

# Honing the edge in the city — poetry at Tenderloin's 21 Club

BY TOM CARTER

THE door's wide open for poetry on a hot Wednesday night in October at the 21 Club, where strange things are seen and heard.

Tenderloin poet Ed Bowers, who runs the open mic show, says he never knows what's going to happen at the "most chaotic and edgiest" reading in town. It's held at the city's most famous skid row bar at Turk and Taylor, twice mentioned for its charms in Esquire magazine.

Poetry night kicked off in July 2009 and has been repeated the second Wednesday of every month since, thus joining a long list of open mic sites, with Sacred Grounds Cafe on Hayes Street claiming to be the oldest with a 30-year run.

Since Kenneth Rexroth spearheaded the city's poetry renaissance in the 1950s, the open mic scene has evolved to well over two dozen sites. Sessions range from weekly to twice a month to monthly. One occurs outdoors, Thursdays, at 16th and Mission. Another is in a laundry, Brain Wash Cafe on Folsom Street.

Unleashing poetry at his favorite bar was Bowers' idea. Frank, the barkeep, gave his blessing, and Central City Extra, where Bowers is Art Beat reporter, sponsored the Ground Zero Poetry Readings, giving \$5 to the first 15 poets who read their stuff. But what was intended as a modest honorarium for a moment of creativity didn't pay artistic dividends, because some folks hardly tried. They just wanted the bread. After a few sessions, Frank, who handles signups and payouts, scotched the stipend. Still, if Frank really likes something, he'll hand the poet a drink and a buck.

Over on Chestnut Street, the winner of Bistro Yoffi's monthly Word Up! open mic got \$100 — then the bistro went belly up. Pizza for poetry is rare, but Escape from New York Pizza on Bush Street used to give away slices after a \$5 donation. But, 10 years later, they discontinued the practice in July.

"We started getting put on 'cheap things to do in San Francisco' lists on Websites," says Manager Adam Levin. "The money went to a charity the poets picked. Well, it got to be more about pizza than poetry. People were just sucking up as much pizza as they could."

**Popular Ground Zero readings showcase emerging poets, turn dive bar into art venue**

Environment plays a part in being edgy, too. The 21 Club is in a hot spot of the poorest and roughest neighborhood in town. After some late night murders at the Taylor-Turk intersection, the media called it "ground zero" for drugs and violence, the poetry event's name. Across Taylor from the club is an ex-con halfway house, and on the street, prostitutes come and go, oblivious to Michelangelo. Others call this the Tenderloin Arts Corridor.

At 8 p.m., a dozen people are milling about on the corner. Inside, in the bar's dim light, the jukebox is going full tilt, the soundless TV nobody's watching is showing "Pirates of the Caribbean," and two whirling fans are bothering the paper ads pinned to the walls.

From six to as many as 30 poets read. Frank was happy about last month.

"Some poems were really good," he says. "Some new people with talent."

One was Jessie, a hooker. She had sidled up to hustle Bowers, not knowing he was in a foul mood. "Fuck off," he growled. She left, went to her hotel and returned with a thin gray and black scarf her mother had knitted. She gave it to Bowers. He warmed up, and they talked about poetry. She said Bowers was an inspiration to her, then wrote a poem about her life and her sister hookers, and read it.

"A good poem," Bowers says. "But she got busted and sent back to New York. She's in the women's house of detention now."

Tonight, wearing a baseball cap and lived-in sport-coat, Bowers, 62, is looking much the poet, and with the scarf around his neck he seems immune to the heat. In his briefcase on the bar next to his wine glass are poems he'll read tonight. He's anxiously awaiting Charlie Getter, a poet in his 30s, before starting.

Duo Dagiate, 28, from Chicago is sitting next to the window. He's a veteran of the 16th and Mission readings. "A lot of great energy here," he says.

Getter, a husky 6-footer, arrives with a young brunette, Shye Powers. Getter runs the extemporaneous outdoor poetry sessions near the 16th and Mission BART Station, Thursdays at 10 p.m. And he's known for initiating the annual poetry reading under the City Hall dome about five years ago, events now arranged by Diamond Dave Whitaker.

Soon Charles Kruger — short, bald, gray-bearded, in a Hawaiian shirt — arrives carrying a folder.

Just as things are about to get under way, a short woman in bejeweled denim swaggers in saying, "Fuck that shit. Fuck that shit." She sees a \$10 bill on the bar, grabs it and runs out. The bar is momentarily stunned. Then Frank hustles around the counter and out the door, joined by three customers yelling for her to stop. "A prostitute," someone says.

The posse corners the woman a half block away in front of the Curran House apartments. She's loud and defiant, and a couple of bystanders stick up for her. After some yelling, Frank is back. Dagiate lingers to shout a parting shot at her: "You gotta work for money!"



Frank the barkeep, a one-man show himself, acts as bouncer — and poetry critic.

## Poetry bargain

"21 Poems done at the 21 Club," by Ed Bowers, photographs by Lenny Limjoco. 32 pages. Full-color and colorful. \$5 at the 21 Club, Turk and Taylor. Published by Study Center Press. A central city extra. www.studycenter.org

Frank resumes his spot behind the bar. "She had the \$10 bill stuck in her pants — behind," he tells two customers. "I wasn't going to reach down there for it."

Kruger asks for "a tonic water for a poem," apologizing that he's broke. Frank slides a glass to him.

Bowers checks the keyboard on the bench next to the mic. Poetry finally seems imminent.

"This is the 108th poetry reading," the hyperbolic Bowers announces as the jukebox falls silent a little after 9 p.m. "So write it on a cocktail napkin if you have to, and come make an asshole out of yourself like I am."

Somebody plays soft note progressions as Bowers begins reading, "Why I Commit Suicide at 13," timely because of the news of bullied gay teenagers taking their own lives.

It's a long, meandering poem. Here and there a bar patron yelps "yes" after such phrases as: "to avoid killing you," "this world is not my lover," "God didn't help me," "destined to be desperate," "I am trash, you'll never understand me," "my music will seduce you after I'm dead."

"Watch out," Bowers reads on, "just because I'm dead doesn't mean I'm not alive; just because you're alive doesn't mean you're not dead."

"Amazing poem," Kruger says to him. Kruger takes the mic and begins reading his long poem, "We Take What There Is to Take," mentioning many penises and "pools of tropical sweat." It ends: "And somehow we live." His "Nitty Gritty Haiku" lays some dysfunctional blame on parents, and Frank likes it so much that he pushes another tonic water at Kruger with two \$1 bills stuck to the damp glass.

Dagiate stands and speaks extemporaneously, something about being in a car trunk and a "shadow that's skin tight like cheesecloth," but ends it: "I'm not strong and will never be, trapped in the trunk of your goddamn car."

Getter kicks it up a notch. Eighteen are in the little bar now, eager for more edge. He speaks loudly in sort of free association rap style that doesn't need the mic's volume, repeats phrasing, arm-waves and steps forward and back — "I can't preach, I can't reach" — and it sounds pretty good. He ends with a loud flourish. Getter gets a beer and a buck.

Powers is next up. She's scribbled her 36-word poem, "Waking Up," on the back of a midterm history test on Gender and Sexuality in Pre-Modern Europe. But it doesn't hold the interest that her next poem does, a typewritten two-pager called "Cabin Plotting," a love story about a fling in the woods with the fallout written and remaindered on Post-its in the cabin hallway.

But her poem gets short shrift because of a commotion at the front door. People inside are saying the thieving hooker's pimp is out there with his shirt off and wants to fight somebody. However, no blows are struck, the scene diffuses in just minutes, and the troublemaker leaves.

The attention turns back to Bowers at the mic. He begins, "How to Get Shot," accompanied by faint notes from the electronic piano. It's another long one, a tragi-comedy that tells about Bowers as a youngster seeing so many murders on TV news in the 1960s. The poem strings them together in an assassination frenzy, an awful run of gut-wrenching news that TV mined like precious metal.

Powers gives another short reading; Getter repeats, too. Then, sensing break time, the poets and half the crowd drift toward the door to stand outside and take



PHOTOS BY LENNY LIMJOCO

Poet Charles Kruger maintains the edge at the 21 Club's Ground Zero open mic, with Ed Bowers on keyboards and Charlie Getter and Shye Powers on deck.

the cooler air, smoke, laugh and kill time, satisfied, while sealing a memory full of edges and worth repeating.

The poets were like kids who just bust out running. Open mic, with its generous offer of freedom of expression, in front of a receptive audience, does that to people. ■

**Next Ground Zero Poetry Reading**  
**Wed. Nov. 10, 8 p.m.**  
**21 Club, Turk and Taylor streets**

## Honoring the homeless dead — poignant 2009 ritual presages tradition's 20th year

BY TOM CARTER

DOZENS of mourners will gather across from City Hall for the annual memorial recognizing the homeless who have died during the year on the streets. The grim and, many say, strangely elating ceremony will be 20 years old on Dec. 21 at 5:30 p.m.

"This started in 1990," says Rev. Glenda Hope. "It was a bitter early winter like last season. The paper had reported that 16 people had frozen to death."

"We were just becoming aware of it. But 16 of us got together and walked to every spot — all in the Tenderloin — where some-

one had died. And we stopped there and were silent and someone slowly beat a drum. No one had a name. And then we moved on to the next place.

"At the end, I said a prayer and that was it." Over the years the ceremony has changed, grown larger, even added a bell, and remains a somber, dramatic statement. It's held at dusk, rain or shine, or in whatever brutal weather prevails, a reminder, Hope says, of what the homeless endure. But just where homeless die outdoors is nearly impossible to find out now, unless it is in a daily newspaper story, she says, "or if it's anecdotal. But they (the city) don't want these figures out — and Newsom doesn't want them out there."

More than 60 bundled-up mourners gathered in Civic Center Park on the longest night of the year to pay their respects to the homeless who died on city streets in 2009. A brisk wind pestered them and darkened skies threatened rain, a potential misery that, Hope assured everyone, would not stop the ceremony. Most were from the city, others came from Berkeley, Concord, Hayward and San Mateo.

They stood in a circle around the diminutive Presbyterian minister, who was dressed in black clerical garb, her white collar and silver hair vivid in the darkness. Francine Braae sat on the ground at her feet, ready to strike the black Tibetan bell in front of her when each name of a deceased homeless person was read.

Francisco Aviles, a hand-

some young guitarist, sang "You Lift Me Up" in a sweet operatic tenor, the electronically amplified chords filling the night air. When he stopped, the silence magnified the sound of the wind whipping at people's clothes, and the papers with the deceased's names rustling impatiently in Hope's hands.

"This is our 19th year doing this," she announced. The memorial wasn't meant to be just religious, she said, but a time for anyone who felt compassion for the homeless. There would be opportunity later for anyone to add a name of a friend or acquaintance.

"It's complicated to get names from the authorities these days," she said. "We also have some people here from Hayward with their list. As a name is read, Francine will ring the bell."

Rev. John Wichman, a Presbyterian minister from Hayward, has been a regular at the ritual for years. The other community representatives were a surprise to Hope, but welcome nonetheless.

Hope had distributed the list of names to be read to a half dozen people, some had volunteered, others she asked. One by one they stepped to the microphone, read a dozen names, then stepped back into the crowd.

Between readings, Hope introduced religious people who spoke briefly, or prayed, or read poems or scriptures — a Catholic priest, a Buddhist monk, a Unitarian, a rabbi. Carmen Barsody of Faithful Fools read a poem in English, then Spanish. Hindu and the matriarchal goddess worship speakers weren't present last year, nor was the Islam representative who, in a miscommunication, went to the wrong place.

Each reader raised his or her head to recite a name distinctly and with finality. The style and tone aroused a sadness over the lost

life. After each name was called, Braae struck the bell. It rang loud and bright, galvanizing in the stillness and intensifying the grief. As the plaintive bell tone diminished, it warmed and quivered before trailing off into nothingness. The wind lapped the solemn faces with their sad, staring eyes. A few people sobbed.

"John Doe 71, 92 and 95," announced one speaker.

Hope could get only 10 names from the Department of Public Health last year — "unclaimed bodies that included the John Does." But they came from less than half the fiscal year, July 1 through November. She got other names from two other agencies that she won't divulge for fear they'd stop cooperating if they were publicized.

From the city's records it's hard to determine that someone was truly homeless, she says. Homeless advocates have pressed for a month-to-month report to determine homeless deaths. But the cost to do that is prohibitive, Hope's been told.

At least two people whose names were read were not homeless when they died, though they probably had been homeless. Luke Smith, for example, was living at the Elm Hotel and Hope had performed a memorial for him there.

The rabbi read from the Hebrew Scriptures.

"Anyone have any other names?" Rev. Hope asked.

A half dozen names were barked out from the crowd. Someone yelled, "And all the people who died in SROs and weren't reported." Braae struck a riff.

Aviles sang and played again. The crowd chanted, "Veni Sancte Spiritus," come, Holy Spirit.

Now, Hope said, it is time to burn the lists

of names. The first year, city officials made her promise she'd not allow the names to be published anywhere. So she decided to burn them on the spot. It became tradition. "We release our brothers and sisters into the hands of the loving God," she says, "and it rekindles our fires to work for the homeless."

The papers were set afire and the names became smoke that danced momentarily for the crowd, then wafted upward, pointing like crooked fingers that eerily disappeared in the stary bed of black above.

Ninety-five names had been read. Aviles sang another song. Then Hope asked everyone to commit to "the work of peace" and "grant us safe lodging." A misty rain began to fall but people were smiling now and ignored it.

"Now, turn and give your neighbor the sign of peace," she said, sealing the closure the way she does for every memorial she leads. The people turned and gave each other hugs, lingering then before wandering into the night toward their havens of warmth.

The bountiful city's lights glistened in the puddles, the uncomfortable 47-degree temperature persisted, but the wind was dying. ■

## Homeless Memorial

**Date:** Tuesday, Dec. 21  
**Time:** 5:30 p.m.  
**Place:** Outdoors, across from City Hall  
**Who:** Everyone welcome  
**Sponsors:** Network Ministries, Coalition on Homelessness  
**Information:** (415) 928-6209



PHOTO BY TOM CARTER

The burning of the lists of names of people who died on the streets has become a tradition at Rev. Glenda Hope's annual memorial. Last year, 95 names went up in smoke.