

AT THE DART BOWL, A STRIKINGLY GOOD TIME ON AND OFF THE LANES

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Technically, the Dart Bowl should be my local. It's as close a place to my house as I can find to buy a bourbon. Technically, however, it's a bowling alley, not a bar. But there's bourbon and hangover food, which is better than I can say for some bars. I don't go Dart-Bowling often, but I've never been bored when I do.

"Ugh?" may well have been what I said to my friend Robert when he called me at home bright and early (OK, at 10 or 11) one morning after a late night of shows. "Enchiladas?" he said into his cell phone while sitting at one of the Dart Bowl Cafe's vinyl booths and glancing at sports on the big screen TV. The sound of his voice bounced off the far wall, a wall brought over from the original Dart Bowl, covered in graffiti and well-wishes. The enchiladas are served in a skillet with cheese and chili con carne and are about as heavy as anything I've ever seen. Robert swears by their morning-after gloriousness, as do other friends. I've never braved them. Perhaps that's why my hangover often lasts longer than his.

But enchiladas and a can of Lone Star in the morning? Pain.

The cafe is enclosed and separated from the alley, more or less, by glass. About 10 tables with primary-colored plastic chairs reside between the cafe/bar and the alley. People smoke at these tables, and sometimes drink. Once, a woman in a wheelchair, a cigarette ash as long as my finger rising from the filter, stopped by our table and began talking at me and a friend. She was, if memory serves, dressed like cupid, or at least in red and sparkles. Her hair was in disarray and it was hard to understand her. Moved by compassion and a sense of wonder at the surreal qualities of the moment, we spoke to her for a little while, the words of the conversation lost now.

Bowling can be dull if you're not much of a player. But still, if you're having a drink at the alley, watching a league team with red-stitched flames crawling across their bowling shirts, and listening to the wooden thunder of pins falling, a game seems like a good idea. And when you and your friends start making innocuous, foolish bets -- that Matt has to shave half his beard, that Owen has to give a newbie at school a back rub in the pub, that you have to bowl in another person's lane -- the game gets more exciting.

Suddenly you find yourself jumping and swearing, terrified that you will have to roll your ball into someone else's lane because everyone else looks tougher than you, which isn't hard. You don't do it, because you don't lose that bet. You've wiggled your way out with some fancy rock-scissors-paper, best-four-out-of-seven action.

The alley closes, you all go on to another bar, the Poodle Dog, betting on pool, though the others can play and you can't. Later still everyone plays cards -- the betting that enlivened the bowling has now become the night's theme -- and you lose all your money more quickly than you thought possible.

And you're going to have to owe that money, because you spent your cash on bowling shoes and gutter balls, having to charge the Shiner and Lone Star and bourbons-and-cokes you bought, an inexpensive round or two early in the night. But your friends know you're good for it -- or at least, they know where you live and work. And when you wake up in the morning, gray and tired, the cards still on the table, you think for a moment about this column, about how perfect the symmetry would be if you went and had breakfast at the Dart Bowl. But you can't face it and walk to the kitchen for a glass of water instead.

'A Girl Walks into a Bar. . .' alternates with Jonathon Goodsell's 'Night Moves.'

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Dart Bowl. 5700 Grover Ave., 452-2518. Cafe: 459-4181.