

Seattle City Council

Housing, Human Services, Health and Culture Committee Meeting

2 p.m. Friday, July 13th, 2012

Words' Worth

The Poetry Program of the Seattle City Council

Curated by **Sibyl James**

Today's poet is **Esther Altshul Helfgott**

Esther Altshul Helfgott is a nonfiction writer and poet with a Ph.D. in history from the University of Washington. Her work appears in the Journal of Poetry Therapy, Maggid: A Journal of Jewish Literature, Drash, American Imago: Psychoanalysis and the Human Sciences, Raven Chronicles, Floating Bridge Review. Beyond Forgetting: Poetry and Prose about Alzheimer's Disease (Holly Hughes, ed., 2009), Jack Straw Anthology, Northwest Prime Time, HistoryLink, and elsewhere. She is the founder of Seattle's "It's About Time Writer's Reading Series," now in its 22nd year, and the author of The Homeless One: A Poem in Many Voices (Kota, 2000). She has been writing the blog, "Witnessing Alzheimer's: A Caregiver's View," for the Seattle Post-Intelligencer since 2008. Esther is a 2010 Jack Straw writer. She is writing a biography of Viennese-born Seattle psychoanalyst Dr. Edith Buxbaum and her website is www.estherhelfgott.com<<http://www.estherhelfgott.com/>>.

Fragments from an Alzheimer's Journey

1

He's Sadness
and thin,
scared,
confused—
a bird looking for its mother

There is no pill for this
not for him,
not for me

I give him a pear.
He eats it all—
bit by bit
until
it's
gone.

2

Today I wheel him
to the window
where he points outside

and says:
He's dying

I say:
Who's dying?

He says:
That guy

3

More and more
he slips into himself
un-waiting for me to join him.
A man, still. The same face
hardly changed.

But for cognition and the lack
of affect
who would know
he won't remember us—
when I leave.

4

His face is my grandfather's
staring out from an old picture frame
a reminder that love is like the moon
waning into different shapes—
crescents, slits

5

Today when I walked into his room he was sitting in the wheelchair staring. His eyes were red, and I thought he had been crying; but there were no tears. He didn't know me. I looked straight into him and said:

Hi Abe. I'm Esther. I'm your wife.

I'm Esther.

Really?

Really, I said.

And he was alive again.

6

He's better today,
recognized me when I came in
took my hand and kissed it.

Later, he kissed his own hand.

He has a bruise,
and he kissed the bruise
as if he were a father caring for a child,
something like the day
he called himself *He*.

7

Tonight at Dinner

A dish of pears
6 ounces of health shake
4 ounces of apple juice
The rest: spit out.
Chewing's hard.
Swallowing
liquid's easier.

To myself, I think:
I'm tired,
I want to go home.
But where is home?
Here, at the nursing

*home or in that other place
where we used to live?*

8

HE'S BEDRIDDEN

bedridden
bedridde
bedridd
bedrid
bedri
bedr
bed
be
b

9

He's weak and tired
his hands curl into fists
they're cold and clammy
his arms are cool
the rest of him is warm

he opens his eyes and says: *We did it.*
then falls back to sleep

10

How long
can a body do this?

Whose body am I talking
about anyway,

mine or his?

I'm not sure
I know
the difference.

11

Neither pear nor peach satisfy him.
He barely drinks the shake
and doesn't understand the word *Cookie*.

But he smiles and holds my hand. He calls me *Hon*.
When I leave, I kiss him and say: *Goodbye*. Again.

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