

# The Best Bar in the World

Seth Sawyers

Before it was the best bar in the world, I hear it was as rough-and-tumble as it gets. It was called Dizzy Issie's and was one of two hundred interchangeable corner bars in this town. Dollar drafts paid for from piles of singles stacked neat on the bar and no food unless potato chips count, a pool table upstairs, plenty of fights, smoking a click shy of mandatory. Eventually, they got rid of the pool table, added a kitchen, and now they put out a good bacon-and-blue-cheese burger, solid wings, two kinds of jalapeño poppers.

Now it's called The Dizz, and I hope it never changes, stays open until the sun swallows Remington, Baltimore, the earth. The Dizz is, and I've been around at least a little, the kind of neighborhood bar that almost anyone would want, cozy in an end-unit row house that, no matter where you live in town, feels like it's just up the street.

It does happen to be just up the street from where I live. The Dizz is, like its city, somewhere in the middle. The Dizz is an old baseball glove. The Dizz is an old Ford pickup that runs great. The Dizz is to Applebee's as a New York slice is to Sbarro's. It's the real deal, its own thing, an originator rather than a facsimile. Of course, you've got your own best bar in the world and I'm sure it's

wonderful, so long as you're wonderful, and I'm hoping that you are. But, for right now, The Dizz holds the title because I say so. Maybe I can convince you.



The best bar in the world does not have a specialty cocktail menu and thank god for that, though it does have a machine that turns ice into frozen drinks. The dinner specials at the best bar in the world are hand-written and photocopied. The high-end dinner is a crab cake, and I suppose they have fish and steaks. I am reasonably sure if you are a vegetarian that they will serve you something hot to eat.

What the best bar in the world does have is a Kelly, a Robyn, a Rico. It's gray-haired ladies sitting down to a side salad, a bowl of Maryland crab soup, the pork chop special with two vegetables. It's post-shift bus drivers drinking ten-dollar bottles of wine, Johns Hopkins poets ordering another pitcher of Miller Light, dreadlocked white boys drinking something a little nicer. It's Indian graduate students, older round-the-corner men eating late breakfasts, young parents hurrying through early dinners. At the best bar in the world, I've met firefighters, doctors, novelists, community organizers, cops, dudes from Sweden, weed dealers, a current United States senator. It's older black couples on dates. It's young gay boys and girls on dates. It's walking canes hung on rails. It's Baltimore accents for days. In a city that can feel awfully segregated, everyone hangs out there.

The game will be on and when there's no game the jukebox isn't bad. There are clear-plastic tablecloths, bunches of fake grapes, naughty old matchbooks along the bar's back mirror. There's a fireplace that burns actual wood. The walls are given over to fallen heroes: Michael Jackson, Elvis, Marilyn Monroe, Whitney Houston, David Bowie, Prince. There's a dessert case, within which slowly revolve towering slices of cake. If you have to wait for the bathroom, you dance with the servers rushing into and out of the kitchen. If the *City Paper*, when it was still around, had awarded Most Colorful Cursing, Rico, the server, would have won every year and it wouldn't have been close.

It's not that The Dizz is stuck in 1970 or 1980, but it's not sprinting, exhausted, overpriced, toward 2020, either. If I had to pick I'd say The Dizz is somewhere around, let's say, 1994 or maybe '99 or even 2002, and it has not yet gotten a cell phone though it's thinking about it, has not consulted with a mixologist because it never will, and has decided that, hey, you there, in the shirt and jeans and sneakers or boots, neck tattoos or not, have a seat wherever, but if you want to order something to eat, do it before 10:30, though they could probably fry you up something after that if you hurry.



Baltimore, as you might have heard, is famous for its poverty and its violence, twin ills that have complex sources but which certainly have to do with the loss of manufacturing jobs and also many decades of racial segregation. But it's at the same time a lovely place, a fighting place, a charmer. It's easy to overdo this kind of thing, the bruised fighter with the heart of gold, but clichés are at their cores truth. Of course my city's not the only place with two sides. San Francisco both glimmers and stinks. Little Appalachian towns, all rolling hills and fast creeks and twenty-year-old sedans needing muffler work, can delight a spirit but also crush it. It's just that our bruises here in Baltimore are not on the leg but on the face. Absolutely, you come visit and we can see art and theater and listen to symphonies and eat fancy burgers if you want. And then, after that, we'll drink a whole lot of cheap beer, climb up on someone's roof, and set off some fireworks, and if you make it through all of that, I promise you we'll be friends forever.

"We're not like those other cities," a friend once said. He was talking about shinier, richer towns. Towns with more expensive salads. "But we don't want to be."

What I'm saying is that absolutely I'd love fifty more bike lanes. That I'd give a toe if it meant a halving of the number of handguns out there in waistbands, stashed in abandoned doorways. But we've got a few bike lanes, and I've got all my digits. A lot of people—but by no

means all of the people—can afford to buy a house here. There's not a lot of pretension. It often takes a full five minutes of conversation before you get asked what you do for a living. And we've got places like The Dizz.



Just after the end of World War II, his corner of the city presumably still rubble, George Orwell wrote for the *Evening Standard* his description of the perfect, idealized London pub, which he thought ought to be called The Moon Under Water.

Orwell had ten criteria, many of them what I can only call exceedingly British, among which were Victorian furnishings, an absence of radios or pianos, cigarettes for sale (sure), aspirins (fair enough), and stamps (drunk letter-writing?), liver-sausage sandwiches and mussels and biscuits with caraway seeds, stout on tap, and, perhaps most importantly, Orwell's perfect pub had to serve beer in handled mugs or, even better, mugs made of china. No London pub, circa 1946, satisfied even nine of his ten criteria. Only a few ticked off eight.

If The Dizz had comment cards and if you forced me to fill one out, the only thing I'd change would be booths instead of the high-tops along the bar's back wall. I'd adjust the air conditioning from Deep Arctic to merely Pretty Cold.

And that's it. The Dizz isn't for everybody, but of course if it were, it would not be the best bar in the world, or even close. I guess you could call it a dive, but, you know, "dive" to me has always just meant "good bar." The best bar in the world is Kelly and Robyn and Rico, it's Bohs for two-fifty and bags of Utz Party Mix for thirty-five cents (up from a quarter). It's sheets of paper with hand-written specials and it's the Orioles on the big TV, bottom of the ninth, down two, two runners on, the meat of the order up.



One night last spring it was just that: bottom of the ninth, the O's down two, two on, Mark Trumbo up, his big California face huge on the TV, jaw set tight, eyes boring holes into the pitcher.

The best bar in the world shows games of all kinds but the only ones that really matter are the Ravens and the Orioles. Everybody's nuts for the Ravens, but the Ravens are football and football seems almost too easy to like and also somehow compulsory. The Ravens are a crab cake sandwich but the Orioles, decent again after what felt like four hundred years of terrible, are long talks on the phone until the battery dies, an old, cold dog curled up next to the wood-burning stove. The Orioles are *Moby-Dick*. Stop me if this is all too much. No, don't. The Orioles on the TV at your favorite bar with your friends, in this city that will tackle you and then hand you another beer, that's love.

Because here's the pitch, and we're all there, faces soft in the dimmed Tuesday-night lights, all of us up too late but who cares: the federal employee, the chef, the writer, the drummer, the social worker, the guitar player, the young lady who is now my wife, me.

Trumbo doesn't get hold of that pitch every night but this night he does, launching that pill into the bullpen, and it's good night, game over, see you tomorrow. And though it's just game number 22 or 34 or whatever it is out of 162, and though we're not the best team in the league or the prettiest or the richest or anything else, The Dizz erupts, all of us shouting *Trumbo jumbo, Trumbo jumbo, Trumbo jumbo!* and then Kelly or Robyn pours us another pitcher and Rico drops it off and though the best bar in the world may not be the shiniest, that's exactly the quality that makes it the best, the thing that keeps us here, in this town that takes a little effort to love. Because if you let it in, The Dizz will love you back, and then you're a goner.

## Seth Sawyers

Seth Sawyers' work has appeared in *Fourth Genre*, *River Teeth*, *The Rumpus*, *Salon*, *Literary Hub*, *The Millions*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, and elsewhere. He writes essays and is working on a novel. He lives in Baltimore with his wife and is an editor at *Baltimore Review*.

## Holly Willis

Holly Willis teaches in the School of Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California. She writes frequently about experimental film, video, and new media, while also exploring experimental nonfiction, creative critical writing, and poetry. She is currently working on a series of text-based videos, and her work has appeared in publications such as *Film Comment*, *Afterimage*, *ArtWeek*, and *carte blanche*.

## Ash Whitman

Ash Whitman is a Washington State native who currently resides in Virginia with her husband. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Hollins University and is currently working on a collection of essays. Her work will appear in a forthcoming issue of *Michigan Quarterly Review*.