

THE GREAT AND THE NEAR GREAT  
ANN MARIE SAMSON

Not that Billyboy minds going to the store to buy Charleen her doughnuts and cigarettes, but being with the band is like walking a carnival midway, and that's good for about one week out of the year. If he hadn't started going with Charleen, Billy would be back home at his shop fixing up his robot.

Billy knows it's going to be another tough day when, at the counter of B&J grocery, he finds himself standing behind a woman on a leash. The leash is a leather strap that goes from a jewel-studded collar around the woman's neck to the hand of a ferret-eyed man Billy suspects is wearing elevator shoes. The woman has wild hair, the look of someone who traveled all the way from LA on a motorcycle. Just before they leave, the man takes a mint out of the basket at the register, pops it in his mouth, then shoves the wrapper down inside the back pocket of the woman's jeans.

As soon as they're out the door, the guy working the register wants to talk about it.

"Takes all kinds, don't it?" He pops the doughnuts into a bag. "Stick around this place long enough and let me tell you, you get to see just about everything."

Billy nods his head and takes out his wallet.

"Say, you're with that Charleen band aren't you?" the man asks Billy.

"That's right."

"Yeah," the man says, "I thought I saw you walking by here with her yesterday. I told the boss I thought Charleen Sawyers went by here. I said maybe you guys are playing down at the bowling alley."

"Nope. Sunny's Place."

"Well, I'm a big fan of Charleen." He gives Billy change and shakes his head. "She's something else."

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The man tells Billy he's real glad she doesn't sing the dumb electric crap kids are into these days. He asks Billy what does he do and Billy tells him he's in charge of "special effects," which comes down to carrying Charleen's microphone on to the stage and bouncing people who get too rowdy or insist on seeing Charleen after the show. The guy tells Billy that sounds like interesting work and Billy tells him he should come around ten and check out the first set. The guy says he might do that.

All the way back down the street, Billy is wondering if Charleen hooked up with the new drummer. Last night she kept on Billy's ass about one thing or another; the speakers shorting out, she was getting too much feedback out of the mike. Next minute it was the lights were too bright and made her look about forty, and what kind of one-horse town was this anyway when only ten people show up? This whole time she's talking to Billy, the new drummer is lighting her cigarettes, following behind her like a trailing microphone wire, and when the show is over, she tells Billy to forget hanging around. She'll just get one of the other guys to pack things up and he can go home early.

The way Billy figures it, women can't think straight. Only a few days ago his balloon was on the rise. He was getting a raise because, as Charleen said, he was a real professional. She hired him because he knows his stuff. He was ready for the big time.

Charleen was always talking the big time. "We won't always be doing the small towns and the poker bars," she told Billy. Soon she'd be singing at the Grand Ol Opry in Nashville alongside the Willie Nelsons and the Johnny Cashes because she's a real professional and she's headed to the top of the charts, that's where she's going all right, and she's taking Billy and the band right up there with her.

But last night she sent him home early. What did that mean, for Christ's sake?

Billy is hoping it means Charleen's in a better mood, and maybe the bass player, Klinky, stayed sober for once, and the new drummer checked in to his own room and not Charleen's next door.

The Happy Owl Motel where the band is staying is painted flamingo pink and features an empty swimming pool out front and a big clock that always says it's 4:10. In Room 302, where the band is staying, the TV is still on. Billy can hear it when he knocks. The door's not even locked. Inside, the room is filled with empty beer cans and ashtrays spilling over with butts and on the coffee table, a pile of "roaches." In the middle of one of the beds Klinky Maroney is rolled up in the blankets like a big cigar. Billy shakes him awake.

"Where's Hobie?"

Klinky sits up and runs his hand through his nest of wheat-colored hair.

"Don't know."

Billy hears the shower running. He steps into the bathroom and pulls back the shower curtain. Max the piano player is sitting on the floor of the shower letting the water run all over his face and down his back.

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“Where’s Hobie?” Billy asks.

“How should I know? Ain’t he around?”

Billy closes the curtain. “Shit!” he says to Klinky. Then he walks up to the big drum with CHARLEEN AND THE SUGAR BEATS written out in bright red and black letters and puts his foot neatly through it. Then he strolls over to Charleen’s room where he plans to fold up Hobie the drummer like an accordion.

A few minutes later Charleen is pacing the wall-to-wall carpeting of her room and Billy is following behind her, still holding the bag of sugar doughnuts.

“What in the world is the matter with you?” she whines. “Have you gone crazy? I’m telling you we weren’t doing anything but talking business and you come in here and bust up everything like what? You’re some kind of prizefighter?”

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Billy shakes his head. Charleen tugs at his shirt so he has to look right at her. “Now what if he doesn’t come back and we have to go find ourselves a new drummer? Then what? Did you think about that? Huh?”

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Billy shakes his head back and forth. This is the place where Billy is supposed to say, *I’m sorry. I lost my head.*

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He knows that. Not only has he seen the movie. He’s read the book.

“We can figure something out,” he says.

“Hand me my cigarettes,” Charleen says.

Billy reaches into the bag and pulls out a pack of Salems.

He’ll figure something out.

“That Billyboy can figure out just about anything,” his mother used to tell the neighbors. “There isn’t a thing that boy can’t figure out or fix.”

She was right. Just before Charleen found him checking out her speakers in Clemmie’s Bar, Billy was working on a robot called Julia Child that could roast a whole chicken in ten minutes. Also stuff it, baste it, slice it and do dozens of other things it took too long to explain to people.

“Don’t worry,” Billy said, “I got things covered.”

“Yeah? And just where are you getting this cover from Billy?” Charleen lights her cigarette. “Cause you don’t look too flush to me and you already owe me for the tab that last night in Clemmie’s and drums don’t come cheap now, do they? So I hope you’re not looking for that cover in my pocketbook because I don’t have it and if . . . DAMN THAT PHONE!”

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Billy listens while Charleen Sawyers ~~Miss Charleen-reaching toward-great-Sawyers~~ answers the phone. She tells the Brentsville Bulletin she's in town but she is not appearing at Al's Redwood Room the way they have it in the paper. She'll be starring tonight at Sunny's Place. She talks to them like they're the New York Times. Her voice is fog rolling over honey. *(and remember to mention the two dollar cover and remember Charleen is spelled with two e's and an 'n')*.

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She'll be by later with the photo.

Billy knows the one she's talking about. It's the one where she's wearing black satin pants and a man's tuxedo shirt.

If she was singing at the grange it would be the one where she's in a flowery print skirt sitting out in a field somewhere, holding a cowboy hat in her lap. If it was some other group who wanted her to look some other way she had a picture for that occasion too. This woman was so goddamn slick he'd like to put a collar around her neck and stuff candy wrappers down her jeans.

*Now, Billyboy, you have just three hours to fix things right, including settling up with Hobie and... and now you stop that, Billy, hear? You just stop all that. There's not enough time. The boys will be over to rehearse in a bit and... well, what about my cigarettes? Put them there on the table and my shoes under the bed now like a honey and just don't let me sleep too long afterwards, and that's just fine, just like you're doing, Billy. You're the best. Haven't I always said it? The only one, Billy. The greatest.*

Under the soft lights at Sunny's Place, Charleen looks the way she looks in her publicity photos. Scarlet lips, two inch long eye lashes, and her strawberry blond curls sprung into place with hairspray.

By the end of the night she'll be perspiring and her hair will be saggy and falling down around her eyes so she'll look the way she looks when she gets up in the morning. Only Billy knows she's near-sighted and cannot see the audience without her glasses. Only Billy knows she wears cover-up for the few zits under her chin. Only Billy knows about the appendix scar on her belly and the mole shaped like a duck just below her left shoulder.

Charleen's voice is bayou-lazy and when she sings she moves around the stage, swaying her hips from side to side. The women at the bar examine themselves in the mirror. The men watch Charleen.

The guy standing next to him at the bar tells Billy he's damn lucky to be hanging around a piece of ass like that all day long. Billy tells the guy yeah, maybe, but he isn't going to be doing this for the rest of his life. Not after they go to Nashville and he takes out a patent on Julia Child. The guy at the bar points to his ear to indicate he didn't hear what Billy was saying and Billy bends nearer to him to talk. So he never sees the bottle that comes flying at Charleen. He sees her duck and then the bottle smashing up against the wall behind her and then Charleen falling over, off the stage, dragging her microphone behind her. The audience gasps. The band stops.

Everyone's running toward Charleen. Hobie jumps off the stage. Max leans into the microphone by his piano. Billy pushes his way through the crowd around Charleen.

*Calm down out there* Max is saying.

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"Folks, who threw that?" Klinky calls out to the audience. Suddenly, everybody is moving toward the stage.

"Give her air," Billy extends his arms to hold back people standing around where Charleen lies crumpled up on the floor. He bends down beside her. "Charleen . . . you okay?" Charleen's eyes are half-closed like a kitten Billy once saw caught in a car door.

Klinky jumps off the stage and makes a grab for some guy wearing a plaid shirt and smoking a cigarette. He swings him around, knocking the cigarette out of his mouth.

"WHAT THE HELL?" The guy lunges at Klinky.

"Ain't he the one?" Klinky asks the crowd. Then someone next to the guy in plaid takes a punch at Klinky that never reaches him and Klinky swings back. Max jumps off the stage and Hobie shoves a guy into a chair. A small brawl opens up about four feet from where Charleen is still lying in Billy's arms. Sunny the manager appears from the back room with her gun raised. Another bottle comes out of nowhere and slides gracefully across the stage, breaking only when it hits the drum. Sunny veers around and the crowd pushes back to make room for her to squeeze her ample frame through to the fighters up front. "I'm calling the cops on the whole bunch of you," she yells. There is one brief second of silence.

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"Never mind that," Billy tells her. "You better get an ambulance."

For days afterwards, even after being dismissed from the emergency room, Charleen is not right. She complains of headaches and cries a lot. Sometimes she forgets the words to songs, or makes up new ones of her own, and worse yet, forgets where she is singing.

Then about a week after the accident, the guy from B and J's grocery calls up the motel and says someone better come down to the store because Charleen Sawyers is sitting out front on the curb crying because she can't remember where she lives. The doctor says, *take a break. Let her rest. Traumatic injuries like this take time.* Billy tells the boys in the band to take it easy for a few weeks, he and Charleen are going away for a little vacation, Klinky Maroney when he calls to find out when things are starting up again, and Klinky says that's okay with him if the band's going to hang loose for a while. He's shaved his head to do a gig with the Four Skins—maybe down in LA somewhere.

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"Sure, I understand, Klinky," Billy tells him, "but keep in touch."

Charleen sits on the edge of the bed weeping. "Who's Klinky?" she asks. "Goddamnit! I can't remember who he is."

She put her hands over her ears and screams.

Billy covers her mouth with his hand to adjust the volume.

It's not long before they're back at the Happy Owl Motel in a double with a fan to circulate the air, and there's only one bureau for both of them and it has the knobs off of it. Charleen gets out of bed only to go to a doctor or a lawyer.

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She has four of each, Billy thinks, but he's not sure. He's been cancelling engagements, telling the papers "Miss Sawyers has been indisposed." Charleen stays up in the room a lot, lets the dark roots of her hair come through, forgets about cover-up for the dark circles under her eyes. Billy searches the drawers to make sure it isn't drugs. He doesn't find anything.

Max the piano player comes by to tell them he's going to play one of the cruise boats for a while and they can just forget about old Hobie. He's doing time in Lake County for something he did with a minor, but Max doesn't know exactly what—maybe sex, maybe drugs, maybe both.

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In the bathroom, Charleen sings to herself. Not band songs. Kid songs maybe. "I've been singing since I was three," she once told Billy. "My daddy took me down to the corner café and put me up on the piano and he said, 'Sing, baby, sing,' and I've been singing ever since."

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Billy listens now to Charleen, listens to the voice that's been singing for so long, puts his ear against the door, listening way deep down to this woman singing, listening to check whether everything is coming apart the way he thinks it is.

A few days later, when he gets back to the motel after messing around back home with his robots all day, everything is changed. Charleen rushes him at the door. She's colored her hair milky blonde and is wearing a great big lip glossed smile.

"Call the band, Billyboy," she says, "We're headed for the big time. We're going to Sacramento."

"Who says?"

"Bob Davett himself. That's who."

Billy drops down on the bed. "And who the hell's Bob Davett?"

"Bob Davett? You can't be serious. Everybody knows Bobby Davett. He made the Doobie Brothers and Joe Hill and Loretta and just about everybody."

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"No kidding."

"Now you rest right there and let me tell you about it."

Charleen begins pacing the front of the bed. "There I was walking down the street right here." She points out the window "Right here in this little one horse town and there sitting in the coffee shop was Bob Davett. The very one. Would you believe it? I'd have recognized him anywhere. Well, sure it was him and I went right up to him because he knows my Uncle Willie from Jackson. They did time together. Course that don't mean a thing. He's completely rehabilitated. Ask Loretta Lynn. Ask any of them. Well, we had just the nicest visit and by the end of it I had us all signed up to go to the state fair next month and be the warm-up band for—guess who?"

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Billy shrugs his shoulders.

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“Now wait til you hear this. Merle Haggard! Merle Haggard, mind you. Well, I just about dropped dead right there when he said it. How much time do we have? Three weeks? You got to call the boys in the band together. I’ll call the papers. Did you bring any more cigarettes? And we’ll need pictures, Billyboy. You’ve got to find me a nice cow for a picture taking. Don’t you forget.”

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So that’s how Billyboy finds himself driving the van to the state fair on a rainy fall afternoon. In the back, Max the piano player and Hobie are playing cards. Hobie is back from rehab and he keeps them all in line now. And they have a new bass player they call “Big Les.” Les wears the dark glasses even at night. He’s played all the jazz lounges and he has the look.

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Les and Billy open up the six packs and start moving beers around. Charleen tells them they better stay sober for Christ’s sake and Billy better change that shirt before anyone in Sacramento sees him.

Billy smiles. It’s just like the old days.

“Who did you say you were?” the woman at the gate asks. She is searching the inside of a big black file folder.

“Charleen and the Sugarbeats” —from Brentsville,” Billy tells her.

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“Tell her that’s Charleen with two e’s and an ‘n’, honey.”

“She knows, Charleen. She knows. Just hold on here.”

The woman turns more pages. “We have the Strawberry Patch Scramblers. Could that be it?”

“No. Sugarbeats with an EA.” Charleen is annoyed. “We’re booked to go on at 9:30. Just before Merle Haggard.”

Now it’s this lady who is getting annoyed. “I know that can’t be,” she says. “Country Hodowners is the ones on before Merle.” She reaches into the stack beside her. “Here’s the program. See for yourself.” She hands the program through the window.

“Give that here, Charleen.” Billy grabs the program and examines it. “We’re not on here, Charleen. They don’t have us here anywhere.”

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“Let me see that,” Charleen takes the program from Billy.

“What the hell’s going on, Charleen, you said we were opening act for Merle.”

Charleen begins to cry. “Well, of course, we are, Billy, honey. There’s just been a mistake. That’s all.”

Big Les leans forward into the front seat and clutches Billy on the shoulder. “What’s the problem?”

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“There’s always a mistake, you know that, Billy,” Charleen says. “You know how I always have to call the papers twice before they get it straight and even then they make mistakes, don’t they? Just park the van somewhere and I’ll talk to them.”

“Maybe I should go in with Charleen,” Les says. “I know what these people are like.”

“Let me talk to them, Billy. Let me tell them. Me and Les.”

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Billy gives her a look and Charleen turns her face towards the window and looks out into the rain. She starts to cry.

“I thought he was Bobby Davett, Billy. Really I did. He was just so nice and all that.”

Billy starts up the van.

“You just keep on driving Billy. You just drive to Nashville. You just keep on going all the way to Nashville, hear me?”

The way Billy figures it, he’s in charge now.

Max tells Billy he knew someone who got shot in the head once. He was never the same. Had to wear a steel plate in his head. Still does, shuffles around in a nursing home somewhere.

Billy stares over at Charleen sitting by the motel window in her bathrobe. She’s smoking a cigarette and staring into the trees outside. Her face is a blank screen waiting to be plugged in.

“We should call everything off,” Big les says, “if this is what it’s going to be like.”

“Rehearsal. Tuesday at 2:00.” Billy says. “Two sharp.”

Even though she comes to rehearsals and has this new wardrobe to cover the places where she’s filled out some, Charleen can’t hide the places where she forgets the words or the spots where the band stops playing and she keeps on singing.

Billy gets the idea that if he can just get Charleen to stop singing, if he can just send her away for a while to one of those health spas, like the one where all the movie people go, the band can go on rehearsing and maybe he can come up with a temporary replacement.

Billy goes back to his parents’ house, locks himself in the garage with Julia Child. He vows he’s not coming out until she can sing every song Charleen Sawyers ever knew.

They call her “Charleen Too.” On the way to the gigs she lies across the back seat in a long box resembling a music case. When they get on stage she unfolds into three neat parts, legs, torso, head. She is taller than Charleen and shinier. The voice inside is more curvaceous, more blond, more glossy. She is everything Charleen Sawyers ever was, stepped up in volume, and intensity, amplified by sultrier smokier sounds.

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Tonight, to honor her twenty fifth appearance, “Charleen Too” is wearing a sequined red ribbon to match Charleen’s red gown with the strap across the shoulder. Tonight “Charleen Too” has been spray painted gold, coinciding with the highlights in Charleen’s hair, sprayed saucily down across one eye. Tonight they are singing country music’s greatest love song.

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Sometimes Billy wonders if people even remember “Charleen Too” is not the real Charleen. Now and then he’ll catch customers watching the glistening knobs and blinking lights instead of keeping their eyes on the real Charleen, on stage swaying her hips back and forth, moving her lips only slightly like he showed her.

They have sellout crowds now. No more small town bars buzzing with barflies. These are the better clubs with a more sophisticated audience, one that appreciates the technology. That’s what the new agent told them. “Don’t be limited to those hokey audiences packed tight inside their jeans.”

Already Billy is working on a new component, “Charleen Too” with a more upbeat jazzy sound. He’ll have Charleen dye her hair “midnight blue” and paint “Charleen Too” to match. Maybe she’ll sit on top of the piano, and he can hook her up to one of those long cigarette holders.

It’s not like they’ve forgotten the original Charleen. It’s not like they’re taking anything away from her. She can go on singing like she’s been singing since she was three. She can go on singing for as long as she wants. Who knows the great future where she could be headed?

Just like he told her, even Julia Child started off as a model airplane.

**Diane Elayne Dees**

Diane Elayne Dees's work has appeared in many journals and anthologies, and has been read on national radio programs. Diane frequently writes fiction and poetry about artists and entertainers. She lives in Covington, Louisiana, where she is a psychotherapist in private practice. Diane also publishes Women Who Serve, a blog about women's professional tennis.

After reading a newspaper story about a local Elvis impersonator, I had a fantasy about a woman whose only sex partners are Elvis impersonators. I thought an unhealthy father-daughter relationship could be the origin of such a proclivity, and "Her Knees Are Weak" was the result.

**Scott Duhamel**

Scott Duhamel writes about film for *The Providence Monthly*, all things pop for PopKrazy ([popcrazy.com](http://popcrazy.com)) his own blog, ([culturevulturetime.blogspot.com/](http://culturevulturetime.blogspot.com/)), and to our great fortune, *shaking like a mountain*.

Somehow, as an active blogger for multiple sites (including my own), I found myself the master of the Glorified Obit or the Poetic Tribute, a natural form for a middle-aged baby boomer devoted to pop culture at large, allowing a writer of my age and interests to examine the past, yet legitimize it by placing it in the context of the present. I’ve always had a special interest in Bo Diddley, despite the fact that when measured up in the pantheon of rock pioneers, he couldn’t quite match Chuck Berry in songwriting prowess, or Little Richard’s sky high performance abilities. Yet Bo had it down—the hat, the guitar, the album covers, the old-before-his-time look, and yup, the beat. Writing the piece

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included in this collection, writing this very paragraph, I can still hear it: The one and only Bo Diddley beat.

**Rachel Unkefer**

Rachel Unkefer is president and a founding member of WriterHouse, a non-profit writing community in Charlottesville, Virginia. “No Harm Done” is excerpted from her second unpublished novel, *The Sea View Hotel*, about a hotel clerk seduced by a con artist. Her first unpublished novel *A Useful Life* was a quarter-finalist in the 2011 Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award.

The main character in my second novel is a frustrated musician in a dead-end job until a con artist turns his life inside out. I realized that a successful con artist is really a fantasy-fulfillment agent, so I wanted to set up scenes in which Alistair anticipates fantasies that Scott is not even aware of, like a jam session with great musicians.

**Libby Cudmore**

Libby Cudmore’s stories and essays have appeared in *PANK*, *Independent Ink*, *Criminal Class Press*, *Kneelerk Magazine*, *Connotation Press*, *All Things Girl*, *Needle*, *Hobo Pancakes*, *The MacGuffin*, *The Yalobusba Review*, *The Chaffey Review*, *The Southern Women’s Review*, *Sunsets and Silencers*, *Red Fiez*, *Inertia*, *Big Pulp* (with Matthew Quinn Martin), *Xenith*, *Pop Matters*, *Pulp Pusher*, *Daily Love Stories*, *Curly Red*, *Espresso Stories*, *Mysterical-E*, *The Midnight Diner* (where she also serves as an editor), and the anthology *Relationships and Other Stuff*. She is a frequent contributor to *Crime Factory*, *Battered Suitcase*, *Celebrities in Disgrace*, *Hardboiled*, *a Twist of Noir and Thrillers*, *Killers ‘n’ Chillers*, where her story “Unplanned” won a Bullet award in 2009 and was a finalist for the 2010 Derringer award in flash fiction.

“Wallflowers on the Dance Floor” was the first short story I wrote in grad school, inspired almost word-for-word by the end-of-the-residency dance party. It had been a rough residency; my grandmother was dying, I missed my boyfriend and I swore everyone hated me. I only went to the party because I was hungry and broke and there would be free food, and I hung around the edge of the dance floor, too cool for school. Somewhere towards the end of the night, it finally occurred to me to actually get out and enjoy myself, and when the Wang Chung-ing was done, I ran back to my room and wrote “Wallflowers in the Dance Floor.” It is both a love song and an FU to my graduate program and to writers in general, who tend to take themselves way too seriously.

**Brendan Harding**

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Born in 1962 in the small landlocked county of Carlow in Southern Ireland, Writer/Columnist and Broadcaster Brendan Harding always found it easy to invent stories of a larger world where excitement and wonder exists in abundance. This need for the “larger world” has resulted in Harding developing to become a successful and award-winning Travel Writer specializing in Eastern Europe and East Africa; with a particular fondness for the nature and wild places of both continents.

At present he is working on a (reasonably) factual book regaling anecdotes from the past five years he has spent working with a small eye-care charity in Kenya’s remote Ukambani. Stories of laughter and hope, family and separation, tears and despair and even the occasional story of prostitutes and tea-drinking nuns...

Harding continues to travel extensively while writing and broadcasting for many publications throughout Europe, the US and beyond.

His motto ‘*this ain’t no dress rehearsal*’ ensures that as long as there are new places to visit and a pen with ink in it he will carry on his “selfish” pursuits right until the final curtain.

During the late 1970’s in the Punk and Poverty greyness of small-town Ireland I witnessed the musical anarchy sweeping the country. My parents were strict enough to ensure that tartan trousers, Doc boots, safety pins and jackets adorned with dead seagulls would not be an acceptable dress code in the home. And so I watched voyeuristically from outside.

Many years later on a writing course with Dr. David Butler, my character Brownie Goldin allowed me to relate some of the stories I had heard and witnessed first-hand; compiling snippets of people’s lives who had found their adulthood in the changing times of Ireland in the 1970’s.

Brownie Goldin is a story of living hope for me. Hope in a troubled time, where laughter, loss and life go hand in hand. As Brownie would say, “It’s mad how everything is Golden around here...”

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### Fred Shaw

Fred Shaw is a graduate of the University of Pittsburgh’s Creative Writing Program (B.A.), and received his MFA from Carlow University where he currently teaches writing and literature. His work has appeared in *5AM Magazine*, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, the Pittsburgh City Paper’s Chapter & Verse section, *Carlow Journal* and at the online literary magazine, *Shaking Like A Mountain*, where he is currently poetry editor. He lives in Pittsburgh with his wife and dog, and hopes to someday see the Pirates have a winning season.

The death of Jim Carroll took me by great surprise and gave me pause to consider my own journey into the world of writing. Carroll seemed to pack so much into surviving his early years and write about it with such beautiful realism that the reader knew his speaker was no fraud or poser. It felt great to read his poem, “Praying Mantis,” to my lit class and to include his work in a university classroom, if only to give him some deserved recognition on the occasion of his demise. The culmination of the events that led to me seeing him read (and play) live remains something of a touchstone to me, if only because I will never forget the day, July 23, 1993, when I turned 21 at midnight. And like so many small venues in Pittsburgh, the Graffiti is a club no longer there.

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### Toni Martin

Toni Martin is a practicing physician and writer. Her essays have appeared in the *Express*, the *East Bay Monthly*, and *The Threepenny Review*. After finishing her second non-fiction book, *When the Personal Was Political: Five Women Doctors Look Back* (2008) she turned to short stories. She and her husband came to California for medical school when tuition was \$325 a quarter and never left. They have three children.

I take jazz piano lessons. Herbie Hancock is a god in my pantheon. His album, *River: The Joni Letters*, transcends the racial boundaries that dominated my youth.

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### Pablo Medina

Pablo Medina is the author of 12 books of poetry, fiction, non-fiction, and translation, among them the poetry collection *The Man Who Wrote on Water* (2011) and the novel *The Cigar Roller* (2005). Forthcoming in 2012 is the novel *Cubop City Blues*. Medina's work has appeared in several languages, among them Spanish, French, German, and Arabic, and in periodicals and magazines throughout the world. Winner of numerous awards, among them grants from the Rockefeller Foundation, the NEA, the Lila-Wallace Reader's Digest Fund, and others, Medina is currently professor in the Department of Writing, Literature and Publishing at Emerson College in Boston and is on faculty at the Warren Wilson MFA Program for Writers.

The story is, of course, based on Chano Pozo, the great Cuban percussionist and composer, who collaborated with Dizzie Gillespie in developing Cu-bop, the precursor to Latin jazz. Chano was killed by a man called El Cabito over a drug deal gone bad. Most of the story is historically accurate. I say most because Chano was shot outside El Rio Cafe, not inside, nor could I possibly know what went on in the characters' minds while all this was going on. That's the way fiction happens.

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### Louis Bourgeois

Louis Bourgeois is the Executive Director of VOX PRESS. His memoir, *The Gar Diaries*, was nominated for the National Book Award in 2008. Bourgeois lives, writes, and edits in Oxford, Mississippi.

The music that inspired my story "Spontaneous Generation," was the Canadian Prog Rock band, Rush. I've always been fascinated by the way this band uses the most advanced technology in order to achieve true Western Secular Mysticism.

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**Elizabeth Medden-Zibman**

Elizabeth earned a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from Fairleigh Dickinson University and a Bachelor's degree in English/Creative Writing from San Francisco State University. Her work is published in the *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Transfer 37*, *The Kelsey Review*, *The Kennesaw Review*, *Open Mouth Poetry Anthology*, and the *U.S. 1 Newspaper* Summer Fiction Issue. A former advertising copywriter, she has published marketing collateral as well as feature articles for the architectural home plan industry. Currently, she teaches expository and research writing at Rutgers University and is looking for a publisher for her novels in the literary fiction and magical realism genres.

This story was inspired by a song of the same name, written by Christine Turner Curtis. I first learned the song in elementary school. Another song mentioned in this story is, "Hang Down Your Head Tom Dooley" by Frank Proffitt and later recorded by the Kingston Trio. It was a family favorite.

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**Jared Ward**

Jared Ward has had work published by West Branch, New Delta Review, Santa Clara Review, and others. He lives with his wife and two children in the Ozarks of Arkansas.

This piece was completely about music for me, from my personal history of playing the worst "Wish You Were Here" rendition known to man, to being unable to shake Modest Mouse's "People and Places" from my head while I was writing. Plus, the main character I kind of envisioned as a mix of Jack Black, Bobby Bare, Jr, and the guy at the state fair who ran the ring toss.

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**Norah Piehl**

Norah Piehl's essays and reviews have been published in *Skirt! and Brain*, *Child* magazines, on *National Public Radio*, and in print anthologies. Norah's short fiction has appeared in *Literary Mama*, *The Linnet's Wings*, *The Legendary*, *Printer's Devil Review*, and the anthology *Battle Runes: Writings on War*. She grew up in Minnesota and now lives in Somerville, Massachusetts, where she is the Director of Communications and Development for the Boston Book Festival.

The story is loosely based on the real-life personal circumstances of the contemporary Minnesota band Cloud Cult, many of whose songs continue to be inspired by the unexpected death of the lead singer's young son several years ago. I used the story to explore various manifestations of grief and to consider why, for some people, unimaginable loss can be the catalyst for remarkable creative production.

### Ryan J. Werner

Ryan Werner is a Midwestern janitor. He runs the music/literature project Our Band Could Be Your Lit, wherein he writes a new short short story each week based on a song suggested by a musician or writer (or reader or rocker). He is a six foot, hot look, all American man.

My band was together for six years, and then we broke up. Though we were an abrasively loud party-doom band and not an abrasively loud country-rock band, the ideas about how a band works and unworks are pretty much the same. I'd love to meet a girl like West in real life, but since I'm yet to do so, I had to make her up. Really, I had to make her up regardless: if it ain't got a girl, it ain't rock and roll.

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### Judy Lee Green

From a colorful family of storytellers, [Judy Lee Green](#) is an award-winning writer and speaker. She has been published hundreds of times and has received dozens of awards for her work. A Chicken Soup writer, her most recent work has appeared in *Christian Woman*, *Cooking Up South*, *Passager*, and *Now and Then: The Appalachian Magazine*. She has appeared in magazines, newspapers, literary journals, business publications, and anthologies.

The soundtrack of my childhood was the sound of my mama's voice singing country and gospel songs. She sang along with Hank Williams on the radio, singing up-tempo happy songs and lonesome pitiful songs. We kids sang along too. Daddy couldn't sing. With the slow songs, he howled like a dog.

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### Sally Bellerose

Sally Bellerose won the Bywater Prize for her novel *The Girls Club*, widely available from Bywater Books, <http://amzn.to/apVqj1>, or your favorite bookseller. The manuscript won several other awards including a Fellowship from the NEA. Please visit her at [sallybellerose.wordpress.com](http://sallybellerose.wordpress.com). She loves visitors and responds to all comments.

“Do What You Gotta Do” was inspired by our four year granddaughter Kennedy. In fact, as I approach my 60th birthday, much of the heightened enthusiasm I feel in my personal and writing life has been inspired by this little girl who is able to perform a perfect forward roll in her Timberland boots and Cinderella gown.

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### John Campbell

John R. Campbell is an award-winning poet and essayist whose work has appeared in *Poetry*, *The Georgia Review*, *The North American Review*, *Threepenny Review*, and many other journals. A book of his environmental prose, *Absence and Light*, is available from the University of Nevada Press. Campbell is also a guitarist, working in blues and free improvisation configurations. He currently teaches writing at Western Oregon University. See [google.com/profiles/johnrobcampbell](http://google.com/profiles/johnrobcampbell) for samples of his writing, photography, and music.

John Coltrane exemplified real freedom. He was fully contained within his musical reality; instead of denying the limits of jazz, he reworked those limits from the inside out. Rather than merely transgressing, he explored the boundary lines themselves, prying them open in order to delineate new inner territories. I love the way he moved the music from within.

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### Ann Marie Samson

“The Great and the Near Great” is based on an actual singer/songwriter of local repute and one real event that happened to her. The rest is made up and intensified by my imagination and hyperbole. Her best (near great songs) that inspired me were “Country Roads” and “The City of New Orleans” which she sang on that very train when it made it’s last run.

My short fiction has appeared in *ZyZzyva*, *Inkwell* and other literary magazines. In my ordinary life I’ve been a teacher, a gardener, a struggling flamenco dancer and singer in the shower. I am a wife, mother, grandmother, auntie and friend and I try not to drive and write stories at the same time. Sometimes it’s a struggle.

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