

KIRSTEN REINER

Turquoise Bottle and Stone, 2014
Oil on canvas, 11.75 x 11.75



COURTESY THE ARTIST

MAGGIE PAUL

Interview with Naomi Shihab Nye

Naomi Shihab Nye is the author or editor of more than thirty volumes of poetry, essays, short stories, novels, and anthologies. Shihab Nye has been a Lannan Fellow, a Guggenheim Fellow, and a Witter Bynner Fellow. She has received a Lavan Award from the Academy of American Poets, the Isabella Gardner Poetry Award, the Lee Bennett Hopkins Poetry Award, the Paterson Poetry Prize, four Pushcart Prizes, and numerous honors for her children's literature. In 2010, Shihab Nye was elected to the Board of Chancellors of the Academy of American Poets. In 2012 she was named laureate of the 2013 NSK Neustadt Prize for Children's Literature. Shihab Nye was born to a Palestinian father and American mother and grew up in St. Louis, Jerusalem, and San Antonio. In her work, she draws on her Palestinian American heritage, the cultural diversity of her home in Texas, and her experience traveling the world. Shihab Nye uses her writing to attest to our shared humanity.

Maggie Paul: Your poems powerfully convey both the complexities and beauty of being the product of two diverse cultures: Palestinian on your father's side and European American on your mother's side. How much has your family background influenced your poems and the way you see the world?

Naomi Shihab Nye: Background of course shaped me, it fed me, as background and culture does for everyone. Because my parents were from two different sides of the world, there was also a sparkly sort of clash or general frictional element, which often characterized our household. I loved poems for their calm and unifying presences, before I loved them for so many other things.

MP: The common denominator portrayed in your poems often seems to be those daily tasks, feelings, loves, and losses that transcend culture and ethnicity—the simply human facts of our day-to-day lives. Can you talk about the particular power poetry has to unify, to dissolve barriers between people of diverse religious, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds?

NSN: Well, there you have it. We may be arguing—but what really matters? What might we share, anyway? Where is that field that Rumi mentioned, beyond right and wrong, where people come together to talk? Poetry lives there. I am really not so interested in or concerned with people matching one another in all facets of their lives—finding ways to enjoy one another's variations may be a talent the world needs more. I think poetry, with its attention to detail and intimate perception and care, takes us to places of mutual discernment and respect quickly. We can find out what matters to someone else without suffering a lot of editorializing or prefacing. We can bask in their style.

MP: You have said “the material things of this world give us a sense of gravity.” In your poems, specific, common objects (i.e., teacup, onion, spoon) are not only mentioned for what they are, but often symbolize entire belief systems and cultural values. Calling our attention to the power of individual objects in poetry reminds me of the poems of Pablo Neruda, whose famous odes to such items as socks,