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# The Power of Poetry: Naomi Shihab Nye, Whose Poems Reflect Daily Life, Will Speak at UCSC

Nye, with roots in Jerusalem and Texas, will speak during the fourth annual Morton Marcus Memorial Poetry Reading at Kresge Town Hall Nov. 14.

Posted by Brad Kava (Editor), November 04, 2013 at 06:38 PM



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Naomi Shihab Nye

Interview by poet Maggie Paul

Maggie Paul is a poet and Writing Instructor at Cabrillo College. Her collection of poems, Borrowed World, is available from Hummingbird Press

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**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 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. Nye uses her writing to attest to our shared humanity.

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Naomi Shihab Nye Interview,

Oct. 19, 2013

MP: The Santa Cruz community is delighted that you will be sharing your work as our honored, guest poet in the tribute to the late, beloved poet and teacher, Morton Marcus. Could you share some of your memories of Mort, and a few thoughts about his work?

**NSN: The way I knew Mort was through his work, and we exchanged letters regarding my inclusion of one of his wonderful pieces in an anthology I made. But knowing someone through their work can be a truly great way to know them!**

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

**NSN: 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**

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
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
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
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
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
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
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**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: In a previous interview you spoke of your Palestinian grandmother who lived to be 106. Although you did not speak her language, the two of you shared a strong connection. The poem, "Words Under Words" suggests what a powerful influence she might have been. The final stanza urges us to seek the spirit, the subtext, the depth that exists behind all things if we want to experience the world as a place of beauty rather than constant pain: "Answer, if you hear the words under the words —/otherwise it is just a world with a lot of rough edges, / difficult to get through, and our pockets full of stones." Would you consider this to be one of the gifts of poetry, its ability, if not insistence, in urging us to look below the surface, to reflect more deeply?

**NSN: Absolutely, yes, and this is something I love very much about the writing of Morton Marcus. His work has always carried me to a deeper place very quickly. He had a very delicate (also sturdy) gift of apprehension, a perfect touch – knowing just how much was needed to say – a great instinct for hinting, too.**

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, salt, lemons, and tomatoes, for example, elevate the things of this world to universal importance. One could say these details are what truly connect us. Are you aware of the multiple possibilities of these images when you are in the process of composing, or do you discover further associations and possibilities after the poem is written?

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**NSN: I think they lend themselves to our narratives in some ineffable way and we only find out later what other associations and significances might be. But I always think about simple common objects in times and places of war and conflict and chaos, how they too are being assaulted – the grandmother’s jar of buttons, the little lamp with the tipped shade – crushed, stomped, not respected. These bastions of dailiness which make us feel at home – more casualties. I treasure them.**

MP: The tone of your poems is often intimate and private, yet they manage to simultaneously address personal issues of ancestors, love, and loss as well as the wide-reaching global concerns of war, religious fundamentalism, and the urgent need for us to see ourselves as part of a shared, human family. This brings to mind Emily Dickinson’s poem, “Letter to the World,” in which she states, “This is my letter to the world,/that never wrote to me...” When you are writing, do you envision an entire community or culture of people as your audience, or an intimate other, and how does this affect what you want the poem to say?

**NSN: Thanks so much. You seem like the best reader my poems may ever have had! I feel connected – both intimately and collectively. I wouldn’t call it a sense of audience exactly – more a sense of the vast human tribe, all our cares, all our hopes and sorrows.**

MP: Privacy has become an increasingly pivotal issue not only in the U.S. but around the world of late due to the power of the internet and those who want to use other people’s personal information for their own gain. “The Art of Disappearing” gracefully reminds us of our right to say “No.” While this poem does not directly speak to privacy in regard to internet issues, it offers great advice for anyone who wants to protect the privacy of their own thoughts and free time.

As a member of the Board of Chancellors for the Academy of American poets since 2010, along with numerous public appearances and obligations, do you find protecting your private time more challenging than perhaps it was earlier in your career? How do you balance the two?

**NSN: Being a “Chancellor” (I agree, it’s an exalted word!) is a privilege. I love being in league with other poets and wonderful people working for poetry – sharing and supporting and encouraging both the reading and writing of poetry – what could be better? Probably we all do balancing acts in our lives, whatever those lives include. But I’m a simple person and I do like time to feel empty and open rather than full. So sometimes it’s a challenge yes. I do not like multitasking. My phone is not smart at all. I don’t want it to be smart. I don’t use social media and I have never sent a text through a phone. My whole life is a text.**

MP: Mary Logue in The Village Voice once used the term “alchemy” to describe the way your poems weave ordinary objects and day-to-day experiences into moments of

transformation and elucidation. Can you say something about how language and experience contributes to that type of "magic"?

**NSN: Well, that was generous of her. I think spending contemplative time with words – whether reading, writing, meditating, praying, chanting, singing, or simply conversing with others in a meaningful way – creates an alchemy, a transfused energy, with the power to change us. Poets revere that power. They create a practice which invites more magic to happen. William Stafford, the favorite poet of my own life, spoke often about the practices of daily writing, regular attention, which would allow images and ideas to come through – you had to open the door, though.**

MP: I have shared the much-anthologized "To Any Would-Be Terrorists" to many classes of college students over the years. A prose piece written in the form of a letter, it is at once both a letter to the whole world, and a letter to any individual who considers violence a way to solve social, political, and/or religious issues of difference. Readers can attest to its emotional appeal, and its common-sense plea to choose love over hate, tolerance over ignorance, to live and let live. The piece ends with a refreshing call to action: "Find another way to live. Don't expect others to be like you. Read Rumi. Read Arabic poetry... Read American poetry..." Poetry is offered up both as sword and salve, as a powerful, peaceful path to human compassion across cultures. I would like to thank you for writing that "letter," and ask whether you think people have turned to poetry more since 9/11 to examine our common humanity.

**NSN: I thank you for sharing my piece, written out of great urgent sorrow, and I can't really answer your question. I hope they have.**

MP: In *You Must Revise Your Life* (from the Poets on Poets Series out of the University of Michigan), William Stafford discusses the importance of silence in his poems. I think that is, in part, what some of us go to poetry for – a place where there is, as Stafford puts it, "a time to think." The reader's presence, as well as the poet's, is palpable and acknowledged in such poems. There's a beautiful balance between speaking and silence in your poetry. Is this something you are consciously aware of when writing, or are you following the natural rhythm of your own mind?

**NSN: Really lovely of you to say that. Sometimes you have to invoke the silence. Sometimes it only comes back to you again after attention to the chatter, or clearing it away, and the many directions of language-layering leading you back. I think Stafford and Marcus both had brilliant gifts of allowing silence to take its rightful place. When you read a poem you like, you often feel restored to a similar resonant silence inside yourself.**

MP: In the poem "Passwords," Stafford asserts that the purpose of poetry is "to bring strangers together." I think your poems do just that; they invite the whole world in on equal terms. How important is it for writers to reach beyond their own experience and consider the realities, challenges, concerns, and cultures of others?

**Very important! Utterly important! Older poets should read younger poets and kids. Urban poets should read rural poets. Christians should read Muslims. Jews should read Arabs and vice versa. And you know what, I think many people have the natural instinct to do just this.**

MP: Santa Cruz is a community known, in part, for its abundance of poets and writers. The Poetry Show on KUSP is the longest-running radio program devoted to poetry in this country, and the non-profit organization, Poetry Santa Cruz, devotes its efforts to bringing local, national, and international poets to read and give workshops. What advice would you offer, particularly to new and young writers, to guide them in their writing practice? What two or three habits have you found pivotal to your continued practice of poetry?

**NSN: Lucky Santa Cruz! I can't wait! The three most important habits are, Read, Read, then Read some more – write regularly – and find a way to share your work. Not all of it, of course, but the things you want to share.**

MP: You have edited numerous anthologies of poetry for children and young adults. Can you speak to the importance of sharing poetry with children and adolescents to help them make sense of the world, or to guide them toward discovering their own identity?

**NSN: That exposure to wonderful, rich language can make all the difference in someone's life. It did in mine. Children need regular, enthusiastic exposure to literature, invitations to model their own poems on poems which already exist (this is not plagiarism but encouragement), plenty of opportunities for free and open writing, contagious pleasurable guidance by librarians or teachers or writers or parents or anyone who likes reading and writing too, and to have some fun. My second grade teacher was passionately obsessed with poetry. She wanted us to read and write it every day and also, to know how to stand up in front of a group and say a poem from memory without any shyness. She said, "When you leave my class you will no longer mumble." So many of us have tried to convey our love for poetry to students all our working lives, and stimulate their own senses of language and you know – I've never yet been anywhere that poetry didn't live.**

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UC Santa Cruz is proud to sponsor **The Fourth Annual Morton Marcus Memorial Poetry Reading** featuring Naomi Shihab Nye, who was elected to the Board of Chancellors of the Academy of American Poets in 2010. She will be reading on Thursday,

November 14 at 6:00 PM, at UCSC's Kresge Town Hall. The evening will also include a reading by the winner of the Morton Marcus Poetry Contest. This annual free event will have first-come, first-served seating. Doors will open at 5:30 PM.

The Annual Morton Marcus Memorial Poetry Reading honors poet, teacher, and film critic Morton Marcus (1936-2009). Marcus, a nationally acclaimed poet, called Santa Cruz his home for more than 50 years. This annual poetry series continues Mort's tradition of bringing acclaimed poets to Santa Cruz County, continues to acknowledge the significant role poetry has played in our community's history, and works to maintain poetry's influence in our county's culture. Learn more at: [www.mortonmarcus.com](http://www.mortonmarcus.com)

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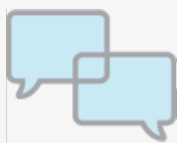
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