

## Interview with Naomi Shihab Nye

April 6, 2022

**Cale Helsel:** Thank you for doing this interview!

**Naomi Shihab Nye:** It's my pleasure!

**CH:** My first question is, how do you think poetry has changed in schools in recent years compared to how in the past it focused mostly on recitation and memorization?

**NN:** Well, that's a great question! It all depends on the teacher. It's hard to make a generic statement about how all poetry has changed in schools because so much depends on whether a particular teacher loves poetry at all, takes a little bit of time to share it, or more time than is required to share it, and does so with enthusiasm. So, I think a lot depends on the particular teacher. I know that teachers feel more stressed getting everything in - like curriculum-wise - than they may have felt 50 years ago when I started working in schools. It's impossible for me to believe that - well, 48 years ago I started working in schools. And teachers at the time had felt a little more latitude about things they could add to their curriculum that weren't required and absolutely necessary for standardized testing prep and so forth. But now sometimes you have to really badger them a little more to sneak in a little extra creative time and I always try to say "If you do this, if your kids really fall in love with their own voices, their own language, the possibilities of language, they'll do better on the standardized tests" This is creative work but it's essential, necessary work for loving language at all so that you could succeed in it. So, it's a curious roundabout. I always urge teachers to share at least a few poems that they really really love themselves in classrooms - if they're talking about poetry. Because so many teachers have confided in me that they hate the poems they're asked to teach. And I say well if that is the case, you can move quickly through them. Talk about some aspects of the poems that are worthy of discussion and ask the students if any of them love that poem - because some of them may love it more than you do. Let them guide the conversation, then. And bring in some that you think are worthy - because poetry is a subjective realm. But I do think teachers seem - and this is a generic statement - to feel a little less confident with expanding their curriculums than they might've felt 48 years ago. Which to me is a sad truth. Because they act as if - you know, I've worked a lot in Texas - the Texas authorities are "cracking down" on us now more, they're watching us more closely, we can't do all the creative projects we used to do. And I say try to work it in somehow in a way that nourishes the rest of your curriculum. So, it's a long answer to an important question.

**CH:** So, how do you bring students' diverse writing interests together into a workshop-style class?

**NN:** Well, my goal is always to help people believe that they have material that they could use in writing. That they know characters, that they have lived through many scenes already, even if you're already nine years old, you've already had different eras of your life. Now that we've all lived -- we're all still living through COVID, we have the COVID era, plus the previous era, and so on. So, identifying experience as belonging to everyone and yours is just as interesting as everyone else's - and that's hard sometimes for people to believe. Everyone believes other people have a more interesting life. A lot of people, a lot of kids believe that. So, the goal is: How do I help all these diverse people? What do you love? What do you wanna tell the truth

about? What do you know about? What are you curious about? Y'know these really basic questions that would help guide students to their own areas of interest.

**CH:** What do you think is the best advice you can give a young poet when it comes to trying to revise their work?

**NN:** I like to think of the word "Revision" as "New Vision" Not like "this thing is broken, I need to fix it" A lot of people approach revision as if it's this drudgery "I have to clean it up. I don't wanna do it." But really, it's your chance to take that magical thing you wrote that no one else has ever written before and see where the true spark in it is, where is the glimmer? And what feels clunky, awkward, too many words, what do you need to work with to trim it back to make the best piece you possibly could. So, it's really fun to have a revision opportunity because it means you don't have to be perfect the first time and you can over write it the first time, write more. And I really love slashing things out! When I find a rough draft of mine that I could take seven words and have one word that's better? [exhale] That is like a moment of glory! It's like at a sports event when somebody does something fantastic. Like okay! I've got that sentence. It's better, so much stronger now. It's like a little muscle has come into the sentence. So, trying to encourage people to have fun with revision. Not to look at it as drudgery, to think of it as an opportunity to write something better. And figure out a way to make it fun for themselves. And I think there needs to be a little space of time between initial writing and when you go back to revise it. Whether it's a day, a few hours, a week, a month - you need a little time so you can see it from a different perspective. And sometimes if something just doesn't feel as if it's working out, be radical! Try it from a completely different angle. If you're talking about something, become that thing talking. You know? Just switch it all around. Do something different that you didn't even think of in the first draft - that can help! I mean, just make it fun for yourself. You know, when I was in high school, I didn't love revision - but I love it the most now. Because I know it's where the power comes in. It's where you're really able to sit back and look at that thing and say "Here's material. I've already got the resources on the page, the raw materials" It's like putting all your ingredients out on the counter before you bake or cook something. Now what do I wanna cook? How am I gonna cook it? So, it's just fun. Sometimes even just reshaping it, if you're doing poetry - or prose too! Making it look different on the page. Last night I was lucky to sit at a dinner with some high school teachers from here who were talking about how different languages in the world do and don't use paragraphs in their writing. I'd never heard anyone talk about this in my whole life! That there are some languages in which the paragraph is not used. It was fascinating! Some of their students were happy to hear this because that meant they were letting them experiment like "Okay you can write everything in one big block" And then they were trying from like Italy this is what they do, one of them had worked in Africa this is what they do. And I just thought, this is an interesting topic of discussion! Because in my whole life as a writer, I've never heard of anyone take on the paragraph. Maybe it's not always needed as much as we think. You can always have a fresh approach to something. Then we veered off from that into writers who didn't use punctuation. Like the writer Grace Paley wrote a lot of human conversation but she didn't like quotation marks and commas. So, she just wrote it out like all as one sentence. And if you read her short stories, they have a true Grace Paley punch to them that she could see all that extra punctuation was gonna get in the way. Anyway, play with it! Try giving some things up. You could give up paragraphs! Try rewriting in a different shape. Or try giving up all the punctuation and see what happens. You know just really play!

**CH:** Honestly, that's really great and accessible advice. Are there any styles or forms that you find challenging or dislike in general?

**NN:** Well, I don't dislike formal poetry styles like sonnets, villanelles, and so forth. But I'm not that interested in them. I wouldn't use them myself at this point. When I was in high school in Texas for my last two years only, when we wrote poetry in class it was always formal poetry. No one ever invited us to write a free form poem, a free verse poem - I was just doing that on my own after I was six years old. I wanted to write in that way. It was a good challenge to write in those different forms, but they didn't really interest me. They seemed archaic.

**Professor:** Do you ever rhyme?

**NN:** Well, I was a songwriter for a long time, and I did rhyme in my songs. I feel like I do rhyme a lot but it's irregular rhyme and occasional rhyme in my poems. Sometimes it's end rhyme only that kind of sneaks up on you. There's no rhyme in the rest of the poem and suddenly there's an echoing rhyme of a final word to an earlier word. So, I like playing with rhyme, but end rhyme like in country music song lyrics for example doesn't interest me. I did use it though when I wrote songs. I wrote probably hundreds of songs. And I wrote songs with kids too for a few years. I did this initiative of songwriting workshops with kids - and the kids were amazing songwriters! We made a whole album of songs by kids for kids. And it was a big hit, but then it was gone. It was out of print, and we didn't have any more. But they all rhymed! And I helped kids work with the rhyme and stuff. It's a good thing! And I've come back to loving it because of reading to little babies, my grandson, and other little kids who like rhyme. My son never liked rhyme, but my grandson liked it a little more. And I do like rap! Rap definitely uses rhyme to the maximum! I don't like super profane language, but it doesn't bother me if somebody wants to use it, feel free - I'm not interested in writing with it! But I like the innovation of rap because I really like rhythm and I think spoken word poetry and rap music poetry have really created like almost a muscular sense of language again. Which was missing a little bit in the world that I was a college student in, for example. You know like slam spoken word poetry was not happening when I was in college. I even got to attend the national finals of the national slam. Oh my gosh! It was one of the greatest things I've ever been to. I was crying so much through that whole evening because every single piece was gorgeous, emotionally powerful. This was original slams spoken word poetry. And a lot of it used rhyme in a very traditional kind of way. But I was very moved by it. So, I can appreciate aspects - you know, when Terrence Hayes, the great poet, writes an entire book of sonnets, I'm impressed by that! I couldn't do that! I'm impressed that he could do that - and by the way, something I learned working multiple times in Japan. Counting syllables in haiku was only intended for people who write in Japanese. Japanese poets think it's hilarious that people count syllables in English. They said "No, no. That's very carefully tied to the Japanese language" The way they have the "kanji" the way they write. They said "If you write haiku, it's nice to write three lines, contain nature, and have a little twist in it. But don't count the syllables. That's for us. That's for Japanese only." So that was interesting because I thought wow that's really been exploited in English classrooms over the years! 5, 7, 5. How many kids have had to do that? It is a good discipline, though, to try to do that. But I think you can write haiku just as well without counting the syllables.

**CH:** So, in terms of language and poetry - and there's no denying that we've seen a major influx of various languages coming into the realm of poetry - what do you think are some reasons for this sudden influx of bringing in various keywords or entire sections?

**NN:** Well, I think people are respecting culture more now, I think, than when I was 10 or 20. There's more of a sense of "Your language is beautiful" you know? English isn't the only nice

language, there are a lot of beautiful languages. So that trend of stitching to quilting phrases, words, I've done it with Arabic words in my novels. People like Saunders Cisneros and many Latino/Latina writers have done it with Spanish into English. But y'know what ever language background you're pulling on - I've read many Native poems that pull in Native words that I've never heard, but to see the word in the context of a sentence where the rest is English? It's as if there's a new gravity in the poem, there's a new respect for history, and for all our voices. I think it's a positive trend. Just like you can find a Thai restaurant in almost every town in the United States now. When I was growing up, I never saw a Thai restaurant in my whole life. Best Palestinian restaurant I've ever eaten at is in Beijing, China. Y'know things are all multicultural mixed now, all this fantastic rich, rich tapestry of connections. There's a school I volunteer at in San Antonio where there are 32 languages spoken in that one school. 32. By the kids at home. And the kids, many of whom used to be called "refugees" - the school has banned that word. They don't use the word "refugee" anymore, they use the word "newcomer" because they say we're all newcomers to one another when we meet, make new friends, visit another culture, enter another culture, live in another culture. But to be a refugee, that's like you're emphasizing "This person lost" you're emphasizing something negative and sad versus "You're new! You're welcome! A new welcomed person!" And I said well, as a person who had a refugee as a father, I appreciate that. He would've liked to be called a newcomer. So that's a new use of language, for example, to welcome people. And those kids in that school, they love English with a passion even though the majority of kids all speak different languages, they're such articulate users of English. You just realize we become more nourished by bringing other languages into our literary texts, by recognizing that that is reasonable. You probably grew up in worlds where you went to lots of Thai restaurants. I've never been to Thailand, but my tastebuds have!

**CH:** Well, I grew up in a small town so...

**NN:** Did you have a Thai restaurant?

**CH:** No. [laughs]

**NN:** No? It's probably there now, though, don't you think?

**CH:** Oh, no. No way! [laughs]

**NN:** [laughs] No? Not yet, not quite? Well maybe soon! You don't know!

**CH:** That's true!

**Beth Robinson:** Did your father speak Arabic to you?

**NN:** Oh, my father's first language was Arabic, yes. But he loved English from being a little boy. And what people don't realize is, just like India where most people speak English, in the Middle East, most people speak English. Now in China, in Japan almost no one speaks English. But in the Middle East, you can get along speaking English. Everybody will come around and help you. So, my father grew up in the early part of that trend where kids were being taught English in schools. He also grew up under a British mandate where British people were running Palestine at that time. So, he started working for the BBC at the age of fourteen. He was reading the evening news - this used to amaze me as a child! As a fourteen-year-old! And I said they must've really been hard-up! Who hires a fourteen-year-old to read the evening news? That's pitiful! And he said, "Because I had such a beautiful voice." And he did, he had kind of like an actor's resonant voice - with a British accent at that time. But yeah, he grew up with both languages. And he became a newspaper writer and editor in English and Arabic. When we lived

in Jerusalem, he was the newspaper editor of the city for the Arabic newspaper and the English. It was the first time they ever had the same editor - where he had one office in each branch of paper. That was exciting for him because he had to use both languages! I've studied other languages, but I still really only speak English, I feel ashamed about that. But I always tell kids who are bilingual, you have the power so use it! If you can integrate Spanish words into your writing - I live in a 63% Latino city - if you can integrate those words in your writing, feel free. And even if someone else in the class doesn't know what it is, you can tell us. Or let your context tell us! And that's exciting to kids, they like using their powers in their writing. I just heard something - you know how everyone has started using Latinx instead of using Latina or Latino? Well, I just saw this interview with a Latino writer, and he said "I haven't heard one Latino person yet use Latinx. That is something like the word Hispanic - which we don't particularly like which was applied to us." And so, I thought I was using Latinx, so I better stop using it. I don't wanna just try to be trendy. He said "No, we prefer Latino/Latina" he said "because it is not a gender-free language because Spanish is a masculine/feminine language", so he said, "that's not really appropriate for us." I thought that was interesting. I mean there's always more to learn about language. Do you speak more than one language?

**CH:** No, I'm taking Spanish right now and I can barely squeak by [laughs] you know?

**NN:** [laughs] Yeah!

**CH:** Verbs are the toughest thing because they're so complex.

**NN:** Yeah, and all the tenses, the verbs...

**CH:** Tenses, the forms, and...

**NN:** Right! And what about you?

**BR:** No, I don't speak any other languages. My mom speaks Spanish though. She teaches bilingual elementary school.

**NN:** Oh, that's beautiful!

**BR:** Yeah, but I never picked it up

**NN:** Recently I was doing this Zoom class with second graders in Chicago. Your mom would've done well because they were all in a bilingual school. But these were really Spanish speakers. They were gonna write poetry, so I let them write in Spanish, but then I said, "Get one of your friends in the class to translate." So, they were translating each other's [poetry]. It was a great class! They did a great job! And they all said it's easier to translate someone else's poem than your own. And the teacher said "I never even thought of having them translate poetry as part of our writing class" but translating their own poetry, of course they knew the words and they could do it. It was beautiful. I was proud of them.

**BR:** Yeah, because sometimes the translator is the poet.

**NN:** Yeah! And how many people have worked with translations of poetry like W.S. Murwin worked with Japanese poetry. The 13th century poet [Tsoseki] that he thought had never had a good translation in English. But he didn't speak Japanese, he worked only with an English translator. He worked with a bilingual person, and he spoke only English. So, you could still be a translator even if you only speak English. Which I never realized until I worked for 10 years on this Arabic translation project because even though I never spoke Arabic fluently, I was able to

help with the English text and make it a "better" text. Sorry I give such long answers. You're just very inspiring people here!

**CH:** No, it's alright. I mean, you have a wealth of knowledge!

**NN:** [scoffs and laughs] Not really, but thanks!

**CH:** [laughs]

**NN:** I'll try to do shorter answers. [laughs]

**CH:** Have you noticed any major shifts in student's motivation for writing poetry? Like why they decide to write?

**NN:** Oh... yeah, that's a great question. I think students need poetry more than ever. Not only because of COVID and all the solitary time we've had but because we live in such an instantaneous, fast-paced, headline-burdened world. We desperately need to slow down and hold personal experience very tenderly. And poetry comes out often of personal experience - or at least personal perception or observation. It's not all about *you* but it's about what you've noticed. Everything is so blippy now like "blip blip blip" you go this headline to that headline to another one, you go "Oh I can't read this story, that's too mean" "Can't try this--" you're just bouncing all the time! I think we need slowness more than we did in a slower world. I feel almost more of a hunger in young people these days for poetry - but I've always felt that hunger! I've always felt people wanna tell their stories, they want other people to know who they are, they wanna have confidence in their own voice. But now we're challenged because we have all these devices and techniques for instantaneous stuff, things. But in one way it's good because you can transmit your poetry so easily now! You can write something and send it to your friend, and they have it - that's amazing! One girl - this is maybe ten years ago - a girl at a high school in Arlington, TX, said "Last night I posted one of my poems on Teen.Com and by morning it had 53 helpful responses and comments." And I said "Wow! I mean, I'm a professional writer. I've never had 53 helpful comments in my entire life overnight - or ever!!" [laughs] I said "Keep it up! Keep it up!" And she said a couple people said they didn't understand the title, she was giving all these different examples. And she had shared this poem with us and then told us this - so it was really interesting to think how so many people who had responded to her poem were coming at it from different angles. So that's a huge gift of today. And she didn't know any of these people, maybe a few of them from her school, but others were just poetry lovers from far and wide. We have that ability through technology to share quickly with one another. But I think we still need slowness areas - like the whole slow cooking movement. Some people still wanna do things in a slow way. You know, make it really from scratch, really yummy. We don't all wanna have just a frozen dinner every day. I think we need that balance now more than we ever did before. Last week, something funny happened. I told our grandson, who's 6, that there's a YouTube of my father that he and I have never watched together. Because he often talks about my father. He looks at a picture of my father that's on my wall - and he really kinda reminds me of my father. He just like has his DNA strain. He'll say something beautiful or amazing and I'll say, "That reminds me of something my dad would've said." So, I said "Y'know I just thought of something. There's a YouTube of my dad that we could watch together if you ever want to." And he said "Oh yeah sure I do! Was he a TikToker?" [laughs] And I thought "I can't believe this six-year-old said 'Was he a TikToker?'" I don't even know what a TikToker is!" and he goes "You don't look at TikTok?" and I said "No, I've never looked at TikTok." He said, "Oh

we can do that sometime too." And I thought "Oh my god!" I've never looked up a video on TikTok. Is it just like Instagram? How do you even do it?

**CH:** Oh, I don't do social media.

**NN:** Oh, you don't use social media?

**CH:** No.

**NN:** Do you know?

**BR:** It's just like really short form videos that people post.

**NN:** But how do you find it? Like I don't use Twitter, but I could find - I could look up someone's Twitter stream and read it. Right?

**BR:** Right. And that's the same thing with TikTok.

**NN:** So, I could look up someone's name - but you'd have to know their name first?

**BR:** Exactly!

**NN:** Okay. I'm sure people do a lot of poetry on TikTok.

**BR:** Oh, sure! Yeah!

**NN:** It's a funny name... TikTok! [laughs] Now I'm impressed with you that you don't use social media.

**CH:** Oh, I just don't think it's worth the time honestly.

**NN:** Yeah... So, you probably have more time in your life than all the people who do use it.

**CH:** Nope! [laughs]

**NN:** No? You don't think so?

**CH:** [laughs] Still too busy running around.

**NN:** Oh, okay! Well, that's interesting. Good for you!

**CH:** So, as a young poet who has never performed their work, do you have any suggestions for gaining the confidence and composure to --

**NN:** To perform work?

**CH:** Yeah.

**NN:** Well sure! I would start with your friends. I would start with some people who like you - or they're stuck with you like your family. Although family is often not the best audience. I have found that family is not the best audience. But my grandson would be a great audience for anyone. He'd be curious to hear anyone in his family say a poem. But start with a few friends you trust and build up confidence. Actually, I think going to a venue where you don't know anyone - I used to run a project that was taking kids to nursing homes for

poetry readings. So, all we would need would be a microphone - a very low microphone [laughs] - and a room. And we'd invite people in who'd like to listen to kids say their poems. The kids really gained their confidence doing that because everybody was so excited to hear them, and they were so cute! They got a lot of applause. So that was a confidence builder for them. Feeling their voices being heard. And we would have rehearsals to prepare, give them a relationship with the microphone. So, sharing with people who would really be grateful. I always think nursing homes need more work of substance being shared. Not just silly things. Not cartoons. Not just playing bingo. My professors from college, some of them have been in nursing homes. And when I go and visit them, I think "Wow, they're not realizing this person was a doctor in English. He ran the English department and they're talking to him like he's a baby. That's so insulting." But go to a place where you know people would be friendly to you. Could be a church group, could be any kind of group and say, "Can I share a poem?" Just any venue "Why don't we start with a poem today? I brought one to read." It doesn't have to be by you. Sometimes it's good to practice reading other people's poems. Then you gain more confidence to read your own. That could be good. I don't know if I would go for the taping of yourself. When people do these selfies of themselves in a mirror - that seems weird to me. That wouldn't give me confidence. That would make me more ill-at-ease. Like I'd be more aware of my weirdnesses. But I would say to just find a friend - even two friends! In high school, I had a circle of girlfriends - I still know some of them. At the very end of high school, we used to get together maybe once a week and say, "Okay I'll read a poem, then you read a poem, then you read a poem..." and we would just read one poem that we'd been working on that week. And that was like a little sharing circle. And we'd do it after school! Before we walked home, we'd sit on a wall outside the school and just share our poems. So even something that small where it's mutual sharing, that could help gain confidence, I think. Would any of that be helpful to you?

**CH:** Yeah, I think so. Like basically starting small and then growing. As much as anything else.

**NN:** Yeah. And with a potentially friendly audience would be good.

**CH:** Has there ever been any one poem that has carried different meanings for you throughout your life you just continue to revisit?

**NN:** Oh yeah! What a great question! Well one of the first poems I ever fell in love with was Emily Dickinson's where she starts "I'm nobody. Who are you? Are you nobody too?" And I can still remember thinking about that poem when I was seven years old - or even before when I was four years old, before I ever went to school. I think I first heard it when I was three. But that poem has come to mean more and more and more to me over the years. I would say almost every poem takes on a deeper meaning the longer you live with it. Like I can look at a William Stafford poem that I loved when I was eighteen and I can read it now and now it's like I've been all the people in the poem. I've been the son, I've been the daughter, I've been the parent, I've been the grandparent - they're all in the poem! I've been the timeline in the poem, there's a timeline like in the past and the future. Because you live and it's like the poem grows. It grows in you, on you. So yeah, I think if you reread poems over the years that you liked earlier, they will tend to expand their horizon for you. And even a poem you wrote when you were younger may come to take on new meanings for you. That's a good thing.

**CH:** Do you think travel plays any big part in making yourself into a better poet?

**NN:** Why yes, I do! I think that I was lucky to be a traveler in my life. And since I didn't travel for the past two years - except through Zoom - I think yes because you just keep expanding your sense of amazement at the wondrous world we live in. It really makes something like war feel more unthinkable than ever. How could anyone ever destroy someone else's city? That's so horrific. So invasive. So presumptuous. I don't care what crazy person is telling you to do it, you shouldn't be doing it. If all of you had just stood at the border and said "No, we're not going in there. We're not gonna do it. We're not gonna fight." Why didn't they just have enough power as human beings to say "They kind of look like us. They remind us of ourselves. They love their families. Why would we go kill them?" Just because some crazy person is telling you to do it? That makes no sense to me. It's partly because I've been a traveler and I've gone to so many countries where I wasn't always an expert. Like when I went to Hong Kong, I wasn't that aware of all the history of Hong Kong and the worries that people had about becoming more tightened-down as they have in recent years by the Chinese government. I just felt like being in Hong Kong alone for two weeks, I learned so much about the world from a different angle and geography. I was looking at a map from a whole different angle. Just to see where you are in the map and how close you are to all these places you've never been yet - I felt like Cambodia was outside my window. It wasn't but it seemed like it. Suddenly everything was next-door in a different way. So yes, travel expands you and it enters into your work. Hopefully it makes you a better person, makes you respect other people more. And also, it makes you see that there's nothing *nothing* that suggests that we do better when we're only with people who are like ourselves. No, there's nothing! What's the point of that? To be with people who share your exact same religion, or your exact same ethnicity, or who like the exact same foods you like. Why? I mean, who needs that? Are you that desperate for confidence that you have to have someone else who mimics you like a total twin? So, wanting to make someone else like ourselves, that kind of fundamentalist behavior never made any sense to me. Partly because I was bicultural, and my parents were so different but having a larger respect for [the fact that] it's more fun to be with people you don't know that much about and find out what the world looks like to them. What are they afraid of? What are they worried about? I was once travelling with a beautiful woman. She was a librarian assistant in China. And it was a pretty cool day because it was the day Barack Obama was first inaugurated. So I had gotten up at 2AM to watch the inauguration - watching it on TV. And it was highly censored watching it from China. Any time Barack Obama mentioned freedom? Blip! Like the screen went dark and I would think "What is he saying that's so bad that the Chinese censor is blocking it out?!" [laughs] Anyway, I had asked tis library assistant if she would ride with me to the Great Wall. They were gonna take me to see the Great Wall and I was going alone with a taxi driver for a six-hour round trip. And they had told me he didn't speak one word of English. So, I thought "I need a Chinese speaker in this car." So, I said, "Please go with me!" and she said "Okay!" She went and then in the car, because we had so much time together - also it was snowing! It was a wild day! Somehow, I don't picture in China, you're in a blizzard. [laughs] It was snowing, and I thought "I don't know if this is the best day in the world to go to the Great Wall. What if we get stuck there?" So, I started asking her questions about her parents. because my mom was still living at the time, and I was just curious. She was way younger than I was, but she started looking panic stricken. Like her face gave me a feeling like she didn't like my questions. So, when we got to the wall, the driver told her he would stay in the

car, and we had to go up to the wall by ourselves. It was freezing cold by now, ice everywhere and I was like "We're gonna die! I don't wanna die on the Great Wall of China!" So, we're climbing the stairs, we get to the top and I said "What is wrong? You don't wanna talk about your parents? That's okay. I'm sorry I asked." and she goes "No, I can't talk in front of *him*. Because if I tell you my parents' problems right now, he could turn me into the authorities. I could be arrested." And I said "Are your parents criminals? What are your parents doing?" And she said "No, they just wanna move. They're on the seventh floor of an apartment building. There's no elevator. They have to walk up the stairs. But if I even said that you I could--" I said "You could be arrested for *that*?! That your parents are not able to walk up stairs? You would be arrested for telling me that?" She said "Yes, because it would sound like I'm complaining about the restrictions of China" and I thought "My God, I don't understand anything about what real fear of censorship is." Because to me, that didn't sound like something to be arrested for. But she said no, people get arrested for the tiniest things. And she said a lot of taxi drivers are informants. And I said, "But wait a minute, you told me he doesn't speak English at all!" And she said "He could be lying. He could be taping us." that in China, they are always taping us all the way. And I thought "Well they're gonna know I'm a maniac so who cares?" [laughs] But see? That gave me a whole different impression of China. That a person is afraid to talk about their own parents' problems because they could be arrested for complaining. As an American, even as a Palestinian, I would never have thought of that being a reason for fear. Then it made me think I don't understand highly censored society. Americans don't understand. You know, we weren't saying one word about politics. Except I was really excited about Barack Obama. And she was too! But she couldn't express it. So, you learn that expands you. You can cut all that out of this tape, but that expands your consciousness. Like every trip I've had to China, Japan, anywhere, India, I feel that my world awareness changes. And also, anytime you read a lot of poetry from a country it changes your awareness. I worked on a whole book of translations from Tunisia - a country I've never even been too. I'd love to go there! I feel very close to it because of the voices of the poets that I worked with. So yes. It changes you forever. Travel. And Zoom also is a nice means of travel for those of us who now wanna stay home all the time. [laughs]

**CH:** Since high school teachers don't typically have enough time - like you said before - to fully explore creative writing, what do you think are the most important aspects of poetry that they should be trying to bring out?

**NN:** Well always remember that poetry is the shortest genre. So, you can sneak it in! [laughs] I mean you could take ten minutes in your class and sneak it in. I think they should be working with concise language and the pleasure of observation. There's a beautiful little book called "Braided Creek: A Conversation in Poetry" by two great American writers Ted Kuser and the late Jim Harrison. I love this book so much. I've written the introduction for the new edition because I bought like 50 copies of the book to give away. That book alone could be used with high school students because the poems are no longer than three lines long and you realize each one is like an exquisite world of its own and takes you into a different thought. And it's an exchange of letters by these two friends, these two men writers. So, teachers could just focus on that and hopefully poetry makes us more attentive and all teachers want their students to be more attentive. To the lesson, to their own work,

to their homework. And poetry helps! It's a tool to use. It's like an exercise. If you don't have time to think of it as an art, think of it as an exercise. Also, it's a healing device! It's a healing method. To spend like five- or ten-minutes writing down your own thoughts, you feel better. Every single person, I guarantee it, feels better when they do that. If you do it and you're not judging yourself, you're just welcoming whatever comes to you, you're writing your own questions, your own descriptions, your own images, just short little increments of writing. So much can improve in a classroom if kids have more care for text itself. Not only their own text, but text written by others. And it only makes sense that they would become better readers and scholars if they're also caring a little bit more about their own work. It would be otherwise like a chef who never ate. Y'know, if you're a chef you wanna taste things. You know "How is this?" We probably wouldn't trust a chef who never ate. [laughs]

**CH:** There's no denying you've had great success in your career, but how do you maintain focus on the art and being able to self-critique?

**NN:** We probably become harder critics on ourselves as we get older but that's okay. We're more resilient now. I don't mind if I go back to a draft of something I've written, and I just go "Nope! Big X! That's going in the OUT pile." Just staying with it as a process and every single project or poem or page is its own learning process. But not being afraid to change! Life is change; text can change. So not being worried to work on something and make it better. There is a very traditional rejection of revision given by high school students. Maybe they've given it up now, but it used to be very common. You would hear a high schools student say "If I work on this, I'm tampering with the true emotion that I felt yesterday" [laughs] "when I wrote the first draft. And I will somehow taint this piece, and it will not be genuine to my soul anymore." And I would say "What have you become an artificial soul overnight?" No, you're still a genuine soul. You're just a genuine soul with a little more perspective on your piece. So please take your genuine soul of today back to your genuine soul of yesterday and give it a look. I think there's some extra words in this piece, I think you need a little more description here or there - y'know you can always work on something.

[Here is where the battery on our recording device died. However, we were able to get one final thought from Naomi Shihab Nye before concluding the interview.]

**NN:** There was an English teacher who just read one poem to her students every day after lunch. [The students] would come in hot, sweaty, kind of tired. She would keep the lights dim and she would read one poem that she loved. That was the ticket, it had to be a poem that she loved. And they felt like the poem was gonna lift them up. And he said he'd never thought about poetry before that time in his life. But I mean it changed him. He later became a journalist who would make these landmark programs about poetry and interview so many poets. I asked him "Do you write poetry yourself?" and he said, "I'm not gonna show you." But he said yes, he did, and he always had after that. Right when he was graduating from high school, he entered a poetry contest in Marshall, TX and won! He said it doesn't take that much exposure to fall in love. Just sharing a poem every day. And now there's so many other ways people can hear poems. I hope you subscribe to Poem A Day because I got to pick the poems for April. It was the first time they've ever asked me to be the editor for that

so it's very special. And also, there's a little audio segment where you can listen to the poet read their poem.

[END]