

Lecture Refreshments Will Be Served: Our Lives of Reading & Writing

NAOMI SHIHAB NYE |||||

I took the name of my first cat—Puff—from May Hill Arbuthnot’s Dick and Jane books, which had entered our home before I went to school. Our Puff came to live with us in Ferguson, Missouri, when I was three, following my mother and me home from the market. Puff was placid and mellow and maintained cozy habits, curling up at the foot of my bed, following me patiently, frolicking with leaves. When I was six, in first grade, and my class read Dick and Jane every day, Puff froze to death in a blizzard. It took a while to find him. I cried and cried, till my mother suggested I could try to thaw him on a cookie sheet in the oven. I remember hovering in the kitchen, hoping to open that oven door to see him raise his head again and mew. Of course, this did not happen. We buried him under the cherry trees. Our Puff was gone. But Puff was still in the BOOK.

And therein shimmered a great comfort of literature: bigger lives. My Puff—Big Puff. Already I had learned that when my mother or the local librarian read a poem or story from a book, the language in the air felt clarified—better than conversation. No one was bossing anyone. Someone was describing. A neatness shaped by carefully chosen lines felt delicious, containing decisive precision. I could hover in the air afterwards, holding these calmer notes.

The Dick and Jane books were always urging us to *Look! Look! See! Pay better attention!* And now, in my books, Puff still had adventures. His eyes were open. He was still going places.



Naomi Shihab Nye (c) with Sylvia Tag (l), librarian, Western Libraries, and Nancy Johnson (r), professor, Western Washington University

It’s very nice to see the great state of Washington again. You know, among state mottoes, you really have the best one of all: “Bye and Bye.” It’s been getting me through the days for a while now. We also like Bellingham’s unofficial motto: “City of Subdued Excitement.” There must be a story here.

Recently our beloved next-door neighbors and our daughter-in-law’s fun parents all moved from San Antonio to Port Angeles, Washington, just because they wanted to. They didn’t have to. Cut it out, you guys! Stop taking our people.

Today’s humble remarks are dedicated to all of you who took time to come and listen to me. But also I dedicate them especially to one of the heroes of our shared book universe—Dr. William Teale of Chicago. Bill lived in San Antonio

before that (and also moved away). But Bill belonged to the WORLD. He was a global hero, and he cared so much about everything connected to children’s literature and literacy. Everyone who heard him speak or studied with him loved him. He supported us more than we could ever have known. I ran into him in airports—he was always laughing, encouraging. Bill and his wondrous wife, Junko Yokota, gave deeper, wiser sense to the magical kingdom of reading. Bill, you are with us always, we miss you terribly, and we thank you for your belief.

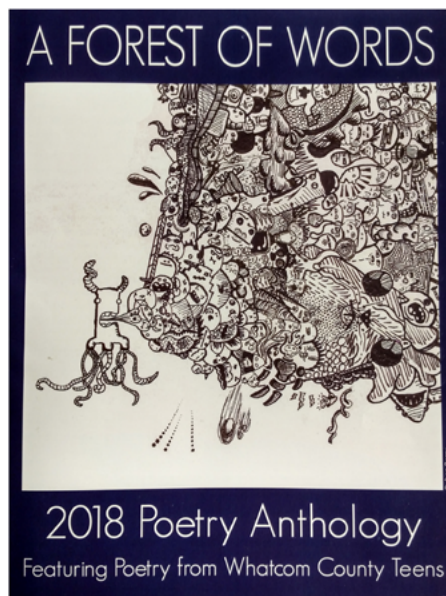
Also, thank you to Sylvia Tag and Nancy Johnson, superstar hosts here at glorious Western Washington University. We appreciate all you have done so thoughtfully to welcome us, and we love your inspiring campus. Thanks to everyone from HarperCollins Children’s Books,

especially publisher Suzanne Murphy and Patty Rosati, director of School & Library Marketing. I thank the Arbuthnot Selection Committee and chair Betsy Bird, as well as the Association for Library Service to Children and their president (and also fabulous poet), Nina Lindsay. Today at our luncheon at the university we were privileged to hear local young poets, and to view an amazing play performed by young actors and receive copies of *A Forest of Words* anthology, containing art and words by young people of Whatcom County. Bravo!

Also, I dedicate these remarks to the best luck I ever had in life—Virginia Duncan, my longtime editor and friend, who took the time to write me an old-fashioned envelope letter way back in 1991 and ask if I'd ever thought about writing for younger readers. Well yes, I had. Since I was little. And the door to life opened wider. Although she enthusiastically rejected the first two manuscripts I sent her, everything suddenly got better once we started on our first project. Virginia, kids LOVE hearing about any time you have rejected something from me. Or asked me to develop passages or change course. This is their favorite thing. Forget successes. Knowing of your wise and frequent counsel—*Work on this*—makes them feel better about teachers' comments suggesting further drafts of their own papers.

Together Virginia and I made *This Same Sky*, a contemporary world poetry anthology compiled by two novices who had never made an anthology before. The gorgeous book is still in print. It stunned even the contributors, some saying they recovered from chronic illnesses the moment they first held it in their hands. *This Same Sky* has been used in fifth grades as well as university classes, which was one of my secret hopes. Penetrating age borders in readership—belonging to all. If you do not know this book, it is not too late to get a copy. Strangely many of the poems mean even more to me now, in our current universe, than they did when we made it. *This Same Sky*—all of us connected.

Contemplating Virginia Duncan and her work, I'm not just thinking with gratitude about my own books we have made. So many other books Virginia edits have been crucially important to our reading lives, as well. I can't imagine having lived without Kevin Henkes, for example. Try *Wemberly Worried*—my central sacred text as an American since Election Day 2016. "Wemberly worried about everything. Big things. Little things. And things in between." Flap copy for America.



Teen Services of Whatcom County Library System publishes two anthologies annually, *A Forest of Words* and *Whatcomics*.

I'm happy that our grandson has recently become addicted to Kevin's *A Good Day*, about a bad day that turns good—at two, he marches around the house waving the book, shouting *Day! Day!* And if anyone turns on the news, he conveniently switches it off.

Thank you, Kevin. Thank you, Susan Hirschman, first editor in chief at Greenwillow, for being Kevin's first editor; and thank you, Virginia, for these many years since. And thank *you*—all librarians and teachers everywhere, who open up our worlds. No young person ever asks a teacher or librarian, "Help me make my world smaller." No student says, "I wish to know fewer people, have fewer ideas."

Because of Libraries We Can Say These Things

She is holding the book close to her body,
carrying it home on the cracked sidewalk,
down the tangled hill.
If a dog runs at her again, she will use the book as a shield.

She looked hard among long lines of books
to find this one. When they start talking about money,
when the day contains such long and hot places,
she will go inside.
An orange bed is waiting.
Story without corners.
She will have two families.
They will eat at different hours.

She is carrying a book past the fire station
and the five-and-dime.
What this town has not given her the book will provide, a sheep,
a wilderness of new solutions.
The book has already lived through its troubles.
The book has a calm cover, a straight spine.

When the step returns to itself as the best place for sitting,
and the old men up and down the street
are latching their clippers,

she will not be alone.
She will have a book to open
And open and open.
Her life starts here.

Our grandson has also been addicted since he was born to Greenwillow's *My Car* and *My Bus*, by Byron Barton. In that old way of high school English class, if you stare at something long enough it starts to take on many more resounding metaphorical layers—the "1,2,3" on the bus has become much more important to us in recent months. These are existential texts. You drive around with a dog, you drop off the dog. You pick up three

dogs. They all want to go somewhere. One wants to get on a boat. One wants to move to a sane country. Just kidding.

Today, it's a good day. We are a roomful of family because we all value books, carry books everywhere, give books as gifts, find homes in books. We have tickets to sanity and ways of escape. A realm of delight that remains private, portable, inviting but also collective. For some of us there is nothing more delicious than tucking up with a really good book. We have whole worlds waiting beside our beds, in our satchels, on our shelves and tables. We have better compasses and maps.

I'm curious how many people here grew up in sugar-free households. Please raise your hands. Keep your hand up if you still eat no sugar or gave it up along the way. Very few hands, people!

Well, how many of you joined the Girl or Boy Scouts because you heard a rumor that there would be TREATS?

I had no great desire for badges, though of course once you're in the ranks, your fervor grows. Swimming badge! Of course, I can! Sewing badge! A whole basket by my bed filled with my family's tattered socks.

It was mortifying to me that when it was my turn to bring treats, my mom sent unsalted almonds and dried apricots.

Everyone else brought cupcakes.

Bully

One boy in our grade school was considered
a bully—
muttering rude insults under his
breath,
tripping girls as they walked to
their desks.
He bothered everyone equally,
shook his shaggy
blond hair when teachers called his
name.
My mom, hearing the tales,
decided he was lonely

(no one ever played with him—in those days

bullies weren't popular)
and committed me to attending a children's Christmas party with him
in the basement of a Methodist church.

Somehow she arranged this plan with his mother
as they waited for us by the schoolyard.

Impressive he had a mother who waited—

he seemed like a person who sprang from a forest,
growling.

My parents argued about the

Christmas party
every night before it happened.
Daddy said Mom was "sacrificing me to her idealism."

He kept calling it my "first date."

I was only interested in what people did

in basements of churches
and what I would wear and would there be cake.

Since we ate no sugar at our house (idealism),

I dreamed of meeting sweets everywhere else.

The night of the party, Bully wore a suit

and striped tie. He didn't growl.

It was his church, but he didn't seem to know

anyone.

I stood in my puffed pink icing of a ruffled dress

by the cake table and watched him.

He skulked around while the choir sang Christmas songs,

looked embarrassed when Santa appeared.

I talked to him any time he came near.

Would you like some cake? I don't recall him

bothering me again at school for the rest of our years.

So for me, my personal refreshments were usually reading-related. No candy bars, no lollipops. Library shelves were a



My parents, Miriam Allwardt and Aziz Shihab, on their wedding day in Topeka, Kansas, 1951. They both loved words and had wide-open minds.

smorgasbord worth cheering for. No matter how many times you visited a library, you never read all the books. New ones were always arriving. Popular ones kept going out into houses on their little journeys, then returning. They would wait for you. I felt personal victory and nourishment in checking out books I thought no one had paid attention to for a while.

Students always ask why I wanted to write poems as a child. It is because I had heard poems. For years already by the age of six, I had felt the joy of text carefully shaped entering my ears. I had been lifted by it, calmed, held. I still remember floating in the hallway outside my childhood bedroom repeating *Hope is the thing with feathers* over and over inside my mind. Exposure opened me. I knew what a poem was, therefore I had something to model on. I knew four lines might be enough.

It was a place to rest. A small quiet shape in the great body of language.

These days, we have to remind ourselves. I'd like to share a passage from the introduction to my newest book, *Voices in the Air: Poems for Listeners*.

Not so long ago we were never checking anything in our hands, scrolling down, pecking with a finger, obsessively tuning in. My entire childhood did not involve a single deletion. These are relatively new acts on earth.

In those archaic but still vivid days, there might be a meandering walk into trees, an all-day bike ride, a backyard picnic, a gaze into a stream, a plunge into a sunset, a conversation with pines, a dig in the dirt, to find our messages. When we got home, there was nothing to check or catch up on—no one speaking to us in our absence.

Recently, when I had the honor of visiting Yokohama International School in Japan to conduct poetry workshops, student Juna Hewitt taught me an important word—*Yutori*—“life-space.” She listed various interpretations for its meaning—arriving early, so you don’t have to rush. Giving yourself room to make a mistake. Starting a diet, but not beating yourself up if you eat a cookie after you started it. Giving yourself the possibility of succeeding. (Several boys in another class defined the word as when the cord for your phone is long enough to reach the wall socket.) Juna said she felt that reading and writing poetry gives us more *yutori*—a place to stand back to contemplate what we are living and experiencing. More spaciousness in being, more room in which to listen.

I love this. It was the best word I learned all year.

Not that sense of being nibbled up—as if message minnows surround us at all moments, nipping, nipping at our edges.

* * *

Recently while on a beautiful working trip to the Middle East (and I have to throw that word “beautiful” in there, because

the Middle East is so much more than the sorrowful place too many imagine) . . . I remembered years earlier being at a library/reading conference in Bahrain where we all attended an amazing talk by Dr. Munir Fasheh, a visiting scholar who had worked for the Harvard Center for Middle Eastern Studies. Something he said has always stayed with me: “Arabs are known for their hospitality and generosity. Reading is a form of hospitality; it is inviting ideas, perspectives, and experiences of others into your innermost home—yourself. At the same time, reflecting on and expressing one’s experiences is a form of generosity; it is giving the most valuable thing you have—your innermost self.”

The deep exchange.

My Palestinian father always emphasized hospitality when we were growing up too, so this touched me with expanded resonance—suggesting a different kind of hospitality.



My Palestinian grandparents (date unknown)

At the American School of Dubai, a very large fifty-year-old school on an expansive elegant campus that seems more like a college, each morning before 8 a.m. the youngest students—ages three and four—would march into the library. Truly a global community of kids—every background you can imagine. They were so serious and focused about picking out their new books to read, and dropping off

the ones they had finished—they would line up with pride at the Return Desk, then buzz like little honeybees around the shelves in harmony, whispering together. Since they celebrated International Dress Day during those weeks, it was possible to see how many countries they hailed from—astonishing. No walls between any of them.

My visiting author colleague Todd Parr, from Berkeley, California, was delighting them every day with his *Animals in Underwear* books and his credo of *Be Who You Are*. To hear the kids laughing from the next room when Todd spoke was like a healing waterfall in a world of broken news. I was meeting up with large groups of older students, talking about observation, writing regularly, and possibilities of language, sharing Gary Snyder and Bashō of ancient Japan and poems by Arab poets and American kid poems and some of my own about my Palestinian grandmother, and passing out funny scraps of paper from recycling bins for them to write on if they didn’t have their own notebooks. And here are some lines they wrote:

I wish to remember to stitch my words—
to stitch them tight
and to sew them with purpose
(Allia)

Silence will always be waiting,
staring . . . (Sammy)

I’m lost and confused—
I keep finding myself in my old house in Syria
—what is this life? (Sufyan)

Why does my door to my dream close?
Why can’t I just dream all day?
(Jazlyn)

The pencil was running on the page
blooming with new ideas (Dorra)

When I was born the light post was my friend,
the diaper was my enemy,

my brother was my stepstool,
my dad a horse, my mom a chair . . .
(a 2nd grader—Lila)

Loneliness says nothing,
sips on a cup of tea, thinking,
giving me a long hollow face
like a valley . . . (Sami)

Naturally, when kids write like this very quickly, seeming surprised and uplifted by their own words (teachers also surprised—and teachers also writing)—one feels encouraged to continue visiting classrooms even forty-two years after one planned to stop. This refreshment of happy contagion—words sparked by other people’s words—is nourishing to us all.

I would go out walking in the evenings in Dubai—when the heat softened and the sun sank and the coastal breezes blew and the little shop that sold lilies locked its door and the Arabic sweets vendor waved his spatula at me through the window. I would watch the sun set between the tall, tall buildings, over the sea. And then I would go back to my room and take a hot lavender bath and hop into bed **WITH MY BOOK**. I was reading Elizabeth Crook’s recent novel *The Which Way Tree*, which takes place in Civil War Texas (not an era which ever particularly interested me)—the main characters are a teenaged boy, his younger wounded sister, and an elusive very mean panther. I hope this book will be picked up as high school reading coast to coast, because I cannot remember a better sense of a teenager’s voice than Benjamin’s—he tells the whole story in his unforgettable letters to a judge.

And every evening this ritual was the sweetest, most incredible reading time—even after whole days with words and talk talk talk and kids, being transported into a long-ago time in history, and the very tough lives of kids on their own and how they got through, restored me. I would fall deeply asleep to dream surreal time-traveling stories and images and awaken profoundly refreshed, ready to go see those loads of kids again.

It’s impossible to be lonely if you have a good book.

* * *

Today I think of May Hill Arbuthnot, who went to college in Chicago (I wrote my first poem at age six about Chicago). She believed in children and voices and the encouragement of voices. She described “that long stretch of years when I was dashing from one end of the country to the other, bringing children and books together by way of the spoken word.” She also said, “I am a strong believer in the efficacy of direct speech . . . a forthright vigorous lecture can set fire to a piece of literature that had failed to come to life from the printed page.”

Well, I don’t know about the word “lecture”—it has always given me the shivers—but I do agree that talking about poetry a little more, aloud, with others, stirs it into action. I’ve never yet visited a place where it didn’t live. I like to tell kids we are getting onto the poetry channel together. They know about channels. Once we click in, stirring up some remembering, describing, making a few metaphors or wild leaps in language, good things happen. I like to say poems or parts of poems to them aloud—thank you for the last ten years to the Poetry Out Loud initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts!—and it seems to me that hearing poems in a room with other listeners changes the air, and the capacities of language. I believe what my wondrous teacher friend Lisa Siemens of Manitoba, Canada, believed with her students for many years—exposure may be the most important thing of all. Forget about expertise—exposure and enthusiasm matter more. And definitely, please forget about explanations. Poetry prefers hinting, insinuating, suggesting, leaping, triggering. As poet Charles Simic once said, “It’s a great disservice to paraphrase poems in duller language.”

Richard Jackson reminded us, “Nobody can guarantee fans for a poem or a film, a sculpture or a dance.” Or a song or anything else. But once it’s **OUT THERE**—who



I was in second grade when I started sending poems to magazines for children.

knows what might happen? What else might it awaken?

These strange days, maybe we have to listen harder, share more good news, be a tiny bit nicer, upgrade our optimism any way we can, work a little harder . . . to try to recalibrate reality. What else can we do?

I have noticed that audiences of children have not changed much recently. But audiences of adults these days often have a more desperate feel, as if they want any speaker to hand them passwords for sanity—a magical code for survival during weird times. And all any of us can do is tell the best things we know.

The best thing I know is children. Spending time with them all these years—staying close to their interesting ways of thinking—continues to seem the best possible realm. Last week a boy from Afghanistan asked me a question no one had ever before asked in quite this way: “You are an author. You could be with grown-ups all day. Why do you choose to be with us, kids?”

He looked stunned when I said, “I think you are the best people. I want to remember what you know.”



Two of my favorite books from childhood. I argued with *The Important Book*, by Margaret Wise Brown, pictures by Leonard Weisgard. I thought everything was important. Helen Ferris edited my first anthology of poems, a treasure still.

Another great thing you all might look up to restore faith in humanity when yours feels lagging is a project called Every Campus a Refuge, founded by Dr. Diya Abdo of Guilford College, Greensboro, North Carolina. See the story in a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* titled “We Can Eat, We Can Live”—this project supports welcoming refugees (now called *newcomers*, in San Antonio, anyway) to American campuses where they may get organized, balanced, and helpfully integrated into their new lives. They stay for a few months, then move on to their own apartments or homes. The vivid talents of college students in all departments are available to help them. Dr. Abdo is Palestinian and was chair of the English Department when I visited—she is a true hero to me, and we could all advocate for campuses in our own areas to participate.

There are so many great and under-sung projects in the world. Sharing good news—it’s not a luxury these days. We really need it.

A boy from Iraq, after reading *The Turtle of Oman*, raised his hand to say, “Many things are different in my new life too. Like Aref, the boy in the book, at least back home I knew what to be scared

of—soldiers, guns, tanks, things blowing up. Here I am not sure what to be scared of. So mostly after school we stay in our apartment.” It took him a long time to say this. He wanted to speak properly. Two of his teachers had tears running down their faces. They said, “That’s the most we’ve ever heard him talk.”

Scrap of a story. Such a hard story. How one person’s story encourages another’s. When I was a child living my simple life, the book *Mister Dog*, by Margaret Wise Brown, gave me a place in my mind to go when things didn’t seem to fit well. The dog belongs to himself. The boy belongs to himself. The very carnivorous “conservative” dog who’s a little obsessive about having things in their proper places—I didn’t eat meat and never had a dog and wasn’t conservative at all, but I *loved* him.

Does your story have room for me?

My story has room for you.

We live on the edges of stories we don’t hear. Every person walking past us on the pier at Bellingham is full of stories. Those tattoos! Those tank tops naming bands or coffee shops we never heard of. We’re

wearing coats; they think it’s summer—Americans from different climates.

Years ago, I sat with one of my Palestinian uncles under our ancient Texas pecan trees. He was wearing a white shirt, as he did every day. It was summer. He never looked hot. He had eleven kids—my dad had two. They were half-brothers—same dad, different moms. He was debonair and dashing, and on that day said, “I have a story to tell you about your dad. A story you never heard before. It explains everything about him.”

Really? I thought I knew my dad pretty well.

“You will be surprised,” Uncle Mufli said. “You might be shocked.”

Tell me!

He looked at his watch. “I don’t have time today. It’s a long story. I’ll tell you the next time I see you.”

Then he got on an airplane, flew to Jordan to see some of his kids, and died.

BOOM. No story. We loved him and we were all so sad.

I asked my dad, “What was Uncle Mufli going to tell me about you?”

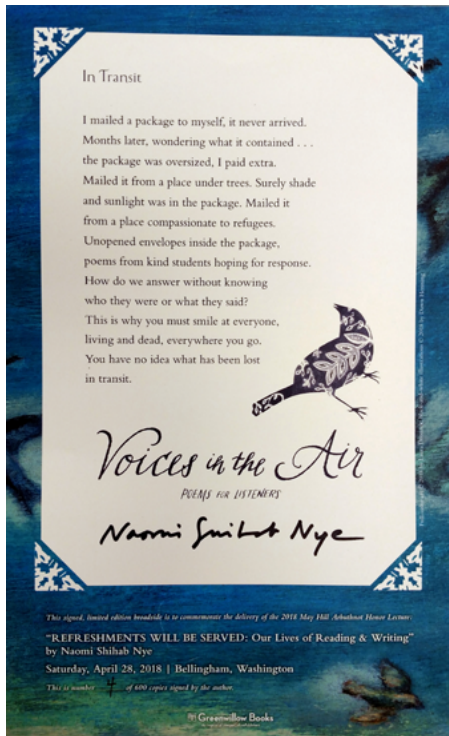
“Heck if I know,” my dad said. “Who did he think he was? He had a big revelation? I could tell you some things about him too.”

That was that.

Then my dad died too and we couldn’t even speculate anymore. The untold story. Like that song—“The Lost Chord”—that all piano students had to learn in the 1950s and 1960s.

When I’m visiting their classrooms I tell kids—Ask questions. Before it’s too late! If they say, “Oh, it’s nothing . . .” urge them again! Press! Most of poetry is probably asking questions.

Think of the wisdom given us by teachers along the way. Sometimes it takes years



Signed, limited edition broadside commemorating the 2018 Arbuthnot Honor Lecture

for the refreshments to be served—for the wisdom to come into focus. Scribble it down. Muse upon it. I have always urged everyone to keep a notebook and write at least three lines a day. Not a great investment of time, but wow! What a possible payback.

Mrs. Harriett Lane of second grade told us if we memorized poems they would be with us always. *Check!* We would hear those voices—Langston, Walt, Emily—inside our heads forever and they would belong to us in a different way. *Check!*

She told us never to be ashamed of speaking up, using our voices. She taught us not to mumble. We whispered among ourselves, “What does mumble mean?”

My teachers in the ancient Sts. Tarkmanchatz Armenian School of Jerusalem suggested that if we sat in dullness and boredom long enough our brains would give us better things to think about. We’d become more creative because we were desperate. *Check!*

My Texas high school art teacher told us each to pick a word to be ours for the entire semester. “You will paint this word, batik this word, make a sculpture to signify this word, carve this word into wood and clay; it may turn out to be your word for life.” Good thing I chose SIMPLE. As Isaac Newton said, back in the seventeenth century in England, “Truth is ever to be found in simplicity and not in the multiplicity and confusion of things.” *Check!* Some simpletons hang on forever.

These days, thanks to our grandson I’m reminded of the great refreshment I always felt emanating from offbeat texts—surreal tinges—like a cinnamon scent from a cooling pie in a window. (Does anyone still place a pie on a windowsill to cool?) Our grandson is currently loving an alphabet book from Platt & Munk, 1966, photographed by Thomas Matthiesen. It is somewhat bizarre. He asks for it every day we are together. These are some of the lines that appear in the text:

“D—No one has ever seen a doll grow up.”

“E—It is not good to drop an egg unless you like to mop the floor.”

“K—Have you ever seen a closed door and wondered what was on the other side of it?” (image of keys)

“L—Never growl at a lion.”

“O—Some people think owls are very smart. No one knows if owls think people are smart.”

Somehow I find this book helpful right now. See, you don’t even need the whole text. Even a line or two can lift your spirits. No, I don’t think owls think so! Maybe this is why I became a poet. A single bite satisfies.

Here are a few lines about my mentors from *Voices in the Air: Poems for Listeners*.

About William Stafford:

Stay humble, blend, belong to all directions.

Fly low, love a shadow. And sing,
sing freely,
never let anything get in the way of
your singing . . .

About Peter Matthiessen:

Never too proud to tip his head
back.
To gaze, look beyond.
Something nesting in leaves,
unseen,
presence on a boulder beside
water,
single strong leg.
Fine if it took a long time to walk
there.
Better if it took time . . .

About Maya Angelou:

And if anyone told her they were
going
to Gloomy Street,
she’d say, What? Lift those eyes.
Take a look at the
sea to your right, buildings full of
mysteries, schools
crackling with joy, open porches,
watch the world whirl by,
all we are given without having to
own . . .

Kids ask me if it’s important to have mentors. Without a doubt! And what a great time, searching for them, following up.

Never lose the pleasure of being a fan.

A few months ago, a tall, elegant African American IT expert stepped into a library where I was meeting with kids. He stood with his head tipped, listened for a minute, and began weeping. I paused. All the kids looked at him. He said, “When I was a kid you came to my school and told me my voice mattered. That I was original. You clapped and everyone clapped when I read my poems. No one had ever clapped for me before. I’m taking the day off starting right now, and I’m going to sit in here and write poems with you all.”

The kids looked stupefied. This older man had been MY STUDENT too? He stayed in the library all day. He stood up and

REFRESHMENTS WILL BE SERVED

Our Lives of Reading and Writing

Naomi Shihab Nye



Members of the 2018 Arbuthnot Committee with Nye before the lecture. Monica Edinger, Betsy Bird, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Sharon McKellar (l to r)

shared. It was impressive to them that their tech expert cared so much.

Or, I recall the day I volunteered at our son's middle school, and a mom stormed into the classroom I was visiting and said loudly, "Why don't kids get to do this every day? Share their thoughts with a page? You came to our school when I was little and it was the only time anyone asked me to share my voice EVER the whole time I was growing up!" She was ferocious. I said, "Take this to the top!"

No, really. I didn't know what to say.

We want it to be obvious.

Words have been given to us and we want to respond in words. Collecting so many passionate testimonials by now warms the heart but also haunts me. Let's make a world together where reading and writing are among the most essential things we trade.

I've never met people who didn't have something to say.

Last month, a ninety-year-old architect and urban planner from India, Balkrishna Doshi, won the Pritzker Prize, architecture's highest honor—and he is the first recipient from India ever. He said, "Architecture is not a static building—it's

a living organism." We all think of books that way—they are the living air we breathe. He also said, "One is all the time looking at financial returns—that is not only what life is. I think wellness is missing." He described "wellness" as how we can connect with silence, how life can be lived at your own pace," and "how do we avoid the use of an automobile."

I think about the wellness factor when I think of the overdose of standardized testing emphasis in too many public schools. I think about how poorly I did on some tests—and how fine my life has been. I think about the questions about an essay I had written that a Houston journalist smuggled out of a standardized-testing lab a few years ago and how I could answer only three out of ten of them with conviction. The questions ABOUT MY OWN ESSAY.

This is why kids need to exercise their own voices. So there is something else thrumming in their heads. A better story. A real true, spoken, shaped story. Watching the Dubai kids enter the library every morning for two weeks, or the beautiful kids in Muscat, Oman, writing and volunteering to read the next week—everyone felt their pride. Library time was a crucial part of their days, expected and anticipated. This was glory in selection. This was freedom.

Mohsin Hamid, the novelist, makes it simple when he says, "Empathy is about finding echoes of another person in yourself." Why is it sometimes hard to feel those echoes? It shouldn't be.

Richard Jackson said, "Art comes from imagined life—no matter the degree to which it's based upon real people and actual family or historical events."

This opens up the world.

Tell this to high school kids—their eyes widen hopefully. *OK, so maybe I'm not stuck, then.*

Tell this to elementary kids and they nod vigorously! *Of course, we knew that! That imagined life I was living in my head this*

morning before I jumped out of bed is also my real life! It's not nothing!

The novelist Kurt Vonnegut's son Mark said, "Reading and writing are in themselves subversive acts. What they subvert is the notion that things have to be the way they are, that you are alone, that no one has ever felt the way you have."

I thank Virginia Duncan for never having backed away from the notion that Palestinians are human beings too. She and I published *Sitti's Secrets* more than twenty years ago, and the picture book, illustrated by Nancy Carpenter, is still in print. The Afghani kids last week told me that my Sitti is *their* grandmother. They said this with conviction. Virginia Duncan and I published *Habibi*, about the friendship between an Arab American girl and a Jewish Israeli boy, with the subtle mention of adolescent kissing on the very first page (I heard this caused a little consternation in Saudi Arabia). But an Arab dad recently wrote to me from Cleveland—*Very tricky, putting that kissing part up front. Snagged my daughter!*

Arthur Murray had a mission in his dancing. He wanted to use dance to "bring ease for universal heartache, desolation, and loneliness." What a model! Think of those feet gracefully swishing across a floor, then think of the dance of any text you have loved in your life—how it gave you hope and dreams of a better way to be.

In second grade, we read Walt Whitman for the first time—

*Afoot and light-hearted I take to the
open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me
leading wherever I choose.
Henceforth I ask not good-fortune, I
myself am good-fortune,
Henceforth I whimper no more,
postpone no more, need nothing,
Done with indoor complaints,
libraries (no, Walt, no!), queru-
lous criticisms,*



Sitti, age 105, and son Madison, age 5, in the West Bank—only one hundred years between them. They really hit it off.

*Strong and content I travel the open
road.*

I loved this so much, except for the libraries phrase, and I still do. You can only wonder—what had just happened to him in a library? Did a library refuse to shelve his book?

Once on a plane in the midst of turbulence, a child behind me began crying out, "I want to touch the houses! Where is our house?"

It seemed such an accurate longing, at a bumpy moment. How do we touch the houses? How do we feel grounded somewhere again? And which adult could say that so simply?

Always take a book on a plane.

I'm thunderstruck when some writer mentions a text saying, *I wish I had written that*. It shakes me up. Aren't you glad someone else wrote it? Why do you want to own it? Don't you own it as a reader?

Gregory Maguire, author of *Wicked*, among other great books, and truly one of the finest people I met in my life, said, "MAY WE REGARD THE READING LIFE OF THE YOUNG AS THE MOST VITAL HOMELAND PROTECTION STRATEGY GOING—FOR OUR HOME—FOR THIS PLANET—AND OUR FAMILY THE FARFLUNG TRIBES WHO SHELTER THEREIN."

Here we are, in a world we cannot explain, which we love so much. Here we are with histories and beautiful dreams and hope for one another, and try one day of breaking news. Here we are with every single world religion saying Thou Shalt Not Kill, and what do people do?

No one needs to ask why we need literature. Why we need stories and poems and dreamy images and songs and essays and novels to lift us out of breaking news headlines deftly, and quietly.

There is something else. We know where it is.

Every Day

(For Aziz, and Palestine)

He loved the world and what might
happen in it.
Some people labor to get up but
he was so ready to rise.
Refreshed and still alive
after the dark hours,
glistening with hope and cologne.
Must we love the world doubly
much now
in his absence?

He is not absent.
Still living in the fig tree,
the carefully placed stone,
the draping mimosa.
In his empty notebooks, the lonely
wooden chair.
We will keep it pulled up to the
desk, just in case.
Just in case Justice suddenly walks
into the room and says,
Yes, I'm finally here, sorry for the
delay.
Tell me where to sign.
He tried to think the best of people.
His drawer was not stacked with
disappointments.
Only folded white handkerchiefs
still waiting.
After the storm, frogs and toads
chorus along the pavement,
We believed! We believed! 🐸