



Naomi Shihab Nye

19 Varieties of Gazelle
ISBN13: 9780060097653

Introduction

FLINN, ON THE BUS

Three hours after the buildings fell,
 he took a seat beside me.
 Fresh out of prison, after 24 months,
You're my first hello!
 Going home to Mom,

a life he would make better this time,
 how many times
 he'd been swept along before,
to things he should never have ...
drink and dope,
 but now he'd take responsibility.
 Lawyers had done him wrong
 and women too. He thought
 about revenge, now he was out.
But I'm in charge. I'll think
before I act. I don't ever
want to go there again.
Two wrongs don't make a right.
 Somehow, in his mouth, that day,
 it sounded new.
 The light came through the window
 on a gentle-eyed man in a
 "Focus on the Game" T-shirt,
 who had given up
assault with deadly weapons,
no more, no good!
 A man who had not seen TV in weeks,
 secluding in his cell so colleagues
 wouldn't trip him up,
 extend his stay.
Who had not heard the news.
 We rolled through green Oklahoma,
 the bus windows made all the trees look bent.
 A trick of refraction—
 Flinn looked at his free hands
 more than the fields,
 turned them over in his lap,
no snap judgments, no quick angers,
I'll stand back, look at what happens,
think calmly what my next step should be.
 It was not hard to nod,
 to wish him well. But could I tell
 what had happened in the world
 on his long-awaited day,
 what twists of rage greater
 than we could ever guess
 had savaged skylines, thousands of lives?
 I could not. He'd find out
 soon enough. Flinn, take it easy.
 Peace is rough.

— September 11, 2001

We start out as little bits of disconnected dust.

No, we start out as birds. In a nest, if we're lucky. Being fed, being tended.

We have no idea how many other birds are in their own little nests on their own branches.

Then, so very soon, much too soon, we are toppling from nests, changing species, and we're not birds anymore, now we are some kind of energetic gazelle leaping toward the horizon with hope spinning inside us, propelling us. . . .

Where does it come from? We are not responsible. We did not invent the gazelle.

All my life I thought about the Middle East, wrote about it, wondered about it, lived in it, visited it, worried about it, loved it. We are blessed and doomed at the same time.

I was born in the United States, but my father stared back toward the Middle East whenever he stood outside. Our kitchen smelled like the Middle East—garlic and pine nuts sizzled in olive oil, fried eggplant, hot pita bread. My father dropped sprigs of mint into our pots of hot tea. He had been happy as a boy in the Old City of Jerusalem with his Palestinian and Greek and Jewish and Armenian neighbors. But after the sad days of 1948, when his family lost their home and everything they owned, he wanted to go away. One of the few foreign university students in Kansas in the 1950s, he was a regular customer at the local drugstore soda fountain in his new little town. "He always looked dreamy, preoccupied, like he could see things other people couldn't see," the druggist told me twenty-five years later. Well yes, I thought. That's what immigrants look like. They always have other worlds in their minds.

My father and my American mother invented new dishes using Middle Eastern ingredients. We were proud without knowing it. Travelers from the Middle East often sat in circles in our backyard sharing figs and peaches and speaking in Arabic. Arabic music played in our house. Our father told better folk stories than anyone else's father—he had a gentle wit and almost never got mad. So kids from the neighborhood would camp out on our screened-in back porch, and we would all beg my father to tell more funny stories. It was a rich world to be in that had nothing to do with money or politics.

I got into the habit of writing little things down from the very beginning—not because they were more interesting than anyone else's "little things," but just so I could think about them. When I finally met some other Arab American writers (I was in my twenties by then), we felt we had all been writing parts of a giant collective poem, using the same bouquet of treasured images (was there anyone among us who had never mentioned a fig?).

It always felt good to be rooted and connected, but there were those deeply sorrowful headlines in the background to carry around like sad weights: the brutal occupation of Palestine, the war in Lebanon, the tragedies in Syria, the oppression of women in too many places (my father used to say when I was a teenager, "Do you realize how lucky you are?" and of course I didn't), acts of terrorism, both against Arabs and by Arabs, the rise of fundamentalism, violence in Egypt, upsets and upheavals, and later the Gulf War ... a series of endless troubles.

Arab Americans had the additional sadness of feeling the Middle East was rarely represented in a balanced way in the mainstream U.S. media. Many of us had Jewish friends who shared our sorrows about the ongoing conflicts between our people. Couldn't they work it out?

We always tried to remember the abundant humor and resilience and the love of family. We listened to the music, the glittering *oud* and the flute, and we savored the food. We wore intricately embroidered dresses and vests. We read the poems and held them close in our hearts. As years went on, we learned about groups like Seeds of Peace, dedicated to bringing teenagers together for dialogue and understanding. We knew about Neve Shalom/Wahat-al-Salaam, the village deliberately, exactly balanced between Arabs and Jews. We knew about the *Sesame Street* program designed for both Arab and Jewish children.

We held on tightly to every optimistic fragment of news, every promising thread. We learned how to sew, we learned how to mend.

September 11, 2001, was not the first hideous day ever in the world, but it was the worst one many Americans had ever lived. May we never see another like it. For people who love the Middle East and have an ongoing devotion to cross-cultural understanding, the day felt sickeningly tragic in more ways than one. A huge shadow had been cast across the lives of so many innocent people and an ancient culture's pride.

Through the immense grief in the wake of this disaster, we grasped on to details to stay afloat.

For some reason I kept remembering a gentle Egyptian basket-seller on the streets of Cairo, and an elegant Arab man, an expert on brocade in the Old City of Jerusalem, who gave us twice the amount of cloth we paid for.

I remembered simple Arabic village breakfasts, creamy *labneh* fresh from its cheesecloth with delicate sliced cucumbers and scatterings of thyme ... and a restaurant-owner, Waleed, who would make free lentil soup for my son who loved it, though it wasn't on his menu at that time of year.

A haunting thought returned again and again: the Arabs have always been famous for their generosity.

Messages poured in like waterfalls, tidal floods of messages all over the country, from one country to another: *Are you okay?*

I kept thinking, as did millions of other people, what can we do? Writers, believers in words, could not give up words when the going got rough. I found myself, as millions did, turning to poetry. But many of us have always turned to poetry. Why should it be any surprise that people find solace in the most intimate literary genre? Poetry slows us down, cherishes small details. A large disaster erases those details. We need poetry for nourishment and for noticing, for the way language and imagery reach comfortably into experience, holding and connecting it more successfully than any news channel we could name.

Perhaps Arab Americans must say, twice as clearly as anyone else, that we deplore the unbelievable, senseless sorrow caused by people from the Middle East. The losses cannot be measured. They will reverberate in so many lives throughout the coming years.

But also we must remind others never to forget the innocent citizens of the Middle East who haven't committed any crime. The people who are living solid, considerate lives, often in difficult conditions—especially the children, who struggle to maintain their beautiful hope.

And the old ones, who have been through so much already. I think of my Palestinian grandmother who lived till she was 106. She used to tease us by saying that she didn't want to die "till everyone she didn't like died first." We think she succeeded. The truth was, she was

very popular. She did not read or write, but was famous for her fabulous stories and offbeat wit and wisdom. In her lexicon politics were boring, and fanaticism was ridiculous.

The only place beyond Palestine my grandmother ever traveled was to Mecca, by bus. She was proud to be called a Hajji, to wear white clothes after her pilgrimage. She always worked hard to get stains out of everyone's dresses, scrubbing them with a stone. I think she would consider the recent tragedies a terrible stain on her religion. She would weep. She wanted people to worship in whatever ways they felt comfortable. To respect one another, sit together around the fire cracking almonds and drinking tea, and never forget to laugh, no matter what horrible things they had been through. What wisdom did she know that all these men can't figure out?

After writing about her in essays, poems, picture books, and a novel, I had thought I could let her rest. She's been dead for eight years now. But since September 11, 2001, she has swarmed into my consciousness, poking my sleep, saying, "It's your job. Speak for me too. Say how much I hate it. Say this is not who we are."

I dedicate these poems of my life to the wise grandmothers and to the young readers in whom I have always placed my best faith. If grandmothers and children were in charge of the world, there would never be any wars. Peace, friends. Please don't stop believing.

Naomi Shihab Nye
December 2001
San Antonio, Texas