

Naomi Shihab Nye. *Transfer*. Rochester NY: BOA Editions, Ltd., 2011. ISBN 978-1-934414-52-1. 127 p.

*The inmost spirit of poetry...is at bottom... the voice of pain – and the physical body, so to speak, of poetry, is the treatment by which the poet tries to reconcile that pain with the world. (Letters of Ted Hughes, p. 458.)*

The back cover holds the first telling clue to an understanding of this book. A picture of the poet, age 8, and her father, taken in one of those photo booths, shows them looking into the mirror. His fleshy hands and face embrace and protect her; her face is lit up with delight and surprise at what she sees. *Transfer* is about the loss of this father, Aziz Shihab – Palestinian, American – and his people's loss of Palestine. Aziz Shihab was a journalist, author of two memoirs (*Does the Land Remember Me?* and *A Taste of Palestine*). He was an exuberant man, greeting everyone as a friend (sometimes to the embarrassment of his children), singing loudly in the shower in two languages. His daughter recounts in the introduction her frustration at not having a dialogue with her father while he was alive. After his death, through this collection, she becomes his “anthem”. The whole book is a eulogy to the man. “Missing him contains moments so intense I don't know how I will continue.” An interview with the two may be seen on YouTube, conducted just months before his death from kidney and heart failure.

Aziz Shihab (1927-2007), expelled from his Jerusalem home in 1948, left Palestine in 1950 to study journalism in the USA. He married an American; Naomi was born in 1952. She grew up in a home that privileged “clear attention to language.” She describes herself as a “wandering poet”, one who goes all over the world to bring stories and poetry about peace, humanity, the Palestinian cause, to poetry workshops, and to school children and their teachers. It is a mission her father engaged in, speaking to anyone or any group that would listen: Jews, Evangelicals, Muslims, people in shops and diners. “We were born to wander, to grieve/ lost lineage, what we did to one another,/ on a planet so wide open for doing.” (*History*)

In the poem *Scared, Scarred, Sacred* the poet remembers the time her father explained the need for a bus transfer. After his death she finds stacks of pink transfer tags in his drawer, pulled off suitcases used on long flights. (An impressionistic image of a tag dominates the front cover.) “All your life you were flying back to your lost life.../ You kept the key, as Palestinians do./ You kept the doorknocker./ And now you are homeless for real./ Fire ate your body, you became as big as the sky.” The poet is surely playing upon the other, sinister meaning of *transfer*: the euphemism that Israeli leaders used in the late 1940s to describe expulsion of Palestinian Arabs from their land and homes.

In a sequence of eleven poems (*Just Call Me Aziz*) Shihab Nye uses titles taken verbatim from his notebooks, and composes poems written to the titles (she says they “emerged”), but in her father's voice. The voice is direct, generous, and unsophisticated. “Why was someone else's need for a house/ greater than our need for

our own homes/ we were already living in?” (*Everything in Our World Did Not Seem to Fit*.) Here, however, is the nub of the Israeli-Palestinian (Jewish-Arab) conflict. Was it ever possible for a people afflicted over centuries by expulsions, pogroms, and a final genocide to find a safe haven, a homeland, without displacing some other population? That displacement is ongoing. For Palestinian, Shihab Nye writes, “. . .it was like a person who had died in another country/ and we never had been able to wash the body.” (*I Hate It, I Love It*)

Yet Aziz was not a bitter man. He hoped for peace, he prayed for and expected peace. In her eulogy at the end of the book (*Wavelength*) Shihab Nye repeats “his endless stubborn hope – someday there will be justice for Palestinians and Israelis living, somehow, together. . .as the cousins, or brother and sisters, they always were and still are.”

In much of Shihab Nye’s earlier works (see the fine assemblage of poetry from seven previous collections, *Tender Spot. Selected Poems*. Northumberland, UK: Bloodaxe Books, 2008) the poet’s persona embraces sweetness, a witness to nature, and faith in the essential goodness of people. Surely as her father would say it, she wrote, “I’m not interested in/ who suffered the most./ I’m interested in/ people getting over it.” (*Jerusalem*). But a terrible bitterness does spill out in the poem “*The Only Democracy in the Middle East*”, where a disembodied Israeli soldier’s voice snarls orders at Palestinians being expelled from their homes, the young men to be carted away and forbidden to hug or say goodbye. “Don’t give us trouble.” It’s not a particularly good poem: unsubtle, polemic, the lines coming too easily. It was meant to disturb, and it does – to my ear, it is close to the Nazi language of an *Aktion*.

A more compelling “voice of pain” comes out of the sorrow for loss of her father, and his homeland. To cite a few examples:

- *Will You Still Love Me When I’m Dead?* expresses the all too common experience of not being there at the instant of death of a loved one, here in favor of checking email. “Who was I hoping to hear from?/ You were right there. Cracking/ thunder the moment you left./ We’ll still love you when we’re dead too.”
- *Hello Palestine, For Aziz, Who Loved Jerusalem*: “Now, a seven-pound box of ashes. After many months, we still/ have not scattered or buried them./ They are not him, but I kiss the box.”
- *Undone*: “. . .Mom cancelled your cell phone two days after you died. I could not believe this. What if you had called us?”
- *Ringin*: “Every road, every sea, every beach by every sea, keeps lining up with what you loved -- / Here’s a line of silent palm trees. It’s as if you answered the phone.”

Shihab Nye writes in a conversational free verse, often without stanza breaks; only occasionally does she play with the shape of the poem on the page, or allow words to chime against each other. She is, however, a master of surprise endings and

epiphanies. The strongest poems work in metaphor. In *Later*, for instance, a tunnel beneath our feet grows deeper as we toss into it wasted time, trivial pursuits, inattention to others: “Still, you love them,/ these people on top of the tunnel, clutching little lists, plastic tubs of summer squash and tomatoes to share with the neighbours, or not.” In *At the Block Island Ferry* a hurricane has made people stay on the island for three whole days. Her father never had a ferry to return to his birthplace again. “At the Block Island ferry I wept for/ my father, Palestine, Iraq, millions/ aching for passage home,/ rarely honored in their pain, and their deaths before a ferry came”. Even people on Charon’s ferry are accorded more dignity.

*Transfer* contains the best work this much-honored poet has produced to date. Hers continues to be a voice of conscience and reconciliation.

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