

Women Who Came Before Us

Our mothers stirred potatoes and herbs
in a pot on the stove. They were sniffing the air,
their deep eyes tuned. "Speak up," they sang.
"Say what you mean."

- 5 Our grandmothers hurt in their knees
and their necks. The world had not been easy for them.
Maybe no one had listened enough. My grandma whispered
in my ear, "You want that doll? You'll get that doll."

- And far away the secret women,
10 women in cloaks, wandering home,
sent us messages on the air.
"You're never, never ever alone."

- What words would we shape?
Where could we stand?
15 Women always gripped my hand.
They led me through the city crowds.

- I'd pull my poem from the wool of days.
Comb its hair, sing the praise
of friends and forests, dreams and dirt.
20 Write when I laughed, write when I hurt,

sing when no one fit my wish.
"Nothing here is what I ordered."
Poems would take me past my borders.
Back to the women who wove my name,

- 25 the sewing basket with needles and threads,
the silver thimble, the cozy bed,
the plumped-up pillow, the hand-stitched quilt.
And what would we say? What would we say?

—Naomi Shihab Nye

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