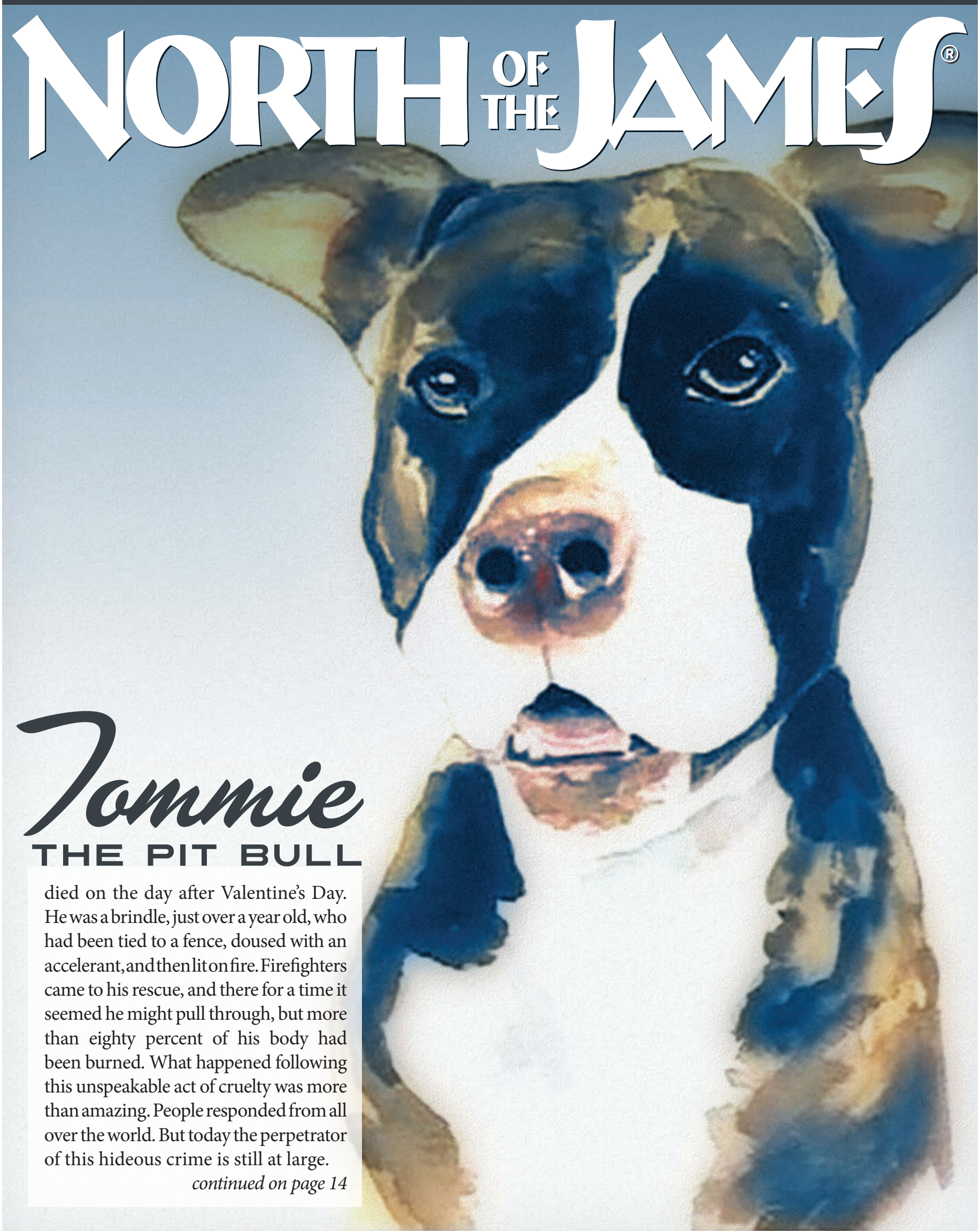
VOLUME 25 Nº 3 MARCH 2019

NORTH OF THE JAMES®



Jommie
THE PIT BULL

died on the day after Valentine's Day. He was a brindle, just over a year old, who had been tied to a fence, doused with an accelerant, and then lit on fire. Firefighters came to his rescue, and there for a time it seemed he might pull through, but more than eighty percent of his body had been burned. What happened following this unspeakable act of cruelty was more than amazing. People responded from all over the world. But today the perpetrator of this hideous crime is still at large.

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NORTH OF THE JAMES MAGAZINE®
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Springing into Death
Or April Is Not the Cruelest Month

by **ALANE CAMERON FORD**

HAVE YOU THOUGHT about death today? You probably should. Today is a good day to think about death because pondering endings doesn't have to be scary. You don't have to wallow in fear, mire yourself in wrenching memories, or become macabre. You also need not put on your black turtleneck and beret, and get all philosophical. Maybe just find a warm spot in a garden and reflect.

I think about death every day because it is what I do for a living (I work for hospice), and yet over the years I have discovered that death wants our attention, whomever we may be. In spite of my career choice, I am not surrounded by death any more than you are, but merely attending to ultimate endings rather than avoiding them. This attention has improved my life immeasurably.

Springtime is a time when death calls to us to give it some much deserved respect and fresh attention. As frost turns to dew, the plant rebirth that is all around us would be impossible were it not for the presence of death. Gardeners will tell you of the importance of compost, mulch and topsoil, all of whose power to nurture and grow is grounded in the necessity of other things dying. Dead limbs are pruned to encourage healthy growth. The grassy underbrush of winter is raked away to reveal protected ground ready for new life.

You may think this is mere metaphor, but plants and creatures of all sizes must die in order to keep the worms, beetles, flies and bacteria all humming along healthily in an ecosystem like ours. It is the way of nature, and it is also our way.

When I started in hospice in 1997 I occasionally would meet someone who was born at the turn of the 20th century. These were people who recalled World War I in their childhoods. They knew flappers as more than a costume. They had suffered despair as they attempted to raise their families during the Great Depression. And they were already "old" during the Summer of Love, still perplexed 30 years later about what was going on there.

I adored that generation, and felt a strange sadness the day I realized I wouldn't be meeting their like again. And yet, if that generation had not taken their place with dignity in the cycle of life, my children could not have been born. The generation who saw humanity take flight were buried to make way for the generation who can talk face to face with someone across the world by holding a technological miracle the size of a hand. Life in 2019 is perched between mourning the people whose parents were born in 1875, and raising the people whose children will survive to see 2125. That is worth some considerable pondering.

As this season of resilience blossoms, the pollen will aggravatingly begin its blurring of the landscape. The seedlings will emerge from the thawed ground, or from their loving coddling indoors to whatever fate may await them in the real world. A struggle will ensue between old growth and new life, a struggle all the more familiar because it happens in our bodies as well. It all cries out for our attention.

Death, in all of its twists and certainty, threats and blessings, is within us all. As is resilience. To better prepare for the ways of death, we must take time to notice it in the full blossoming of life, in peaceful surroundings, and in times of hope. N3J

Alane Cameron Ford is a hospice chaplain, grief counselor, writer, and the host of Death Club Radio on WRIR 97.3. She and her husband have three children and live in Northside where they encourage revelry.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION by DOUG DOBEY

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BOOK REVIEW

Getting Ahead By Walking Backward

by **FRAN WITHROW**

AFTER I READ "The Man Who Walked Backward," I decided to try backward walking myself. It was fun for about ten minutes. My legs quickly became fatigued, and there is always the danger of stepping in an unseen hole or bumping into a mailbox. Plus, people look at you funny.

I quickly abandoned my experiment. I'll walk facing forward, thank you very much.

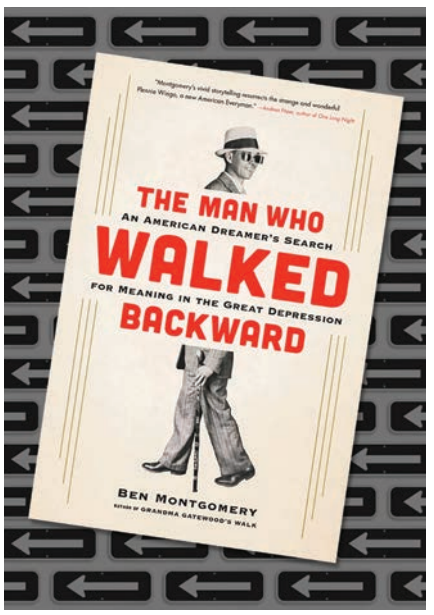
But Plennie Wingo made a different choice. In 1931, with the Great Depression in full swing, Wingo, like countless others, lost his job. He then decided that walking around the world backward was his ticket to fame and fortune. True story!

Wingo set off from Fort Worth, Texas with high hopes and little money, peddling post cards and stopping occasionally to take odd jobs advertising local restaurants. He wore out several pairs of shoes and met folks from all walks of life. (Some encounters were less beneficial than others.)

Author Ben Montgomery could have made this simply a book about Wingo's journey, since the backward walker took copious notes, sent letters, and even wrote an account of his trip (though it was poorly received by the public). But as Wingo wends his way across the United States, Montgomery blends his travels with a look at historical events connected with that city.

Thus, when Wingo passes through Dallas, we learn about the slaughter of buffalo and how that led to dust storms in the 1930s. As Wingo backs through St Louis, Montgomery explains why beer sprouted up there more than in other nearby cities. And as our adventurer chugs along in Chicago, we are treated to a brief discourse on Al Capone. I enjoyed these seamless forays into history immensely.

Wingo practiced for six months before setting out, armed with a special pair of glasses and a steadying cane. Incredibly, he made it all the way to the east coast before sailing to Germany to continue his trek.



En route to Europe, Wingo faced seasickness and belligerent crew members but never wavered from his goal. Once on land again, he was able to walk backward all the way to Turkey before authorities halted his expedition, citing the increasing threat of danger as he traversed eastern Europe. Wingo returned to the States, catching a ride to California and walking home from there. His unusual journey became the defining moment of his life. He died in 1993, penniless, his adventure virtually forgotten, a rather sad end to a truly quixotic life.

I found Wingo both troubling and intriguing. While his wife and daughter struggled to survive back in Texas, Wingo plodded farther away from them, the muscles in his calves moving to the front of his legs and his weight winnowing from the daily exercise. Was Wingo the selfish product of his time or an imaginative, creative freethinker? Whatever he was, his entertaining tale is about a time in history when someone might walk backward as a way to get ahead. NJ

The Man Who Walked Backward: An American Dreamer's Search for Meaning in the Great Depression
by Ben Montgomery
$28.00
304 pages
Hachette Book Group

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION by DOUG DOBEY

It Can Happen Here It Has Happened Here

by **JACK R. JOHNSON**

A **DOCUMENTARY** short up for an Oscar this year, A Night At The Garden, tells a chilling historical tale that many Americans still don't know about. In 1939, some 20,000 Americans gathered in Madison Square Garden for what was billed as a "Pro-American Rally." According to NPR, the organizers had chosen the date, February 20th, in celebration of George Washington's birthday and had procured a 30-foot-tall banner of America's first president for the stage. More than 20,000 men and women streamed inside and took their seats. The view they had was stunning: Washington was hung between American flags — and swastikas.

At the time, gatherings like this had been happening with the regularity of today's MAGA rallies. The German American Bund, an organization with headquarters in Manhattan and thousands of members across the United States, created such rallies in support of Adolf Hitler, and the rise of fascism in Europe. The German Bund in America was surprisingly well-organized, with parades, bookstores, and even summer camps for youth. They tapped into pro-Nazi agitators across America: in the isolationist 'American First' movement, headed by the famous pilot, Charles Lindbergh who was also a fierce anti-Semite. The 'America First' motto originated with people who were often sympathetic to Hitler and interested in keeping America out of World War II, prior to Pearl Harbor. The Bund also gained support through the 'talk' radio star of that era—Father Charles Coughlin, who bitterly denounced socialists and Jews.

According to NPR, "Their vision for America was a cocktail of white supremacy, fascist ideology and American patriotism." A surprisingly familiar canon.

Sarah Churchwell, author of "Behold, America", noted the frequent use of Fascist tropes and their rabid anti-Semitism. She also pointed out that the oversized image of George Washington that dominated the garden on that evening was no accident.

"One of the things they tried to do was to say that this is what America has always been, and this is what the Founding Fathers would have supported," said Churchwell. Indeed, they referred to Washington as "America's first fascist.

But this is America, of course, so they weren't the only ones rallying that winter evening.

Protestors who opposed fascism also gathered outside Madison Square Garden, where they had their own rally.

According to the New York Times, the anti-Nazi contingent included everyone from veterans to housewives to members of the Socialist Workers Party. The New York Police Department had deployed a record number of 1,700 officers around Madison Square Garden that night, enough "to stop a revolution," the police commissioner said.

Although the police had built a veritable wall around Madison Square Garden, one anti-fascist managed to squeeze through to protest the Nazi rally. This man's name was Isadore Greenbaum, a 26-year old plumber from Brooklyn. In the short seven minute documentary, there's a vivid scene where Greenbaum leaps to the stage, and yells "Down with Hitler!" Almost immediately, Greenbaum is tackled by the Bund's security team who punch and kick him, and drag him off stage where they rip his pants off while the crowd laughs and jeers until the police intervene.

Greenbaum's grandson, Brett Siciliano, told Radio Diaries, "He [Isadore] had a black eye and a broken nose, but he said he would have done it again," After the rally, Greenbaum was arrested for disorderly conduct and fined $25 for disrupting the rally. He later joined the U. S. Army where he had the opportunity to fight fascism once again, this time wearing a U. S. military uniform.

Although the movie did not win an Oscar, the poignant image of the singularly vulnerable Greenbaum disrupting a rally of 20,000 Nazis is both inspiring, and a warning. Not only can this happen here, it already has. NJ

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION by DOUG DOBEY

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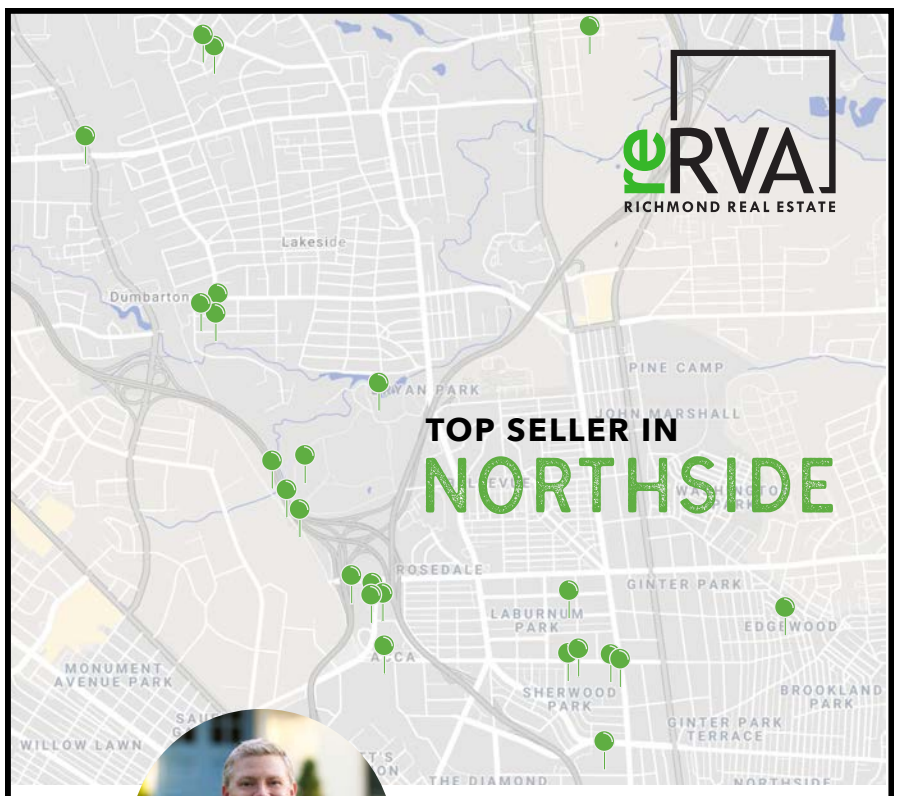

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The Afterlife of Jim Crow at 1708

1708 IS PLEASED TO announce the opening of The Afterlife of Jim Crow (which runs through March 23), a multifaceted exhibition of photography, historical research, and volunteer programming. The Afterlife of Jim Crow explores the restoration of East End Cemetery through the journalism, activism, and artistic perspective of Brian Palmer and Erin Hollaway Palmer.

The Palmers moved to Virginia in 2013 to produce Make the Ground Talk, a documentary centered on a vanished black community near Williamsburg that was settled by formerly enslaved people. It was this project that led them to East End Cemetery, an African American burial ground in Henrico County that has suffered from decades of neglect. The Palmers are members of the Friends of East End, the volunteer group leading the reclamation effort, and are documenting the history and restoration of the cemetery. "The work of reclaiming this history, on the ground and in archives, has been transformative for us," the Palmers say. "To find a grave marker that's been buried under dirt and brush for more than half a century, and then to document it, is to add a page to African American history—and to our collective understanding of ourselves."

The Afterlife of Jim Crow opens a window into this years-long project. Photography, historical research, and journalism are brought together into a creative and artistic practice. The Palmers' images communicate the personal, tactile, and unexpected details made visible by the act of reclamation. In addition, the exhibition presents the growing online archive devoted to East End—the individuals buried there, the community they created, and the context in which they lived. Visitors will be able to interact with the website in the gallery space.

Importantly, the exhibition also invites visitors to get involved in the restoration of East End, through hands-on volunteering at the cemetery itself; through the East End Quilt Collective, an ongoing project with Oakwood Arts; and through the sharing of stories, documents, and information that enrich and expand the history of East End Cemetery and those laid to rest there.

Brian Palmer is an independent journalist. Before going freelance in 2002, he served in a number of staff positions, including Beijing bureau chief for US News & World Report and correspondent at CNN. Palmer has taught at Hampton University, University of Richmond, Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, and the School of Visual Arts, among others. In 2018, he was appointed to the board of directors of SVA.

Erin Hollaway Palmer is an independent editor, writer, and educator. In New York, she was managing editor of Parade and National Geographic Adventure magazines. She now edits for a number of publications and nonprofits and volunteers as an adult literacy tutor. NJ

1708 Gallery
319 W. Broad Street
Richmond, VA 23220

Instrument Maker Gives Ukes to Lakeside Kids

PLASTIC RECORDERS ARE GREAT for teaching kids the fundamentals of music. But to take them to the next level, kids need to practice on an instrument that's more complex than a recorder.

Sara M. Hagerty, music teacher at Lakeside Elementary School, had borrowed ukuleles for her fifth-grade pupils through a nine-week loan program offered by Henrico County Public Schools. They loved the instrument, so Hagerty asked donors to help fund the purchase of ukuleles for her class.

That's when instrument-maker Gabe Sinclair got involved.

Gabe is founder of the Four Hour Day Lutherie, a home for hands-on practice of the creative arts. The group hosts musical performances, makes custom stringed instruments, and teaches workshops in instrument building.

Gabe made 30 ukuleles from sturdy bamboo plywood, and donated them to Lakeside Elementary School, and hopes to duplicate the effort at other public schools.

On Friday, March 1, he spoke to an audience of Lakeside Elementary fifth graders about the joys of making instruments by hand, whether as simple as a single-string "can-jo" or as complex as a hurdy-gurdy. "

Can you think of other things that seem impossible that you might build?" Gabe asked. "A treehouse," one student said.

"A recliner," another suggested.

"Could you make a PS4 (PlayStation 4)?" one boy asked.

"When you make something, things can go wrong," Gabe Sinclair told the students. He has the scars to prove it, plus a whole basement full of experimental instruments that didn't quite work. But it's okay to fail, he said to the students. "That's how you succeed." NJ

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ELLEN ROAD

Tommie The Pit Bull

NO ONE REALLY KNEW MUCH ABOUT HIM, where he came from, the date of his birth, the circumstances of his life. He was handsome, cute, his disposition sweet even after the cruelty and the indescribable suffering. Despite the extreme pain purposefully inflicted on him, he managed to remain kind. Heroic is how you might describe him.

EVERYONE KNEW he had a mother who'd nursed him at birth and swaddled him in unconditional love. But he was separated from her at an extremely young age, and may have never have seen her again.

It was uncertain who had adopted him, and what the first full year of his life was like, which would turn out to be the only year of his life.

Here's the thing, too: no one even knew his name. That changed, though, after the horrific incident. Now, he's known the wide world over as Tommie, the pit bull.

Every Richmonder remembers that night in February when someone tied a brindle pit bull to a chain link fence in Jackson Ward's Abner Clay Park. After tethering the dog to the fence, the assailant sprayed the animal with some kind of accelerant—gasoline, perhaps. The smell might have been unfamiliar to the dog, but he probably sensed fear, and an anxiety that caused him to yelp. Then a match was struck, or a lighter flicked, and flames immediately began devouring the pit bull, who could not escape. It swiftly burnt away his fur, and then began burrowing into his flesh.

The killer, clad in in multiple layers of pants, ran from the park toward Brook Road. He disappeared into the night.

Just across the street from the park, four fighters from Richmond Fire Station No. 5 had just finished their Sunday dinner when a call came over the scanner. Someone had lit a dog on fire. From the open bays they could see the dog. They ran to the park. By then the tether had burned away, and the pit bull was rolling in the damp grass trying to extinguish the flames. All the pit bull wore was a camo collar. There were no tags. No way of ever knowing his name.

Not far from the park, over on Chamberlayne Avenue, Richmond Animal Care and Control (RACC) responded immediately, and took the pit bull to the emergency vet clinic where he was promptly treated. It appeared 40 percent of his body was covered with burns, but for a while there it looked like he might pull through. On Valentine's Day, Tommie stood up, and wagged his tail. Early the next morning, after staff at RACC freshly dressed his wounds, Tommie the pit bull laid down and died. He wasn't much more than a year old.

On a cold February night, a few days after Tommie's death, my son, Charles, and I went to one of a number of open houses held at RACC in lieu of a memorial service there. There were twenty to thirty people there at any one time, and throughout the evening people drifted in an out to pay homage to Tommie. There were paintings and drawings of the pit bull, and hundreds of cards and loving valentines pinned and taped to walls and bulletin boards.

Christie Chipps Peters, RACC director, was hunkered down on the floor with a black pit bull, who had once found refuge here, but has since been adopted.

"It's like a giant world of emotion," said Christie, as she stood up. "It started out really, really sad, and we hoped that we could possibly save him, and when he passed away our hearts were broken."

She remembered how the local community, and folks from halfway around the world, had rallied round Tommie, hoping for his recovery. "This incredible support has just restored our faith in humanity to a level that we never expected," she told me.

Initially, staff at the emergency vet clinic suspected that about forty percent of Tommie's body was marred with burns. "But burns don't show their true colors until day two, or three," Christie explained. "They just kept coming forward on his skin until at the end, probably eighty percent of his body was covered in burns."

The flood of support was unprecedented. Along with the cards and letters, and thousands of posts on social media, financial donations flowed in, to help RCCA continue its work for the welfare of animals.

And, of course, there were the healthcare providers. "Tommie had incredible round-the-clock care," said Christie. "We brought in nurses and physicians from the VCU's Evans Haynes Burn Center who came down and gave us some wonderful advice, and some of them actually volunteered their own time to do his burn scrubs for us. It's been an outpouring of community help in every capacity. People just showed up and said, 'What can we do?'"

Christie pointed to an acrylic painting of a dog that could be Tommie. It was created by an artist from Japan. "The love and the compassion that has come forth from the community is unsurpassed," she said. "The support has come from across the country, and literally from around the globe." She paused, and then added, "If every person, in every county and every town, who has focused on this story or made a donation, would go to their local municipal shelter and foster, and adopt, and donate, think of how great animal welfare could be from this point forward."

On the opposite side of the room, seated in a folding chair was Rob Leinberger, animal control supervisor for RACC and a director with the National Animal Care and Control Association. He has been working in the field of animal protection for nearly three decades.

When I asked him about Tommie, Rob shook his head. "This ranks up there in the top five when it comes to horrific acts done to animals," he said. "It was something that was deliberate, something that was callous and cruel."

Along with representatives from other city departments, Rob's working on the investigation into Tommie's brutal killing.

"We're getting a lot of good information from the public," Rob said. "We've got information that we're processing. And the punishment should be severe for something like this."

Rob told me that Tommie's killing struck a particularly strident cord with everyone. "It was a deliberate act," he said. "There was pain, terror, confusion. Most American households have a pet, so this was as if their own pet had been set on fire. That's why it shocked the conscience of a lot of people so deeply."

During his years in animal control, Rob has witnessed significant changes. "I've watched the evolution of animal welfare and care," he said. "The laws that we have now weren't even in existence when I started."

A few days after that memorial service, I spoke with a woman who has probably done more for animal protection than anyone in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Northsider Michelle Welch, a senior assistant attorney general in the Attorney General's office, is the director of the Animal Law Unit. "Four years ago, Attorney General Mark Herring institutionalized what I've been doing for about twelve years in the attorney general's office," she said.

Before that, Michelle had been the animal abuse prosecutor for the Richmond Commonwealth's Attorney's office. "I was probably the second animal abuse prosecutor in Virginia at that point," she said. "So when I went to the AG's office, I had a lot of experience, and so people started calling me and wanting to get advice from me about their animal cases. Over those twelve years, it started evolving where they would ask me to come and special prosecute either an animal abuse or an animal fighting case."

Along with her prosecutorial duties, Michelle Welch has also become one of the state's leading authorities on animal abuse law. She frequently conducts training sessions for animal control officers, law enforcement officers, and prosecutors. "It's all directed at people who are first responders," said Michelle. "The people who can actually be boots on the ground, and do the animal abuse investigation."

BY CHARLES MCGUIGAN
PHOTOS BY REBECCA D'ANGELO

When she had first entered the field of animal abuse investigation, jurists across the state did not seem to take animal abuse and cruelty very seriously. That has all change. In the near future Michelle will be adding another litigator, and an investigator to her team.

This is a trend gaining traction all across the country. The FBI has begun tracking animal crime, and compiling it in their data base, the National Incident Base Reporting System. "They're now tracking simple and gross neglect, intentional torture and intentional abuse, organized abuse (things like cock, or dog fighting), and sexual abuse of animals," Michelle said. "The bottom line is that in a couple years we will know just how prevalent those crimes are."

Having worked in the trenches for years now, Michelle has witnessed for herself some of the worst behaviors in human beings, the willful torturing and killing defenseless animals. "I will tell you anecdotally that intentional abuse is rarer than simple neglect, but it's still pretty prevalent," she said. "And what I teach a lot about is that there's always a link between animal abuse and interpersonal violence, or human abuse."

Serial killers, for instance, sometimes begin their acts of sadism with animals, graduating later to human victims. Consider Jeffrey Dahmer. He started out his career of terror buy carving up cats and dogs in his family's garage. What's more, his father actually condoned, and encouraged this behavior. "His dad thought he (Jeffrey) was going to become a doctor," said Michelle. "That broke down barriers, so that any

empathy he might have had was kind of destroyed, and he started moving on to killing people."

Ted Bundy's proclivity for murder might have had its origins with his family's pet. "Either his grandfather killed the family dog in front of him, or his grandfather made him kill it," Michelle told me. "Not everyone that hurts an animal is going to become a serial killer, but the hurting of an animal should raise a red flag with law enforcement, animal control, and prosecutors, because someone that would hurt an animal is more likely to be a violent person."

Which brought Michelle to school shooters. "One of the things we see in school shooters' backgrounds is animal abuse," she said. "The Columbine kids shot up dogs before they went and shot up the school. What the FBI has tracked with school shooters is they usually go after neighborhood dogs, they don't usually kill their own dogs. They're out there kind of target practicing, or doing other things to animals, breaking down those barriers, and then going and shooting up the school."

There are exceptions to this. Michelle mentions a young man from Pennsylvania. "He killed his own dog, and he journaled about it," she said. "Then he killed his mother, and then he went to the school and he shot four kids."

There's a bottom line here. "If a child is doing anything to an animal that is abusive, that should raise a red flag" said Michelle. "And the worst thing that can happen to a child is that if he kills an animal or abuses an animal and he gets away with it. Because that sets him up for a lifetime of offending."

Michelle then talks about animal abuse, and how it relates to domestic violence. "There was a case just a year ago in Alexandria where a man kicked a kitten, broke its legs, took a video of that, and sent it to his girlfriend, the owner of the kitten," she says. "He also threw her ferrets out the window. Animal control responded, and took care of the animal part."

Unfortunately, the man's rage and violence would not be curbed. "Twenty-four hours later the girlfriend was stabbed to death by the man," Michelle recalled.

Animal violence and cruelty are used as a method of control and asserting power. "Sometimes they do it because the domestic violence victim is paying too much attention to the animal," Michelle explained. "They do it as a way to have power and control over her. We also see intentional animal abuse used to keep children, who are being sexually abused, silent."

She remembered one case that occurred in Richmond. A three-year old girl was sexually abused for ten years by a predator. "That particular man, who was the little girl's stepfather, killed a kitten to keep her silent," said Michelle. "Then he took a cross bow and he shot her dog." That action, which occurred when the girl was thirteen, was also meant to keep the child silent about the sexual abuse. "But it had the opposite effect," Michelle added. "The girl finally came forward. We see that over and over again. Our child advocacy centers have given me anecdotal stories where they're doing something to the dog to keep the child silent, so they don't come forward."

And whenever a child abuses an animal, this is a probably a good indicator that something bad is going on at home. "It should signal for people to take a closer look because a child doesn't usually hurt an animal," said Michelle. "If they're doing something to an animal, it means that there's something larger going on in that particular household."

She fleshed out a recent case that involved two boys—one four, the other five years old—who beat kittens to death with drapery rods. "We're worried that maybe the father is beating the mother and they're witnessing that," Michelle said. "Or maybe he's doing something to them, and they're basically emulating what they're seeing.

A new law, which will be effective July 1, makes intentional abuse to cause serious bodily injury to a pet a Class 6 felony, which carries a prison sentence of one to five years. "It took us three years to get that law passed," Michelle said.

She then told me about a case in Richmond where someone had thrown acid in a German shepherd's face. "His name was Elton, he was blinded by the acid, and he was the sweetest German shepherd you've ever seen," Michelle remembered. "We never did find who did that, but it was a very deliberate act of violence."

"Every Halloween there's some animal that someone has ritually hurt or killed," said Michelle. "I can't tell you how many times I've gotten calls where someone finds the head of a dog, or the head of a goat, or a cat that is skinned alive. Intentional abuse does happen and it's important to treat it very, very seriously."

Aside from being warning signs of violent behavior that could escalate into acts of human violence, animals simply deserve protection under the law.

"They feel pain, they grieve," Michelle said. "They deserve protection in and of themselves. They're just like children, and we protect our children. There's no reason not to protect our animals. Someone who is violent to an animal rarely stops there. They're violent in all of their dealings. Animal fighting is very violent. Someone who would fight a dog, or a rooster, are violent people, and so therefore we need to treat them very seriously, and make sure we punish them accordingly."

"I think what's important to keep in perspective is that most people are fundamentally good," Michelle Welch concluded. "They love their animals, they take very good care of their animals. But there are a percentage of people who are violent."

Thirty years ago, an incident occurred that would never leave my thoughts, and almost killed my desire to do something I had loved doing since I was a child. My three brothers and I were down on the Outer Banks for a long weekend. We fished in the surf some days, and other days off the catwalk of the Bonner Bridge, or from one of the piers that spear the Atlantic along that section of the coast.

Late one afternoon, just as the tide began coming in, we carried our gear out to Jeanette's Pier. We stripped out squid, and baited hooks, weaving the barbed ends through the white flesh like needles through sailcloth. And then we worked our way along the length of the pier from the first line breakers out to the broad tip and, all the while jigging for summer flounder. We each caught a keeper, almost doormat-size, and laid them out on the ice discs in the cooler, after we had gutted them.

We were going to call it a day, when a group of seven men, probably around our age, lugged offshore gear out to the tip of the pier. They had a veritable train of wheeled-coolers, the size of small caskets, that followed them. When they reached the tip, they set up a small camp there. They were loud, and they were drunk. One of the men held a stout offshore trolling rod with a massive Penn reel, the sort of gear you might use on a Sportfisherman out of Pirate's Cove heading for the Gulf Stream.

From a distance, my brothers and I watched the man with the offshore rod tie a long steel leader to the end of his line. We noticed that he threaded the line through a small white disc no larger than a dime. He then he secured the rig, and baited the hook with either a large Spanish mackerel, or a small skipjack. We couldn't tell from a distance. He buried the hook deep within the fish, then did something we had never seen before. He inflated a

large plastic leaf bag with air, secured the mouth with a twist tie, and then attached this massive black balloon to the small white disc on his line. Turned out to be a single peppermint Lifesaver. He then lowered the rig to the water, and as the lead weight sunk as far down as it could, the black bag spread out like a dome, and slowly bobbed on the surface as the tide shifted outward, toward the horizon.

He explained to us that they were deep water fishing; that by the time the Lifesaver had melted, the rig would be a half-mile offshore.

"Ingenious," my brother Marty said, and the man looked at him as if he were bewildered by the word itself.

Within the hour, the fisherman had a strike, and the pole bent, and the line sang out, and the fisherman secured a gimbal around his waist, and put his back into landing whatever was on the other side of the line.

"Shark?" one of his friends asked.

But the fisherman shook his head. "No way. This is dead weight."

It took him a full hour to drag the fish to the pier, and as it neared the pilings below us we could see it thrashing in the water. Two of the fisherman's friends lowered a pair of grappling hooks secured to thick, yellow nylon line over the rail. Each managed to lodge a fluke into the broad mouth of what turned out to be a giant ray, and then began hoisting the catch upward.

It was enormous, and hit the deck of the pier like a barrel, and then its fins began slapping at the planks, thunderously. It was a ray, all right, kite-shaped, the biggest I'd ever seen with a six-foot wing span, seven feet long from mouth to tail tip, fully ten-inches thick, easily a hundred pounds.

My brothers and I expected the group of men to cut the leader, and slip the ray under the rail and let it slide back into its watery world. But these men had other plans. They flipped the ray (to this day I don't know if it was cownose or manta) onto its back. Its solid white belly seemed almost luminescent in the dwindling light. Now the sun was halved by the horizon, and the shadows grew long. The two men who had brought the ray up to pier, stood on either side of body, then knelt beside it. The ray was no longer slapping the deck frantically. It seemed to realize that something bad was

about to happen. That's when we saw the men pull their fillet knives from the tan sheaths that swung from their belts. They raised the knives in unison.

"Hold on," my brother Chris yelled, and we all stepped forward.

And the fisherman turned to us, and screamed, "Mind your own ****ing business." That fisherman wore a John Deere nylon mesh cap backward on his balding head, and his eyes were the palest blue, almost white.

By then, four of the men blocked our view of the ray, but we could see shadows of the fillet knives come down, and we could hear the blades cutting through the skin of the enormous animal. There was no other sound.

Not long after that, the seven men left the pier, staggering drunkenly toward the shore, and their trucks and cars. My brothers and I returned to the manta ray and surrounded her. Almost all the light had seeped out of the world, the sun sucking it down below the horizon. Colors changed, and we could see black pools of liquid near the angry gash that ran across the ray's belly. I put my finger into one of those pools, and brought it up to my squinting eyes: it was deep red. Near the whip-like tail there was a small mound of something that looked slimy. There were four unborn rays, stacked one on top of the other, each an exact replica of its mother. They were no more than eight or nine inches long, and still bore part of their yolk sacks. We held up the young rays, but they were limp and lifeless. So each of us dropped one back into the ocean. And then we lifted the mother up and dropped her over to join her young—a fitting burial at sea.

It would be ten years before I ever fished again. But eventually I would, and I have since instructed my children in the art of angling, and both have become skilled at it. If we don't plan on eating what we catch, we always release it, gently removing the hook, then kissing the fish on its forehead before lowering it to the soothing ocean currents. When we do kill a fish for consumption—blues, stripers, speckled trout, puppy drum, croaker—we do it reverentially, silently begging forgiveness and thanking the founder of the seafood feast.

To this day, every time I sever the head of a fish from its body, flake the scales away with the edge of my knife, then cut into its body and scrape away the entrails, I feel a deep queasiness and grow light-headed as an unconscious acknowledgement of the frightful deed I have just performed. May that always be the case. NJ

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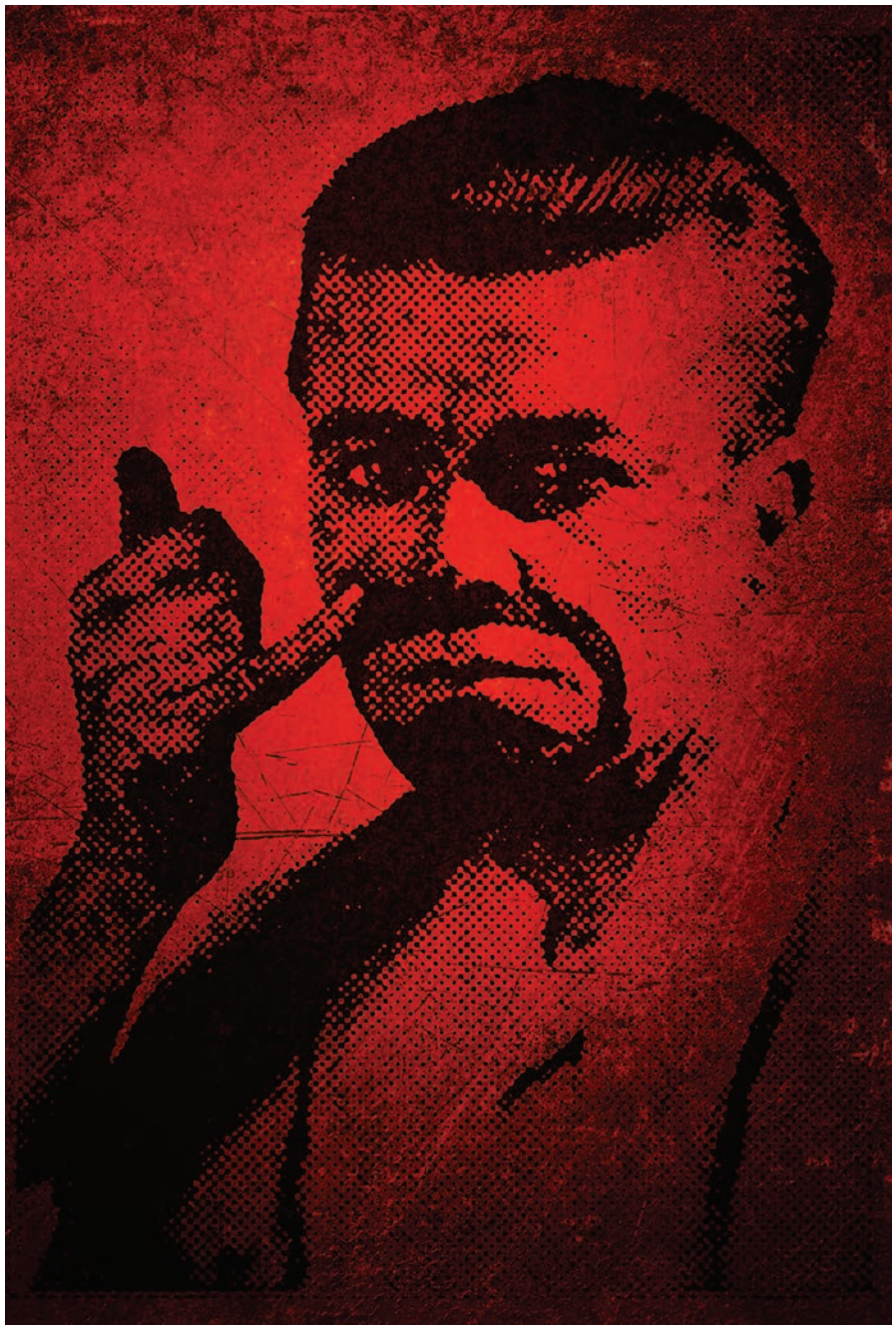
Blackface State, Blackface Nation

by JACK R JOHNSON

SUSAN SONTAG'S book-length essay, "On the Pain of Others", opens with a description of Virginia Woolf's "Three Guineas" in which Woolf asks a male pacifist who wishes to enlist her aide in preventing future wars to look at photographs of war. The idea is by studying images of war, they will be so thoroughly repulsed that war will no longer be a viable alternative. "For a long time," notes Sontag, "some people believed that if the horror could be made vivid enough, most people would finally take in the outrageousness, the insanity of war." Fundamentally, there was a belief that it was merely a failure of imagination that caused war to occur; and given the certainty of such images, if we were to see it clearly, we would never make war again.

Although Sontag is less than sanguine about its efficacy, there can be no doubt that when horrific images are finally brought to the public's attention—especially the American public—things that were previously acceptable become forbidden. It wasn't the sworn testimony about Abu Ghraib that caused that horror show to be shut down, but images of American soldiers taking delight in the pain and humiliation—in some cases quite explicit sexual humiliation— of their prisoners. To suggest that the constant replay of bloody images from Vietnam made the war effort almost impossible has become conventional wisdom; and indeed the paucity of photographic evidence of our seventeen-year-old war in Afghanistan speaks directly to that truth. The Pentagon has learned from its past failure, and part of getting over the so-called 'Vietnam syndrome' is erasing the act of war itself; its pain and horror and monstrous cycles of dehumanization.

Except for those directly involved, Americans are typically shielded from the realities of these wars. If they hear about a bombing or other event, details may be discussed, but dead or wounded American bodies are carefully screened from view. This 'cleansing' of the American vision is carefully followed in domestic situations as well, so that we never really see the gore left behind by one of our many mass shootings, but only the tearful anguish of survivors. It is all quite antiseptic. Presumably, this is in the interest of presenting a dignified and civilized front for what is, in fact, a relatively barbaric reality. At some level, there's a decorum to this which is understandable. 'Not too direct' as Joyce Carol Oates warns. We all presume we know what's happening in Afghanistan, or at a school shooting, and don't want to offend hurt family members with violent photographs, whose consumption feels almost pornographic. And yet, we don't really understand or thoroughly imagine what is happening, and it's allowed barbarities both new and old to continue apace.



"Shaping the lips with minstrel black," from Denison's Make-Up Guide , 1926.

One of the turning points for the American Civil Rights movement happened well before Martin Luther King Jr. took to the streets of Birmingham, Alabama. An African American boy named Emmett Till was visiting relatives in Money, Mississippi in 1955. He was accused of making lewd advances to a white woman, Carol Byrant, at a local store. Byrant's husband heard of this, and he and his brother-in-law, J.W. Milam, forced Emmett into their car. They took him away and beat and mutilated him before shooting him in the head and sinking his body in the Tallahatchie River.

Three days later, his corpse was recovered, but was so disfigured that Mose Wright could only identify it by an initialed ring. Authorities wanted to bury the body quickly, but Till's mother, Mamie Bradley, requested it be sent back to Chicago. She decided to have an open-casket funeral so that all the world could see what racist murderers had done to her only son. Jet, an African American weekly magazine, published a photo of Emmett's corpse, and soon the mainstream media picked up on the story. Her decision focused attention on U.S. racism and the barbarism of lynching, and Till's murder was ultimately seen as a catalyst for the next phase of the Civil Rights Movement. In December 1955, the Montgomery bus boycott began in Alabama and lasted more than a year, resulting eventually in a US Supreme Court ruling that segregated buses were unconstitutional.

What Till's mother did was refuse to erase her son or the barbarity that a white supremacist society had inflicted. In a word, she bore witness, and wanted the world to bear witness. Did the photographs of the tortured son help bring home the point? Undoubtedly. Just as photographs of U.S. soldiers killed or wounded in the thick mud of Khe Sanh turned public opinion against that war. It allows the unimaginable to be imagined (to be image-ed-in).

But if you take a moment to scan the publicly available photos from Khe Sahn, they are instructive, showing the suffering of our troops, and in some instances the suffering of the Vietnamese, yet they are not the whole picture. There were many images that are too scurrilous for public consumption—images of genitalia butchered from the enemy's body and shoved into the enemy's mouth. There are other images that will never be made public of enemy combatants tossed from helicopters while still alive, or tortured with car batteries by attacking jumper cables

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION by DOUG DOBEY

Thomas Rice Playing Jim Crow in Blackface, New York City, 1833.

to bare nipples. These images are rarely made public because they are so horrific, or pornographic, in their obvious intent to shock, and dehumanize. Yet, they tell a different kind of story about war and the way images are used. They tell you what we all understand on some level: war is about dehumanizing. In some cases, about mocking the enemy as a form of dehumanization, mocking them before death with torture, or after death with butchering.

There's a kind of cultural mockery that we all understand as well, yet rarely talk about. This, too, has photographic evidence. Mockery is a stand in for physical intimidation, which itself is a stand in for direct violence, and finally murder. They are all levels of erasure; of denying humanity.

Imagine for a moment that someone has taken an image of an American soldier—let's say one of those wounded American soldiers from Khe Sahn—and superimposed on that image, a clown's nose and mop of red hair, like a latter-day Ronald McDonald. This is mockery, no doubt, something you might expect an enemy to carry out; an enemy that in earlier times or even contemporaneously might want to kill you.

Imagine for a moment that someone has taken an image of a holocaust survivor, one of those horribly ghostlike, yet sentient, starved images from Auschwitz, and presented them in some mocking manner, smiling in a foolish way, big ears, extra big nose, of course. We'd understand immediately the cruelty of the image, its obvious anti-Semitic intent; the lurking death wish underneath such derision.

The Jim Crow era was named for the eponymous minstrel show performer whose real name was Thomas Dartmouth ("Daddy") Rice, an itinerant white actor. Rice first introduced the character who would become known as Jim Crow between acts of a play called The Kentucky Rifle, in which he performed a ludicrous, off-balance dance in blackface while singing "Jump Jim Crow," which described his actions ("Weel about and turn about and do jis so/Eb'ry time I weel about I jump Jim Crow"). He portrayed the character principally as a dim-witted buffoon.

There is contemptuous cruelty displayed by those who dress in "blackface", mimicking the mockery of Thomas Rice, aka Jim Crow, that suggests it's okay to deride and dehumanize black people because they are merely caricatures; not humans who have suffered enormous historical wrongs, in many cases as horrific as Auschwitz survivors.

For our institutions and our leaders, educated individuals, people who have gone to the best schools our nation has to offer, none of this should have been necessary to write or explain. But they have not bothered to learn their own history, or to care. With such people, who lack both imagination and empathy, it's obvious their history, our history, must be re-explained, again and again. NJ

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Storytelling is at the helm of Tellico's music. They wrote all of the songs on their most recent album except "White Line-River of Pride," a Neil Young and Crazy Horse medley of two dirty electric rock tunes buttoned up bluegrass-style. The leading track, "Backstep Blues" [Hinkle] has a "backstep", a rhythmic hiccup that is typical of old-time music, telling the story of a man's successive retreat from his wife, leaving her with the "backstep blues". NJ

Tickets are $20 in advance; $25 at the door. Children 12 and under are admitted free of charge; teens 13-18 are admitted at half price. Net proceeds benefit UUCC. For advance tickets, or more information, call (804) 323-4288, visit the Shady Grove web site at shadygrovecoffeehouse.com, or send e-mail to info@shadygrovecoffehouse.com.

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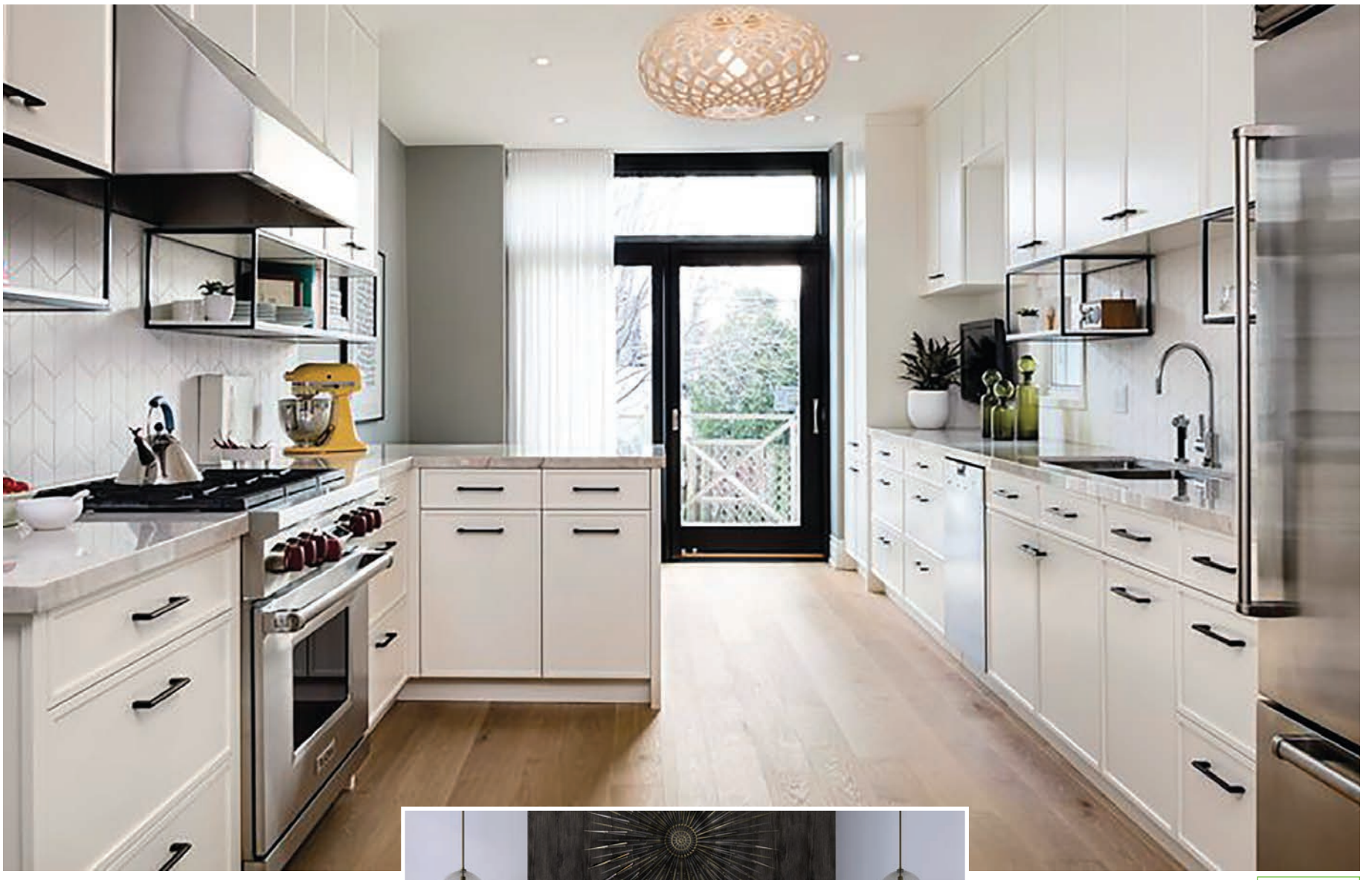

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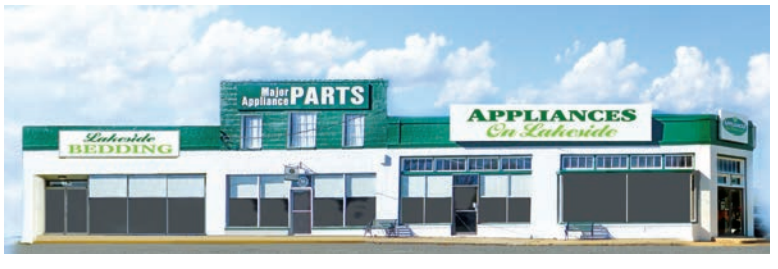

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