

Seattle City Council

Public Safety, Civil Rights, and Arts Committee Meeting

Tuesday, 2 PM, February 3, 2004

Words' Worth

The Poetry Program of the Seattle City Council

Curated by **Christopher J. Jarmick**

Today's Words' Worth poet is **Carlos Martinez**

Carlos Martinez has an MFA from Antioch University, teaches creative writing and literature at Western Washington University and has been a featured poet at PoetryMagazine.com, past President and board member of the Washington Poets Association, and will be a featured poet at this year's Skagit River Poetry Festival. His poetry has appeared in Crab Creek Review, Pittsburgh Review, Black Bear Review and Jeopardy, among many others, and has also had poems published in a number of anthologies, including An Eye for an Eye Makes the Whole World Blind: Poets on 9/11, winner of the 2002 Josephine Miles PEN Oakland Award.

The nuns who taught us

By Carlos Martinez

(For Sisters Catherine, Margaret, Philomena, Antoine and John, Sisters of Charity)

You were always told how to feel and when to feel it,
what hours of the day were set aside
for kneeling and folded hands, for your shaved heads to be bowed,

and how, with your eyes closed, in silence, you were to feel ecstasy
while outside of your bodies
slim beams of light streamed through stained glass

as boys sang Gregorian chant. One by one you grew old beneath your robes until
all anyone could see was the raised blue veins of your hands, your choleric faces,
and the possibility of any men loving you vanished. You didn't need men

when the thin gold bands you wore told of your marriages to someone else,
whom you met in the quiet chapels of your convents, alone, late at night,
or on cold mornings when you took his body onto your tongues and your bodies
shivered.

In the classrooms where we huddled in our pressed uniforms,
we wondered what it must be like
under the habits you wore, as you spoke of sacrifice,

of the mortification of the flesh, of how there was something even bigger than us,
your faces transported for a moment, a fleeting look of rapture
before you became what you had always been and your angry hands

lashed rulers across our knuckles. We grew and moved on
and you disappeared from our lives, not remembered or thought of again
except in stories told over beer or wine, set to our laughter,

how against wanting to learn to read or write or to do our sums,
you made us learn
and how since, one by one you died.

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