

Seattle City Council
Housing, Human Services, Health and Culture Committee Meeting
2 p.m. Friday, June 3rd, 2011

Words' Worth
The Poetry Program of the Seattle City Council

Curated by **Sibyl James**

Today's poet is **Sibyl James**

The publications of **Sibyl James** include eight books (poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction), including *The Adventures of Stout Mama* and *In China with Harpo and Karl*. She holds a PhD in English and has taught in the US, China, Mexico, and—as Fulbright professor-- Tunisia, and Cote d'Ivoire.

Shine and a Hair Cut

For Nick

by Sibyl James

My father specialized in flat-tops
For years,
A cardboard sign in the shop window
Curling in Cleveland sun,
Curls of hair my father swept into the dustpan
Like a disinterested Don Juan, a man
Afraid of sentimental locket, what they hold.
My father was not sentimental.
An Italian
In an Irish neighborhood
Shaving cops and old men
While I shined their shoes.

A man likes to have his shoes shined
When his hair is cut, likes
To see the clean line of his ear mirrored in gleaming shoe leather,
The white nape of his neck above the tan—
The last thing a barber does,
Running the clippers there
Before he flicks away the towel
Lifting a stubbled cloud.

Faces shining out of shoes with pointed toes,

The kind of shoes Italians wear
And Irish,
The kind of shoes my father wore, but not
The men in *Argosy* magazines
I read between shines.

Women hate it
When a man has his hair cut,
They don't love him
For days, think
How ugly
Logic is, how
Hygienic
The burr of electric clippers
Against their fingers
Slipped behind his neck.
They keep their fingers there,
But let their eyes wander
To men on safari without razors,
Unkempt as sensuality,
Men in *Argosy* with dust on their shoes.

A man has to have a gimmick,
He thinks,
And to be Italian among Irish
Is not one.
But a color-blind son with cakes of black, brown
And neutral in his kit,
A kid with smooth skin and dark Italian eyes
Too innocent for a spit shine in a New York subway
But this was Cleveland,
Slow lines, time
To read *Argosy*, to think
About women, what shoes to wear for them,
What lines to feed them.
My father lying to my mother
As long as he could
About his age, about his money,
Gimmicks flimsy as a cardboard sign.

What things women trying to love
Forgive
And keep their fingers gentle on necks,
The careful generosity of lions
In a circus of spit-shined shoes.
A woman's world of cats on green-shingled roofs,

Sleeping in their fur like jungles,
Storing their passion in a locket
Deep in their throats.
My mother bringing the thermos of coffee
And all the curls lifting off the shop floor
In the mute roar of her wind.

There remain the women's foraging eyes,
Flipping the streets like pages,
And the colors of them I can't see, only
The gimmick of neutral, camouflaging their shine.
Forgiving the lines men give them,
Lines that shift in and out of fashion
But are always
Like stripes on a barber pole—
Peppermint,
Orderly,
And the same.

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