

## Gate A-4

Wandering around the Albuquerque Airport Terminal, after learning my flight had been delayed four hours, I heard an announcement: “If anyone in the vicinity of Gate A-4 understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately.”

Well—one pauses these days. Gate A-4 was my own gate. I went there.

An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing. “Help,” said the flight agent. “Talk to her. What is her problem? We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this.”

I stooped to put my arm around the woman and spoke haltingly. “Shu-dow-a, Shu-bid-uck Habibti? Stani schway, Min fadlick, Shu-bit-se-wee?” The minute she heard any words she knew, however poorly used, she stopped crying. She thought the flight had been cancelled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment the next day. I said, “No, we’re fine, you’ll get there, just later, who is picking you up? Let’s call him.”

We called her son, I spoke with him in English. I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane and ride next to her. She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for the fun of it. Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out of course they had ten shared friends. Then I thought just for the heck of it why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her? This all took up two hours.

She was laughing a lot by then. Telling of her life, patting my knee, answering questions. She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies—little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts—from her bag—and was offering them to all the women at the gate. To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo—we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There is no better cookie.

And then the airline broke out free apple juice from huge coolers and two little girls from our flight ran around serving it and they were covered with powdered sugar, too. And I noticed my new best friend—by now we were holding hands—had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves. Such an old country tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and I thought, This is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in that gate—once the crying of confusion stopped—seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women, too.

This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.

Naomi Shihab Nye, "Gate A-4" from *Honeybee*. Copyright © 2008 by Naomi Shihab Nye.

## Red Brocade

The Arabs used to say,  
When a stranger appears at your door,  
feed him for three days  
before asking who he is,  
where he's come from,  
where he's headed.  
That way, he'll have strength  
enough to answer.  
Or, by then you'll be  
such good friends  
you don't care.

Let's go back to that.  
Rice? Pine nuts?  
Here, take the red brocade pillow.  
My child will serve water  
to your horse.

No, I was not busy when you came!  
I was not preparing to be busy.  
That's the armor everyone put on  
to pretend they had a purpose  
in the world.

I refuse to be claimed.  
Your plate is waiting.  
We will snip fresh mint  
into your tea.

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## So Much Happiness

It is difficult to know what to do with so much happiness.  
With sadness there is something to rub against,  
a wound to tend with lotion and cloth.  
When the world falls in around you, you have pieces to pick up,  
something to hold in your hands, like ticket stubs or change.

But happiness floats.  
It doesn't need you to hold it down.  
It doesn't need anything.  
Happiness lands on the roof of the next house, singing,  
and disappears when it wants to.  
You are happy either way.  
Even the fact that you once lived in a peaceful tree house  
and now live over a quarry of noise and dust  
cannot make you unhappy.  
Everything has a life of its own,  
it too could wake up filled with possibilities  
of coffee cake and ripe peaches,  
and love even the floor which needs to be swept,  
the soiled linens and scratched records.....

Since there is no place large enough  
to contain so much happiness,  
you shrug, you raise your hands, and it flows out of you  
into everything you touch. You are not responsible.  
You take no credit, as the night sky takes no credit  
for the moon, but continues to hold it, and share it,  
and in that way, be known.

"So Much Happiness," by Naomi Shihab Nye from Words under the Words (The Eighth Mountain Press).

## 300 Goats

In icy fields.

Is water flowing in the tank?

Will they huddle together, warm bodies pressing?

(Is it the year of the goat or the sheep?

Scholars debating Chinese zodiac,

follower or leader.)

O lead them to a warm corner,

little ones toward bulkier bodies.

Lead them to the brush, which cuts the icy wind.

Another frigid night swooping down —

Aren't you worried about them? I ask my friend,

who lives by herself on the ranch of goats,

far from here near the town of Ozona.

She shrugs, "Not really,

they know what to do. They're goats."

Source: Poetry (January 2016).

## Many Asked Me Not to Forget Them

Where do you keep all these people?  
The shoemaker with his rumpled cough.  
The man who twisted straws into brooms.  
My teacher, oh my teacher. I will always cry  
when I think of my teacher.  
The olive farmer who lost every inch of ground,  
every tree,  
who sat with head in his hands  
in his son's living room for years after.  
I tucked them into my drawer with cuff links and bow ties.  
Touched them each evening before I slept.  
Wished them happiness and peace.  
Peace in the heart. No wonder we all got heart trouble.  
But justice never smiled on us. Why didn't it?  
I tried to get Americans to think of them.  
But they were too involved with their own affairs  
to imagine ours. And you can't blame them, really.  
How much do I think of Africa? I always did feel sad  
in the back of my mind for places I didn't  
have enough energy to worry about.

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Jerusalem

“Let’s be the same wound if we must bleed.  
Let’s fight side by side, even if the enemy  
is ourselves: I am yours, you are mine.”  
—Tommy Olofsson, Sweden

I’m not interested in  
who suffered the most.  
I’m interested in  
people getting over it.

Once when my father was a boy  
a stone hit him on the head.  
Hair would never grow there.  
Our fingers found the tender spot  
and its riddle: the boy who has fallen  
stands up. A bucket of pears  
in his mother’s doorway welcomes him home.  
The pears are not crying.  
Later his friend who threw the stone  
says he was aiming at a bird.  
And my father starts growing wings.

Each carries a tender spot:  
something our lives forgot to give us.  
A man builds a house and says,  
“I am native now.”  
A woman speaks to a tree in place  
of her son. And olives come.  
A child’s poem says,  
“I don’t like wars,  
they end up with monuments.”  
He’s painting a bird with wings  
wide enough to cover two roofs at once.

Why are we so monumentally slow?  
Soldiers stalk a pharmacy:  
big guns, little pills.  
If you tilt your head just slightly  
it’s ridiculous.

There’s a place in my brain  
where hate won’t grow.  
I touch its riddle: wind, and seeds.  
Something pokes us as we sleep.

It’s late but everything comes next.

Naomi Shihab Nye, "Jerusalem" from Red Suitcase. Copyright © 1994 by Naomi Shihab Nye.

## Famous

The river is famous to the fish.

The loud voice is famous to silence,  
which knew it would inherit the earth  
before anybody said so.

The cat sleeping on the fence is famous to the birds  
watching him from the birdhouse.

The tear is famous, briefly, to the cheek.

The idea you carry close to your bosom  
is famous to your bosom.

The boot is famous to the earth,  
more famous than the dress shoe,  
which is famous only to floors.

The bent photograph is famous to the one who carries it  
and not at all famous to the one who is pictured.

I want to be famous to shuffling men  
who smile while crossing streets,  
sticky children in grocery lines,  
famous as the one who smiled back.

I want to be famous in the way a pulley is famous,  
or a buttonhole, not because it did anything spectacular,  
but because it never forgot what it could do.

“Famous” from *Words Under the Words: Selected Poems* (Portland, Oregon: Far Corner Books, 1995).  
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## Shoulders

A man crosses the street in rain,  
stepping gently, looking two times north and south,  
because his son is asleep on his shoulder.

No car must splash him.  
No car drive too near to his shadow.

This man carries the world's most sensitive cargo  
but he's not marked.  
Nowhere does his jacket say FRAGILE,  
HANDLE WITH CARE.

His ear fills up with breathing.  
He hears the hum of a boy's dream  
deep inside him.

We're not going to be able  
to live in this world  
if we're not willing to do what he's doing  
with one another.

The road will only be wide.  
The rain will never stop falling.

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## The Art of Disappearing

When they say Don't I know you?  
say no.

When they invite you to the party  
remember what parties are like  
before answering.  
Someone telling you in a loud voice  
they once wrote a poem.  
Greasy sausage balls on a paper plate.  
Then reply.

If they say We should get together  
say why?

It's not that you don't love them anymore.  
You're trying to remember something  
too important to forget.  
Trees. The monastery bell at twilight.  
Tell them you have a new project.  
It will never be finished.

When someone recognizes you in a grocery store  
nod briefly and become a cabbage.  
When someone you haven't seen in ten years  
appears at the door,  
don't start singing him all your new songs.  
You will never catch up.

Walk around feeling like a leaf.  
Know you could tumble any second.  
Then decide what to do with your time.

"The Art of Disappearing" by Naomi Shihab Nye from Words Under the Words: Selected Poems. © The Eighth Mountain Press.