

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 lockets, 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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