Opinion
EarthBeat



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I've been thinking lately about what is only able to be said through poetry. How a poem can transform a moment into a feeling and make a memory come to life.

Poetry has an incantatory effect; I read a poem more than once, both silently and aloud, to allow the words to wash over me.

I believe that people often reach to poetry because it is language that can hold the whole of an experience. Poetry knows the truth about our experiences of being alive; multivalent and contradicting, there is sweetness and wonder tucked away in small horrors.

Naomi Shihab Nye's 1998 poem "Snow" is one of those poems. The poem is a story, the memory of a story and a reflection of that memory all at once.

Told in six stanzas, the poet speaks about going out into the snow with their younger brother. Something has happened at home. As readers, we don't know what, only that for relief these two kids wade into a blizzard. It's exceedingly cold outside, but the storm inside the home is colder.

"Someone was crying hard at home again, / raging blizzard of sobs," Nye writes.

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This last line of the first stanza sets a scene for the reader: The winter storm is both physical and emotional. The winter storm is a landscape the poet uses to translate and understand what can take place between two people. Despite the storm, the two children go out and we are made to understand that there is a relationship between the siblings.

The poet writes, "I dragged the sled by its rope, / which we normally did not do / when snow was coming down so hard, / pulling my brother whom I called by our secret name / as if we could be other people under the skin."

These are some of my favorite lines of the poem. "Secret name" and "other people under the skin" are so rich in feeling and in what they imply. The speaker doesn't say the "secret name" for the reader, we're only told that they know and love one another well enough to have named each other.

Such is the action of bestowing a prayerful hand on a loved one's forehead and whispering the words of God. Praying for someone else, especially when we do not know what to say, can be a relief when the storm is outside and within us. Liturgy can function like this, too; both liturgy and poems being languages (of God and poets) that come from within our many skins yet live outside of us.

There's such emotional intelligence to the line, "as if we could be other people under the skin." The speaker intimates a desire to leave, further, even as the two children have already left their home into a snow storm. There is a desire to leave into oneself.

Then, the poet describes an interaction between her and her brother — an exchange in which they attempt to mask their emotions for each other. The brother "musters" in a "sunny voice" that he's having fun. The sister shouts, "Look at him go!" But even these exclamations cannot keep the spell alive. The poet's voice grows clearer in this stanza, as if she's looking back through time on this memory.

The poet says, "That was the deepest / I ever went into the snow. Now I think of it / when I stare at paper or into silences / between human beings."

These lines still me. What was it about the solitude and vastness of the unrelenting snow that captured the poet into adulthood? What was it about the blizzard that, even in memory, hungrily grew into every space, every silence?

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The poem could have easily told the story of how two siblings took care of each other during a moment of familial turmoil. But instead, these lines meditate on how to escape the worlds we are born into — and how futile those efforts may be.

The dropping temperatures of winter accentuate contrasts. The poet writes, "How there can be a place / so cold any movement saves you."

In a storm, the gestures that bring the body back to life look like celebration. Clapping one's hands, stomping, jumping, charging the facial muscles to make a smile or something like it. The winter storm nearly persuades you into thinking you enjoy losing feeling. When you move your feet and hands, the first to go cold, you remember what it is to feel life in them. You are grateful for every little bit of pulsing

blood.

In the last stanza the poem's main character speaks again. There are three italicized sentences, though it's unclear if these were words actually spoken aloud on that hill, to or from her brother. You get the sense that the speaker is talking back to herself, either in the moment or in memory.

"*The father could die! / The son*!" the poem says. There's a sharpness to these lines. An urgency that comes from youth, of learning the contradicting ways of nature — both the immediacy of death and the inevitability of the seasons that make life possible. What continues and what stays.