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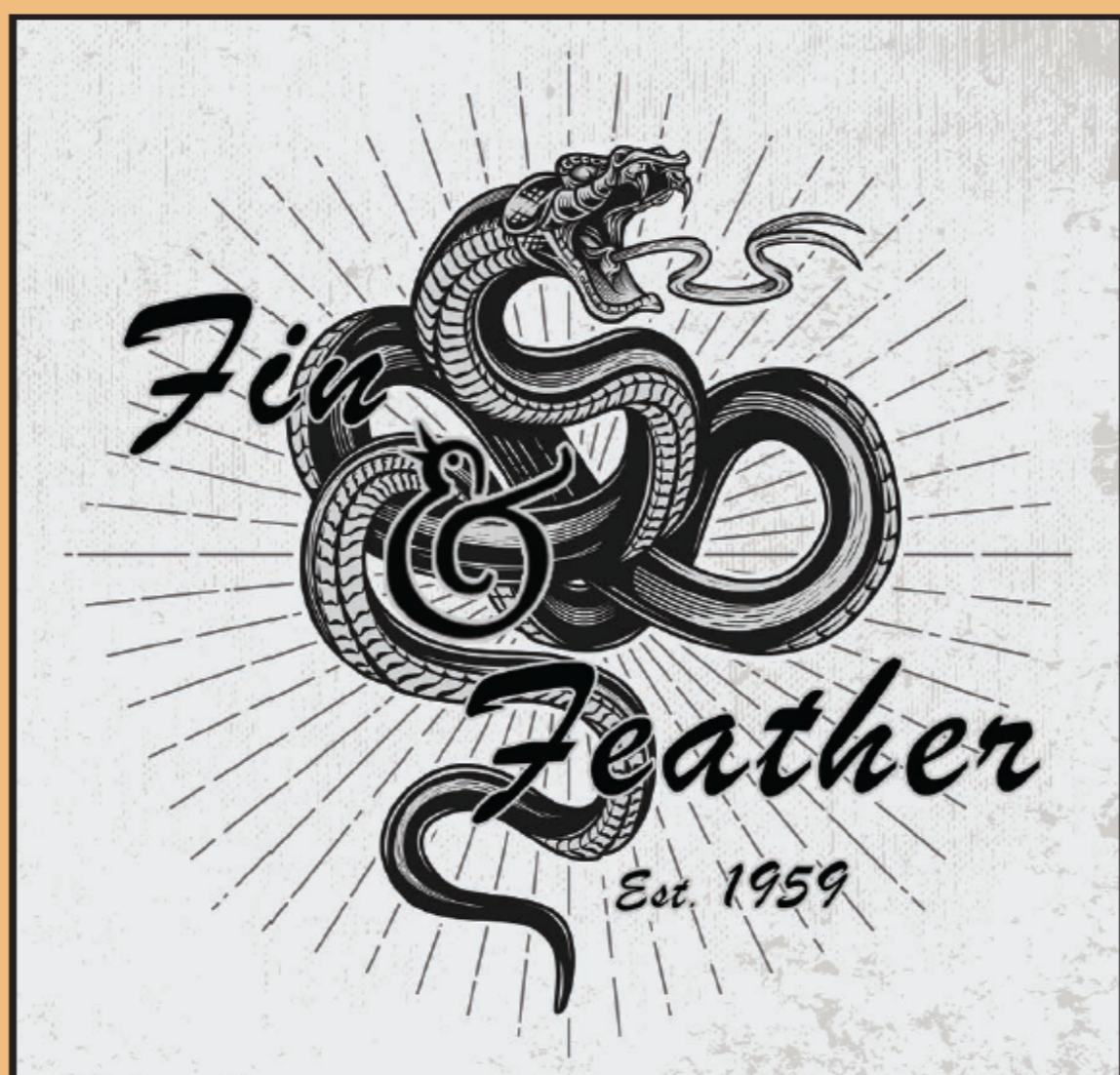
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NORTH OF THE JAMES

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PO Box 9225 Richmond, VA 23227

(804) 218-5265

editorial: charlesmcguigan@gmail.com advertising: charlesmcguigan@gmail.com www.northofthejames.com

editor/publisher

CHARLES G. MCGUIGAN

art director and web manager

CATHERINE MCGUIGAN

contributing photographer

REBECCA D'ANGELO

CHARLES BR MCGUIGAN

contributing writers

- DALE M BRUMFIELD
ALANE CAMERON FORD
ORION HUGHES
JACK R JOHNSON
ANNE JONES
BRIGETTE KELLY
CATHERINE MCGUIGAN
CHARLES BR MCGUIGAN
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# Nick Sharp A Human Singularity

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

**N**ICHOLAS ANDREW Sharp passed away last month, leaving behind fourteen children, twenty-five grandchildren, eight great-grandchildren, and Linda, his loving wife of fifty-five years. He also left behind the rest of us, who either knew him personally, or knew of his existence through acts of humanity that echoed from him through those he touched.

Nick Sharp was friend and mentor, and more like a close relative than many of my closest relatives. I have never met a human being quite like him. Don't suspect I ever will. The mold he was cast from was shattered the moment he was born.

Nick struck a handsome, devil-may-care pose with a stylish mustache partially concealing a hint of a grin, not mocking or judgmental, but one suggesting, that though uncomfortable at times in the world, he nonetheless loved everything about it, including, and perhaps because of, all its glaring inconsistencies that might cause paralysis in an ordinary man. It was the smile of Voltaire, punctuated at its left corner with a cigarette or a pipe stem. He always wore an Irish flat cap (think "Peaky Blinders"), and for many years donned tweed or corduroy jackets. But at certain point, Nick traded in his professorial sport coats and khakis, and replaced them with garments, from neck to ankle, that were jet black. From the rear he could have been Johnny Cash.

Nick shunned public recognition or celebrity of any kind. I approached him on several occasions, asking if he would allow me to write a profile about him. Each time, he declined.

I have no idea how many people Nick influenced and helped and encouraged and taught over the years—thousands, I'm guessing; His reach was broad and unbiased.

I first met Nick when I was 23 years

old and on the eight-year undergraduate plan at VCU, while working the dream job of waiter at Matt's British Pub on Shockoe Slip. At the time I was dating a woman who had taken a class from Nick. She introduced us, and almost from the moment we met, Nick encouraged me as writer when few others—outside of girlfriends—ever did.

Even though I never took a class with Nick (they were always filled by the time I got around to registering) he taught me more about life and literature and the art of writing than anyone else I've ever known.

For the better part of twenty years, I spent hundreds of hours in Nick's office on the fourth floor of the Hibbs Building on Shafer Court. It was a windowless room, and the lighting subdued. A desk and chair faced two small armchairs that sandwiched an end table from which sprouted a small lamp with a low wattage light bulb. Behind those chairs there was a floor-to-ceiling bookcase that Nick himself had built, and it was packed with books.

This room was always thick with smoke, and in the center of Nick's desk there was a massive green glass ashtray brimming with charred pipe tobacco filings, spent wooden matches, amber-stained pipe cleaners, and cigarette butts curved like comas or quotation marks.

I never made appointments, and if Nick was busy, I'd simply come back another time. When I did gain access though, we would talk for an hour or two, about almost anything.

Nick introduced me to Hegel and Heidegger, Walker Percy and Jim Harrison. He recommended scores of books over the years, every one of which I read. At a point I began making my own recommendations to Nick, from Rick Bass to Amy Hempel, and he would read their books and then we would discuss them.

We often talked about the craft of writing, and even parsed literary



*My daughter Catherine Rose Brigid McGuigan at her Confirmation at the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart on May 19, 2013 with her sponsor Nick Sharp.*

wonders like "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" by Flannery O'Connor, and others that were easier to dissect like Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-Lighted Space."

Along with fiction and philosophy, we also discussed books about religion, history and science, and just about any other subject under the sun. His interest in Christianity tended toward the mystics—Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and, of course, Thomas Merton. Buddhism fascinated him, and Nick swore by the writings of Suzuki. When the craze of the Civil War hit, with the release of Ken Burns' documentary masterpiece, Nick recommended a book by a man named Michael Shaara. Called "Killer Angels," it became my favorite book about the turning point in that war—the Battle of Gettysburg.

Nick loved words and the English language, and was generous with his time and his knowledge, and his advice, which was always sound. He did not trade in empty flattery, yet his criticisms were never harsh or dismissive. They were thoughtful, and always correct.

As we entered the new millennia, every few months I would deliver

a new short story to Nick's office, and within a week or two he would critique what I had written. And I would listen intently to what he had to say, and scribbled notes on a hard copy of the story I had written. He taught me more about writing short fiction than anyone else.

While I was working on a particularly difficult short story, which would take me more than two years to complete, we spent many of our sessions talking about the nature of love. Here's what he told me during one of those sessions: "McGuigan, you want to know what love is. What it really is. It's wiping s\*\*t from your baby's ass and not complaining." He paused for two seconds, and then said: "Particularly when that baby's thirty-nine years old."

Nick and Linda had more than their fair share of babies. Five of them were biological, the other nine adopted. Once, I asked Nick why he and Linda adopted so many kids. He just smiled. "What else should we be doing?" he wanted to know.

Everyone knew the Sharp house at the corner of Belmont and Grove. It was the most active home in the entire Museum District, and sat on raised ground directly across the

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Following a reception held after the funeral service on April 27, Nick's family posed for a group shot.

street from St. Benedict's School. And on its porch, over on far left hand side, Nick could be found on many afternoons seated with a book on a table, or with a notepad, and pen in hand. I spent as many hours there as I did in Nick's VCU office.

On certain Sunday afternoons, my two children and I would often wander over to the Sharp house after a late lunch in Carytown, or a visit to the Virginia Museum. At such times we would frequently enter the Sharp home and congregate in the living room, often with the two latest additions to the household—Rebecca and Ann—stretched out in their respective wheelchairs, sitting beside us. These twins were long and lean, and loved to have their hair stroked, and there was always an abundance of flattened palms available.

For several years after NORTH of the JAMES began publishing (first as NORTHSIDE magazine) Nick wrote a monthly column called Home Improvements. He would explain how to build things, whether they were bookcases or wheelchair ramps, but these columns were actually carefully constructed essays that would include Nick's own perceptions about life as it TRULY is, minus any of the sugary decorations that only obfuscate reality.

Nick was a Midwesterner by birth. I remember him telling me about the

first time he saw the ocean. "I'd seen the Great Lakes before," he said. "But the first time I stood on a beach looking out on the Atlantic, I had what you'd call a panic attack. I couldn't breathe. My mind raced. I could not get over the immensity of it all."

Nick graduated from the Shawnee Mission North High School in Johnson County, Kansas, then earned his bachelor's in English from the University of Kansas. Directly after that he earned a master's and a doctorate, both in English, from The Ohio State University. For almost fifty years, Nick worked as both an English professor and administrator at VCU. Among other things, he helped create the bachelor of general studies and the master of interdisciplinary studies program at VCU, and he wrote and edited scores of university publications. And he knew Shakespeare inside out, could quote every play and sonnet that the Bard ever wrote. He loved Shakespeare, and, what's more, he respected him as both a writer and a man.


Though I was never able to take one of his Shakespeare classes, my daughter Catherine did. Nick was Catherine's godfather, and would later act as her sponsor when she received the sacrament of Confirmation.

On April 27 a funeral service for Nick was held at Saint Benedict

Catholic Church. It was a high Mass with plenty of incense and bell-ringing and genuflecting. Nick's cremated remains were housed in a walnut box that looked for all the world like an antique pipe tobacco humidor.

Following the funeral Mass for Christian Burial, a reception was held in the cafeteria of St. Benedict's School. There were hundreds of people gathered there—college professors and colleagues and friends, and an enormous family, spanning the generations. I ran into one of Nick's sons, whom I had not seen in years. His name's Nate and he's significantly taller than Nick was, but his face is the spitting image of his Dad's. He told me his mom had taken Nick's remains with her when she went out shopping; it would sit in the passenger seat next to her.

We were waiting in line to the buffet tables laden with an incredible assortment of mouth-watering food prepared by Croaker's Spot. As we stood there, we chatted some, and then Nick's son told me this: "My dad knew a lot of people, but he always spoke of you as a good friend."

I held back tears, and smiled the smile I had learned to make many years ago from my dear friend Nick Sharp. 

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# Bellevue Porchella Held 4/20/24

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

**B**ELLEVUE PORCHELLA, a Bellevue Civic Association event, was bigger and better than ever. Originally conceived by Brooke Ullman, the first Porchella was held in the fall of 2020 when the world was still reeling from the Covid pandemic.

“Bellevue Porchella is a fantastic event the size that it is, and we do not want it to become a major ‘must see’ in Richmond for all locals, far and wide,” Brooke said recently.

This year’s event included four food trucks on Fauquier Avenue, which was closed to traffic the entire day. “The food trucks were a hit,” says Brooke. “We feel like we had the right number, but may have six total next time. The trucks are already asking to return again. They all sold out before the day was over.”

And every single local restaurant owner I spoke with said they were swamped throughout the day and into the evening. Northside Grille even held a post-Porchella concert which was packed with patrons.

Before Porchella started for the day, Brooke approached her neighbor, a young mother.

“I am sorry but we are hosting a kid band in my yard at Porchella this year,” Brooke told the woman. “They start early this afternoon. It might mess up your baby’s nap schedule. I’m sorry.”

The young woman’s response? “Oh, no. That’s fine. Porchella? Yeah, we know about it; its why we moved here.”

Brooke also talked with two young men who moved into a house across the street from her about a year ago. The two would be married the afternoon of this year’s Porchella. “One groom was staying at home to prepare with the wedding party,” Brooke said. “He opened the windows and they weaved the sounds of the atmosphere into their wedding



Northside Groove Committee, from left, Alex McCallum, (guitar), Matt Hulcher (bass), Marshall Norton, Jr. (keys and vocals), Micah Berry (drums and vocals), Charles Owens (sax), and the singular voice of Laura Ann Singh.

prep.”

Along with Brooke Ullman, Bellevue Porchella has been shepherded by Rob McAdams, Summer Gentry, Jami Bricker, and many other volunteers. Now an annual event, Porchella features local musicians performing from front porches throughout Bellevue. It has become the most popular event hosted by this Northside neighborhood.

This year, thousands flocked along the streets of Bellevue to listen to 37 bands that performed from shortly after noon until six in the evening. What’s more, the weather was perfect for this outdoor event that highlights the remarkable musical talents of our Northside residents.

We strolled the streets for hours, catching as many of the acts as possible. Crack Fox seared the audience of some 150 spectators on Nottoway Avenue with their blues-tinted punk, loudly punctuating lyrics from the prolific pen of lead singer Rasputina, aka Alane Ford. This band in the past year has skyrocketed from relative obscurity into the stratosphere. They’re playing regular gigs at Northside Grille, and all around

town.

Right after their show, we made our way over to Fauquier Avenue and watched the duo of Wrong Worshippers—Milo (the band’s lyricist) on drums, and Nick (vocalist) on bass. These two young men, who performed during the very first Porchella, captivated a massive group of listeners. Milo’s lyrics are socially and politically inspired and come to life with bass lines and drum beaten melodies that are reminiscent of the punk revival. This, too: their stage presence was absolutely phenomenal.

For the last group of shows, we had hoped to get by to see and to hear The Ex-Patriots (one of our favorites), and the four-foot-ten-and-a-half inch Susan Greenbaum (another favorite, and one of Richmond’s most gifted singer-songwriters). Unfortunately and fortunately, we chose to see Northside Groove Committee first, and once we arrived were glued there for the next hour. The band, led by Micah Berry, includes members of Three Sheets to the Wind, along with master tenor saxophonist Charles Owens. And as if that weren’t enough, Laura Ann Singh

sang three songs with the band that brought the figurative house down. About three hundred people stood elbow to elbow along LaMont from the alley up to Bellevue Avenue. The Berry’s, who own the corner house there, removed the side fence from their backyard, creating an instant stage.

The band is made up of seasoned musicians who are absolutely flawless in their presentation. There’s not much you can say about Laura Ann—other than her voice is like no other. She sang three songs: “You’re So Vain”, a duet with Micah of “Don’t Mess Up a Good Thing”, and “Dancing in the Streets”, which is exactly what everyone there did, and the applause that resounded after each song was thunderous, foreshadowing Laura Ann’s performance four nights later at The Kennedy Center.

The day once again confirmed the extraordinary amount of musical talent that resides in Bellevue, and this neighborhood’s deep commitment to community. **NJ**

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## BRIEFS

# RVA Clay Studio Tour Coming Soon

**T**HE RVA CLAY STUDIO Tour is coming up on the first two days of June. You're invited to take a self-guided tour of Richmond's diverse clay community.

Over 20 clay studios throughout Richmond and the surrounding area will be open to the public with 50 clay artisans showing off their work and studio space.

Brochures showing locations will be available at each studio so you can plan out your route and spend the weekend visiting your favorite artists and meeting new ones. Visitors will have the opportunity to see what a clay studio looks like, and talk with the artists about their work and process, as well as purchase work directly from the artists. Demos of pottery techniques and info about classes will be shared at some locations.

Studios will be open on Saturday June 1, from 10 am until 5 pm; and on Sunday June 2, from 12 pm until 4 pm.

For more information, please visit [www.rvaclay.com](http://www.rvaclay.com)

### "TIME BEINGS" BY BLYTHE KING AT ERIC SCHINDLER GALLERY

Recent collages by Blythe King will be on display at Eric Schindler Gallery through June 14.

According to the artist, "I'm starting to see my collages as visual diagrams of Zen meditation. My work shows activity within an expansive field. The portraits visualize thinking in the midst of our originally radiant, naturally awakened mind. Fragments disperse, float, and orbit around luminous circles made of gold-leafed magazine and comic book clippings. My women break the spell of advertising by shattering its very words."

Blythe King works as educator,



Clay Studio Show

mentor, collaborator, program director, and practicing artist. Blythe's collage works have been shown regularly at the Richmond Public Library, Eric Schindler Gallery, and the Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art. She has also been showcased by the The Griffin Museum of Photography in Massachusetts and the Hillyer in Washington, D.C.

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Stream of Consciousness, work by Blythe King

### MAY FAIRE AT WALDORF

Richmond Waldorf School hosted its annual May Faire on Saturday, May 4. A morning of traditional maypole dancing was followed by



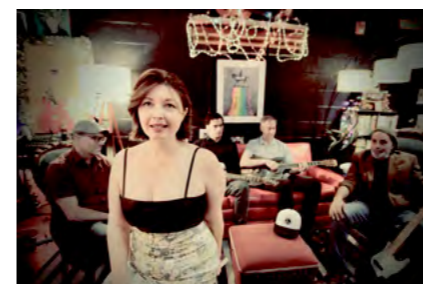
May pole at May Faire.

a large family-friendly fair full of flower crowns, tie-dye, a baby animal petting zoo, homemade bbq, and lots more. Over 300 attendees from the Waldorf community as well as our Northside neighbors helped to raise funds for the RWS students and also share the spirit of spring with the community.

### MONTHLY MUSIC LINEUP AT NORTHSIDE GRILLE

Here's a the monthly list of band to perform at Northside's leading music venue—Northside Grille.

May17, High Frequencies; May18, Janet Martin; May19, Hungry Hard Luck Heroes; May22, Nucleus Trio; May 23, Party Favors; May 24, Carmen Anne & The Low-down Gamblers; May 25, Ramona & The Holy Smokes; May 26, Prab-bit; May29, Tarrant 2 Piece; May30, Brandon Wayne & His Lonesome Drifters; May31, Lucky Stiffs; June 1, The Ex-Patriots; June 2, Mike Lucas; June 5, Roger Carroll; June 6, Armistead's Army; June 7, First Friday Karaoke; June 8, Jimmy Rushing; June 9, Susan Greenbaum; June 12, Andy Cobb; June 13, Tarrant; June 14, Mike Gales; June 15, Jonathan Meadows; and June 16, Janet Martin.



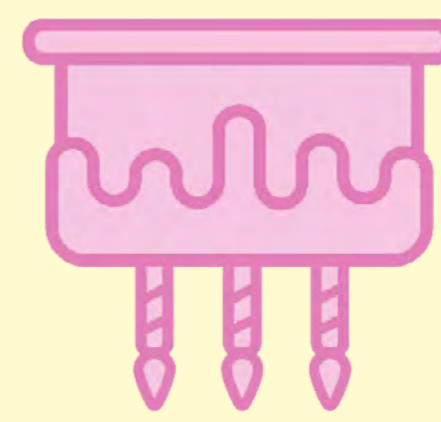
Carmen, photo by PJ Sykes.

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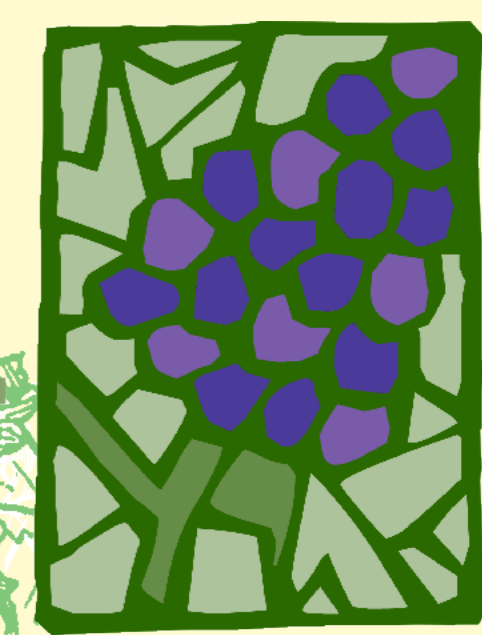
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Once Upon a Vine



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IN THE ENCLOSED SIDEYARD OF MY BOYHOOD HOME ON THE ISLE OF PALMS,

I was lying on a bed of grass staring into a flawless blue sky. The only interruption to this field of vibrant blue was a single white cloud that moved leisurely to the east, heading toward the Atlantic. I breathed deeply of new-mown grass that was tinged with the pleasant sweetness of gasoline, and I could hear the sputtering of the lawnmower and the whirr of its blade. Even though I could not see him, because my view was blocked by the wall that surrounded the yard, I knew my father was pushing that mower. For many years after that, the smell of freshly mown grass, or the sound of a lawnmower conjured that memory, which was always followed by a sense of security, as if all was right in the world.



Anna Sundstrom, Laura Dooley, Bonnie Holland, and Suzanne Bessenger.

All that has changed. Nowadays when I smell that mixture of gasoline and freshly-cut grass, and hear the belching and drone of a lawnmower, I am more apt to think of Apocalypse Now. Specifically that iconic scene when the Air Cavalry takes flight in a swarm of Huey Gunships, menacing birds of prey, their rotor blades churning the air thunderously. Then the obliteration of jungle foliage and human beings with jellied fire, and Lieutenant Colonel Bill Kilgore being moved by the smell of napalm, reminiscent of gasoline.

So much for fond memories.

Lush, emerald lawns cover over 40 million acres in the continental United States. That's nearly fifty thousand square miles, roughly the

size of New York State. It is the largest crop in the country, even edging out corn, and has absolutely no food value. These uniform swards of green, whether they blanket golf courses or the yards of residential homes, come at a dear cost to the environment.

In some states, turf grasses cover large portions of the ground. Ten percent of Delaware is devoted to lawns, and in Connecticut and Rhode Island the number soars to twenty percent.

Lawns in the United States require about 2.4 million metric tons of fertilizer annually, which contributes to increased nitrogen levels in runoff water, and in far too many instances herbicides and pesticides are used, which eventually end up



Assessing new plant placements.

in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. And consider this: each day, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, nearly nine billion gallons of fresh water are pissed away to keep a non-native species of grass ever-green.

Add to that, loss of habitat, and because manicured lawns do not flower, pollinators perish for lack of nectar. This, too: turf grass is a monoculture: it offers no biodiversity.

And though lawns do sequester carbon, they don't do it nearly as well as a more bio-diverse ground covering.

During the last recession, Richmond had a bumper crop of abandoned properties, and Chris Gough, an associate professor of

biology at VCU, seized the moment.

"We followed up by digging in the soils and quantifying the amount of carbon in the soils and how that changes over time after people leave," says Chris. "And so the take home from that was lawns that were abandoned for a longer period of time actually accumulated more carbon because there was a recovery, a return, back to the prior ecosystem that existed before it was grass. You eventually get woody species, trees, shrubs, bushes and so it appears that as that plays out over time after abandonment there's this accumulation of carbon in the soil."

There is a national trend that has been gaining momentum for well over a decade. More and more peo-



A liberated lawn on Avondale Ave in Bellevue.

ple are allowing nature to take its course by introducing native plants into their yards and letting the cultivated grasses die out. I have witnessed its progress in Richmond, year by year, and when one front yard on a given block eliminates turf grass there is a sort of domino effect, with neighboring homes following suit. Many front yards in Bellevue are now blanketed with perennials and native ground covers. They look natural, they celebrate their own diversity, they restore ecosystems, and unlike the boring conformity of a green lawn, these perennial landscapes—varied and colorful—possess an aesthetic that appeals to all five senses.

"And if every one of us little homeowners would bring some natives, we could help restore habitats, we could bring back biodiversity," Catherine Farmer told me a few years back. Catherine is responsible for the removal of invasive species and the restoration of native plants on Belle Island, a volunteer initiative she started almost a decade ago.

It is in the small engagements, the slightest of skirmishes, that the tides are sometimes turned so a war might be won.

I recently had the pleasure of meeting a group of four women whose

rallying cry is Liberate Your Lawn! All Bellevue residents, Bonnie Holland and Anna Sundstrom live next door to one another on Claremont, and Laura Dooley lives just up the street from Suzanne Bessenger on Avondale. Along with their shared passion for things that grow in the good earth, each one of these women had lived in California at one point or other in their lives.

"There's no coincidence that all of us have lived in California at some point because what we're doing here is the norm there," says Bonnie. "Water is such a major concern there that this is what people did in their front yards, and so I did this for fifteen years before we moved here."

We're sitting at a table, the five of us.

Bonnie looks at her next door neighbor on Claremont, who happens to be her next door neighbor at the table. "One of the things when we were buying our house is we saw your garden, Anna," says Bonnie, "And we were like 'Yes, this is it, at least one neighbor's going to be okay with what we're going to do.'"

"I started really just growing food out front because that's the only full sun we had," Anna remembers. "It was probably back in 2012 or 2013. We did raised beds first. After that,

I realized I needed to plant more flowers, and when Bonnie moved in I realized I needed more color."

As it turns out Bonnie, like the late great garden designer Gertrude Jekyll, is also a visual artist.

"I used to paint and this has sort of taken the place of that for me," says Bonnie.

Bonnie considers why some people have a love affair with their lawns. "One of the things they seem to like about their lawn is that it's so tidy," she says. The same tidiness can be achieved by planting perennials instead of turf grass. "You can have someone come in and design a low maintenance landscape with perennials that is drought tolerant and eco-friendly," says Bonnie. "But it's super tidy and looks pulled together and I think that's important to some people. You could also do a lawn substitute like clover or creeping thyme."

But not one of these four women is looking for the manicured look of a front yard.

"For me I like the wildness," Bonnie says. "I love that it's alive. I feel the wish to control nature is a vestige of a former time when that's what people thought they were supposed to do to nature. It's a holdover from that."

"Humans began to think they were apart from nature," Laura Dooley says. "And we need to move back to a time when humans were seen as a part of nature."

Bonnie suggests that many folks harbor good memories of turf grass lawns. "They have these associations with it, maybe they grew up with it," she says. "And they have these warm, fuzzy associations with it. And it looks neat and tidy to them."

Laura nods. "I agree completely," she says. "I've thought of different reasons people hold on to lawns. For one thing, they think it's less maintenance, lawns require watering, and irrigation systems. They require pesticides and reseeding and fertilization, and they require lawn mowing every week in the summer. They require raking in the fall, or else your lawn will die."

None of that is required of a yard planted with perennials. "I water my plants for the first two weeks after I put them in and then that's it," says Laura. "I don't do any watering after that. I don't do fertilizing. I don't do any mowing or raking. I welcome the leaves in my yard in the fall because they mulch my ground. They're free mulch and they add nutrients to the soil. I

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN  
cover by CATHERINE MCGUIGAN



A Bellevue yard in full bloom.

think how much money people put into lawns compared to what money I've put into my garden so far in two years. I bought some plants from Bill Shanabroch and other native plant purveyors. I've also gotten so many plants free from people. I haven't needed to buy much. And native plants thrive in

clay soil so you don't need to bring in truckloads of soil. It's cheaper honestly than maintaining a lawn."

These front yard gardens offer many other benefits. "It's such good exercise," Suzanne Bessenger says. "And it's a good way to connect with your neighbors."

Bonnie smiles when Suzanne says this. "People talk to me about my garden all the time when they're walking by," she says. "That's a big social connection I have."

"All the response I've gotten from neighbors has been positive," says Laura. "Anyone walking by has said, 'You're doing beautiful things



A Bellevue yard in full bloom.

here.' I just had a really positive response. Gardening has built community for me."

And these front yard gardens are educational for all who come in contact with them. Laura mentions her daughter. "On a daily basis she's outside exploring the plants because there's something new to



An Aesclepias waystation for monarchs and other pollinators.

see every day," she says. "What's blooming, or what insect or animal visitors do we have today? It's a way to bring our younger generation back into feeling part of nature, and they learn to have respect for other species besides humans."

These small ecosystems encourage us to experience the world as it re-

ally is. "When you go through the world thinking about everything as alive and contributing something everything becomes magical," Suzanne says. "It's all a miracle."

There is some labor involved in creating these green spaces. "When I'm out in front working people are like, 'I love this, this is beautiful,

but it must be so much work," says Bonnie. "When people first started saying that to me I really had to think about it. Is it really a lot of work? What it is good work."

Then Suzanne tells a story that occurred in her hometown on the West Coast. "There was a woman in her eighties who had this fantas-


tic garden in her front yard and she was out there puttering," she says. "And these other people walked by and one of them said, 'Oh it's so beautiful, but it must be a lot of work. And she said, 'No, it's a lot of play.'"

There's no doubt about it. This approach to front lawns is taking off, and it spreads from house to house, from street to street.

"It is a tremendous sense of joy for me," says Bonnie. "And I have people regularly walk by and say that my garden is a source of joy for them as well. People come by and they're like 'This is our favorite little stretch.'"

And then Suzanne asks us to imagine the future. "How awesome would it be if a whole block was like that? I would always walk down that block"

Someone says, "What if the entire neighborhood was like that?"

"It would be like living in a park," says Suzanne. 



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**TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARIES**

# Twentieth Anniversaries Once Upon a Vine and Stir Crazy

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

**T**WENTY YEARS AGO this month, two things happened on MacArthur Avenue that changed that business strip in the heart of Bellevue forever.

Bob Kocher, who had operated Price's Market in the Fan for many years, had toyed around with the idea of opening a beer and wine shop for some time. He considered different areas of the city, but ultimately chose Bellevue. Every Wednesday for about a month, Bob would park his car on MacArthur Avenue and walk ten blocks in every direction. He chose Wednesday because it was trash day and the recycling bins were lined up at curbside. He rooted through the discarded cans and bottles, taking notes. "I wanted to see if people were buying wines, and, if they were, what kinds of wine they were buying," he told me years ago. "That's how I made my decision to come over here. That was a lot of it."

Bob purchased the building that houses Once Upon A Vine on December 15, 2003, and started a total renovation two weeks later. With the restoration completed, and the shelves fully stocked, Bob first opened his doors for business on May 4, 2004, and his shop was an immediate success.

"It's been a fabulous twenty years, thanks to all of our loyal and supportive customers," Bob told me recently. "I'm looking forward to the next twenty years."

Four days after Once Upon A Vine opened, Stir Crazy Cafe served up its first cup of coffee. The original owner was Jerry Bistline. After nine months of arduous renovation he opened Stir Crazy, and it filled a long neglected void in Bellevue.


Claire McGowan took over ownership of Stir Crazy Cafe on the evening of April 22, 2013. There was already the firm foundation that Jerry had laid, but she expanded the menu and repainted the interior, and later did

significant enhancements, including a completely revamped counter and murals by Ed Trask.

Then in 2018, Vickie and Trey Hall purchased the business, and breathed new life into it. They beefed up the menu with dishes made from scratch that appeal to every conceivable palate, along with coffee, tea and other beverages, and baked goods. The consistency of food served there is unparalleled. The staff is a constant, and they act and interact more like family members than coworkers. It's always a joy to enter Stir Crazy, and be greeted by any of the employees, because even to the customers they seem like family.

"We wanted a way for us to stand out from some of the other coffee shops in the area," Vickie told me about a year after she and her husband took possession of Stir Crazy. "And we already do stand out because it's like a living room, as if you're coming home when you come in here. With the new menu we've made Stir Crazy stand out even more. Food has set us apart."

Here's what Vickie had to say on the occasion of Stir Crazy's twentieth anniversary: "It is amazing and humbling that this small cafe, tucked away in the heart of Bellevue, open only for breakfast and lunch, has survived and thrived for twenty years. I am so grateful to be a part of the magic that is Stir Crazy Cafe. We owe all that we are to our amazing staff and our incredible customers—the long time patrons, our newer regulars, and those who just happened upon us. We really enjoy what we do and we hope that is felt whether it's your first time at Stir Crazy or your daily stop here. As you may have heard us say many times when you visit, 'thank you, we appreciate you!'"

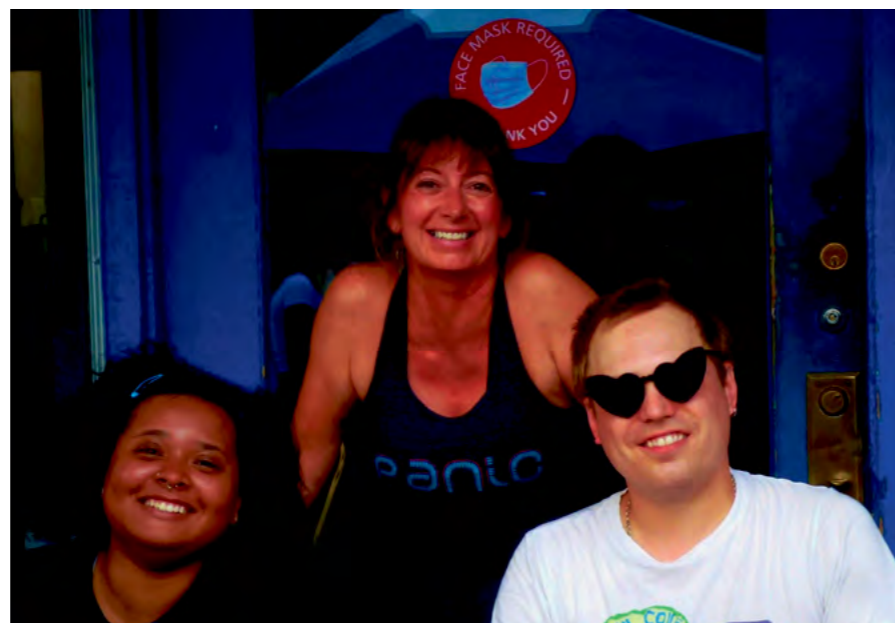
And on May 20 to celebrate twenty years of service, Stir Crazy will offer 20 percent off on everything on the menu. 



Stir Crazy mural by Ed Trask.



Vera and Bob Kocher at Christmas on MacArthur.



Stir Crazy staff at National Night Out.

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DIVERSIONS

# The Best Hiking Neighborhoods in RVA

by FAYERUZ REGAN

**LEARNED THE HARD WAY** still shrouded with an air never to hike in the woods alone. Luckily, I wasn't the victim of a crime. But I could have been, had others not shown up.

One afternoon, I was hiking solo en route to the Bronson Caves. This Hollywood landmark features the original "Batcave" from the 1960s TV series. In the opening sequence, viewers see the Batmobile zipping out of this cave, and I wanted to explore the area.

I passed a few people along the trail, but Griffith Park was relatively empty that day. When I came to a clearing, instinct told me I wasn't alone. I looked up and saw a man with a moustache, smiling at me. I smiled back, then tried to pass to the right. He blocked me. I tried to pass to the left, and still smiling, he blocked me again. In a split second a million things ran through my head. Miraculously, a family came bounding down the trail, and when he saw them, he took off. I left with that family.

Richmonders often claim that to have a decent hike, one must go west to Charlottesville and the Shenandoah mountains. While it makes for a great day trip, it's not convenient for those who like to hike often. The Buttermilk trail and other James River footpaths feature decent inclines. But since I prefer to hike alone to clear my head, these options don't address the safety issue of flying solo in the woods. In Los Angeles, mountains seemed as if they were plopped haphazardly in the middle of a metropolis. I got used to solitary hikes in places with plenty of doorbells, and people to hear me scream.

Richmond may be comparatively flat, but I have doggedly searched for the best neighborhood hikes. I explored communities around the river to uncover the most scenic places with an incline to get your heart pumping. I'm happy to share these secrets with you. Here are some of the best.

### THREE CHOPT AND IRIS LANE

Right where Grove Avenue ends at Three Chopt, where all the private



The Philadelphia Quarry

schools form a cluster, sits a hilly neighborhood that's also a feast for the eyes. Venture down Iris Lane off Three Chopt and take in the stately homes and old-growth trees. The hills are so challenging that residents tend to scoot around in golf carts; especially since this neighborhood abuts the Country Club of Virginia. You'll have to return to this neighborhood a few times to wind through miles of roads. You'll uncover old stone houses built in the 1920s and an eco-corridor that runs alongside the University of Richmond.

### HOLLYWOOD CEMETERY

It's hard to classify this hike as morbid when it offers sweeping cliffside views of the James River and an open-air mausoleum with stained glass windows. No one can deny the beauty of the ornate graves, or the aggressive inclines that will leave you breathless. While there, you can check out the graves of Lewis Ginter, President James Monroe, and other famous residents.

### ROTHESAY NEIGHBORHOOD

At the west end of Douglasdale Road is an exclusive neighborhood with hills all around. It's impossible to get lost because the area is isolated on three sides by the James River, Powhite Parkway, and the forest behind Windsor Farms.

You'll find Tobacco money-era mansions overlooking the James and Japanese gardens. The coolest feature? The Philadelphia Quarry, from the 1800s. Sure, it's a super-secret swimming hole for locals only, and you can't even get into the website without a secret password. But if you peek through the trees from the heights of Rothesay Circle or the netted fence, you'll witness the steep granite walls, sparkling water, and floating docks. I'm still trying to find someone who can get me in.

### DOWNTOWN

I know it's unconventional. No one thinks of the city when it comes to hikes, but downtown has the most aggressive hills out there. Shockoe Slip, Shockoe Bottom, and the grassy hills surrounding the Virginia War Memorial beckon to those looking for a challenge. What downtown lacks in natural beauty is more than made up for with architecture, educational historical markers, window shopping, and plenty of places to end your adventure with a cold drink.

As I write this, I realize there are more neighborhood hikes I haven't mentioned. I'll likely release a part two. Until then, go take a hike. [N]

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# On Presidential Immunity

by JACK R JOHNSON

**I**F YOU ARE A LITERALIST, AS are many of our current Supreme Court justices claim to be, the assertion of sweeping presidential immunity that Trump has made should be a 'no brainer' as they say.

In the U.S. Constitution there is no such thing as presidential immunity. Period. Not in the various Bill of Rights amendments, nor in the body of the text. In fact, the only 'immunity' found in the Constitution revolves around congressional liability and freedom of movement. For example, members of Congress can't be arrested on their way to Congress, (a rule designed to prevent the obstruction of congressional meetings.) And members of Congress can say whatever they want to on the floor, including something absolutely defamatory, and no one can sue them for it. So these are privileges and immunities granted to members of Congress, but the presidency doesn't have any of them. The only privilege the President actually has spelled out in the Constitution is a guaranteed salary—that's it.

In the Constitutional Convention, James Madison actually said perhaps we ought to consider what privileges and immunities the president should have. And then turned around and did nothing, perhaps because all of our founding fathers were busy rejecting the privileges of royalty, like those declared by King George III.

Saikrishna B. Prakash, a University of Virginia School of Law professor, points out that George Washington was involved in many legal disputes in his private capacity, and he never suggested that while he could sue other people, they couldn't sue him. "In fact, there's an order from a state court in Virginia while he's president, enjoining him to deposit some assets with the court because he was an executor of an estate, and he wanted it settled." Prakash goes on to describe an interesting anecdote where [Ulysses] Grant is frolicking on his horse, speeding up and down the streets of Washington.

"And he gets stopped by a cop — a Black police officer — who says, you can't do this, it's illegal. And he gives him a warning, but the president does it [again] the next day, and the police officer actually takes Grant down to the police station, which is a form of arrest. There's a scheduled trial date. Grant doesn't show up and doesn't contest that he was doing this, and he ends up paying a fine." So Prakash argues that Grant evidently didn't think that he was immune from arrest or criminal prosecution.

The first civil law suit actually brought directly against a sitting president didn't occur until the Civil War era in *Mississippi v. Johnson* (1867), in which the Supreme Court of the United States ruled then President Andrew Johnson could not be sued. *Spalding v. Vilas* (1896) affirmed that federal cabinet officers had immunity for actions "more or less" within the scope of their duties. *Barr v. Matteo* (1959) extended this to all federal executive officials. So, despite having no language in the Constitution to support it, the Supreme Court's precedents allow for immunity in civil liability matters for sitting presidents.

That relative immunity was ratcheted up in 1978, when whistleblower A. Ernest Fitzgerald added former president Nixon to his suit against several officials involved in his firing from the Department of the Air Force. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that a former or current president was absolutely immune from suit regarding acts within the "outer perimeter" of his duties (i.e., from civil suits directly linked to his role as the country's chief executive), citing the president's "unique status under the Constitution." Notably four of the justices dissented objecting to the term absolute that could include willful violations of the Constitution (like those for which Trump is on trial.)

Trump's immunity defense draws on *Nixon v. Fitzgerald*, which granted Richard Nixon immunity from Fitzgerald's civil suit. Trump's lawyers



Image of the White House by Chris on Pexels.com

are arguing that under the U.S. Constitution, the exclusive method to proceed against a president for crimes allegedly committed in office is by impeachment in the House of Representatives and trial in the Senate.

Prosecutor Jack Smith argued the Fitzgerald precedent, which found presidents enjoy absolute immunity from civil suits, does not apply to federal criminal prosecutions. That's an entirely different matter, he argues. Smith's criminal case against Trump is based on four charges. Those stem from allegations that he promoted false claims of election fraud and urged the Justice Department to investigate them, tried to get Vice President Mike Pence to alter the election results when Congress was certifying Joe Biden's win, and directed his supporters to storm the Capitol on January 6, 2021.

As Prakash has pointed out, "The Supreme Court has never held that a president is immune from criminal prosecution. It's the Department of Justice that says that," relying primarily on a memo written during the Nixon era. In 1973, amid the Watergate scandal, the Department of Justice's Office of Legal (OLC) issued a memorandum concluding that it is unconstitutional to prosecute a sitting president because the president "is the symbolic head of the Nation. To wound him by a criminal proceeding is to hamstring the operation of the whole govern-

mental apparatus in both foreign and domestic affairs." The OLC issued a second memorandum in 2000, distinguishing civil and criminal presidential immunity, and determining that it was still improper to prosecute a President due to the adverse affect it might have on his ability to govern.

Neither memorandum has force of law, but both are binding within the Department of Justice. After a president leaves office, however, there are no such restrictions. The problem for the SCOTUS justices is that an "official act" of the presidency (in either a civil, or a criminal case) isn't a term that's rooted in the Constitution or a federal statute. It was created largely by the Supreme Court in *Nixon v. Fitzgerald* and earlier. The court said the president has absolute immunity from civil suits that are based on his "official acts," and that immunity extends to the "outer perimeter" of his duties. What does that actually mean or include? Either the Supreme Court will need to answer this question, or, more likely, they will send it down to the Appeals Court for them to decide. One has to ponder even if the justices determine that Trump was acting officially in his role as president, is trying to overturn a democratic election a presidential action that should enjoy immunity? If so, we may be returning to the era of English nobility, and the glory of royal immunity enjoyed by crazy King George. **NJ**

# North of the James 2023 Virginia Press Association Awards

**N**ORTH OF THE JAMES magazine won multiple awards in a trifecta for design, writing, and photography from the Virginia Press Association at this year's conference held earlier this month.

Catherine McGuigan won an award for her design of the covers for "Noah Scalin," "Ramps RVA," and "Dawoud Bey."

Charles McGuigan and Rebecca D'Angelo won awards in the combination story and photography category for the cover story titled "Alleys."

Fran Withrow was recognized for her book reviews of "Foster," "Master, Slave, Husband, Wife," and "Crossings: How Road Ecology is Shaping the Future of Our Planet"

Charles McGuigan won an award for feature story writing with the cover story "Meghan Varner: A Silver Lining."

NORTH OF THE JAMES wishes to congratulate all journalists, photographers and designers across the Commonwealth who were also recognized for their hard work, and commitment to a free press in an era when certain politicians routinely attack the Fourth Estate. **NJ**



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## BOOK REVIEW

# “Alfie & Me”

by FRAN WITHROW

**E**COLOGIST CARL Safina's book, “Alfie & Me,” is the author's chronicle of how he rescued Alfie, a screech owl, from near death and nursed her back to health. But this thoughtful book is not just about an adorable owl and how she learns to take her place in the wild. Safina uses his experience with this owl as a basis for discussions about how humans interact with nature and what that means for the future of our planet.

These observations about nature are intertwined with Alfie's endearing story. I loved reading about this charming owl, but it was Safina's insights about our world that led me to pepper the pages with dozens of sticky notes highlighting his most important points.

Safina says Westerners in particular believe the world is here only for human consumption. This kind of thinking means we are always taking from the earth; that our relationship with the world is not one of connection and reciprocity. We should all be in a network with each other and with every element around us rather than in a power hierarchy with people at the top. Without these reciprocal relationships, the earth will eventually be plundered to the point where she cannot recover. Citing the works of historians, ecologists, and others, Safina pinpoints the crucial detail we are missing today: mutual connection between humans and the earth.

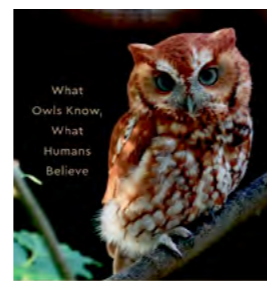
This is heavy stuff, but Safina offsets it perfectly with Alfie's story. Safina sits outside at night, trying to observe her as she silently flies from tree to tree. During the day, cars race by and people walk past, oblivious to the owls watching them from above. The relationship between nature and people can be terribly one-sided.

Safina says indigenous and traditional Asian belief systems stress the impor-

ance of respect for the earth. “They sought great wisdom. The West sought great power. But power in the hands of the unwise is danger.” Indigenous people exercise restraint in their use of resources, so there is always enough for the future. When we take only what we need, when we are in a symbiotic relationship with the earth rather than one where humans are in control, the earth rewards us with enough for all.

Safina cites examples of hope: when we identify animals not as “it,” but as “they,” meaning they are seen as more than mere objects, our perception of the earth changes. India, for instance, in 2013, ruled that dolphins are “non-human persons,” so they cannot be held captive, and have certain legal rights. Legal rights for animals and natural areas are being approved in other countries as well.

Safina's story of a child whose grandfather took him to the lake and told him to stir up the water exemplifies our careless attitude toward the earth who nourishes us. “Now put everything back,” says the grandfather after the child gleefully stirs up mud, silt, dirt, and leaves. And of course the child cannot put it back just as it was before. “So proceed thoughtfully,” Safina says, “reversing course may not be an option.” **NR**



**Alfie & Me**  
Carl Safina

“Alfie & Me”

By Carl Safina

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