

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

September 30, 2019

A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



Famous

The river is famous to the fish.

The loud voice is famous to silence,
which knew it would inherit the earth
before anybody said so.

The cat sleeping on the fence is famous to the birds
watching him from the birdhouse.

The tear is famous, briefly, to the cheek.

The idea you carry close to your bosom
is famous to your bosom.

The boot is famous to the earth,
more famous than the dress shoe,
which is famous only to floors.

The bent photograph is famous to the one who carries it
and not at all famous to the one who is pictured.

I want to be famous to shuffling men
who smile while crossing streets,
sticky children in grocery lines,
famous as the one who smiled back.

I want to be famous in the way a pulley is famous,
or a buttonhole, not because it did anything spectacular,
but because it never forgot what it could do.

Naomi Shihab Nye¹

Reflections

It is a new season of *Wellspring*, a return and a beginning at once. The joy in writing these reflections is, for me, a reminder that poems are supremely patient. They are not squeaking

¹ "Famous" by Naomi Shihab Nye first published in *Words Under the Words: Selected Poems* by Far Corner Books, 1995.

their wheels, whining for my attention; they are not needy or burdensome, shouting their demands. Instead, I like thinking that they wait as long as they must, perhaps a lifetime, for their reader to arrive and discover the gifts therein. In other words, poems are simply there being “famous” for us, alive with a kind of fame I had not thought to redefine myself. It is like the feeling of hearing a perfect song, or meeting the perfect company: how did I live so long without knowing this?

The way I have thought about Naomi Shihab Nye’s redefinition of fame—of the object to the subject, the unknown to the knowing—is something like an unrequited love, a realization that love unreturned does not diminish or undo the love being given. Nye’s poem ultimately raises questions that transcend it: who or what is capable of being famous, and to whom? Can a pulley be famous? What does it mean to realize we can all be famous to one another without knowing it? The poem suggests in its final two stanzas that if to be famous means not simply to be familiar or known at all, but to be known for kindness, for generosity and warmth, known for an ordinary dutifulness, daily love and need-meeting, then we all might do well to seek fame after all.

I am thinking of my son, famous to me even before his birth as I suppose my body might have been famous to him, and understanding now that I might be famous to all who have loved me my whole life long, and all who I love are famous to me. What a beautiful responsibility we have in maintaining this kind of awareness! The poet Edward Hirsch calls it the “the secret enchantment we carry” and I think I now echo in earnest this speaker’s desire: I want to be famous, too, as the buttonhole is famous—not for anything extraordinary, but for continuing to do whatever it is I am meant to do. Or, when I am uncertain about what or who it is I am supposed to be, I would like to be famous for doing the next right thing, ever onward in life, trying hard and meaning well.

Perhaps I am drawn to this poem, too, as a personal prayer, that I might notice and honor the world in all its fame and glory, that I might stay true, attentive, and faithful, that I might use whatever power I have for good, and that I might—even when a struggle and especially to those “sticky children in grocery lines”—smile back.

✧ About the Poet

Naomi Shihab Nye (b. 1952), born in St. Louis to a Palestinian father and an American mother, has traveled the world promoting peace and poetry. She is the author of many books and the winner of numerous awards, fellowships, honors and accolades. Most recently, she was named the Poetry Foundation’s Young People’s Poet Laureate. Considered one of the leading poets of the American Southwest, she is also an activist for Arab-Americans, speaking out against terrorism, hatred, and prejudice.



Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

by Allison Seay, Associate for Religion and the Arts,
St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church © 2019