

Interview with Naomi Shihab Nye
By Dr. John McBryde, Dr. Elaine Smokewood , and Dr. Harbour Winn

Harbour Winn: One thing, Naomi, I think everybody in this room is aware of, I know [omitted] and those that have been with you last night are aware of, is your energy- your incredible energy. I don't know whether it's because of the Bill Moyers and the Naomi association, but it just seems like you could be on a dose of chemical. It's almost like your energy is your bliss. I face this myself, but how are you able to be a poet and a writer, and how are you able to be a mother and a wife, and how are you able to be here with us now and still be so giddy and [omitted]?

Naomi Shihab Nye: You are very generous to say that. Thank you, Harbour. I've always been interested in energy as a topic. I remember thinking about it when I was very young- what gave it to people, what seemed to deplete it. I think poetry gives us energy, because in many ways, it gives us a deep breath. And it gives us a respect for solitude. Not that poetry is completely solitude, because I think it is community based as well. I think poetry is a way to connect with each other, but solitude is a source. And the sense of the presence of time- not the kind of time that is always toppling forward, "Quick we've got to get somewhere else! What's the next thing we're up to? What do we have to do for tomorrow?" That is a very exhausting perception of time and we're all part of it, because we all live in a world where we have many duties, responsibilities and things on our daily calendars. But in order to be able to respond to all those calls, I think we need to be very aware of what the sources of energy are for ourselves. So reading has always been one, also just being with poems is another source of energy for me. Not always writing one, even just reading one! There's a Jane Hirschfield poem I've been carrying around in my bag for about a week now and I just read it for the first time, it's a new poem, a week ago. I find that every time I read it, I read it if I'm feeling tired, I feel better. That sense of support through language, I would say that's where it comes from- not being afraid to be quiet, especially in a world in a world where we are called to speak and want to speak, but loving quietude and being very happy in it as well. From five or ten minutes of deep quiet, you can get enough energy to go! I'm sure you knew that, because your energy seems pretty amazing to me too- all of you! But I think it's that sense of balance between solitude and activity and also the sense of arrival in every moment, which is what poetry gives us to counteract the sense of always toppling forward and needing to do the next thing. When I named the book of essays which I wrote, *Never in a Hurry*, some people have said, "Oh, were you describing yourself?" I wish! That would be what I aspire to! But because I'm a human being, many times I get in a hurry and I know it doesn't feel good to be in a hurry. I know you don't give your best attention to things when you're in a hurry. Actually the phrase in the book referred to Moose, in name. But I said, "That's something I would like to remember, not to be in a hurry." Poetry slows us down, suggests we pay better attention, and honors each moment for what it is.

HW: You refer to the art of disappearing [omitted]

NN: It's my poem but sometimes a poem ends up being so closely connected with someone else in your mind that you don't think of it as [omitted]. I was very surprised and touched that someone else could feel attached to that poem and claim it in a way. It was so beautiful to me that I wanted [omitted] If I read it, I really think of him and his life and what his commitment to voices signifies to the rest of us, because he has taken the time to seek out people of alternative opinions or people who may not be in the center of any spotlight, but who need to be heard. He helps so many things appear for the rest of us that we need to hear, I believe. So in that way, the poem kind of is double fold. And I'm glad that I could have ever done any scrap of anything in my life that he approved of or appreciated. That means so much to me. It also makes me think about, "Well, sure, you're not just blowing about in winds, our metaphor for today, then you have more of a presence and more energy to spend on the things you want to work on [omitted]. I've always told students that poems like to go out into the world and have their own lives. Things can happen when you let your work out that no one could predict. So I tell them, "When you let your poem go out, now be prepared for surprise!" Who knows? Many things can happen when you let your poem out. It can be very wonderful and connect you to other things that matter to you. But if you don't let the poem out, it could have [omitted]

JM: I want to ask you two questions, both having to do with the public performance of poetry—the reading of it—performance is the word that comes to mind. But first I want to ask you about the split in your life between the private poetry which you obviously indulge in and your public life as a poet. How do you split the time?

NN: That's a good question. I don't think you consciously split your time, but I think as time goes on and writing accrues and gathers in your notebooks and you see what's there just by some kind of mysterious instinct, there are certain things you've written down that are for you. You don't have to go anywhere else or don't want to go anywhere else—it's just that you need to write at that moment. They don't demand any more attention or traveling out into the world. You are conversing with yourself in that moment in some way. And often those things will lead you to other things you might work on which have more of a community where you see this is something I could send out or this is something that might have a connection with someone else or elsewhere. It is mysterious. I have published some things—there are some poems in *Fuel* which I would never have thought I would let out into the light of day and it even surprises me that they are there or that they are in the book! Just at the moment of putting the book together they wanted to go in, but there are things that I would have said, "No way! That would never be seen." So I think everything in life is related to balancing. The more you write, the more you have to write. That is a mysterious part of the balance. Because some people imagine that you can use up your material and that doesn't happen. Also, when you are writing the things which on their own start moving out—it's like an instinct you have about them, "this wants to move out", or something you've been writing about to yourself for a long time, that you just thought you were talking to yourself or just thinking something, suddenly something comes that is connected to that. That particular piece wants to move out. So much goes on that cannot be planned or predicted in just that quiet writing time. Now in the fourth draft of the novel I'm working on, there are

sections I'm really attached to but they can't be in the book. I see why they can't. They digress too much! I would be expecting too much of a reader to want to go in all those directions. Maybe I like that section; maybe I'll keep it in another folder or file and someday who knows what will happen with it! It might become a whole story on its own. But right now I don't have to think about that. I don't know if that answers your question.

JM: Yes, the first part. The follow up is in the reading of poetry. I've notice that with every poem I've ever sat and listened to, when a poem is read, the voice changes. It is not conversational. It is a different level of speaking. I notice that with you and Mark Doty and any time I've seen poetry read especially by the writer of the poem, but even by other people, it is a different voice that you are going into. You said this morning in the workshop, "That even reading a paragraph, if I read it that way, people think of it as a poem." What is with that poetry way of reading a poem?

NN: That is a good question, and I hear what you're saying. I've actually been at poetry readings before where people in the audience complained that they had a very hard time telling when the poet was reading from the poem to the talk in between. They would say, "Our ears couldn't detect any difference so the whole presentation was one long poem. It was kind of difficult." I would have been interested because I wouldn't have felt it was difficult. I would have thought, "Maybe it is because I know some of these poems from the page, or is there a slight little difference in the tenor of the voice?" What is it that for some us set the poems aside from the talk? One thing I feel is when I read a poem I feel a little more comfortable stretching a syllable or holding a note. Whereas when you are talking, you feel that you should be moving forward. You don't feel as comfortable using a tiny bit of exaggeration. I often tell students when they are having a hard time reading their poems without mumbling, "Please exaggerate! You need to read at a pace which feels almost shockingly slow to you, so that we can hear! So you can let the syllables in each word stretch a little bit and have more intimations!" And people, of course, do it in all different ways-some people, being more dramatic readers than others. I used to think, maybe twenty years ago, that my talking voice and my poetry voice were the same. But I don't think so anymore. I think it is different! It is a little different and I think the poetry voice has more of a sense of cadence or rhythm or pause or emphasis. My husband taped Ashley Bryan reading some Langston Hughes poems last week. Ashley Bryan is one of the great speakers of other people's poetry, I think in the world. And Langston Hughes is one of his favorite poets. Listening to him say these poems *so* dramatically was phenomenal! I had goose bumps for an hour just listening to him say these poems! Even though I knew the poems really well, and had read them to myself many times, it was as if I had a completely new experience just hearing him say them dramatically into a tape. I think that language has inherent within it all of these different experiences. It has the visual experience, it has the aural experience and when a word actually comes out of your pen. I feel very different about the words as they come out of my pen or pencil. And I still really speak up for the pencil, because I like writing in pencil in first drafts, even more than with a pen for different reasons. It's that primitive, early childhood sensation in the soft scratching sound that it makes. To me, it's very important to write with a pencil still and never give that up. If I started typing a poem on

the computer, it would be a completely different physical experience with the word itself. I think everybody should experiment. It is fun for students to experiment with their reading styles, to tape themselves reading and listen to it. To listen to different poets. There are so many great tapes, so many audio tapes of poets these days, and video tapes where you will hear different voices. You will hear voices that seem, for you, comfortable. Then you will hear voices which seem too much artifice in some way. Students have even said to me when I visit high schools, “Do you read poems in that way where your voice goes really high at the end of every line?” And that’s before I’ve read anything! I don’t think so, but now I’m going to be really nervous while I’m reading! They said, “Well, we heard a tape of a poet once, and every time she would get to the end of a line she would go *up* to a really high note.” So I said, “Well, I don’t think so.” People have different styles. I wouldn’t want to do something that was so noticeable in that way. I actually had to go about eight or nine years ago to speech therapy for six months, because I got callouses on my vocal chords from talking too much. It came from being in too many large rooms without microphones. It was very troubling; I was hoarse all the time. After I had done a few things that the voice doctor said to do, he said, “You *must* go to speech therapy to learn how to use an easier tenor for your vocal chords.” I just loved it! The speech therapist said, “You are the oddest client I have!” She would make me tape these things and listen to them back, and she would point out what I was doing that was hard on the voice and what I should be doing and made me practice on the tape. Then I would have to take these tapes home and do it over and over. But she said, “You are the oddest client, because you talk as if you love every word!” I said, “I do!” and she said, “That’s really odd for me as a speech therapist.” She would hand me a list of words and she would make me say them over and over. So I would go back and forth on this list and then one of them I would get really attached to and I would say that one over and over. It helped—it helped a lot! One of the things she taught me about was speaking at a slightly higher pitch. I feel like my real voice, when I hear tapes, needs to be lower than this. When I was speaking at that lower level, I tended to grate more. There are certain things that we all do. She called it, “voice abuse” that we all do. It was interesting to me to listen to old tapes of different poets and to hear the language in that different way—to start thinking of those chords as an instrument and how you can tend to them better.

JM: I relate to poetry a lot better hearing it than I do reading it, just as a personal thing.

NN: Is it easier for you to be moved by a poem or to have goose bumps or that feeling of “wow” if you hear it?

JM: Yes.

NN: That’s good! I think that’s a good sign, because there is a great immediacy about that. You have to be very in tune at that moment when you are listening to enter the world of the poem. Then you can go back to it on the page and have more experiences with it.

ES: You were talking in a way about the spaciousness around words when you are presenting them in oral performance. You talked this morning about the blankness and the whiteness on the page and the words being surrounded by that. I think in your poetry there is always such a wonderful relationship between the whiteness and the blankness and the space and the words. I wondered if you would talk a little bit about how you see that relationship of nothingness, blankness, silence, whiteness and words and having used that in the creative process.

NN: What an interesting question! I love it! Sometimes I find when you're really struggling with lines in a poem, simply to rearrange them spatially can be so helpful—to do wild things with them—to scatter them, to open them up, to write on a very large paper so the space changes—to do something where you are able to feel the word itself as an entity can help, but the space is a part of the chord of music. I always loved the way poems ended, as Carl Sanford said, "If they are successful, something keeps happening in the air after the poem." [omitted] So space is acting upon you, or the blank is acting upon you. I really think that's true. Also, within the poem, where you choose to break the line or go to another stanza is very, very useful in terms of what the poem is trying to do. So you respect the space. Sometimes if I have a phrase, I'll just keep saying it over and over, and then I'll go do something else. I'll go wash some dishes or go take a walk or dig in the garden or something. When I say the line, the line will begin interacting with the space that's just around us in the silence. It will attract almost magnetically where it wants to go. Whereas, if you just keep staring at it, like the gentleman who asked about writers block this morning—sometimes the worst thing you can do is become stressed or tense about, "I don't know what to do next!" I also like to think of the space as a walk. The words are walking across the paper. Just like when you take a walk, you have many options. You could keep going straight; you could take a turn, like when the poem suddenly turns a corner; you could go back over the ground you've covered; you could stop and just stare at things right where you are. So if I'm having trouble grooving with the language, I try to actually see it as a sidewalk or see it as movement in space. There was a poet I met in the United Arab Emirates some years ago who said, and I really loved, he said the space around the poem was the most active part of the poem. It was because each line was sending out its little radar feelers, and while you were reading, as a reader, your mind would be going in all these directions or seeing what the poet saw and seeing your own experience you bring to the poem. He said, "You think, you all keep talking (this was at a poetry symposium in Amudahbi) and saying the words are so important. But none of you are honoring ..." I kept thinking, here we are in this glittering city, with what's around us—this incredible desert, this beautiful desert. We can drive in any direction—either over here, into the sea, we can take a boat, or over here into this empty desert for miles and miles. So how perfect that in this spot he would be feeling the creative pull and tug of the line and space. I like to think about where the mind may wonder off to. When I read a poem back to myself, when I'm working with it and rearranging it often it's simply that placement that helps my mind find what isn't necessary or where it might go, simply the placement. There's nothing intellectual about the connotation as much as the placement, physically. I once took a very interesting class with Jimmy Santiago [omitted]. This was just a few summers ago. It was a week long class and a block from my house. I hadn't taken a poetry class from another poet in a while. I thought, you know, I'd like a little refresher this summer. Jimmy is an

intriguing poet; I wonder what it will be like. So I signed up and I went to the class. We all had to give Jimmy three of our poems in advance of coming, or three poems that we felt fairly good about so he could have a sense of each person in the class. On the first night, he gave us each an individual assignment that we were to do for the week. All the poems we wrote, we were supposed to keep this thing in mind. Everybody had a different one. Mine was, and this intrigued me, he didn't want me to have a straight left margin. He said, "I noticed in your poems, even some of them have long narrative lines and some are shorter, you have a straight left margin in all of them. You can't do that this week. The poem has to be more scattered across the page! Indent lines differently." With each person he did something like that, something very specific. In some cases it was thematic, "I really want you to explore..." something thematic. Mine was the only spatial assignment, I think. I think I remember thinking that. What fun I had because I felt, just by doing that, and I kept doing it throughout the summer after the class was over. And now I still do it sometimes. I'll think of it, his voice. The things that I wrote or I was given to write were very affected by the fact that I was trying out this thing that I didn't feel so comfortable with, that he was challenging me to scatter my words more. I think sometimes we become comfortable with a shape and it's good to try something else.

ES: Several times you have talked about getting a sense of what the poem wants, what your lines want, what your words want. How do you see the relationship between the poet's conscious will and the will of the poem?

NN: I do feel that the poem quickly develops a will of its own and is very stubborn and has certain ideas about itself. I feel that living with poems, they work upon us. One thing that I love about living with poetry is that the longer you live the more lines are given to us from other people's poems [omitted]. You're just in a quandary, you're in a mess emotionally or mentally. Recently with the war and everything, this has been very true. Lines will come out of the ether and I will think, "Where did that come from?" I'll have to go search, was that in a Stafford poem, was that in a [omitted] poem? I needed that line at that moment. And it's amazing how your mind becomes this rich reservoir of images and lines as life goes on. Poems even know when to give themselves to you sometimes. Sometimes it'll be a line from one of my own poems coming back to me as if the poem is giving me a gift at the moment that I needed it. It's not a conscious thing at all. I think that poems want us, human beings, to stop being so busy. I've said that for years and the poem nods its head inside of me when I say that, because poems are offended by this human obsession with jittery activity. A poem demands and deserves another kind of consciousness. It's related to that moment. I think of Gary Snyder poems that I read when I was in college. There is a poem that Gary Snyder wrote called *This Moment Only*. It's about walking outside and just looking at a certain configuration of stars and moon, and the way the air smells at that moment where he's standing on the earth. Who's in the hut that he's just come out of. He just describes in a very tiny poem that this moment will not happen again. And I think that's the kind of consciousness that poetry has always wanted us to be aware of. Some people say, "Well that's very zen." Yes, I think it is! It's very immediate. It's very present to the moment. I remember when our son started high school. People started asking him where he wanted to go to college.

He came to me and said, “Did people do that to you too?” And I said, “Really, no, because I was living overseas, my life was in chaos, the country was on the brink of another war, so, no, we just wanted to live to the next day when I was in high school. By the time my family moved back to Texas and I was in high school, probably so.” I said, “You’re in a relatively stable position in your town and in your city and in your school.” Immediately he said, “But that seems wrong.” I said, “It *is* wrong.” I mean, it’s not wrong to think ahead in your life and think, “What am I interested in?” and where are you attracted. But for someone to start asking you, as if these next four years are going to mean nothing, you don’t even know the high school yet. You don’t even know your teachers yet. You don’t even know anything yet, and people are already pushing you beyond this time. I said, “When I really felt it was when I was in college--when everyone says to you from day one, ‘What are you going to do after you get out?’” It’s like, “Wait a minute! This is my precious college time! I want to participate! I want to be here!” I felt that poetry really helped me during that time when the world was saying, “Busy, busy, busy, busy! Be ready! Where are you going next? Are you making your plans? How much money do you have in your bank account? Are you ready?” There was this scary feeling of, “If I live in that way, I cannot live in this other way. And I need to be very present to these days and the poetry of these days, the magic of these days. That is the kind of attitude which gives me poems, because poems are at the center of my heart. I think it’s a disservice we do in our culture, I think it’s a way of dishonoring the moment. And I think that part of the reason there has been such an attraction to, I know in humanities projects around the nation in recent years leading up to the change of the millennium, I think so many projects that were very popular were projects that related to the past—oral histories, lost history, history of our cities, history of our music, history of our ancestors in this country—and I think for good reason. We are such a forward looking people there is something in our souls that cries out for a root and gravity and needing to know more of the past. Sometimes students say, “It seems that you like contemporary poetry the best.” I do. But I’m very glad that I’ve read poetry from many different ages past and still do. I can go pick up an ancient Longfellow book that I first read when I was twelve and now at this age, find things in it and appreciate things in it that I never could have appreciated when I was twelve. I think that obsession with our past is a good one. We need it to balance our obsession with the future. But what happens in the present, in the mean time?

ES: You seem to be such a profound poet of loss. In your poetry I always get this sense of a chemical process happening where loss becomes transformed into some kind of palpating presence in the poem. Do you get a sense of that?

NN: I’ve always had a very sharp, acute awareness of loss. It was of time to begin with. My first sense of nostalgia as a two year old, which I remember vividly, I have a very clear memory from the ages two, three, four, five, and less clear from the ages ten or eleven. That’s a foggier time for me. I remember at the early ages feeling how quickly everything moved past us and feeling stricken by that. How can we live if everything is always passing so quickly—just becoming attached to a scene, a kind of light—I was very attached to the twilight hour or half hour, depending upon what season it is, however long twilight would seem to last as a really young child. It wasn’t something I could

articulate. I didn't even know the word twilight probably. But I remember being drawn outside at that time, or being drawn to the front door to look out at the grass at the willow right in between day and night. I remember that time being so swiftly gone and feeling like, "I have to wait till tomorrow to see everything look that way again." And then feeling when I knew what poems were, and started writing, that somehow in poetry it was like that twilight hour. That you could pay attention in poetry to things that were passing rapidly, but that you treasure, that you love. I became good friends with the poet, Coleman Barks, years later, that translated [omitted], and also a wonderful poet of his own poems. Coleman had the same affection for the twilight hour. In fact, I learned about it by listening to his interview with Bill Moyers. He called it the "golden hour" or the "golden time," "the yellow time of night." He used to lie on the floor of his house hugging himself, wanting to cling to the way everything looked in a certain beam of light. I knew really what he was talking about. He used to say to his mother, "I've got that feeling, I've got that feeling again!" And she would say, "I know you do, honey." And it was kind of like, "Let's go on about our business." And I think my parents were worried about this nostalgia. I think for them, dealing with a three year old that was so nostalgic and clinging on to things, "Could we ever see this again? Could we go back here?" My father and I would go out on the old Admiral, the old river boat on the Mississippi river and ride around [omitted] and I would feel like weeping when we had to get off, because I would think, "I won't be on this boat now." I loved the sense of being on the river. "Now I have to get off the river. I'm not ready to get off the river! I'm not ready to be three, I still want to be two! I'm not ready!" There was always this feeling of life pushing us forward. So, yes, a sense of loss is everywhere. And I think loss is a basic human experience that we are grappling with all the time. It does not get easier. We just have more experiences with it to go by, but it really doesn't get any easier.

HW: [omitted]

NN: I listen for a moment that listens out of all of the other moments. I listen for a voice which stretches out beyond where it might have been at a certain moment. Some of the students said very touching things. There would be that one moment when their voice went a little farther, you know, they might not have said that, they might not have been brave enough to say that one extra thing that connected to themselves or connected to something very meaningful to them. Those moments always stop me—when someone speaks. I am very attracted to the human voice and the casual remark and what someone says to someone else. Where it's not too precious of a moment, but it's just a little stretch, a *little* stretch. I listen for a way that we connect beyond all the official ways. Then, the listening in this time that has felt so difficult with the war going on and with so much language in the media that feels manipulated and distorted to me—no matter what you think about the war—there was a great article in the New York Times a few weeks ago about how wartime always distorts language. The scholar linguist went back to all the wars of the twentieth century, to phrases that had never been popular or used before that particular war, why they came into popularity and which ones vanished forever and were never heard again in our common language and which ones stuck around. There were phrases in there that I had no idea even had any war connection in the past. In times like this, when I feel a certain abuse of language, or language manipulated for particular

responses and what I feel sometimes are questionable responses, I listen for a true note in language and in the world itself, a true note whatever it is—if it’s just the sound when you walk outside. There’s the great Stafford poem called “Evening News.” He can’t stand the evening news; he turns it off. He goes to the sink to wash his hands; he goes to the back door, touches a plant that’s outside the door and he says, “I pray to the grasses, oh please make everything go deep again!” I listen for that real moment. And it’s very available. It’s all around. It makes everything go deep again. Yesterday after I got off the airplane, John took me down some favorite streets in Oklahoma City. There were streets that I could listen to. I thought, “Oh you can just let me out right here!” I would walk around, “I want to look at this street further, I want to see these signs, and I want to see these businesses and go into these places and hear these voices.” I feel even cities are tuned sometimes to a certain kind of architecture. I love looking at architecture and looking at buildings. You just tune to things that help you feel like you go deep again in time or that feel distinct to a place, to a moment. Those things are given freely. They are all around us. They are so frequently in the voices of children. Children throw them away day and night. They are out there, just all around children. On a day recently, when I was feeling very despondent, I was in an airport. And they have it fixed in the airport these days so you can’t get away from the tv monitor sound- it’s *everywhere!* You really can barely get away from it, even [omitted] you can still hear the voice going on. But I found a little corner where two boys, maybe six and seven, were on their stomachs, on the floor coloring. They were two brothers, obviously, just chatting with each other. And I felt so sad to hear the voices of the news. I sat down where I could hear them chatting and I felt restored just by their language—the little things they cast to each other. They weren’t even looking at each other. Their mother was sitting there reading and they were just chatting. And I thought to myself, “They will never know how they restored some stranger, just by chatting.” It is so easy for them. It was a true language. They were talking about colors and crayons. One boy had the yellow too long. The other *really* needed the yellow. Just the banter between brothers was so dear—the way they were in a world that was so pure. It was beautiful.

JM: I’m going to ask a question that’s really obvious, or at least I think the answer will be. But I do want you to elaborate on it. Among the poets I know, you have traveled widely around the world and you have met people everywhere you’ve been and engaged them. I think that you have found and brought back to us a sense that there are very little differences between us. What do you think in terms of that, in terms of the human condition. Why do we behave the way we behave versus the way we all apparently are?

NN: That is the question that confounds me, John. That is the question that makes something like war seem such a failure of imagination. That if human beings are able to connect and communicate across their differences and through their cultural differences, why can’t we put that to use when we really need it? That’s the time we really need it! I’m sure that people who’ve worked in different cultures, different countries, I meet them everywhere, we all have experiences of such strong resonance with one another. That’s the abiding power. I feel every use of weapons is a failure. I feel no one else’s weapons are any better than anyone else’s weapons. I feel that none of us would send our beloved children to school saying, “Now you’re going to have to get along with a lot of people,

and they're not all going to be like you. They may all not want to share. They may not have the same ideas, this and that. And at a certain point, if you find you're just not getting along at all, just kill them." None of us would tell our kids that! So why can our country tell us that's ok? That confounds me! This does not say that I don't support my troops or support Americans who are willing to die. A girl said at a campus in San Antonio recently, "I support my troops so much that I want them home in their beds! I don't want them dying for me." She said, "I am very troubled by the fact that people have gone to die for me and I don't want them to die! That's how much I support them!" She said, "People on my campus are telling me that I am a traitor because I am not pro this war. I was brought up to communicate, when the going got rough, that's when you communicate! Not when it's easy and we're all on the same page and we are all great." Anyone who spends time with level-headed, calm-hearted Palestinians and Israelis know that they feel the same way on the issue. And there are far more of them that do. But then you come to the question of respect. It also involves a kind of mutual respect. Do we gain each others respect? By what ways? I think when we look at history and how much cultural history there is, in all fields—in religious history, in artistic history, in educational history—we should keep relying on the wisdom gained in those other places. I keep feeling like politics is the problem because politics brings up certain—I mean, you're not going to see librarians going to war with each other. Even if this librarian loves a certain kind of book, and that librarian loves a certain kind of book. That's not going to happen because they have invested themselves in a certain kind of behavior, a certain kind of relationship and a belief. "You know, we didn't have enough money for books last year and we're pretty mad about that because another town had more. What can we do about it?" So they think of something very creative to do. I just think about politics itself being the problem and the impulses and motivations that are behind politics being the problem. If you look at cultural experience and other kinds, you'd think people can figure it out. I wrote an [omitted] piece in San Antonio not long ago, that I just thought, what about a year where we put everything in the hands of librarians and school teachers and see if things are better or worse. You know, of course we'd have to give them time off from their jobs, so call the substitutes in full force! But let's see! Because I bet they could work it out. Nobody can be a politician by nature, by desire, by past. And this is not to say that I completely disrespect politicians, I don't. And I think many times that politicians are working with their better natures in tow and they are working on our behalf. But then things come up and if you are in any other area of life, that would not be appropriate! You know, you would not resort to killing! Someone said to me in New Jersey a few weeks ago, "Oh yeah, I know about your city, San Antonio, isn't that a city that used to have a really bad gang problem?" And I said, "Actually, we did have real gang issues in San Antonio, especially in the '80's. So many people worked on those problems like what was creating the gangs and whether they were priests or sociologists or psychologists, people went into these schools where there were lots of issues with these gangs and really worked." I said, "You know, we didn't go bomb them. There was no moment when we said, 'You know if you guys don't behave, if you keep having gangs, we're bombing your school out of existence in our town.'" We would never do that in that way! I'm getting off the subject, but I do think that for example, I know a lot of retired diplomats, many of whom work in Washington, D.C. And they are brilliant about the Middle East. They are completely fluent in Arabic and English. They've lived

there for most of their adult lives. They have devoted themselves to bringing people together, bringing different consciousnesses together. I have asked them, “Does anyone ever ask for your advice now in the government? Does anyone ever call you in?” They said, “No. When we retire, it’s like we don’t exist.” That is a wealth in this country! We should be using those people to the maximum! They should be called, these people who have devoted their lives to diplomacy and to working out problematic issues in countries where we as a country are having a problem. Those are the people we should be calling on. Now, I think that’s a humanities question, because these are people who are educated in a wide realm and they have no political gain for themselves anymore. They are retired. These are people we can use. Why don’t we use them? We have so many resources.

HW: What about your experience now working with the National Endowment of Humanities? What’s that like? What hopes do you have?

NN: I am very honored to be connected to the great work that is done by humanities councils in all states and the national endowment. I feel that, to me, the National Endowment for the Humanities is not political, because although it is related to politics and funded through politics, I think of it as being related to the soul of humanity and the kind of and the kind of work that goes on with education and research and discovery and articulation of our history and our heritage in this land. I have been very heartened to know what great projects go on all over the place that unless you are right there you might not have heard of them. I am aware of things that say, have been sponsored by, funded by the Texas Humanities Council where I live. I go to many events where the Humanities Council is thanked, but Humanities Councils around the country have operated in so many different ways appropriate to their own population and their own needs. It’s fascinating to read—we read a lot of documents with NEH and we make suggestions or are able to put our two cents worth in and say, “Maybe also think of such and such,” or maybe a state might consider what another state has done that has been very successful in another state. I would say it’s uplifting. Everything related to the NEH is uplifting to me, because humanities itself is an uplifting subject. If we really believe in the humanities between countries too, we would find some ways to get passed the most difficult times and spend out resources in better ways. When you think about what is done with how much money by humanities councils and the NEH in general, great things are done with what seems like a small amount of seed money in different places. That’s very inspiring! How many people are brought into projects or who suddenly see their own lives as being part of the larger story of humanities? None of us are existing in a vacuum. We are all part of this national community. So, it has been very heartening for me to be part of this wonderful group of people. And all of the people on the national council are from different walks of life and I respect them so much for the expertise that they bring to the meetings and the discussions. I guess one good thing to think about- you know sometimes when we feel sad about money and we feel wasted in certain ways by our country or government- there is so much money being spent in good ways that we often don’t hear about because it doesn’t get a lot of fanfare, really beautiful projects that would lift all our spirits. Just to travel from state to state and go to one humanities event in each state would be amazing because they’re so different, such different scales. Some states are huge and some states are grass-roots tiny and all

the kind of things that are encompassed [omitted]. So I feel like a servant—whatever I can do. I’ve worked in so many states that sometimes I feel what I bring is just a sense of what it is like to speak to an audience in South Dakota or certain issues that come up every time I go to Wyoming that people talk about. I’m like the hobo of the NEH that has worked in all these different states and has seen magnificent human responses to different things in different states and can think about how things are there, different attitudes and different strengths that each place has.

HW: This is sort of a different direction, but I think that often, or sometimes at least, a poet can be identified or known by a poem or a couple of poems that are often anthologized, like for example [omitted]

NN: Well I don’t know what poems of my own I would put, but it is intriguing how a certain poem will get reprinted so many times. And it’s never, *never*, the poem you would have imagined. Never! Absolutely never! And that is intriguing to me. So now when somebody writes and says, “We’d like to use a certain poem on a test or in an anthology,” if it’s an odd poem, a poem that no one has ever used before, asked to reprint, I always write them a special thank you message saying, “I really appreciate that you listened to that slightly odd poem for whatever reason.” I don’t know why that is. I just finished editing an anthology of one hundred Texas poets and it will also include paintings by Texas painters, it’s coming out this fall. It’s called, *Is This Forever?* [omitted] That’s the feeling that some people have when they drive across Texas, but also related to different things in my introduction. I tried very specifically, it’s very important to me when I make an anthology to have voices that poets all over Texas would recommend. I’m sure we all know those people, but also have people who, the people themselves were surprised—like young poets who have not been in a previous Texas anthology. A couple of young poets who have never published a poem before are in this Texas anthology. I love the idea of a poet saying, “Who is that? Where does that person live?” Then they can go to the back and see something about them. But I also tried to pick from the well known poets, I tried definitely to pick things that I had never seen anthologized anywhere else, kind of the odder poem. It’s all very mysterious and idiosyncratic. You know, I don’t mind niches. Sometimes people say, “Do you mind labels?” Like, “Are you offended,” this is a frequent question, “Are you offended if someone calls you a Texas poet?” Not at all. “What if they call you a Palestinian-American poet?” Fine with me. “What if they say you are a woman poet.” That’s OK. I am! So I don’t mind any label. I don’t feel that labels diminish human beings. I just feel like they give someone a handle on who we are. In fact, I keep waiting—I want to be in a Missouri anthology, because I’m from Missouri! For thirteen years I lived in Missouri! My entire beloved elementary school legacy is in Missouri! But I have gotten to judge the Missouri state contest a few times and that’s been fun. But I do think we all have many different things that we get known by. And if somebody likes the making of this poem, that’s so amazing to me. One thing funny to me is when that poem first appeared, my mother sort of said, “What? I said that? I would never say that!” As the years went on and the poem started appearing in more anthologies she would give a little talk [omitted], and someone would say, “Now you’re in that poem, tell us about that poem!” She would say, “Oh well!” And she would start [omitted] she remembered the scene. And I’d say, “Hey mom, I thought you didn’t remember that!” And she’d say, “Well, now I do. It

came back to me. I remember it all.” She doesn’t remember doing that. But it is a respond though, what other people respond to. It’s all a surprise and I think that is something young poets can feel good about when they send their poems out. They just don’t know which ones—even the ones they might have real doubts about sending out or sharing—that might be the one that gets accepted. Often it is! Students will say, “My high school literary magazine published the poem I thought was the worst! Why? Why do you think they did this?” Well maybe there was a little something odd about it, or risky about it. So you felt less secure about it, but maybe it was really interesting because of that and maybe somebody else responded to that interest. I read this quote in college—I really love the writers of the twenties, United States twenties America, and writers in exile and in Paris and everything—and Gertrude Stein saying, “That every masterpiece in the world, came into the world with a measure of ugliness in it.” She said, “Masterpieces don’t come perfectly honed. They come where people read them and go ‘What is that? That is so weird!’” And you think back to the things that we consider great now and maybe how they were seen in their own time.

JM: People weren’t ready for them.

NN: I’m sorry I talk too much.

HW: [omitted] and not say much.

NN: I love your questions! I’m sorry, I’ll try to answer in monosyllables like a teenager.

ES: You talked about the installation artist last night with the lost friend signs and the school desk and that the goal of her art was to enable people to do something that they needed to do and had to do but otherwise could not have done. How do you see that as the goal of your art?

NN: I think poems invite us to maybe think another thought or honor another memory or ask another question. Many times poems we love give us comfort when we read them because they chime with something we’ve been experiencing. They feel very powerful. But also, they enable us in some way to do something else. There is a great Romanian poet named Nina Cassian. I met her in Jerusalem once and I was in awe of meeting her. I said, “Oh, I love your poems so much! I have your books! I have collected your work for years.” And she turned to me and said, “Yes, but has it ever helped you out of a jam? Has it ever helped you when you were down? Did it help you find love when you needed love?” She started asking me all these wild questions. I said, “Yeah, actually, I think it did!” But I thought that was funny. She wanted her poems to be as useful as the buttonhole or the pulley that I refer to in one poem, or like the screwdriver that opens the can that no one can open. She wanted her poems to be like that. And I think they are. So there is that distinctive sense. You know like, Andrea, the installation artist in San Antonio, and she knows right now that one of her goals as an artist is just to trigger thought, trigger thought or trigger memory. That’s what she wants to do. And I really respect that. I feel sometimes a deep breath come into the classroom and I tell students, maybe they’ve been asked to read some of my poems before I come and before I get

there, so they start asking me questions about my grandmother or my cousin or whoever was the subject of the poem they read. After I answer the questions I say, “But do you know what? You don’t have to think about my cousin, think about yours!” And there will be this moment. I want them to turn that way. I want them to be triggered into their own material from their own life.

ES: Do you have that sense when you’re working with kids in schools that you’re giving them something that can potentially save them?

NN: Oh, I hope so! Because I do feel that poetry is a saving grace and a saving genre. And when students tell me years later that poetry did help them in significant ways or give them a kind of confidence even. In Texas we were having some movement some years ago, talking to Texas educators, and there was always this back to basics theme. And I would say, “But what is more basic than the sense of your own voice?” If you have confidence in your own voice you can do anything! And so creative writing becomes very important because that is the way a student tunes into his or her own material and voice. You don’t get it out of a multiple choice question. It’s not the same. So we need to keep that an essential part of curriculum, where students are able to exercise their own voices and find the power in that. That will help them in whatever they do, not just if they want to become poets or writers, not at all, [omitted].

HW: You touched on this this morning and you said it was all sort of a blur. I’m teaching an Adolescent Literature course right now and they absolutely love *Habibi*.

NN: Thanks.

HW: So when you write *Habibi* or when you write *City Secret* or when you write [omitted]. I mean, I think Margaret Rice Brown is one of my favorite authors.

NN: Oh, she’s one of mine for my whole life! I’m so glad you mentioned her! I adore her. I’m kind of obsessed with her!

HW: My Montessori intern project was on Margaret Rice Brown.

NN: I got to me Garth Williams and talk to him about her. He was her illustrator. And his stories, oh!”

HW: [omitted- I didn’t know how much of this conversation you wanted in.]

NN: She was one of my first favorite authors! She just set me off as a little child, just reading all of her things!

HW: I just wonder, when you sit down to write a novel called *Habibi* or when you are going to write [omitted], you have the child, the adolescent, you have us in mind. I just wonder [omitted]

NN: I think you are just inviting different parts of yourself to speak at different times. The *Habibi* voice, Liana's voice in that book, by the way, the first draft of that book I wrote in first person. Liana was speaking in the first draft. But I did not think of her as being me. Naomi and Liana were not the same person, which some people keep saying I made that up and that it really was me. But I never felt that she was me, I felt that she was someone I knew well, someone I liked. But her story was her story, so hearing her voice was important. I've wondered if I could have written that in the third person in the first draft, if I would have been able to feel the voice. It was not so hard to turn it into the third person. My editor urged me to do that. She felt that for the sake of believability everything should not be in the girl's mind, which it would have to be if it was in the first person. You try to enter into the voice of the character. Right now in the book I'm working on in the fourth draft, I have the voices of the characters, their dialogue is very clear and I'm working on the interiority of the main character. I need to give her a little more time alone, what she thinks. That's something I feel the book still needs, so I'm working with her mind. Really, now that I know her so well it's fun working with her mind, because I can send her walking around the streets of the city—it's set in San Antonio. And I can imagine that would pop into her mind or something her eyes would fall on or what she would think next. I just think with writing, you're always putting yourself in the mind of some voice or someone, some age, some experience. It's all part of you but it's not you. It's not just you, so it's connected. We all contain so much. And I think we all contain voices that will never get to come out in some ways. Just by the fact that we get older. So we have those voices. There's a great story by Sandra Cisneros that says, "I'm always eleven years old inside, no matter how old I am. That eleven year old person is still speaking." It's so true. We are all the ages. We are all the future ages. I remember feeling very attached to the voices of elders and feeling in some odd way that I could relate to the voices of elders sometimes more than the voices of my peers. And I was trying to figure out, "Why was that?" Is it because we are all part of [omitted] time and there is something just in me that is aching for that older voice? I'm crazy about the musician Tom [omitted], so is my husband. We're fanatics. We have everything he's ever recorded. We read interviews with him, and he's so interesting. We've never heard him live. In many interviews he says, "I was always an old man. When I was a boy, I was an old man. I am growing right now into the self that I've always been. I want to get older!" He said, "I'm not at all afraid of getting older. I'm just dying to get older! I'd love to be older, because that's who I've always been speaking from." In some ways, I really identify with that sense of voice, the sense of having an *avocie* in you that's so powerful. He says, "As a teen [omitted]" Do you remember the teacher at Trinity, Nell Lucas? Did you ever take any classes with her?

JM: I never took any classes with her, but I knew her. She was the potter.

NN: She had studied with Native American potters, ceramic artist. Only hand building I took from her. But we also had to go live in a Native American way out in the hill country and fire our pots on the ground and do everything from scratch, dig up our own clay, warm our own glazes, everything. I remember looking at Nell with amazement when she was my teacher and thinking, "She never lost the sense of her child voice. It is so powerful in her. She's an older woman. But she also carries a Native American voice, a

voice that she respects so much and it has become a part of her voice, even though I don't believe she was Native American in any way, not to my knowledge. But she had studied with these teachers whose voices had gone into her and affected her beliefs about touching clay and dealing with clay. When you were working with clay, you had a lot of time to sit around and listen to people talking around you while you were working on your pot. And listening to her talk, and thinking, "Wow, I really admire the voices that are coming out of this person!" All ages, different ethnicities, they are all in there. They are all very tangible too, you could touch them and feel them. She gave me a lot of comfort when we were in college. She was a great person who exemplified that you could be an older age and be a kid and be many things.

JM: Didn't you dedicate a book to her or dedicate something to her?

NN: I wrote a poem to her a long time ago.

HW: You've got good company. [omitted]

NN: That's very exciting! I love even hearing you say that! It's so wonderful he recognizes that!

HW: There's something you're taking about that connects us to our interiority when I can hear that voice.

NN: And it's very close to home. And it's very limber; it's kind of a limber voice. It's not afraid to be odd. But it's part of our voices. In the novel I'm working on right now, I have a seventh grade English teacher give an assignment to her class where they have to write their own lives to that moment as if it's a children's book. Then I wanted to write the assignments for the different characters so I wrote each one the way they would write it. And some of them try to get away with not writing much. You know, in children's books you can have just two words on a page and that's enough in a children's book. SO a couple of them write very succinct, little life stories about themselves. That was really fun to do! I found myself very much enjoying giving this assignment to this class in the book and seeing what different people would write. I think it's a good assignment, too—a good thing to try. Some years ago I had a woman in a class with me; it was a community ed. class at night on a college campus. And she kept writing about being twelve years old. All of her poems related to being twelve years old. There was something wrong in the poems. They didn't quite affect us with as much power as I felt they could. Then it hit me. It's because she's writing about it, she's not creating a world, she's talking as an adult looking back. So I said to her in kind of the way Jimmy [omitted] gave me the assignment, "I'm sorry but I insist that you write everything from the twelve year old perspective from now on. I don't want you to be whatever age you are talking about being twelve. Just be twelve." She looked shocked! It was almost as if I had insulted her. I asked to stay afterwards and I said, "This is not your penance! I think your poems will work better, I'm curious. I want to see the experiment. Well, that set her off til now, I think. Years later she's been writing things! Her poems took off from that moment. She doesn't write everything she writes now in that twelve year old

voice, but there was something about just allowing herself to not be quite as intellectual, making commentary on her young days, which is being the young days, which was so invigorating. And the class loved it! Every week the class would say, “Yes, you did it! Yes, that’s the poem you tried to write three weeks ago and now it’s alive!” I know she’s sent a lot of poems out and has been published a lot since those days and it makes me happy! She said to me, “I was an intellectual person. I never would have allowed myself to do that. I would have looked down on that, because never when you are in college do they tell you to write as if you are twelve.” Never as adults do we tell each other that, that you could try to write a nugget of a voice that’s within you that you still have. But I love reading children’s books for the same sense of cleansing and feel, again, these words, reading them out loud, reading them to kids, just to hear the words in that way.