Need It More Than Ever*, countries developing constitutions coming out of World War II were also quick to embrace FDR's concept. The South African and Iraqi constitutions guarantee a right to education, health care, social security, and housing. Finland's establishes that everyone has “the right to basic sustenance.” Norway's requires the state “to create conditions enabling every person capable of work to earn a living by his work.”

Constitutions in Portugal, Brazil, Poland, Uruguay, Paraguay, Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Russia, Peru, and Egypt all recognize some form of Roosevelt's economic rights. Mexico's 1917 constitution included social-welfare provisions years before America's Second Bill of Rights was

even proposed. U.S. state constitutions recognize aspects of the bill, such as the right to education.

After Roosevelt's death in 1945, his ideas informed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In Article 25, for example, you can find many of FDR's tenants summarized: “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.”

It was the foundation for two covenants adopted by the UN General Assembly: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which, along with the universal declaration, are known as the International Bill of Rights. The two covenants are binding in countries that have ratified them. The treaty protects the right to work; the right to organize; the right to bargain collectively; the right to social security; the right to social and medical assistance; the right to social, legal, and economic protection of the family; and the right to protection and assistance for migrant workers and their families. Ultimately, the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights was ratified by 167 countries—but not by the United States.

Social Democracies like Sweden, Canada, Finland or Norway that have implemented FDR's Second Bill of Rights have built amazing economies and wonderfully sustainable systems for their citizens. Maybe it's time we learned from our own history, and did the same for our own people? In the end, maybe we, too, deserve what FDR promised for us nearly a century ago. **NJ**

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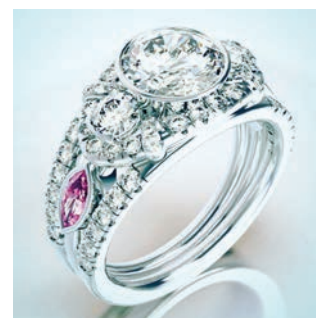
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Bringing The War Horse Back to the Front



War Horse as it once stood outside the Virginia Historical Society.

After standing sentry for more than twenty years near the front entrance of the Virginia Museum of History and Culture (formerly the Virginia Historical Society), “The War Horse”, a bronze sculpture, was unceremoniously removed from its perch last May. Created by English sculptor Tessa Pullan, the statue features an emaciated, riderless horse, paying tribute to the more than one and a half million horses and mules that were killed in combat during the Civil War. It is now hidden from view in the rear of the museum.

Through efforts spearheaded by animal lover and photographer Rebecca D’Angelo, upward of 1,700 people have signed a petition for the return of the War Horse to its original place, facing Arthur Ashe Boulevard. In the petition, Rebecca wrote of the equestrian statue, “though a monument to Civil War horses, [it] is truly a monument to all the beasts of burden that die doing the human race’s ugly work of war.”

For more information, contact Rebecca D’Angelo at 804-874-9709, or dangelorvarealtor@gmail.com

Windows to the Soul: The Eyes Project



Emma Lou Martin Eyes by Susan Singer.

Susan Singer’s Windows to the Soul will be on display in the Gellman Room of the Richmond Main Public Library for the month of April.

Susan Singer, creating art for about twenty years, has merged the art of the interview with the art of painting.

Following her interviews, Susan then painted the subject’s eyes, and just the eyes. “Each time I interview a subject, I come away with powerful feelings,

usually good, about the human race, especially about the individual I’ve just spoken with,” she says. “Regardless of their background, economic situation, race, age, political party or religious beliefs, I fall a little bit in love with each and every person as they allow me to see into their souls.”

For more information, contact Susan at 804.339.0040 or SusanSingerArt@msn.com.

43rd Street Gallery Clay Invitational

Come celebrate our 35th year at our Clay Invitational, part of the NCECA city-wide clay event. Ten recognized clay artisans from the Richmond area will be showing their work past and present. They will focus on creative changes as their work evolves and matures over time.

Featuring Lee Hazelgrove, Diana Cole, Robin Cage, Barbara Mann, Carren Clarke, Kay Franz, Steven Summer-ville, Joel Moses, Nancy Sowder, and Steven Glass.

Reception and 35th Anniversary Bash will be held 4 till 8pm March 27. Show from March 14 till April 16.

43rd Street Gallery
1412 West 43rd Street, RVA 23225
804-233-1758

Music Friday and Saturday Evenings at Stir Crazy

Starting this month, Stir Crazy Café will be featuring live music every Friday and Saturday night from 5 till 7pm. No cover charge.

Dirty Metal Lefty returns March 6; James Westlyn performs March 7; Hillary Kay, March 13; Lilia Rose, March 14; Bill Kaffenberger, March 20; Hot Tea, March 21; James Westlyn, March 27; and Shackelford, Wiley & Morgan, March 28.

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WICKED Coming to Altria Theatre

WICKED, which won a Grammy along with three Tonys, will be returning this June to Richmond’s Altria Theatre. It’s a retelling of the L. Frank Baum classic from the perspective of the witches, a production that has been acclaimed as “the defining musical of the decade.”

The musical will run from June 3 till June 14 for a total of sixteen performances. Tickets start at \$42.50 and will go on sale March 27. **NJ**

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MARGARET ARNETTE

Woody

THE WILL TO BE

WHEN HE HELD HIS OUTSTRETCHED INDEX FINGER

just above her tiny lips, barely brushing her nostrils, he could feel a whisper of breath. And then he heard a faint gurgling sound from her mouth. Both good signs. When he lifted her up, he was surprised at how little she weighed, and he could make out the white-tipped mounds of boils on her thin shoulders, and a range of them running down her back. She was smaller than a doll, a few months old, maybe five pounds. He knew where to take this small bundle of life, understood that at the Holt Orphanage this infant might stand a chance of survival. Survival is what it was all about as his homeland struggled to regain some semblance of order after a war that had slaughtered three million of his countrymen and women and children, and laid waste to much of the countryside. Now, there were these babies everywhere, from Pusan to Inchon, from Kunsam to Samchok. They were often called “the dust of the streets”. These babies, some the products of soldiers who had since returned to their homes, would be ostracized or worse, as would their mothers. He cradled the baby in his arms, and carried her off to the orphanage, but he wondered, deep down, if she would make it.

SEVEN THOUSAND

miles away in Garwood, New Jersey, a couple named the Lerkes put in a request to the lumberman named Harry Holt, who, with his wife, Bertha, had established the orphanage in Korea. The Lerkes asked Holt to send them a boy and a girl who needed them the most. One of them was the infant girl plucked from the streets, the seven hundred and thirteenth Korean orphan who was known as Whang Min, but would become Margaret; the other was a male foundling who would later become her brother. Against all odds, they both survived.

Margaret Arnette Woody remembers an incident that occurred when she was an adult. She was in a diner, when she spotted Doctor Raymond Fidelo, the man who had examined her when she first arrived stateside.

“You don’t remember me,” she said to him. “But I’m Margaret Lerke.”

The doctor looked closely at her, and smiled. “Oh yes, I remember you, you and your brother,” he said. “I thought you wouldn’t live. What were your parents thinking, bringing you here? I didn’t think you were going to make it.” After a pause, his smile broadened, and he said, “But look at you now.”

We’re sitting in the conference room at Stir Crazy Café in Bellevue. Margaret has dark eyes, and jet black hair streaked with grey. She does not mince words, and tells her story straightforwardly, and no matter how painful it can be at times, she embraces and reveals the truth. She is just that honest.

“I was born somewhere near Pouson, South Korea,” she says. “This was 1958, a good five years after the Korean War ended. I was apparently abandoned and was found near a trash heap. I apparently hadn’t eaten anything for a while. I don’t know how I made it because my mother tells me that I had forty-two boils all over my body. I also had a lot of mange and lice, and I weighed less than five pounds. I had severe malnutrition.”

And then she smiles, and laughs. “I eat well now,” she says. “As God is my witness, I’ll never be hungry again.”

Margaret’s adoptive parents, Kurt and Julie Lerke, would ultimately adopt a total of seventeen children, of all ages and races. In addition, they had two biological children. Around the time Margaret joined the family, the Lerkes bought an eight-bedroom house in Whitehouse, New Jersey, a rural community in Hunterdon County. The home, a white clapboard, sat on a fairly large lot, and Kurt put in an expansive garden where he grew a lot of the vegetables the family consumed. During the summer months, after spending their mornings at a music camp, the children would help preserve the fruits of their father’s labor. “We were like a mini-production plant for freezing and canning vegetables,” says Margaret. “That was a very happy memory for me. My father spent a lot of time in that garden all summer long. And every summer, our family would host the Holt Adoption Picnic, so people from all over the country would bring their trailers and stay at our house, and that was fun and I met a lot of fellow adoptees from Korea.”

By the mid-1960s, the Lerkes had adopted nine children, and then LOOK magazine featured the Lerke family in a pictorial spread that was titled “Nine Unadoptable Children Joined by Love”. As the headline indicates, the body copy reeks of paternalism and American exceptionalism. Shortly after the magazine hit the streets, the Lerkes were invited to appear on the Mike Douglas Show, a daytime TV talk show that aired from 1963 till 1981.

“At the time, I was all excited about it,” Margaret says. “I was about eight or nine years old, and enjoyed the celebrity.” A short time later, Julie Lerke was named New Jersey’s Young Mother of the Year. And a year later, the family returned again to the small screen, this time on a game show called To Tell The Truth.

“At the time, we were like little mini celebrities in school,” Margaret remembers. “So, it was like a prop, and I enjoyed it. But looking back on it, I felt a little ex-

ploited.” She considers this for a moment, then adds, “But our appearances did help a lot of kids get adopted.”

In that era, full cultural assimilation seemed to be the order of the day. Add to that, Julie Lerke was a patriotic woman, a trait that might have been bred in the bone because she was a Daughter of the American Revolution.

“To me that was like being colonized,” says Margaret. “There’s good and bad with that growing up. What’s good about that is that you learn to speak very succinctly. I never had a Jersey accent. My mother was an English teacher, and I was brought up almost like a speech and theater student. Our vowels had to be round and pronounced correctly, and the grammar was precise.”

Part of that “colonization” of orphans was a product of the time. “Today it’s easier for a child to be in a home where their culture is accepted, and their differences are accepted,” Margaret says. “I know a lot of people who adopt Asian children, and a lot of those adoptive mothers realize you really need to embrace the culture of the kid.”

It wouldn’t be until much later in life that Margaret would get the chance to explore her own cultural and genetic roots. One would be a gift from a man who became a second father to her; the other would come from her own mouth.

As Margaret neared her fiftieth birthday, her father-in-law, Jim Woody, announced a very special gift. “He felt that before he died, he wanted me to find my heritage,” says Margaret. “He was a really generous person to me, he was a really great guy. I spent a lot of time with my mother-in-law when she had Alzheimer’s. He was grateful and he was very sweet to me, and I adored him. So he decided he wanted me to go to Korea. He thought it would be a fun idea for me for my fiftieth birthday, so he gave me five thou-

BY CHARLES MCGUIGAN
PHOTOS BY REBECCA D’ANGELO



sand dollars the year before my birthday and said, 'Start planning.' And that was amazing, because I was brought up white."

In Korea, Margaret was able to connect with the culture of her birth. And more recently she decided to have the strands of her own DNA inspected to give her even more information about her origins.

"I have done 23andMe, and my DNA says that I'm a hundred percent east Asian," Margaret says. "I'm ninety-two percent Korean, and eight percent Japanese."

This answered questions that had nagged at her for many years. "All my life I grew up thinking that I was an Amerasian child, that my father might have been a soldier, black or Hispanic, or white," she says. "I knew that my face did not look like a typical Korean girl. In fact, a lot of times I would go places and people would say, 'Oh you're not Korean, you're Japanese.'"

The Lerke family, after Margaret's adoption, just kept growing. And early on Margaret created a role, as we all must if we're part of a family.

"I was a social butterfly in school, and probably sucked up to all the administrators," says Margaret. "They always said my personality was my survival skill. The principals like me, and I was well-liked because I never hung out with a certain clique in school. And I never bad mouthed my family."

Margaret was something more than that, though. "My brother and I were my mother's confidants, and my father's," Margaret explains. "They saved us. When we came to the United States, we were literally dying of malnutrition. And my brother felt like it was his calling in life to take care of my mother, and my parents, and help her with our family. I, at one time, thought that myself because that's the way I was groomed, but I didn't want to do it."

Thanks to one of her adopted sisters, Margaret struck out on a different path than her brother. "You need to be independent, you need to go to college," my sister would tell me," says Margaret. "She would kind of put a seed in my head that I need to be independent. She was three years older than me. She taught me how to

drive. She was a big influence on me. She got me my first full-time job with benefits in the summer."

So after high school, Margaret left the nest in Whitehouse. She studied social work in college until she had what would be the first in a series of Road to Damascus moments. Margaret was doing field work for DYFS (Division of Youth and Family Services) in Newark, New Jersey when a fourteen-year old black girl confronted her.

"Bitch, get out of my face, you know nothing about me," the girl told Margaret. "You do not know me. And who the hell do you think you are. You don't even give a s**t about me. So what the hell are you doing here?"

Margaret was speechless, Margaret was stunned. "It scared the crap out of me," she says. "It was an awakening. And I thought, 'You're right, I've adopted somebody else's view. I adopted someone else's view of this girl. I didn't have my own view, I didn't know who this girl was.'"

She pulls closer to the table, the chair legs scraping the floor. She looks to the closed door of the conference room. "It was the opening of a door," says Margaret. "The Higher Power was telling me, 'Examine yourself. And figure out what the hell is going on with you, because you don't have any idea who you are, so why are you helping other people?'"

Margaret pauses following this recital of words she heard clear in her skull decades ago. She pushes away from the table, and says, with a not-so-straight face, "So, I went into theatre instead."

"It became my coming out," Margaret says. "Let's act out everything. I was a terrible actor, but I did backstage management. I had a good life. I got exposed to lesbian theatre, I got exposed to Split Britches in the East Village. I became a more authentic self instead of being the little Jesus freak evangelical person I was in high school."

Raised in a Methodist household, Margaret identifies as Episcopalian, though, organized religion is not her thing. "I'm a Christian," she begins, then reconsiders.

"I'm a very devout Jesus follower. Let's say it that way. I'm not a churchwoman, but all my life I've always believed Psalm 139, which is my favorite." And then she paraphrase this ode to the sacred vessel that each of us is. "I was knitted in my mother's womb before I even knew," says Margaret. "And I was always a child of God, and I always felt like God loved me. And I'm still working on all that. I am just a human being."

In addition to doing local theatre (she even had her own community theatre company called Not-for-Profit Players), Margaret earned most of her money in the printing industry. "I've never had a career," she says. "I've always had jobs."

She worked as a proofreader, did both composition and paste up, and for two years served as an art assistant in the editorial division of Reader's Digest in Pleasantville, New York.

While living in Westchester County along the Hudson River Valley with her former husband, Tom, Margaret became friends with folk musician Pete Seeger and his wife, Toshi. At times, she would work as a swabbie on the Sloop Clearwater, that inimitable Maine-built vessel launched in 1969 that would, thanks in large part to Pete Seeger's commitment, help restore the waters of the Hudson River. "I was sometimes a crew member, which meant following instructions and not knowing what the hell I was doing but enjoying the river at night, and singing with them," Margaret recalls. "Pete liked me because I left him alone. I didn't act like he was a celebrity. And he also liked me because I got along with his wife really well. And I got along with his two daughters and grandson."

In 1989, Margaret moved south to Richmond, and her life was about to change utterly. She took a job as production manager at STYLE Weekly on April Fool's Day that lasted a total of six weeks, then went to work for This End Up Furniture Company.

Early on, she met Wally Bless, and began working as a sort of chauffeur for him. "I started hanging out with Wally, and he took me everywhere in town," says Margaret. "I met everybody I know in this town through Wally. He took me to the French Film Festival. We went to Ashland Coffee and Tea when it first opened."

At one point, Wally looked at Margaret and said, "You talk like you're a writer. You should actually start writing. I know someone who teaches writing named Susan Hankla."

Not long after that, someone else suggested that she take a class in writing from Susan.

Then one day when Margaret was doing the snake pose in a yoga class, she struck up a conversation with a woman on an adjacent mat. She confided in this woman that she wanted to become a writer.

"You ought to take a writing class then," the woman told her.

"I'm not sure who I should take it with," Margaret said. "Everybody says I should take it with this woman named Susan Hankla."

"You know, she's a great teacher," this woman told her. "You ought to take it with her."

"What's your name?" Margaret asked.

“Susan Hankla,” the woman told her. Margaret took a writing class with Susan at the Hand Workshop, and then began The Monthly Muse Poetry Salon at the Main Street Grill in the Bottom, and at Betsy’s Coffee Shop in Carytown. She also decided to go to graduate school at VCU, and that would be a turning point, another one of those Road to Damascus moments. She’d be flung from her horse, and blinded by a light that would burn away lies. And the bearer of the message would be blind herself.

“I registered for a course in rehabilitation services at VCU,” Margaret remembers. A fellow student, who was visually impaired, called her out.

“She said, ‘I don’t trust you, I don’t feel safe around you, you have so much s**t going on in your own head, you’re so full of bulls**t that you need to work it out,’” says Margaret. “And I thank her to this day. She’s the one who started me into really looking at myself, and how inauthentic and hypocritical and religiously pious I was about people who were marginalized.”

It was during this period, too, that she began confronting the sexual assaults



The Lerke family, not long after Margaret was adopted.

that she and at least one other sister had experienced in the Lerke household. Margaret was first assaulted by a twelve-year old adoptive brother when she was just eight years old. She would spend years in therapy, learning to cope with this trauma.

“Group therapy has always been more effective for me because you can be in a safe environment, and people can call you on your s**t,” she says. “I realize today that I spent a lying life, I lived a life of a lot of lies and exaggerations about who I was or who my family

was. I’m not saying it was all fiction, but it was definitely distorted. I struggle with it on a daily basis. Is this the truth, is this not the truth? What am I saying? Do I need to say anything?”

Margaret Woody is one of the most honest people I’ve ever met, and the way she scrutinizes her own life, and her motives would undoubtedly solicit a deferential nod from Socrates himself.

She mentions Corrie ten Boom, a Dutch watchmaker from Amsterdam who with her family helped many Jews escape the Holocaust by hiding them in her home. She was eventually arrested and sent to Ravensbruck Concentration Camp, which she ultimately survived. “Corrie ten Boom said something to this effect,” says Margaret. “I was full of branches and leaves, and God ripped those away from me so I could become a spear for the Lord.’ That really speaks to me. I’m trying to strip away that falsehood. I don’t want it.”

In the light of truth, she has forged bonds with her sisters and brothers, including the one who sexually assaulted her. “I do have a relationship with every single one of my siblings who are still with us,” says Margaret.

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“And even the ones who aren’t with us any more, I had a relationship with them. I would like to think that their relationship with me is really positive. It’s changed me, and it’s helped me.”

At the funeral of her father, the brother who had assaulted Margaret approached her. “I was wrong to hurt you,” he told her. “I came here because I do love our parents and our family.”

“It was so much easier for me to forgive my brother when he came to me, trying to make amends after he had been in recovery,” Margaret tells me.

Margaret and her former husband Tom were divorced in 1997. Three years later, at the dawn of the new millennium, she would meet Jim Woody, who would become her husband. The Woody family almost immediately embraced Margaret as a daughter of their own.

About a year after Margaret first met the Woodys, she noticed that her future mother-in-law’s memory seemed to be slipping. When Margaret, who was working at Cadmus Communications, mentioned this to her future father-in-law, he nodded.

“Oh my God, I thought it was my im-

agination,” he said. “But it’s not.”

“Maybe you ought to get her tested,” Margaret suggested.

Tests confirmed Margaret’s suspicions.

“Long story short, I started taking care of my mother-in-law because I really liked her a lot, and it was a good excuse for me to do something on Sundays,” Margaret tells me. “I kind of did respite care for my father-in-law. And I started caring for my mother-in-law after I got laid off in 2009 from Cadmus. I was the secondary caregiver for her.”

Margaret continued taking care of her mother-in-law until the woman was moved into Hermitage Richmond, a continuing care retirement community on the Northside. Margaret’s father-in-law was devastated.

“It broke his heart,” says Margaret. And when his health failed, Margaret stepped in as his caregiver. The day Margaret’s father-in-law, whom she affectionately refers to as her “father,” died, he gave her some very sound advice.

“You have a calling and you’re not using it,” he told her. “You’ve got a calling and you need to get licensed to do this for a living. You have a calling and you’re not even paying attention to it.”

“What’s my calling, dad?”

“You should be doing this for a living, what you’re doing for me right now, cleaning me, taking care of me, not making me feel ashamed that you’re seeing me naked and on the toilet. This is what you should do for a living. And I’ll tell you one thing, Maggie. If you do this for a living, you’ll never have to look for work ever.”

His words would prove prescient within a week after his death.

During his funeral, Margaret had retreated to the kitchen at her church where she encountered a congregant she had known for years.

“You should be out there in the church,” the woman told Margaret.

“I don’t want to be out there, I just want to hang out with you right now,” she said. “And you can tell me why your parents have been on the prayer list for the last three months. You just tell me that.”

“I don’t want to talk about that right now,” the woman said. “This is your father’s funeral.”

“My father’s dead, now,” said Margaret. “And I’m unemployed. I have nothing

to do. So what’s going on with your in-laws? Do they need help?”

“What are you doing Thursday?”

“Nothing, I’m unemployed. Remember?”

“I want you to meet my husband at Johnson-Willis hospice and pick up my mother-in-law and take her to the facility,” she said. “I’ll pay you. What do you get paid?”

“I don’t know, let’s say twenty bucks an hour.”

“I’ll do that, I’ll pay you twenty bucks an hour, if you’ll spend four hours a day with my mother-in-law and my father-in-law.”

“And they were my first clients,” Margaret tells me. And true to the words Jim Woody had spoken at the time of his death, she has never had to look for work since.

“I have a housecleaning business and a private duty caregiving business,” Margaret says.

The housecleaning always morphs into caregiving. “I clean everything,” says Margaret. “I clean radiators, I clean vents, fans. I’m a really deep cleaner. I always start cleaning their



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Margaret with her father-in-law, Jim Woody, and her mother, Julie Lerke.

houses or changing their bed linens, helping them clear their crap out. I move with them from cleaning their houses to restorative care, to taking them to the doctors, to going grocery shopping with them, until the end of their life. Until I clean their body to take to the morgue.”

For Margaret, who has been cleaning in one way or other since she was a child, this labor, so seemingly ordinary, is imbued with the sacred.

“I think that cleaning has become a spiritual practice for me,” she says. “Cleaning houses. It’s become a calling, and a thing that I do really well. All of my cleaning jobs have led to home care. It’s like ashes to ashes, dust to dust. You’ve got to clean the dust. I also know that I’ve cleaned people’s houses after they’re gone, and it’s kind of my ritual of letting them go.”

She recalls an incident that occurred in Charlottesville after her friend Ruth died. Shortly after Ruth’s death, Margaret deep-cleaned the woman’s home. It was a blue sky day, and Margaret opened every window in the house as she cleaned, and the air pulsed through each room. While on her knees, wiping down the baseboard, Margaret looked to the open window and traced with her eyes a swirl of dust motes, and what she took to be Ruth’s spirit drifting away.

Margaret remembers when her father died. She spoke with him comfortingly, and told him it was okay to let go. “Dad, don’t wait any more,” she told him. “You’re trying to gasp for breath,

you need to go. It’s time to go.”

It was a Friday afternoon in May, and the air warm and the sky blue. The window next to the bed was open, and a slight breeze swept through the bedroom. Margaret moved closer to her father. “I had my hand on his arm, and I could feel his blood flow down and out of his hand and out the window,” she says. “I like to think that I treat a person with their entire humanity just as I would want to be treated. I pray that I do that every day.”

She remembers one of her clients who was often difficult, and feared losing any control over her own life. One Saturday night while Margaret was at a party, this client called her.

“I need you to come tomorrow,” the client told her. “I know it’s a Sunday, but I really want you to be here with me. I’m by myself.”

“I’ll come.”

The following morning, Margaret went to the woman’s house.

“I spent the entire day just hanging out and listening to her bitch and moan and chatter endlessly,” Margaret tells me.

“Don’t make me drink water today, and don’t force me to eat,” the woman said. “Just hang out with me. Don’t be a f****g nurse.”

Margaret complied with the request, and then made one of her own.

“Is it okay if I just lay in the bed with you, just hang out?” she asked

“Oh, my gosh, I would love that,” the client said.

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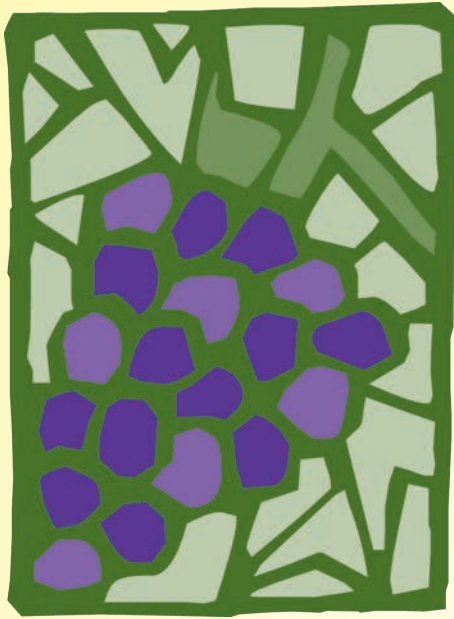
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So Margaret climbed into the woman's double-bed and they spent the rest of the afternoon together, talking like a couple of school girls, the veil of age and infirmity lifted.

When the woman's daughter arrived later, Margaret said goodbye, and left the house. The very day the woman died.

"And I thought to myself, God, am I glad I went," she tells me. "Because initially, I was resentful because I was planning to meet some friends. It was the weekend before Christmas. I was only planning on going on a short visit with her that afternoon."

Last year, as her own mother neared the end of her life, Margaret was there with her. Julie Lerke could no longer drink water, and her throat was dry and scratchy. She was, after all, ninety-six years old, and had a bowel obstruction, and they were just waiting for her kidneys to shut down.

Margaret found herself alone one day with her mother, sitting by her bedside. Her mother's eyelids, thin as grape skins, fluttered open, and she stared at her daughter. She continued staring at Margaret, not saying a word.

"Hey mom, it's Margaret," she said.

Her mother's parched mouth opened slightly. "Oh good," she said. "Are you by yourself?"

"Yeah, I'm by myself," Margaret told her. "What can I get for you?"

"You can tell me the truth."

"Tell you the truth?"

"You know what I'm talking about," her mom said. "What is going on with me?"

Instead of sugar-coating anything, Margaret presented the unblemished truth.


"You had a bowel constriction and you were in in the hospital for days," said Margaret. "And finally we decided not to do surgery, and to give you palliative care. You're in palliative hospice care right now."

"Oh, okay."

"How do you feel about my saying this to you?"

"Well, we're powerless, honey, and I'm okay."

She said one more thing before her eyes shut. "You know, I love you, Margaret."

Margaret shifts in her seat and draws in with her eyes. "I knew she loved me," she says. "At the end she asked me to tell her the truth. She wanted the truth. That was my last conversation with her." 

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BOOK REVIEW

Becoming Dr. Seuss

by FRAN WITHROW

*One fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish.
Black fish, blue fish, old fish, new fish.*

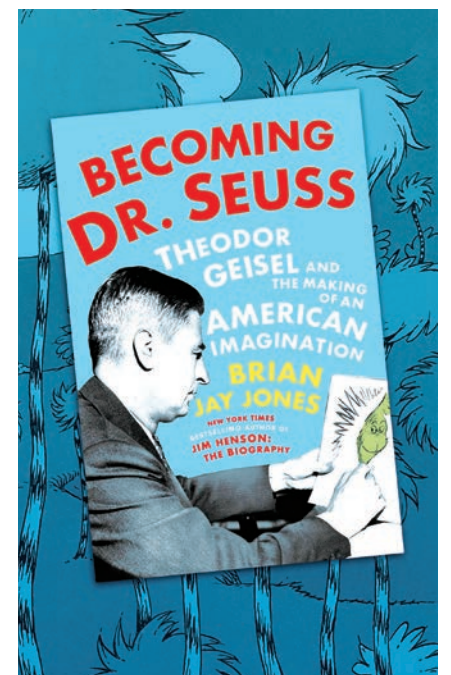
THERE WAS A TIME I could recite that book from memory as I sleepily read it to my two children at bedtime. We burned through all my childhood favorites from “The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins” to “The Cat in the Hat.” How we delighted in the inspired cadence and masterful rhymes created by the incomparable Dr. Seuss. If you are as curious as I was about the man behind the books, be sure to check out “Becoming Dr. Seuss.”

Author Brian Jay Jones has really done his homework, and I was immediately engrossed in his biography of this talented man. Born Theodor Seuss Geisel in 1904, Dr. Seuss was known as Ted as he was growing up. Jones carefully traces Geisel’s early life and describes how his start in advertising, work with Frank Capra creating instructional movies for servicemen during World War II, and failed attempts to write a book for “grown-ups” led to his lucrative career as the famous Dr. Seuss. This intriguing genius who won a Pulitzer Prize for his work never had children of his own. Perhaps the secret to his success was that he felt he was not writing “for children,” but “for people.”

He did not want to condescend to children as books of that era typically did.

His first wife, Helen, was instrumental in supporting his work and giving him thoughtful critiques of his books. You’ll have to decide for yourself just how much Geisel was responsible for her suicide in 1967. His second wife, Audrey, many years younger than Geisel, also supported his work until his death in 1991.

As a young artist, Geisel’s work was occasionally racist in nature, though as he matured, he became quite liberal in his political views. I had no idea who Yertle the Turtle really represents, for instance. Other books also speak to his strong beliefs: “The Lorax” tackles environmentalism, and “The Sneetches” takes on prejudice.



Geisel was a perfectionist, carefully overseeing the publication of his books and heavily involved in television productions of such classics as “How the Grinch Stole Christmas.”

He was at his desk six days a week for an impressive eight hours a day up into his eighties.

It was hard work. Geisel always said one word of a children’s book compared to one paragraph of an adult book, and one page was like one chapter. Often in his writing, Geisel would find himself stuck, with an elephant up a tree and no clue how to get him down, for example. (Fortunately for us, though, he had a brainstorm and churned out “Horton Hatches an Egg.”) Sometimes, Geisel explained, he just couldn’t get his characters out of their situations and had to unravel the story “like a sock” and start over.

This book is an eye-opening account of the man who changed the face of children’s literature. Enjoy. **NB**

Becoming Dr. Seuss: Theodor Geisel and the Making of an American Imagination

By Brian Jay Jones

Penguin Random House

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PHOTO ILLUSTRATION by DOUG DOBEY



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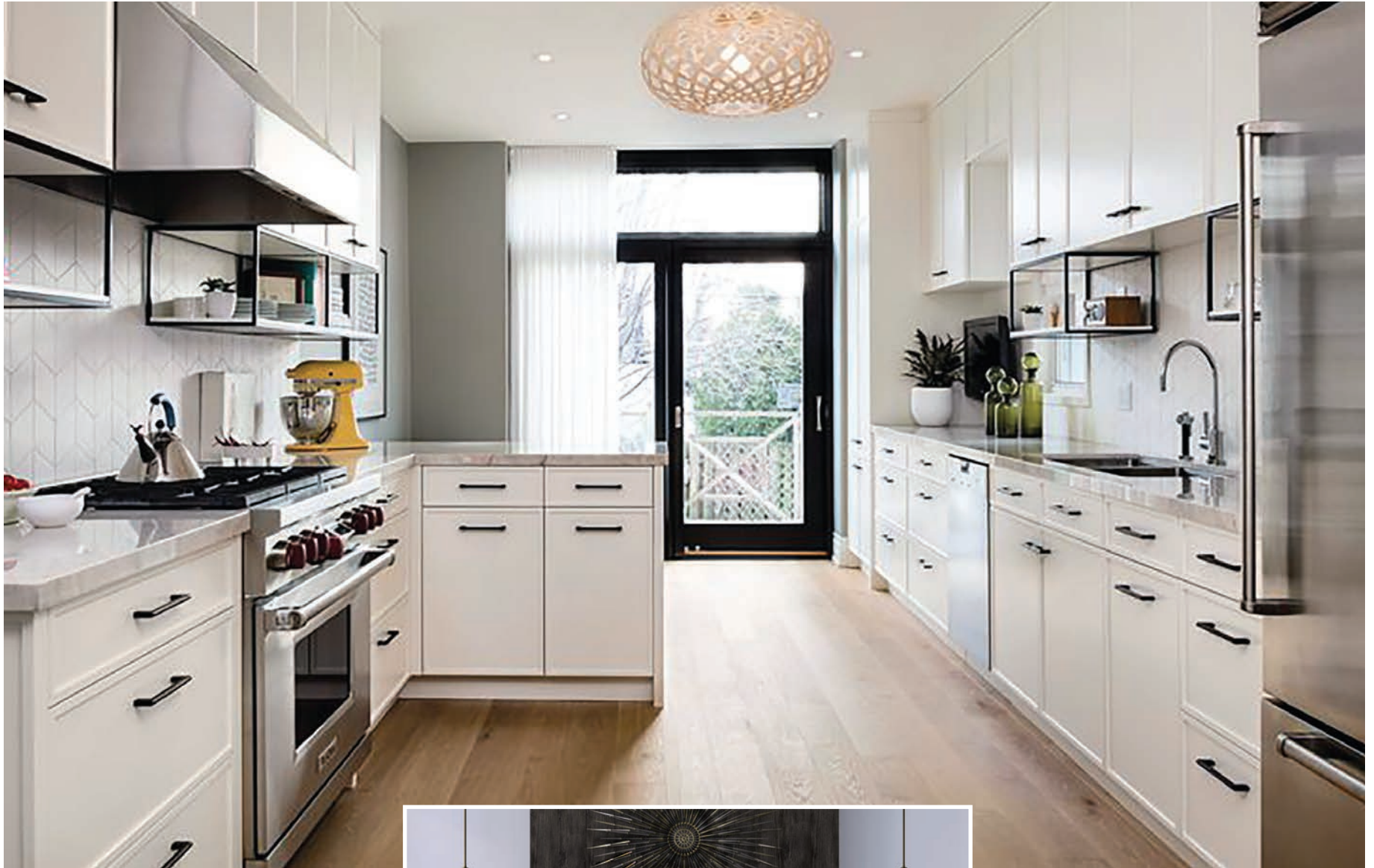
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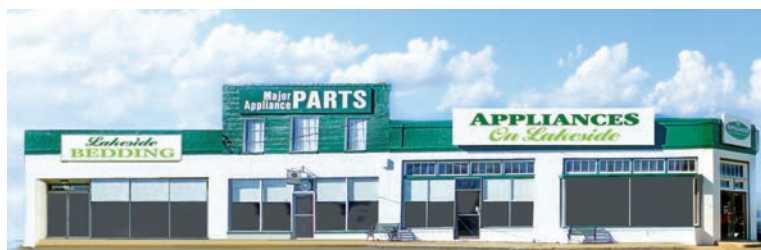


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