

## "Words' Worth" Poetry Readings

Poets at the Culture, Arts, and Parks Committee of the Seattle City Council.

### **Beneath The Heavy Lid** by Paul Hunter

Late coming home the first day  
fourth grade school half a dozen blocks away  
when I ask what kept her she answers  
she was just walking with friends

but next day an hour late she appears  
I wonder how far it could be  
and what on earth could be keeping her  
she looks up with those big dark eyes  
and changes the subject so deftly

third afternoon I take the car  
park half a block up a side street  
hunker down to see what I can see

and at the bell watch the kids  
come gushing forth like a wave  
that splashes around the schoolyard  
then puddles for the slog home  
and all at once there she is  
small alert and cheery beautiful  
with a ragged cluster of girls  
that pinwheel about one another  
and like a fountain skip and twirl

until the first turn up the side street  
toward our house she lags behind  
and in the middle of this intersection  
stops at a barricade  
a yellow metal railing set around  
a white canvas tipi with orange  
safety cones and at curbside  
a utility truck with all its flashers going

that's it a little canvas tent  
set up over a manhole

and thank God she looks both ways  
and thank God doesn't spot me  
when she skips across to the rail  
calls down and a moment later  
up pops one smiling middleaged guy  
then another younger pokes out through the flap

and waves her back to the curb  
where she retreats to banter  
across ten feet of blacktop  
with them for the next half-hour

and I can't hear what they're saying  
except there is knowledge and pleasure  
in this whole interchange

and know this is what she can't tell me  
she has somehow been caught by  
this little gypsy encampment  
right in our humble neighborhood  
that let her steal a peek in under  
the circus tent to a whole other world

and later when she's skittered out of sight  
I walk by thinking maybe have a word  
with these two public employees  
but what to say exactly baffles me

as standing there a moment I can get  
the flavor of their hideout's heat and light  
its clanky music from some tiny radio  
its goodnatured sweating and cursing  
tunafish baloney peanutbutter  
life in an old dented thermos

amid all the damp wires and plumbing  
gas mains storm drains pungent rivers  
drawing raccoons rats opossums  
in tunnels that flow all directions  
underneath the city miles and miles  
that knit together everything  
we could ever think to depend upon  
desire beyond a whim to want to know

its underground truth  
the exact opposite of Santa Claus  
how we plan and make do for each other  
and hide it out of harm's way  
not once a year but every day

and here's the terrible thing of it  
you don't want to spy on your kids  
but for a while so open and innocent  
trusting walk right up to anyone  
these days you worry every hint

where she stands at some yellow steel railing  
talking in some rusty steel-rimmed hole  
peering down into the future  
full of light sound and wonder  
banging and shouting  
sensing almost the whole secret  
to this lowdown hollowed-out old world

no matter in broad daylight here we are  
the heart of 42nd and Fremont

where what could happen  
but a little curiosity

see I can't teach her much of anything myself  
can't even be around to watch  
like in the beginning  
here she is going off on her own  
already where I can't follow

and there will be more stops like this  
more doors to somewhere  
that are not about me but  
what is coming to be all hers dark and light

and when I get home all set  
to tell her what to watch out for  
there she is back to the child's play  
clowning dressing up so sweet  
I don't have the heart to lift the lid

and for the rest of the week  
until the little tent is folded  
the cover clanged on the manhole  
the big city truck flown away  
every day I ask her how's her day  
she answers nothing and everything  
to which I nod and don't listen  
but look deep down into her where  
powers run light reaches waters pool

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