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The Booxer as Critic: Poetry Is Brutal Sport In a Chicago Barroom

Readings Are Held as Bouts,
And Things Do Get Nasty;
Ode to John Wayne Gacy

By Alex Kotlowitz

Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal
CHICAGO—Poetry lovers, this may not be for you.

In a naked barroom stage before a rambunctious crowd of beer drinkers, David Cole reads a graphic anti-abortion verse.

Suddenly, an angry woman bursts forth to confront the 6-foot-1-inch Mr. Cole. She removes her leather glove and whacks the English-born poet twice across the face.

Welcome to the brutal world of "slam poetry." Here at the Green Mill Lounge, a 60-year-old establishment famous as the place where prohibition-era mobster Machine Gun Jack McGurn ordered a comedian's throat slit, poets have been figuratively slugfisting it out every Sunday night for the past year. The bouts seldom involve fistfights; the woman in the leather gloves notwithstanding, the violence is mainly verbal.

Reading Poetry Is a Brutal Sport At Chicago's Green Mill Lounge

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W.M. has held five annual World Heavyweight Championship bouts and recently issued a challenge to Chicago's slam champion, Terry Jacobus, who has held the trophy tight in Chicago. It is again considering sponsoring his own contests. A bar in Cleveland has experimented with the slam, and Mr. Smith says he has had inquiries from poets in New York.

"The crowds at the Green Mill can be 100 in the tight, intimate barroom," McGurn, the gangster, Green Mill patron does not hesitate to bozo, hiss and even urve inspiring poets offstage, and the house rules, patrons can kick their fingers to silence a contestant if his reading goes on too long, which is common enough at any poetry reading. One New York writer left the stage in tears after being clicked "down."

Elitist Reaction?
Some poets disdain the slam. A Chicago poetry newsletter, Letter eX, has been the forum for a continuing debate on the merits of the contest. Critics argue that the poets pander to the audience, by stressing in their writings sex and obscene language. "It has become a cheap theatrical thing, where the poetry isn't valued, but the procedure of battle is," says Paul Hoover, an

Doing Battle

The contest is called "the slam," as in "slam the opponent to the ground—grand slam," explains poet Marc Smith, the contest's founder. Seated in the Green Mill's crescent-shaped booths or standing by the curved bar, up to 200 fans a week come to hear the poets do battle.

The rules are simple. Participants take turns reading the original verse on stage, and three judges chosen from the audience score each poem on a scale of one to 10. Bouts vary in length from one to seven rounds. Amateur poets, and a few seasoned pros, compete for as much as \$50 in prize money, raised from a \$2 cover charge.

Budding Robert Frost they aren't. Green Mill patrons would probably not judge the furthest poet's anodyne words too sentimental anyway. And don't expect Keatsian romance, either—poet Blakey Kucner's poetry tends to themes that are political and sexual and, at times, blasphemous. One winning poem was an ode to mass murderer John Wayne Gacy. Another compared a man to various kinds of sushi.

One Sunday night, a wordsmith in blue jeans named Seth Greene hunches behind the microphone holding a tape recorder close to his head. "This sings to mind war and the corruption of our earth," he reads to the bemused barflies.

"Is this another facile poem concerning our corrupt society?" responds the tape recorder,

to shoulder, guzzling beer as they wait for the fighters to appear.

In one corner stands Teri Davis, no lightweight despite her small frame. This full-time poet has had a book of poems published. Moreover, she has already won six slams. She is the champion of champions.

Leaning against a pillar is her opponent, a subdued, softspoken Vincent Kueper, who is known here as "the Will Rogers of poetry." He earned the appellation because of his wholesome appearance, he explains. Mr. Kueper, a law librarian's assistant by day, hopes he can go the full seven rounds with Ms. Davis—a feat he believes no other challenger has accomplished.

Ms. Davis decisively wins the opening round, and in the next round, reads a poem so erotic in parts that it causes nervous laughter in the audience. The work is entitled "Ode to Men's Bodies."

Booing the Judges

As Mr. Kueper ascends the stage, which is bathed in the green light of the bar's neon sign, a voice comes from the murmuring crowd: "Get dirty, Vince," the poet says. He doesn't, and thus loses the round by a point. A few scattered boos are directed at the judges. Mr. Kueper, a former underdog, is becoming a crowd favorite.

Judges are a constant target of harassment. In one contest, a judge, whose score was the subject of derisive remarks, quit after one round. After a match earlier this year, a disappointed poet remarked

Poetic Dialogue

This begins a poetic dialogue between Mr. Greene and the disembodied voice. Fair game in the approval of the judges. His rival, C.W. Hayes, counters with an eerie poem about a murderer:

*And this is what we see; one check flat-tened and fastened by the asphalt
No fidelity, just the routine clay
No face I remember, as the killer is also a stranger, an Idrone's snaphoot and threadbare suit.*

"Nice, nice," someone whispers from the audience. But gimmickery triumphs over ingenuity, as the judges award the round to Mr. Greene, who eventually takes home the bout's \$10 purse.

Poetry contests aren't new in ancient Athens, local magistrates judged such literary giants as Sophocles and Euripides in annual contests of drama written in verse. But the slam's origins are more mundane: In three poetry matches in Chicago several years ago, poets entered a variety of places. An arts group in Taos, N.M., was the first to be watching on in various places. An arts group in Taos, N.M., was the first to be watching on in various places.

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into the microphone. "I don't like my heart being judged from one to 10." Then he stormed out of the bar.

It is the seventh and deciding round in the Davis-Kueper fight. Kueper has made an extraordinary comeback. The poets have the crowd rapt. "We were trying to set the place on fire," Mr. Kueper would say later. "That was the victory right there."

Mr. Kueper's poem about a serial murderer draws hooting and hollering from the drunken crowd; the judges give it a combined score of 25. At her table, Ms. Davis coughs and friends who urge her to use an old standby, a poem of alienation she worries might not sit well with this reporter, who has volunteered to judge for the match. She decides to risk it anyway.

"It's a sick, sick, sick, sick, sick society," Ms. Davis begins.

The judges reveal their scores: a total of 27.5. Her strategy has worked. Ms. Davis still reigns.

After a great roar of applause, Ms. Davis leans into the microphone one last time. "I would like to take this time to announce my retirement," she says. "See you guys around."

After a brief interview, she says she is leaving the circuit for personal reasons. Indeed, she would have stepped down after her previous match, she says, had she not needed the \$50.

Would she come back under any circumstances? "I would have to be a very nervous Marvin Hagler took to poetry?" She pauses for a moment and replies: "Maybe if there was more money in it."