

How Long Peace Takes

Writing about World Issues Using the Work of Naomi Shihab Nye

MERNA ANN HECHT

FOR YEARS I HAVE COUNTED ON Naomi Shihab Nye's diverse anthologies and her poetry collections to support young writers in engaging broad and deeply human themes. I value how Nye's work encourages readers of all ages to connect to their own life experiences, and at the same time gently insists that they embrace the wider world with compassion for the lives of others. Grounded in her penchant for detail and celebration of daily life, Nye's poetry also encompasses her acute awareness of global conflicts. Her longing that peace might come to us across borders and barriers of ethnicity, land rights, and violent power struggles informs my teaching.

Already anticipating Nye's upcoming reading in Seattle, I was thrilled to learn that I could select student work for display and one student reader who would present an original poem prior to Nye's reading. It was

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important to me that each of my students would feel represented by those few who would be selected. In working with my sixth-grade classes, I wanted to present Nye's work so that it would have a meaningful impact on all of my students.

I formatted our study into three categories, each one reflective of Nye's approach to writing:

A Look Inward and a Look Around

I began with Nye's poem "The Rider" from Paul Janeczko's *The Place My Words Are Looking For: What Poets Say About and Through Their Work*. The poem is accompanied by a photo of and a short statement by Nye. In just a few paragraphs she reveals her humility, her lifelong love of language, and her belief that for her, "poetry has always been a way of paying attention to the world."

Her poem "The Rider" suggests that when/while riding a bicycle, you might be able *To leave your loneliness / panting behind you on some street corner / while you float free into a cloud of sudden azaleas, / luminous pink petals that have never felt loneliness, / no matter how slowly they fell*. The students looked inward and wrote about what feelings, like the poet's loneliness, they would choose to outrace on their own bicycles.

Jumping into Nye's love of close observation and small details we also read her poem "Fold," from her col-

Prayer in My Boot

NAOMI SHAHIB NYE

For the wind no one expected

For the boy who does not know the answer

For the graceful handle I found in a field
attached to nothing
pray it is universally applicable

For our tracks which disappear
the moment we leave them

For the face peering through the café window
as we sip our soup

For cheerful American classrooms sparkling
with crisp colored alphabets
happy cat posters
the cage of the guinea pig
the dog with division flying out of his tail
and the classrooms of our cousins
on the other side of the earth
how solemn they are
how gray or green or plain
how there is nothing dangling
nothing striped or polka dotted or cheery
no self portraits or visions of cupids
and in these rooms the students raise their
hands
and learn the stories of the world

For library books in alphabetical order
and family businesses that failed
and the house with the boarded windows
and the gap in the middle of a sentence
and the envelope we keep mailing ourselves

For every hopeful morning given and given
and every future rough edge
and every afternoon
turning over in its sleep.

From Naomi Shihab Nye, *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East*. Text copyright © 2002 Naomi Shihab Nye. Used by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

lection *You & Yours*. Lines like, *Cakes in a window do something for me too. / Even the doilies where cakes once sat/ marked with small stains, crumbs of sugar. . .* inspired the students as they crafted quick-write snapshots of tiny images and details, celebrating the “diminutive tendency” Nye refers to in her poem.

Looking Outward, Close to Home

One of the poems I used for this portion of the writing was “I Remember My Father’s Hands,” by Lisa Suhar Majaj, from Nye’s anthology, *The Space Between Our Footsteps: Poems and Paintings from the Middle East*. Each of the nine couplets begins with the word “because”; as a whole they tell the story of a family with its bonds of love and loss. Details of daily life come across in an incantatory rhythm. *I remember my father’s hands because they ripped bread with quiet purpose, / dipped fresh green oil like a birthright / because after his mother’s funeral they raised a teacup, / set it down untouched, uncontrollably trembling.* Using this poem as a springboard for writing about family members paved the way for introducing my students to the litany form and to Nye’s poems about her family, especially her Sitti (grandmother) who lived to 106 and her beloved father. Majaj, like Nye, is an Arab-American poet whose father was born in Palestine and whose mother is American; both poets write with immense tenderness and pride about their families and their Arab heritage.

Seeing Beyond, Toward the Wide World

I asked the students to think deeply and honestly about their global concerns and, after listing them, to share their list with a partner. The main issues that emerged were war, racism, global warming, immigration, hope versus hopelessness, and worry for the world’s children. Next we read Nye’s litany poem “Prayer in My Boot.” The students experimented with writing short versions of repeating lines beginning with “For the.” Writing in litany form can provide a structure for speaking about the human condition with authority and insight. I trusted it would also encourage the students to emulate the tone of prayer, invocation, and lament with which Nye writes. Also, the litany form can help students contemplate and pose provocative and often unanswerable questions—the big questions that refer to the complexities and the



Aardvarks grew up very quickly, yet umpteen angst-ridden poems mostly easily perused slightly progressive televisions. Five mostly obese chrysanthemums grew up, but two speedy tickets almost comfortably telephoned umpteen Jabberwockies.

anguish of our times—the very questions that Nye continues to ask.

After our work with “Prayer in My Boot,” I asked the students what other repeating words and phrases might give them a powerful piece. We talked about how Nye allows grief and loss into her work and we talked of what it is “our” poet sees as she looks at the world. We discussed the nature of Nye’s big questions and pondered what we might ask. I read Nye’s poem “Lunch in Nablus City Park,” from *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East*, in which she asks the question, “What makes a man with a gun seem bigger than a man with almonds?” Following our discussion, a number of thoughtful and powerful poems took shape.

Molly chose to write her litany about what the poet sees:

To See

MOLLY LONGMIRE

To see the sky go black
and the sun set for the last time

To see the tears forever fall
from the earth’s eyes

To see the petals of the plants
always bloom

To see through the frozen eyes
of a child

To see time stop before me
scares me, but to see the world
continue to fight and kill
is what I fear the most.

Gannon framed her litany poem with provocative questions and she provided the answers:

who made us

GANNON RACEY-MUNIDES

who made war?
the people who we trust
with our countries and homes

who made peace?
the people we forget about
the people we don't know enough about

who made poverty?
the people we trusted
with our money in the first place
the people in the big buildings
in the pinstriped suits

who made illegal immigrants?
the people who say it's a free country
the people who say this country
is a big mixing pot

who made global warming?
We did.....

Kristin put her learning about Nye's work into a poem which explores concepts of hope versus hopelessness:

How The World Will Die

KRISTIN SNOW

The world will die because of the businessman
who feeds the factories of the world,
who cares only for himself

The world will die because of the homeless man,
reaching out his grimy fingers,
trying to control his chariot of life
which has gone so far off course

The world will die because of the bird,
trying hopelessly to get warm,
to free itself from the slick

poisonous oil on its feathers

The world will die because of the child,
so new to this world,
so unsuspecting of the troubles it will face

The world will die because of the grandma,
sitting by the fire warming her aching bones,
trying to remember what the world had been
like,
trying not to remember how it is now

The world will die because of the woman,
lying in a cold, sterile room,
pushing through the darkness
that surrounds her

Our last assignment was to create litany poems in direct response to Nye's poem "How Long Peace Takes." Nye's ability to write what is deeply true for her as it relates to her love and anguish for the world and her commitment to ask the unanswerable questions moved the students to do the same. Each year that I work with sixth-graders, I become more thoroughly convinced of their capacities to grapple with what it means to be human in an unjust world. The wisdom in Emillio's final piece, "How Long War Takes," shows camaraderie with Nye's courage to name the hatred that exists between us and within ourselves. Nye's longing for peace is beautifully reflected in Kyle's lines where he says that it might come someday "when everyone raises their own white flag."

How Long War Takes

EMILLIO VALDIVIA

As long as someone blinded with dirt in his eyes
As long as a rock sinking to the bottom of the
ocean's blue abyss
As long as someone snapping two fingers
together
As long as a train whizzing by
As long as a brick shattering glass
As long as a person feeling hopeless
As long as a person giving up
As long as someone's heart being broken
As long as someone running out of ideas for a

poem

As long as hatred starting to brew inside one's
self.

Peace Will Come

KYLE GOODWIN

Peace will come
when the last bomb is dropped

Peace will come
after the last punch is thrown

Peace will come
after the last shot is fired

Peace will come
when everyone has a voice

Peace will come
when everyone raises
their own white flag

By the time the evening of Nye's reading arrived, the students were delighted that their fellow sixth-grader Fautimah El-Mehrik would represent them with "our" poet. There were high fives all around for Fautimah and the poets whose work was chosen for display.

Happiness¹

FAUTIMAH EL-MEHRİK

I am that little girl who skips
home with jubilation.

I am the man who just won the lottery,

I float through peoples' minds,
putting smiles on their faces,
making them glow,
like being in the sun,
even if there is a light blanket
of snow on the ground.

I am the boy on his birthday

How Long Peace Takes

NAOMI SHAHIB NYE

As long as a mirror opening its eye
to stretch a room lengthwise

As long as the slow crawl of loosening paint
and the bending of slim wax tapers

As long as a blue thread spinning
a vine of birds up one seam and down another
and the bodice don't forget the bodice
doubly thick with wings and hidden treasure

As long as my Sitti twists her hanky
Around two small gold coins
In the bed in the bed
and says she is not tired

As long as the bed
and all the people who slept in it

As long as the splitting of almonds
the stirring of lentils
the scent of marimea
and the Universal Laundry

As long as the question—what if I
were you?—has two heads

As long as the back of the skull is
vulnerable and the temple and the chest

As long as anyone feels exempt
or better and one pain is separate
from another and people are pressed flat
in any place

And longer

If everyday the soldier slaps
another cousin's face

From Naomi Shihab Nye, *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East*. Text copyright © 2002 Naomi Shihab Nye. Used by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

¹Inspired by Naomi Shihab Nye's poem "So Much Happiness," from *Words Under Words: Selected Poems*. Portland, OR: The Eighth Mountain Press, 1995, p.88.

running down stairs,
stuffing his face with cake,
the candles, six of them, on it
are no comparison to the feeling
I place in your heart.

I am that mom
holding her new baby
protectively in her arms.

Without me there is no joy,
there is gloom,
sadness, anger, and straight faces.
Without me there are no smiles,
no glowing.

Sadness drinks up my feeling,
Loneliness, sits all by himself
in that old diner,
they have never felt me
and never will.
I bounce off of them like a ball on the play-
ground,
Yet, they are my brothers.

To keep me with you,
wrapped in a shawl of love,
you have to have felt my brothers
Loneliness and Sadness,
like the feeling that overcame you
when your cat died,
or you lost what you loved..

Nye's poetic sensibilities and her yearning for a more just and peaceful world had a powerful effect on the students' thinking and writing. Her poems and those she has collected gave the students an opportunity to create pieces that reflected their mature and insightful concerns in relation to our world. Her work and her words encourage all of us to build bridges to creating understandings in a world so much in need of repair. 🌍

Work Cited in the Article

Janezko, Paul, selected by, (1990). *The Place My Words Are Looking For: What Poets Say About and Through Their Work*. (1990). New York: Macmillan Books for Young Readers, "The Rider."

Nye, Naomi Shihab. (1994). *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East*. New York: Greenwillow Books. "How Long Peace Takes," "Lunch in Nablus City Park," "Prayer in My Boot."

Nye, Naomi Shihab, selected by, (1998). *The Space Between Our Footsteps: Poems and Paintings from the Middle East*. NY: Simon & Schuster. "I Remember My Father's Hands," by Lisa Suhair Majaj.

Nye, Naomi Shihab. (2005). *You & Yours*. Rochester, NY: Boa Editions, Ltd. "Fold."

Additional Poems Used in This Curriculum

Nye, Naomi Shihab. (2005). *A Maze Me: Poems for Girls*. New York: Greenwillow Books, "The Word PEACE," p. 92.

Before we gave our full consideration to choosing the weighty matters from which we would create litany poems, we read a prose piece titled "The Word PEACE." I selected this reading because it helped set the tone for lively discussions about the power of words to touch upon the big issues of war and peace.

Nye, Naomi Shihab. (1994). *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East*. New York: Greenwillow Books. "Arabic Coffee," p. 38, I used this poem as a segue from looking at Nye's writing with detail to her poems about family and Arabic culture; "Blood," "Stain," "The Words Under the Words."

Nye, Naomi Shihab, selected by. (1995). *The Tree Is Older than You Are: A Bilingual Gathering of Poems & Stories from Mexico with Paintings by Mexican Artists*. NY: Aladdin Paperbacks. "Should the Sparrow Lose Its Wings," by Homero Aridjis, translated by Martha Black Jordan. I used this poem as practice for writing in the litany form and as a springboard for discussion about the endurance of hope.

Nye, Naomi Shihab, selected by. (1992). *This Same Sky: A Collection of Poems from around the World*. New York: Simon & Schuster, "Stars At Night," by Iku Takenaka, translated by Edith Marcombe Shiffert and Yuki Sawa, p. 118. I used this poem as practice for writing in the litany form before we wrote about world issues.