

A VISCERAL SORT OF POETRY

My Night at the Biker Slam

By Susan DeGrane

My friend "Rebel Ruthi" Limper talked me into going to the Toys for Tots planning meeting, a meeting for the biker toy run that

commenced with a guy named Animal yelling into a microphone, "Awright everybody, shut the fuck up!"

The Stempien VFW post at 47th and Tripp was brightly lit, flooded with cigarette smoke, and crawling with bikers. Ruthi had convinced me to dress dangerously—lots of leather and a black Spandex dress. She's convinced me to take lots of chances, like trying to outrun a summer thunderstorm on her Yamaha: she drove, I rode behind.

But it was Ruthi's friend Santo who convinced me to go to a biker poetry slam. Judging from the scene at the VFW hall, Santo is a pillar of the biker community. In his van he brought the cardboard boxes that would be dispensed to bikers for collecting toys. "Everybody knows Santo," Ruthi said. He's known for his orange Harley, his orange cowboy boots, and his orange Hawaiian shirts.

Santo said he's spent a lot of time at the Green Mill poetry slams, and for the last few years he's been organizing the occasional biker poetry slam. He handed me a flier that advertised a slam as "the biker life-style told through music and poetry." The handout warned, "No attitudes, no assholes."

Later in the week Santo called to make sure I was coming. He said the poetry would probably reflect bikers' interests: "sex, drugs, and rock and roll." He also said that it would be much louder than your average poetry slam because

bikers tended to be loud. This had been a problem at the Toys for Tots meeting. Animal's mike "wasn't loud enough for all the assholes in the back who kept talking," Santo said. "We're not going to make that mistake, you'll definitely be able to hear us."

At Desperados in Schiller Park the night of the slam I wasn't anywhere near the speakers and my teeth rattled every time I closed my mouth.

One rather jittery poet named Herb Weinand stood out like an alien in his cloth jacket and

corduroy pants. A mild-mannered poet and house painter adrift in a sea of black leather, Weinand is a nonbiker who calls himself the Grim Rhymer. He claimed in a voice of experience that biker audiences can be "brutal."

We were surrounded by some 300 bikers, mostly large hairy tattooed men wearing leather vests and chaps—imposing figures who entered the bar with heavy footsteps, the chains on their boots jingling like spurs. There were women too: some were casual, but others were something to marvel

at, with their big hair and heavy eyeliner, leather miniskirts and hip boots.

No less impressive was the Desperado bouncer, a mountain of a man in red suspenders—tall and wide as a doorway—who refused to yield passage to anyone without payment of the \$5 cover charge.

"A lot of this poetry is more visceral than intellectual really," the Grim Rhymer commented.

Jean Howard and Rob Vantulye, regulars at the Green Mill poetry slams, have an interest in motorcycles that led them to this event. Vantulye rides one and Howard's father collected them. They read in unison a romantic poem about a night ride, about holding each other close, feeling one with the bike and the road. "Helmets, we said, when we go, helmets won't help!"

This time the audience was not brutal, but the Grim Rhymer still had the jitters. Before taking the stage, he borrowed my leather jacket and left his cloth one on a chair. "I really consider myself a bit of an impostor," he said. "But they insist I do this. I'm always afraid my cover might be blown and someone's going to kick my ass."

Rhymer's poem about a pyromaniac was barely tolerated. No one bood or yelled for him to leave the stage, but the loud talking began to swell ominously. With a paint-spattered loafer nervously tapping the floor, Rhymer seemed to sense he was not reaching his audience.

His next poem, "Written for the Girls at the Green Mill," went over better.



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