

A WRITERLY SETTING FOR STORIES

Moira Muldoon

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First, an aside.

Last week my friend Maria was visiting, so we rounded up the troops and went out. The Driskill, the Stephen F., Ludwig's -- all merited a stop-by. But we ended up at the B-Side. Halfway through our stay we began discussing the B-Side's famous ghosts (employees have reported that it has on occasion rained inside and that chairs and glasses have a habit of moving by themselves).

It was late, we were tired, and we were talking about the paranormal; some folks started getting a little creeped out. My friend the SJM, a paranoid soul if ever there was one, wondered if the ghosts were listening to our conversation; for a split second we all stared at each other, the entire group focused on the question. Then, before anyone could speak, a whistle blew. Shrilly. Loudly. I jumped. So did everyone else. It was a sign. Never mind that the whistle belonged to some dork who'd been to a party and thought it would be funny to stick his head into the room and blow. For a minute, we all thought the ghost had spoken. The Day of the Dead is how many days away?

Earlier that week, I went to the San Marcos River Pub & Grill, where my friend Cynthia was throwing fried mushrooms off the deck to the ducks and/or raccoons below. We'd come after a reading, "we" being my poet friend Anina, my fiction friends Mark and Mike and John and their significant others. (Cynthia being the "pepper" to Mark's "salt," as he'd said the first time I met her.)

San Marcos is not a serious bar town; there's the Showdown, the Triple Crown, the River Pub, a few others. But the MFA program at Texas State (in which I'm enrolled) seems to have a standing date with the River Pub on Tuesday nights after writing workshops, or any night after a reading. Which means the bar is often full of young writers discussing Walt Whitman, Lorrie Moore and program gossip in about the same proportions. Some of the staff are connected to the university as well; at least one of the employees is a former student of mine (an awkward situation on those very rare occasions that I've had one drink too many).

It's an ordinary bar, with bar food and pitchers and liquor. Some nights there's music on a wooden deck just above the river -- Toni Price and Slaid Cleaves have played there. People can sit inside, or outside on the lower or upper decks. My group tends to overrun the outside because the bar is right on the river and the sound of water is a wonderful thing at night. (That and lots and lots of writers are smokers and smoke disperses better in open air.)

I've been to the River Pub dozens of times, and yet, in lots of ways, I don't know it at all. It's a low-key pub, a place to grab a bite and a drink after class, especially if your poem or story was workshopped that night and you feel in need of a drink. My River Pub

memories are about people and conversations and foolishnesses: The first night of a new semester; the way the poets sit together at their tables and the fiction writers congregate at theirs, and the tentative crossings between; the plans laid for slumber parties and wondering how many people can realistically crash at my house; the way the Austinites have to leave early because the drive home is long, while the San Marcos folks head inside when the deck closes to have one more.

But in terms of the bar itself -- well, I don't remember much about the bar itself. Which is fine. Perhaps the most important thing a bar can do is step back, feed you drinks and allow you to chatter the night away.

bargirl@covad.net

San Marcos River Pub & Grill. 701 Cheatham St., (512) 353-3747. Hours: 11 a.m.-midnight Sunday-Friday; 11 a.m.-1 a.m. Saturday