

A NEIGHBORHOOD BAR CAN FEEL POETIC

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In all the country, I think there's only one place a poetry reading could fill a ballroom: the Associated Writing Program's annual conference, held this year in early March in Austin. It's amazing: Writers attend panels, readings, slam showcases. Horn-rimmed glasses fill the convention center — as one engineering-husband of a writer pointed out — and everyone talks about line breaks and novels.

Hurrah, I say! And hurrah again!

But as I was leaving the Hilton (an official conference site) and heading to the Convention Center (another official conference site), I realized that many of the visitors to our fair city would see only Sixth Street and the Warehouse District; they wouldn't know where the neighborhood bars, juke joints and low-down, dirty dives reside. They'd miss whole hunks of Austin nightlife, especially places such as Billy's on Burnet. Founded by Billy Forrester of Waterloo and the Dog and Duck fame, this is a neighborhood bar. The kind of place you might go to discuss property taxes, or all the new duplexes being built, or who should be mayor, or how long you've lived in Austin and how it's changed. Or to play foosball or Ms. Pac-Man and Galaga. Or to sit on the patio at one of the long, long picnic tables and eat a veggie burger covered with smoked gouda and avocado while drinking good beer.

Billy's offers about 20 beers on tap — including Guinness and St. Arnold's Amber — more in bottles and cans. During the "happiest hour" from 4 to 5 p.m., domestic pints cost a dollar and premium pints cost two. (The regular happy hour runs 2-7 pm., Mondays through Fridays; Monday and Tuesday night drink specials make patrons gleeful.) Lunch specials vary by day, but all of them, from the catfish to the meatball sub, come with fries and a \$5.99 price.

A pair of dartboards, a jukebox, a pool table, video poker and TVs largely tuned to sports during sporting seasons — is there ever a time when something isn't in season? — along with the aforementioned foosball and arcade games (Golden Tee among them) provide entertainment. And free WiFi provides work opportunities. Presuming, of course, you don't want to just sit outside or chat at one of the variously shaped and sized tables indoors which families, groups of men, couples, young folks, older folks and people from the surrounding neighborhood all inhabit.

I keep meaning to walk to Billy's — it can't be more than 15 minutes from my house by foot and the spring nights are growing lovely. I've been contemplating a little mini-crawl, starting with the new Sampaio for a caipirinha, then Billy's, then Ginny's, then a quick stumble home. Yum.

As for parking, Billy's has a small lot (though it's often full), and a nifty sign posted outside the door warns that a couple of the businesses nearby tow if you park in their

spots, 24 hours a day. (Thanks, Billy. I was parked there.) Luckily, nearby street parking isn't terribly hard to find.

My fabulous friend Susan B. A. Somers-Willett (otherwise known to faithful bargirl readers as Whiskey Susan) just had her first poetry collection published and gave a crowded reading at the conference. The poems, like so much wonderful writing, often contain a visceral sense of place. "Stay above water," she writes of her hometown, New Orleans. "Throw parties when there is weather./Vacation during Mardi Gras/or do Mardi Gras every other day."

Place matters. Neighborhoods matter. And sometimes, in the right place at the right time, poetry matters enough to fill a hotel and all its guests.

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