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Commentaries: His Life

Naomi Shihab Nye

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HIS LIFE

I don't know what he thinks about. At night the vault of his face closes up. He could be underground. He could be buried treasure. He could be a donkey trapped in the Bisbee Mine, lowered in so long ago with pulleys and belts, kicking, till its soft fur faded and eyes went blind. They made donkeys pull the little carts of ore from seam to seam. At night, when the last men stepped into the creaking lift, the donkeys cried. Some lived as long as seventeen years down there. The miners still feel bad about it. They would have hauled them out to breathe real air in the evenings, but the chute was so deep and they'd never be able to force them in again.

COMMENTARY

Prose poems invite us to make dramatic or delicately odd *leaps into the deeps*—with no extensive build-up, prefacing or afterword. I admire their directness. I admire their faith in us—that we may, if lucky, if similarly seized, follow their meanderings into some compelling region. In “His Life” I stare at a person I should know very well but don't, then (for relief?) dive into the old mine at Bisbee, Arizona, which I had recently visited, remembering what the ex-miner, now tour-guide, told our group after we plied him with questions (tears clouded his eyes and he brushed them away). After the piece is over, I ruminate about lives, whether animal or human, spent in tied-up situations, but do I have to spell that out? No, no, no!

There is something infinitely satisfying in the blocky shape of the prose poem, after all the angularity and spaciousness of the more vertical poetry form. Prose poems are a refreshment, an oasis by the long reading highway. Entrances and exits are clearly marked. It is easy to feel engaged.

The prose-poem shape also suggests pockets and tables. It is curious how comforted I feel simply to see one popping up somewhere. I am restored to that brief time in first grade when we were invited (by our surly teacher, in my own case) to “make paragraphs”—once we had mastered the tricky art of the “sentence.” What a wonder that was! The simple linkage of lines into a satisfying little house-shapes with windows and doors, dots and doormats . . . all my school-life I was waiting to be invited to make “a paragraph” again. But it was never enough for anybody.

“His Life,” from *Mint*, State Street Press, 1991.