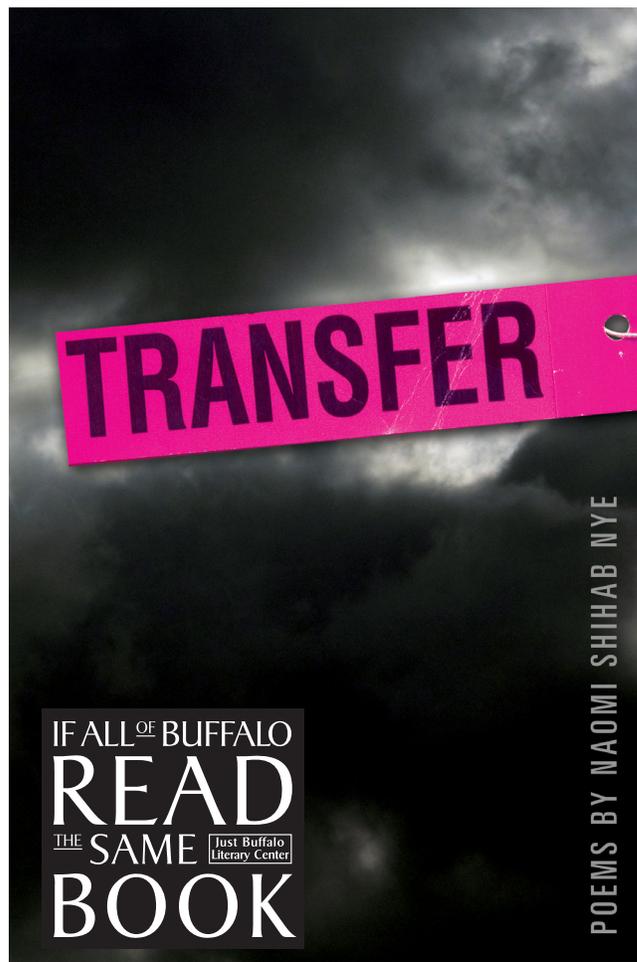


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NAOMI SHIHAB NYE

READER'S
GUIDE



A Wandering Poet – Naomi Shihab Nye



“Naomi Shihab Nye is an American, an Arab, a Poet, a parent, a woman of Texas, a woman of ideas.”

–Bill Moyers, journalist and public commentator

Naomi Shihab Nye finds artistic strength in a life spent straddling cultures and countries. A leading contemporary Palestinian-American writer, she is also regarded as one of the most accomplished female poets of the American Southwest. For more than three decades, Nye has been writing and editing poems, essays, novels and acclaimed children’s books that focus on the everyday lives of cultures around the world, from Jerusalem to the Latino neighborhoods in her hometown of San Antonio, Texas.

Nye is known for her ability to use simple, spare language that celebrates and elevates ordinary events, people, places and objects. Says *Booklist*, “Nye is a fluid poet, and her poems are also full of the urgency of spoken language. Her direct, unadorned vocabulary serves her well.” Her hunger to explore people’s viewpoints is tempered by a humble examination of her personal and cultural biases, and she demands nothing less of her readers.

Born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1952 to Aziz Shihab, a Palestinian refugee from Jerusalem, and Miriam Shihab, an American of German and Swiss descent, Nye lived in the Midwest with her parents and brother for 14 years. The family then moved to the West Bank to live outside Jerusalem before returning to the States to settle in San Antonio. Throughout her career, Nye has traveled extensively in Europe, Canada, Mexico, Central and South America, and the Middle East, teaching in schools and promoting international goodwill through education and creative expression.

A “wandering poet,” Nye also calls herself a “vagabond with many influences. Women, men, children, animals, a nut.” She is a long-time admirer of the American poet and pacifist William Stafford, who shared her focus on the intimate, unexamined life, and she also cites writers such as Carl Sandberg, W. S. Merwin and Lucille Clifton as inspiration. Nye was raised on her father’s vivid stories about life back in the Middle East, and on classic poems and children’s tales her mother read to her, from Emily Dickinson to Aesop’s *Fables* and *Little Women*. She published her first poem in a children’s magazine when she was seven and has kept a journal for years, basing many of her poems and stories on her own experiences. She was especially close to her father, a former editor of the *Jerusalem Times* who later worked as a writer for the *San Antonio Express News*, and his mother, “Sitti” Khadra Shihab (“sitti” is Arabic for “grandmother”), whom Nye visited when her family lived in the West Bank. From them she inherits a unique perspective into what she believes is the “primary source” of poetry: “...local life, random characters met on the streets, our own ancestry sifting down to us through small essential daily tasks.”

Nye’s early free verse chapbooks, *Tattooed Feet* (1977) and *Eye-to-Eye* (1978), were followed by her first full-length poetry collection, *Different Ways to Pray* (1980), in which she explores the similarities and differences between Southwestern American cultures from the United States to Mexico. *I Feel a Little Jumpy Around You* (1996) pairs 194 “his and her” poems written by both a man and a woman, and *The Space between Our Footsteps* (1998) is a collection of poems and full-color paintings about the Middle East.



St. Louis, Missouri

Fuel (1998), Nye's sixth and most acclaimed poetry collection, is praised for its ability to span many topics, cultures, time periods and experiences in places she's lived or visited, from Japan to Texas. A talented musician, she writes and performs her own songs and has produced two albums of music—one of which shares a title with *Lullaby Raft* (1997), a children's picture book. Nye has also compiled and edited several anthologies, including the award-winning *This Same Sky: A Collection of Poems from Around the World* (1992), *The Tree Is Older Than You Are: A Bilingual Gathering of Poems & Stories from Mexico with Paintings by Mexican Artists* (1995) and *Is This Forever, or What?: Poems and Paintings from Texas* (2004).

"I never get tired of mixtures," Nye has said. She borrows from Middle Eastern and Native American religions, and writes of her San Antonio work, "My poems and stories often begin with the voices of our neighbors, mostly Mexican American, always inventive and surprising."

Nye's artistic sensitivity and cultural awareness especially shine in her well-regarded books for children and teens. Several are autobiographical and intentionally highlight female accomplishments and histories. *Sitti's Secrets* (1994) tells the story of an Arab-American girl and her Arab grandmother set in a Palestinian village like the one in which Nye once lived. *Habibi* (1997), Nye's award-winning first young-adult novel, mirrors her life as an Arab-American teenage girl whose family moves to Palestine, despite the decades-long violence in Jerusalem between Jews and Arabs. Her poetry collection *Honeybee* won the 2008 Arab American Book Award in the Children's/Young Adult category.

With the destruction of the World Trade Center towers on September 11, 2001, Nye invoked her heritage again by speaking out against terrorism and prejudice. Her concern over the lack of understanding between Westerners and Arabs led to her publication in 2002 of *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East*, a collection culled from years of writing and a timely finalist for the National Book Award. In the bestselling *You and Yours* (2005), Nye revisits the Middle East more intimately as a mother and a traveler. Her latest work includes the poetry collection, *Transfer* (2011), and a forthcoming collection of very short stories, *There Is No Long Distance Now* (2012).

Transfer is a mixture of short free verse poems, longer narrative pieces and prose poems. Nye dedicates the book to her father's story as a proud yet heartbroken Palestinian immigrant. Aziz, also a poet and writer, was a quick-witted, outgoing news reporter who was passionate about his homeland. In one section, Nye includes 11 of her father's poems, "transferring" her book to him. Aziz Shihab's words illustrate how devastated he was by his family's forced exodus from Jerusalem following Israel's rise to power, and how he lived the rest of his days in the United States with a refugee's embittered hopes of returning home. "I immigrated to the land of the free, but my people weren't free," he writes in his poem, "We did not have drinking water in the middle of the ocean."

Transfer also touches on the ethnic diversity of Nye's San Antonio, and her experiences abroad in cities like Jerusalem and Cairo, to create a collection that bears witness to a shared narrative—what she writes is a "large family of voices linking human experience. We have no borders when we read." According to the publisher, BOA Editions, "At the center of these poems is a looking inward, a questioning of things that help the traveler and of things that should help the traveler but for some reason do not."

Nye subtly navigates the various meanings of "transfer" to convey, carry and send the subject (and her readers) on their own journeys. Physical objects, as well as thoughts, are moved, lost or forgotten and picked up again. Airplanes are boarded, and home addresses change along with perspectives. Nye negotiates her inner conflict at living in the comfort and safety of America, removed geographically from Arab struggles abroad (as in "Burlington, Vermont"). She documents American experiences: the blank stare of a 99-cent store in "Dallas,"

a jumble of misplaced jingoism in “Strange Shirts on the Same Day.” Her grief and wry humor appear throughout the book, such as when she finds her father’s last shopping list (he was an enthusiastic cook who published his own cookbook of Arab recipes), remembers how her mother discards his ties, and describes how Aziz’s body finally fails him as his busy brain carries on, lost in the streets of his childhood Jerusalem.

Nye has said that when creating books for children or adults, “to counteract negative images conveyed by blazing headlines, writers must steadily transmit simple stories closer to heart and more common to everyday life. Then we will be doing our job.” She has been named a Lannan Fellow, a Guggenheim Fellow and a Witter Bynner Fellow of the Library of Congress. She has received

four Pushcart Prizes, a Lavan Award from the Academy of American Poets, the Isabella Gardner Poetry Award and several honors in children’s literature, including two Jane Addams Children’s Book Awards. A regular columnist for *Organica* and poetry editor for *The Texas Observer*, she has been featured on two PBS poetry specials: “The Language of Life with Bill Moyers” and “The United States of Poetry” as well as on “NOW with Bill Moyers.” She has been a visiting writer at several schools including the University of Texas at Austin and the University of Hawai’i. In January 2010 she was elected a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. In 1974, Nye received her BA from Trinity University in San Antonio, where she still lives with her husband, photographer Michael Nye, and their son, Madison.

Finding a Dialogue

The years Naomi Shihab Nye spent shifting from one location to the next gave her, at a very early age, an appreciation for cultural difference. “This is one of the best things about growing up in a mixed family or community,” she has said. “You never think only one way of doing or seeing anything is right.” Her literary focus also shifts between the Middle East and the American Southwest, exploring human conflict and connection from her father’s lost Jerusalem to the wounds of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the American-led occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan.

“Hello, Palestine”

Nye’s father was forced to leave Jerusalem just a few years after she was born, during the 1948 war between the brand-new State of Israel and the Arab nations that Palestinians call the “Nakba,” or “Catastrophe.” Aziz Shihab left for St. Louis when he was just 18 and didn’t return until the 1960s when he moved his family back to his native village of Sinjil in the West Bank. Then came the 1967 War, and he was forced to return to the United States for good, to San Antonio. To this day, Palestinians consider the establishment of Israel and the loss of their ancestral homelands as their people’s most devastating moment in history, and nothing less than a brutal ethnic



Jerusalem

cleansing that drove more than 700,000 Arabs out of hundreds of villages to make room for Jewish immigrants.

In *Transfer*, the poems from Aziz’s notebooks show a man grappling with the memories of his shattered country and with his forced separation from it. He was always looking for ways to connect, Nye writes, always on the move, greeting his American friends and neighbors with a cheery “Hello, my friend” that hid his constant sense of disconnection. This collection is Nye’s way of continuing her conversations with her father; it stems from an abandoned book project they began together while he was alive. *Transfer* is Nye’s attempt to find a dialogue with him and continue the lost thread that began when she was a little girl.

San Antonio

Nye's writing also centers on San Antonio, her long-time home and a city of immigrants—a melting pot of Latino, black, white, Palestinian and other ethnic groups who settled in Texas. As a Palestinian-American artist, educator, wife and mother who lives and works there full time, she knows what it's like to simultaneously belong and stand apart. Her poem "San Antonio," from *Is This Forever, or What? Poems and Paintings from Texas*, reflects on her ties to this historic Mexican-American town steeped in legends of the Alamo and Native American myth:

I remembered the old men
in the west side café,
dealing dominoes like magical charms.
It was then I knew,
like a woman looking backward,
I could not leave you,
or find anyone I loved more.

And her role there has been unequivocally devoted to breaking down cultural barriers; she once invited all the Nyes in the San Antonio phonebook to her house for dinner.

In the Southwestern Writers Collection anthology, *What Wildness Is This: Women Write about the Southwest*, (2007), Nye's short story, "Home Address," describes the proud day she pays off her family's mortgage on their old home near the San Antonio River. She feels as fully at home in the Texas "wilderness" and San Antonio's ethnically diverse neighborhoods as she does across the ocean with her family in war-torn Palestine. It is this search for belonging amidst cultural contrasts and upheaval that gives her writing its power. She says she felt confident in representing Mexican-American voices in her anthology, *The Tree is Older Than You Are*, because "I live in one of the most Mexican of U.S. cities, in an inner-city neighborhood where no dinner table feels complete without a dish of salsa for gravity, and the soft air hums its double tongue... I suggest that blood be bigger than what we're born with."

9/11

Nye became more acutely politicized when she joined the world in decrying the World Trade Center attacks on September 11, 2001. She often tells the story of a post-9/11 taxi ride she once took in Syracuse, New York, and how her interchange with the driver became the theme of 2007's *I'll Ask You Three Times, Are You OK?: Tales*

of *Driving and Being Driven*. As she recounts it in an interview the year the book came out:

He came to pick me up in the dark. He said, 'because we're living in such strange times, we should ask each other regularly if we are, you know, okay.' Between my hotel and the airport he made it a habit to ask a minimum of three times. So after he told me this, he paused and said, 'Are you okay?' And I said, 'I was, until I met you.'

In the same interview and another with Bill Moyers, Nye recalls feeling a surge of memories about her grandmother after the planes hit the twin towers—a sense of responsibility to her Arab heritage that, informed by her world travels, led her to both critique and defend Muslim society. In "Jerusalem," a poem included in *19 Varieties of Gazelle*, she connects the violence of 9/11 to the ongoing bloodshed in Israel and Palestine, and then bluntly urges us to look beyond hate and incrimination: "I'm not interested in who suffered the most. I'm interested in people getting over it."

Over the years, Nye's feelings have matured from when she lived in the Middle East as a teenager. "I do think that as we get older, sometimes we examine culture in different ways, how it has affected our own lives, how our culture parallels things...in other people's cultures, how those variations can actually bring us together." Empathy for different cultures, she insists, comes from listening to each other's stories, and teaching poetry is a powerful yet under-represented way to open students' eyes to the world. "I can never understand it when teachers claim they are 'uncomfortable' with poetry—as if poetry demands they be anything other than responsive, curious human beings," she once said. "If poetry comes out of the deepest places in the human soul and experience, shouldn't it be as important to learn about one another's poetry, country to country, as one another's weather or gross national products?"

The poet William Stafford once called Nye's work "a poetry of encouragement and heart." In *Transfer*, as in so many of her other works, her poems speak to us with hopefulness in their own languages. In this book as well as her others, Naomi Shihab Nye uses her life's journeys to find a dialogue with the world.

Readers Questions

1. Does the title “Transfer” have one meaning, or many? How does it (or how do they) help define what Naomi Shihab Nye is exploring in these poems?
2. Naomi Shihab Nye tells students who are skeptical about poetry: “Do you think in complete, elaborate sentences? In fully developed paragraphs with careful footnotes? Or in flashes and bursts of images, snatches of lines leaping one to the next, descriptive fragments, sensory details? *We think* in poetry.” Do you agree? How do the poems in *Transfer* illustrate this claim?
3. How is Nye’s poetry different from her father’s? How is it similar? Give some examples.
4. Do you think the collection is more powerful and coherent with the inclusion of Aziz’s poetry? Why or why not?
5. What is missing from Aziz’s life that makes him so homesick? Why does Nye describe him as a “refugee/not always”? When is he, and when isn’t he a refugee?
6. A recurring theme in *Transfer* is the shifting place called “home,” and how traveling affects one’s definition of home. What does “home” mean in Nye’s poems as well as in her father’s? Find specific examples.
7. How does Nye incorporate and connect current events with history in her poetry? How does this echoing of her late father’s profession in journalism impact her poems?
8. Identify some of the commonplace objects (i.e. stones, cucumbers, fig leaves, lentil soup, etc.) that Nye mentions. What do they signify in terms of her memories of her father? Of her relationship to her surroundings? Why are these seemingly small physical objects so important to her?
9. What role does food play in both Nye’s poems and her father’s? Find some examples.
10. Throughout *Transfer*, Nye refers to “dialogue”—between her and her father in her memories of when he was alive, and in terms of her own identity as a poet and a teacher. Find some poems that illustrate this. How do you understand the lines: “we dropped our troubles / into the lap of the storyteller / and they turned into someone else’s”?
11. In Aziz’s poems, what is his attitude toward Palestine as an adult living in the United States? How does he feel about Israel’s invasion of his people’s traditional homeland?
12. How does Aziz cope with his loneliness and disconnection as a refugee?
13. How would you answer his question in “Everything In Our World Did Not Seem To Fit”: “Why was someone else’s need for a home / greater than our own need for our own homes”? To what is he referring?
14. Go back and reread the poem, “Fifty Years Since I Prayed Or Thought In Arabic.” What importance does Aziz give to journalism, to reporting news, and to language itself? What made his professional work “magical” to him, and how might that magic be important to Palestinians as a whole? Find examples where Nye describes the magic and power of words.
15. What effect does war in the Middle East have on Aziz and Nye throughout their lives? Give specific examples in these poems.
16. Both Aziz and Nye write about memory—distinct recollections and flashbacks of conversations, people, objects and places. Give some examples and explain how each poem succeeds in illustrating that specific memory. Is it through emotion or detail, or both?
17. What are some memories both daughter and father are fearful of losing, and others they know they have already lost?
18. What is hopeful about the poetry in *Transfer*?

19. Find some examples where Nye uses humor or comic relief to give lightness to a dark situation, where she puts on her “armor of joy.” How is her use of humor effective? How does it change the meaning of the poems?

20. Which is your favorite poem? Least favorite? Explain why, using some of the themes discussed above.

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