

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

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Shoulders

A man crosses the street in rain,
stepping gently, looking two times north and south,
because his son is asleep on his shoulder.

No car must splash him.
No car drive too near to his shadow.

This man carries the world's most sensitive cargo
but he's not marked.
Nowhere does his jacket say FRAGILE,
HANDLE WITH CARE.

His ear fills up with breathing.
He hears the hum of a boy's dream
deep inside him.

We're not going to be able
to live in this world
if we're not willing to do what he's doing
with one another.

The road will only be wide.
The rain will never stop falling.

Naomi Shihab Nye¹

Reflections

Naomi Shihab Nye is known for writing about cultural difference, for confronting difficult subjects, international conflicts and worldly concerns. She is praised just as often for her attention to ordinary events, the mundane, everyday life and strife. In her own words: "The primary source of poetry has always been local life, random characters met on the streets, our own ancestry sifting down to us through small essential daily tasks."

"Shoulders," strikes me as a poem both universal and particular, of both worldly and neighborly concern. It's an ordinary event that comes with extraordinary responsibility, the essential daily task—without hyperbole, a matter of life and death—to carry and care for a young child, "the world's most sensitive cargo." Of course, Nye is pointing to something much larger than this scene of a man and his child, inviting us to consider (and reconsider) our own commitments to one another.

¹ "Shoulders" by Naomi Shihab Nye from *Red Suitcase*, BOA Editions. Used by permission.

I suppose it is a bit easier to identify with the man—I'm an adult with a small child of my own—and it was just this morning that I carried his sleeping body from the car into the house. I find it an interesting challenge to imagine myself as this child, though—a child oblivious to the dangers around me, vulnerable without knowing it, helpless but unaware of my helplessness, safe in the arms of someone who cares for me. How fragile our life, and how precarious our situation.

The poem issues a warning; it isn't only that we must treat one another as precious cargo, but we must "do what he's doing," that is, looking in all directions, stepping gently, listening for the hum, filling up with the breath of a life like the "dream / deep inside him." The man is doing more than simply carrying; he is caring. And those words carry with them enormous obligations, the weight of the world on our shoulders. I love what one reviewer for *Publisher's Weekly* has written of this poem, that it "conveys a delicate sense of moral concern and a necessary sense of urgency."

Of course poetry's fundamental conundrum is that it is always attempting to wrestle into words that which is large and which seems to defy language itself. But Nye reminds us in a way at once gentle and stern that poetry at its best inspires us to pause so that we might continue more carefully. "There is so much we overlook," she says, "while the abundance around us continues to shimmer." Let us take care, then, attend to the overlooked and the nearly forgotten, in shimmering sun and in soaking rain; let us carry our cargo like it is the most important thing we have ever held in our arms. And may the road narrow for an easier passage, the rain stop long enough to allow us to cross.

✧ About the poet

Naomi Shihab Nye (b. 1952) was born in St. Louis, Missouri, though she spent much of her adolescence and young adulthood in San Antonio, Texas, and Jerusalem. Her father was a Palestinian refugee and her mother an American of German and Swiss descent. Author of many poetry collections, children's books, and essays, she served as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets from 2010 to 2015. She is considered one of the leading poets of the American Southwest and, after the World Trade Center attacks in 2001, hers became an important and active voice for Arab-Americans, speaking out against both terrorism and prejudice. She has also edited several anthologies, including the award-winning *This Same Sky* (1992), which represents 129 poets from 68 countries. I especially love what Nye writes in the introduction to this anthology: "Whenever someone suggests 'how much is lost in translation!' I want to say, 'Perhaps—but how much is gained!'"



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