

**The Story around the Corner: Nye's Interest in Minor Details of  
Everyday Life As an Essential Aspect of Her Poetry**

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**Abstract**

Naomi Shihab Nye is a Palestinian American poet, novelist, short story writer, songwriter, editor, and discographer. Browsing through Nye's poems, one cannot help taking notice of a recurrent aspect that permeates her poems, namely zooming in on insignificant details of everyday life and presenting them in a new, hence, serious light. The present paper, therefore, aims at highlighting this remarkable aspect of Nye's poetry first by documenting it through her views and opinions expressed in some of her interviews, essays, and other prose writings, not to mention few of her poems in which she voices these views and opinions forthrightly, together with the views and opinions of various critics and scholars and then by tracing it through her poetry.

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القصة التي بالجوار: اهتمام ناى بالتفاصيل الصغيرة للحياة اليومية كمظهر أساسى  
فى شعرها

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### ملخص

تعتبر نعو مى شهاب ناى شاعرة و روائية و كاتبة قصص قصيرة و مؤلفة أغانى و محررة للعديد من الكتب و ناشرة لألبومات أغانى على اسطوانات مدمجة و هى مواطنة أمريكية من أصل فلسطينى. و يستطيع القارىء بمجرد تصفح قصائدها أن يتعرف على اهتمامها الشديد بالتفاصيل الصغيرة للحياة اليومية كمظهر أساسى يغلب على أشعارها. و تقوم ناى بالتركيز على تفاصيل الحياة الهامشية التى يمر عليها الإنسان مروراً عابراً دون أن يلقى لها بالاً من خلال تقديم هذه التفاصيل بشكل جديد يظهر أهميتها و يسلط الضوء على دورها الفعّال فى حياة الإنسان. و يهدف البحث الذى بين أيدينا أولاً إلى توثيق هذا المظهر الشعرى من خلال آراء ناى التى عبرت عنها فى كتاباتها النثرية مثل مقالاتها و مقابلاتها الشخصية، و القليل من قصائدها التى تعرض هذه الآراء بشكل مباشر و صريح بالإضافة إلى آراء النقاد و الباحثين؛ ثانياً إلى رصد هذا المظهر فى أشعارها.

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Naomi Shihab Nye is a Palestinian American poet, novelist, short story writer, songwriter, editor, and discographer. She was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on March 12, 1952 to a Palestinian Muslim father, Aziz Shihab, who was a refugee, having lost his home in Jerusalem in the aftermath of the 1948 war, and a European American Christian mother, Miriam Naomi Allwardt, of German and Swiss descent. Both parents were not, however, committed worshippers, and hence, their daughter was educated as a Hindu at the Vedanta Society of St. Louis. In 1966, when Nye was only fourteen, the Shihab family moved to Palestine where they lived in Jerusalem. There Nye spent her first year of high school, taking the opportunity to get in touch with her father's native heritage as well as language, namely Arabic, a language she did not speak. Nevertheless, her family had to leave again after the Six-Day war of 1967 broke out, heading back to America where they settled down in San Antonio, Texas, a city that Nye considers as her real home since it is there that she completed her education, worked, married, and lives presently. Nye earned her BA degree in English and world religions from Trinity University in 1974, and in 1975, she worked with the Texas Arts Commission as a Poet in the Schools, i.e., a visiting writer, whereupon she taught students how to fulfill their desire for writing, holding down this job for the next fifteen years. She also occupied the same teaching position with Arts America and the National Endowment for Arts in the eighties, traversing the earth from the West Bank to the Aleutian Islands. During the nineties, Nye gave herself up to writing altogether, producing a profusion of literature of various genres such as poetry, novel, children's books, essays, reviews, and anthologies both in print and online, which won her a great fame nationally as well as internationally. Likewise, Nye is reckoned to be some sort of a political activist that would race other activists to the picket line, protesting against the Lebanon War as well as the Iraq War. Nye is married to Michael Nye, a photographer, and they have one son, Madison.

Nye has to her credit a bulky oeuvre as she is the author and/or editor of over thirty volumes. Her writing gift goes as far back as her father, who is an author himself writing books such as *A Taste of Palestine: Menus and Memories*. Equally, she came under the

influence of her mother who used to read to her as a child on a regular basis. Therefore, Nye showed a great promise as a poet at an early age, i.e., before she could read or write. "Selecting and arranging words seemed comforting," she remarks (qtd. in "[Naomi Shihab Nye: Poet and author](#)"). As soon as she could hold a pencil, she wrote poetry, publishing her first poem at the age of seven and thus beginning an outstanding and prolific career. Her first volume of poetry is *Different Ways to Pray* (Breitenbush, 1980). Among her other books of poetry are: *Hugging the Jukebox* (Dutton, 1982), *Yellow Glove* (Breitenbush, 1986), *Red Suitcase* (Consortium, 1994), *Words under Words* (Eighth Mountain P, 1995), *Fuel* (BOA, 1998), *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East* (Harper, 2002), *You & Yours* (BOA, 2005), *A Maze Me: Poems for Girls* (Greenwillow, 2005), and *Transfer* (BOA, 2011). Her collections of essays include: **Never in a Hurry** (U of South Carolina P, 1996), **Mint Snowball** (Anhinga P, 2001), and **I'll Ask You Three Times, Are You Okay?** (Harper, 2007). She is also the author of two novels for young adults under the titles **Habibi** (Simon, 1999) and **Going Going** (Harper, 2005) as well as a collection of short stories called *There Is No Long Distance Now* (Harper, 2011). In like manner, Nye serves as the editor of such anthologies as *Salting the Ocean* (Harper, 2000), **This Same Sky** (Aladdin, 1996), **The Space between Our Footsteps** (Simon, 1998), **What Have You Lost?** (Greenwillow, 1999), *Is This Forever, Or What?* (Greenwillow, 2004), and **Time You Let Me In** (Greenwillow, 2010). Last but not least, she has published a number of picture books for children including **Sitti's Secrets** (Maxwell, 1994), *Come With Me* (Greenwillow, 2000), and **Baby Radar** (Greenwillow, 2003) and the discography *Rutabaga-Roo - I've Got A Song And It's For You* (Flying Cat - 1979).

Nye's creative merit has been widely acknowledged, being the recipient of numerous honors and fellowships. Thus, she has won four Pushcart Prizes, the Jane Addams Children's Book award, the Paterson Poetry Prize, the Lavan Award from the Academy of American Poets, the Isabella Gardner Poetry Award, the Lee Bennett Hopkins Poetry Award, the Arab American Book Award, and the Golden Rose Award, granted by the oldest poetry reading series in the nation, namely the New England Poetry Club. She has also received a Guggenheim

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Fellowship, a Lannan Fellowship, and a Witter Bynner Fellowship. Moreover, she has been a National Book Award Book Finalist as well as a key columnist for *Organica*. Accordingly, Nye has made a TV appearance on *Now with Bill Moyers* while her works have been presented on two PBS poetry specials: "The Language of Life with Bill Moyers" and "The United States of Poetry." National Public Radio has featured her works on *A Prairie Home Companion* and *The Writer's Almanac* as well. Further, she has been working as a visiting poet for The Michener Center for writers at the University of Texas at Austin and the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. She has also been selected among the Board of Chancellors of the Academy of American Poets in 2010 and made laureate of the NSK Prize for Children Literature in 2013. It is little wonder then that *The Grand Rapids Press* reflects on her poetic gift pointing out, "Naomi Shihab Nye breathes poetry like the rest of us breathe air. When she exhales, the world becomes different. Better," and that William Strafford, the renowned American poet and her mentor, affirms, "In the current literary scene, one of the most heartening influences is the work of Naomi Shihab Nye. Her poems combine transcendent liveliness and sparkle along with warmth and human insight. She is a champion of the literature of encouragement and heart. Reading her work enhances life" (qtd. in "Naomi Shihab Nye: Award-winning Palestinian-American Poet").<sup>1</sup>

Browsing through Nye's poems, one cannot help taking notice of a recurrent aspect that permeates her poems, namely zeroing in on insignificant details of everyday life and presenting them in a new, hence, serious light. In other words, she approaches common things of life that are usually overlooked by one due to the deadening effect of habit or the various distractions of life. This is accomplished by viewing them through a new perspective rather than that through

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<sup>1</sup> For the information on Hammad's life and biography, one is indebted to the following sources: "Biography of Naomi Shihab Nye," *American Poems*; "Biography of Naomi Shihab Nye," *PoetHunter.Com*; Blakely; Colloff; Gómez-Vega, "Extreme Realities;" Hacht; Hirschfield; "Naomi Shihab Nye," *Poetry Foundation*; "Naomi Shihab Nye," *Wikipedia*; "Naomi Shihab Nye: Award-winning Palestinian-American Poet;" "Naomi Shihab Nye Biography," *Famous Poets & Poems*; and "Naomi Shihab Nye: Poet and author."

which they are usually looked at in terms of assigning them new roles in life or investing their old roles with peculiar significance that, though attached by her, amazes her, thus breathing life into them and hence drawing attention to them. For example, such familiar objects and events as a pulley, a buttonhole, a yellow glove that is lost in a stream, small vases Palestinians use to decorate their tables in Hebron, daily domestic chores, the different ways Muslims pray to God, contemplating the last August hours before the year 2000, three female airline passengers sewing, knitting, and crocheting, a man crossing the streets in the rain while carrying a baby, a rat sneaking upon one's sleep, the journey an onion has made before it ends up in the kitchen, etc., which might not interest anyone in his/her day-to-day routine, are all topics dealt with in her poetry. They become important to her because she heeds them, having had a profound insight into the various meanings of their roles in life. The present paper, therefore, aims at highlighting this remarkable aspect of Nye's poetry first by verifying it through the evidence of her views and opinions included in some of her interviews, essays, and other prose writings, along with few of her poems in which she articulates these views and opinions forthrightly, in addition to the views and opinions of various critics and scholars and then by tracking it through her poetry. One is indebted to the paper's main title to the title of Nye's poem "The Story, Around the Corner," which is among the above few poems that address this aspect of her poetry in an explicit way.

In her essay "Spiral Staircase," Nye recollects that she has recently been overwhelmed with "a sense of negligence" while preparing dinner, having not seen the sunset for quite some time: "*What about the sunset?* I thought. *Have I sat with the sunset lately? Why not? What time is it?*" Thereupon, she decides to take a break from cooking and goes to the front porch where she sits on the steps so as to contemplate the sky: "Sure enough, the wide sky toward the west was softening into lovely pink stripes—all in unobtrusive silence" (251). At the moment, Her Mexican neighbor, believing that Nye is locked out, inquires of her whether there is something wrong, and Nye retorts, laughing, "Nothing is wrong! It's right! Look up at the sky!" The bewildered neighbor shrugs her shoulders and goes on her way apathetically. Nye then regrets the fact that observation and

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contemplation have lost their values nowadays, expressing her wish "to go back in time." When her neighbor wonders, "What do you hope to do in your life?" she assures, "Gaze at things. Thank you" (252). Nye confides that this habit of observing everyday life scenes and contemplating specific details of common things goes as far back as her childhood when she was three years old:

Beginning At About the age of three, I was regularly attracted outside onto the square concrete porch of our St. Louis home to watch the softening light. A gray midwestern glow or a lonesome yellow beam said, *Take heed. Notice me. I am going now and you will soon be shipping off to bed.* It made me feel poignant—already I was nostalgic for a different kind of slow-paced life. (252)

To drive her point home, Nye cites the example of her eye-catching spiral staircase, which has been hidden for twenty four years on account of a half wall that has been obstructing the sight and which now, the wall having been removed after renovation, attracts the visitors' attention first thing upon entering the house. Evidently, renovation here represents contemplation while the spiral staircase represents the value inherent in the details of daily, familiar aspects of life.

In another essay entitled "Our Shared Journey," Nye expresses a childish urge to see into the life of things without being herself seen: "I used to feel concerned about a childhood compulsion I had to see into lives—be invisible, but look inside" (48). Nye's naïve compulsion, though understood in concrete, literal terms, brings to mind Wordsworth's abstract romantic principles of pantheism and organicism where one loses one's corporeality in the presence of nature and becomes purely an eye for the soul: "While with an eye made quiet by the power / Of harmony, and the deep power of joy, / We see into the life of things" ("Tintern Abbey" 47-49). Thus, Nye narrates that though peeping through a window has not been popular with members of her community, she has enjoyed it, especially during "that magical twilight hour before the shades in houses would be drawn and you could catch a quick glimpse into other people's rooms—their chairs, tables, pianos, paintings. A vase of red flowers. A couch" (48). She reveals that her

favorite early poet Langston Hughes also shares her deep-rooted urge, quoting his poem "Curious" where he says, "I can see your house, babe, / But I can't see you / . . . / Tell me, what do you do?" (1-2, 6).

Not only does Nye enjoy her drive to pay attention to familiar details during her leisure time, but she also cannot resist it in time of crisis when one is most distracted and extremely preoccupied, which demonstrates how innate and deep is the drive. So, in the introduction to her volume of poetry *19 Varieties of Gazelle*, she conveys how she takes solace in life's simple details in the aftermath of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks:

Through the immense grief in the wake of this disaster,  
we grasped on to the 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.  
("Introduction" xv)

Nye attributes her interest in the details of everyday life to the fact that these trivial things help give her an insight into the latent truths of life, which is in keeping with her childish impulse to see into the life of things mentioned above. Thus, in an interview with Phebe Davidson, she discloses that minute details "have always been the doorway by which we approach and apprehend the larger things of the world, the larger truths, whatever they might be" ("Naomi Shihab Nye: A Necessary Act" 162). She also declares that she has grasped this truth about little things early on in life when she can realize "that small things do have intrinsic and understated meaning that we need as writers" (163). Another reason that may justify Nye's fondness for ordinary things is that these things have the power to keep her sane. When Bill Moyers asks her about the reason "why . . . so often in your poetry you are taking small and ordinary words. Words about ordinary things and-- and holding them close" in an interview with her, she answers, "Because they have a weight that I recognize that helps me stay balanced. And I think other people too. . . . It keeps me focused on things close to us. The material world that gives us a sense of gravity. And that we'd like-- we'd all like to be free to enjoy in our world" ("Naomi Shihab Nye: A Bill Moyers Interview").

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In her above-mentioned essay "Spiral Staircase," Nye underscores her way of approaching life from the viewpoint of everyday details as the most distinctive feature and the fundamental function of poetry, at least her poetry, comparing poetry to the process of renovating her house whereby the wall keeping the spectacular staircase out of sight is demolished: "Poetry takes out a wall and helps us see what was already there" (253). Likewise, in her essay "Our Shared Journey," she refers to the compulsion to see into the life of ordinary things as a major aspect of poetry and hence a key reason why poetry appeals to her: "One of the reasons poetry has always felt so appealing to me . . . is that it's a zoom lens into an intimate, below-the-surface world" (48). In fact, the conviction that poetry can serve as a catalyst for ruminating on everyday life particulars has become Nye's poetic vocation and chief motive for writing at all. She thus avers, "As poets we're attracted to little things and little stories" (qtd. in "Naomi Shihab Nye: Poet & Author"). She also avows overtly, "What drew me to poetry is the sense that everything is precious, and everything is worth noticing." She then elaborates on the subject of commonplace details, taking into account her work as a Poet in the Schools, asserting, "It's important to notice the details that make up our world, that connect us. I think we need to encourage that kind of attitude in children, in the young people we meet" (qtd. in Hirschfield 31). This invitation to implant her attitude towards frequent trivia in children might be the reason why she has accepted to judge a writing contest held for children whereby young authors have to write about their treasured objects. Having read the entries for the contest, Nye comments, "I am looking at every little weird thing in my house as it is my most treasured object right now" (qtd. in "Meet Our Contest Judge" 11). It is hardly surprising then that she introduces her poetry collection *19 Varieties of Gazelle*, defining the aim and function of poetry as follows: "Poetry slows us down, cherishes small 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" ("Introduction" xvi). She reiterates the same meaning when she

muses:

THERE IS A THAI SAYING: Life is so short, we must move very slowly. Being busy has become our calling card, our sign of success, our obsession--but poetry doesn't want us to be busy. When you live in a rapidly moving swirl, you can only view your surroundings with a glance. Poetry requires us to slow down, to take time to pause. (qtd. in Colloff 111)

Nye's interest in minute details of daily life seems to be an aspect not of her poetry alone but of her writing at large, as she points out in her essay "From One Friend to Another" with regard to her novel *Habibi* and picture book *Sitti's Secrets*, "the books are primarily about daily life and little things. I hope readers feel at home in them. This is always my biggest dream" (40).

Not only does Nye articulate the bearing her meditative attitude towards life's minor objects has on her poetry in terms of her poetic vocation and the function of poetry, but she also expresses this attitude outright in poetry. Thus, in her poem "The Traveling Onion" from *Yellow Glove*, she says with reference to familiar details, which she deems some sort of miracles, "I could kneel and praise / all small forgotten miracles" (2-3). Similarly, in her poem "From Here to There" from *Red Suitcase*, she speaks of attending to little things as a requirement for coping with life and fulfilling its various chores from the simplest ones such as emptying baskets and growing flowers in glasses to the most emotional and intellectual ones such as recovering memories, calling this requirement "readiness" and attributing it to an innate sense of order in man's constitution (1).

Everything needs readiness,  
baskets emptied,  
gladiolus spear placed in  
a glass.  
Before you begin,  
before you let yourself move  
from here to there,  
you attend to little things,  
a cat's mouth open and crying,  
a thin parade of ants  
along the sill.

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Something in the way we are made  
wants order. Wants three pillows  
lined across the head of the bed,  
wants porches swept and shades raised.  
Before we begin. Before we head into  
those secret rooms no one else  
has cleaned for years,  
where memories rest in heaps,  
without cabinets,  
and have only to be touched lightly  
to shine. (1-23)

She also acknowledges in her poem "Breaking the Fast" from *Red Suitcase* after citing a Japanese teacher's advice that one should wake up at first light and give up drowsiness:

Sometimes objects stun me,  
bamboo strainer, gray mug,  
sitting exactly where  
they were left.  
They have not slept  
or dreamt of lost faces.  
I touch them carefully,  
saying, tell me what you know. (10-17)

Last but not least, her poem "The Story, Around the Corner" from *You & Yours* epitomizes her interest in everyday life details through demonstrating the fact that no one is entirely acquainted with the actual, namely little and hence hidden, events of stories circulated by daily gossip and their development unless one experiences them oneself, i.e., unless one gets close to them and unveils their reality:

is not turning the way you thought  
it would turn, gently, in a little spiral loop,  
the way a child draws the tail of a pig.  
What came out of your mouth,  
a riff of common talk.  
As a sudden weather shift on a beach,  
sky looming mountains of cloud  
in a way you cannot predict

or guide, the story shuffles elements, darkens,  
takes its own side. And it is strange.  
Far more complicated than a few phrases  
pieced together around a kitchen table  
on a July morning in Dallas, say,  
a city you don't live in, where people  
might shop forever or throw a thousand stories  
away. You who carried or told a tiny bit of it  
aren't sure. Is this what we wanted?  
Stories wandering out,  
having their own free lives?  
Maybe they are planning something bad.  
A scrap or cell of talk you barely remember  
is growing into a weird body with many demands.  
One day soon it will stumble up the walk and knock,  
knock hard, and you will have to answer the door. (1-24)

Nye's disposition to focus her attention on life's common specifics has been testified to by many a critic and a scholar. Thus, Lorraine Mercer and Linda Storm refer to this disposition in their essay "Counter Narratives: Cooking Up Stories of Love and Loss in Naomi Shihab Nye's Poetry and Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*," interpreting it as Nye's strategy for accessing ultimate truths and truthful histories: "She [Nye] is attentive to the small details and everyday acts that represent larger truths and reveal rich personal and political histories" (34). Likewise, Samina Najmi spotlights Nye's inclination towards the insignificant and the usual accounting for it in terms of establishing connections among people: "Nye's poetry connects cultures and countries through emphasis on the small and the ordinary, insisting on the mundane and the everyday to stress human connections" (152).

In her PhD dissertation *Transformative Acts: Arab American Writing/Writing Arab America*, Lisa Suhair Majaj affirms that "Nye is above all a poet of the particular," arguing that "[h]er poems are often about everyday objects and seemingly insignificant incidents" (151, 154). In line with Majaj, Melani Angell Bromfield indicates in her MA thesis *Loosely Bound: A Collection of Poems* that Nye "writes about everyday subjects in everyday language," commenting that her "first task is simply to look around, to record what she observes before

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making judgments: in short, to consider" (8, 6). She traces this contemplative aspect of her poetry to "a resolution to look closely at the world and to store away all of the observations in the individual's attempt to connect to something beyond him or herself," which corresponds to Najmi's reading above (7).

Gregory Orfalea underlines the same meditative aspect of Nye's poetry in his essay "Doomed by Our Blood to Care: The Poetry of Naomi Shihab Nye" when he contends that "her work is faithful to the minute, but essential tasks of our lives, the luminous in the ordinary" (56). By the same token, in her review of Nye's poetry collection *Red Suitcase*, Alison Townsend, comparing Nye to her mentor William Stafford "with whom she shares an aesthetic of quiet under-statement and simple, direct language," maintains, "Nye finds her poetry in whatever she encounters around her. For this most spontaneous of poets, meaning resides in the ordinary and the everyday things of the world" (27). Seeing eye to eye with Townsend, Ibis Gómez-Vega remarks with respect to Nye's talent as a storyteller in her essay "The Art of Telling Stories in the Poetry of Naomi Shihab Nye," "As a poet she is, at the heart, a storyteller, one who focuses on the lives of everyday people, especially her own relatives, to understand the world around her" (245). In view of that, Bill Moyers acquaints the audience with Nye's poetry at the beginning of his TV interview with her, declaring, "Her poems speak of ordinary things -- things we take for granted until it's almost too late" ("Naomi Shihab Nye: A Bill Moyers Interview").

In like manner, Pamela Colloff begins her article on Nye, disclosing, "Her poetry finds meaning in the 'gleam of particulars,'" and when she concludes the article, she stresses, "her poetry still has the slow, deliberate cadence of a life carefully examined" (111). In her blog review of Nye's collection of poems *19 Varieties of Gazelle*, Naomi highlights Colloff's disclosure, explicating that it is these little things of everyday life that are behind the secret power of Nye's poetry whose value consists in helping nourish one's humanity: "the hidden strength of these poems lies largely in the minor details. . . . Through her poems we learn that these details keep us rooted in the

seemingly insignificant things that make us human." Equally, in his review of Nye's book of poetry *You & Yours*, Matthew Rothschild remarks, "The first half of the book is quieter, more conversational and observational, than the second half. . . ." (50).

Critics and scholars have also proved that not only Nye's poetry but also her prose reflects her predilection for familiar details, a fact Nye herself avows, as pointed out above. Thus, Mary Kay Blakely points out this analytical trend in her review of Nye's collection of essays *Never in a Hurry*, accrediting it on the grounds of presenting the reader with a larger view of life and singling it out as an aspect of her life too: "Nye's essays are vignettes that specialize in small moments. Exploring one scene, one character, one place at a time, . . . Nye's accretion of careful observations delivers a much larger view. Her unhurried explorations inform her writing as well as life itself. . . ." (3). In her PhD dissertation *Homeplace of Hands: Fractal Performativity of Vulnerable Resistance*, Diana L. Tigerlily ascribes this obsession with pondering over daily activities to a writer's basic instinct or, rather, defense mechanism to maintain his/her existence just as people who actually carry out these daily activities are hoping to achieve. Considering the act of writing itself among these daily activities, the writer's goal of maintaining his/her existence is, therefore, twofold. Tigerlily lists Nye among such surviving writers to whom she looks up as role-models that inspire her:

Throughout time people have resisted against silencing and have persisted amidst struggle by faithfully continuing life's daily creative actions. I identify these creative acts as vulnerable resistance in the mode of maintenance, the creating of homeplace through everyday aesthetic acts of maintenance that also have a practical function such as cleaning, weeding, painting (as both refined art and housekeeping), building houses, and writing. . . .

I begin with other writers and how they've inspired me through their own activist writings. I categorize their writings as maintenance based on how they narrate their relationship between creative voice and attention to daily activism. (168, 169)

Having covered Nye's interest in the details of everyday life,

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citing evidence from her views and opinions voiced in some of her interviews, essays, and other prose writings along with few of her poems that address such views and opinions outright as well as the views and opinions of various critics and scholars, it is time to investigate this interest in her poetry. The first poem worth examining with this respect is "Daily" from her poetry collection *Words under Words*. The poem celebrates some of one's daily activities that may go unnoticed due to the deadening effect of habit or their insignificant roles in life as some sort of holy worship:

These shriveled seeds we plant,  
corn kernel, dried bean,  
poke into loosened soil,  
cover over with measured fingertips

These T-shirts we fold into  
perfect white squares

These tortillas we slice and fry to crisp strips  
This rich egg scrambled in a gray clay bowl

This bed whose covers I straighten  
smoothing edges till blue quilt fits brown blanket  
and nothing hangs out

This envelope I address  
so the name balances like a cloud  
in the center of the sky

This page I type and retype  
This table I dust till the scarred wood shines  
This bundle of clothes I wash and hang and wash again  
like flags we share, a country so close  
no one needs to name it  
The days are nouns: touch them  
The hands are churches that worship the world (1-21)

The first thing that commands one's attention in this poem is the fact that all activities listed here belong to manual labor that is done by hands and that does not need much effort or skill to carry out, and hence it can be performed by any man, which emphasizes the

common and familiar nature of these activities. It is as if the poet wants to undermine the common belief that physical work is much less important and valuable than mental work. In other words, the poet aims to say that any work is worthy of respect and admiration as long as it is accomplished sincerely and devotedly as one prays to God: "The hands are churches that worship the world" (21). The word "world" here underscores the secular character of this new worship in contrast to the usual religious rituals. Otherwise, the poet would have said "churches that worship *Heaven*" rather than "*the world*." Accordingly, Nye argues that insignificant chores of everyday life deserve one's attention and earnestness as much as the most sublime activity of life, namely prayer to God, demonstrating the fact that if these little chores are the be-all and end-all of the uncreative work of such people as the gardener, the housekeeper, the housesitter, and even the housewife, they should also be the underpinning goal and distinctive aspiration of all people including artists and writers who credit themselves with producing creative works for these daily activities bring one nearer to the world or, rather, the meaning and truth of the world the same as nature does for the Romantic Pantheist Wordsworth: "And I have felt / A presence that disturbs me with the joy / Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime" ("Tintern Abbey" 95-97). This is the reason why Nye claims that "days are nouns," asking people to "touch them," meaning that life in terms of days is empty, i.e., meaningless (mere names or, rather, signifiers, e.g., Saturday, Sunday, etc., without the signified or concepts in Saussurean terms), unless one endows them with purpose and value (touches them) through devoting oneself to the chores of everyday life not only physically but also mentally by contemplating their ultimate truth. Then, one can flesh out days with meaning by fulfilling and appreciating the real worth of life.

Nye's predilection for little details is also reflected here in her descriptive technique. Every activity she lists in the poem she describes in minute detail as an experienced housewife who has an extensive knowledge of various domestic chores from the most exerting ones such as gardening to the simplest ones such as dusting. Thus, it is curious how she pays heed to the diverse shapes of the seeds she plants in her garden: "shriveled seeds . . . , / corn kernel,

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dried bean," as well as how she is conversant with the fact that the soil should be "loosen" so that seeds can grow and the fact that she should "cover" these seeds "over with measured fingertips" (1-2, 3). The same precision goes for other domestic chores such as folding "T-shirts" into "perfect white squares," slicing and frying "tortillas" "to crisp strips," preparing a scrambled egg in "the gray clay bowl" before cooking it, straightening the sheets of the "bed" so that "blue quilt fits brown blanket, / and nothing hangs out," addressing the "envelope" "so the name balances like a cloud / in the center of the sky," and dusting the "table" until "the scarred wood shines" (5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10-11, 12, 13-14, 16). Citing typing and retyping pages among these domestic chores stresses the intrinsic value of such chores, elevating them to the status of artistic works. Besides, it singles out the housewife of the poem, i.e., Nye, as a woman writer, which indicates that Nye is writing about herself. Likewise, the fact that she hangs her clothes rather than using the tumble dryer shows that Nye is writing about herself for only people living in hot, dry states like Texas can resort to drying their clothes by hanging instead of using a dryer. Nye's image where she compares clothes to "flags we share" as well as to "a country so close / no one needs to name it" is quite insightful. She contends that clothes, like the chore of washing them, are among the insignificant, everyday details one fails to notice. Even though they are like flags in being hung up in the air while drying and therefore, they should catch people's eyes, unlike flags, they are taken for granted by people like one's own country, which, ironically, a flag represents. Comparing clothes to one's native country underlines their importance as a shelter of comfort and security.

The use of parallelism throughout the poem by recruiting the grammatical structure that begins the lines with the demonstrative pronouns "These" and "This" to refer to the objects for whose sake the various domestic chores are carried out highlights the common, hence, familiar nature of these inventoried objects: "These shriveled seeds," "These T-shirts," "These tortillas," "This rich egg," etc. (1, 5, 7, 8).

Another poem that is in line with "Daily" in that it likens inconsequential activities of everyday life to the holy act of

worshiping God is "Different Ways to Pray," which is the title poem of Nye's first collection of poems *Different Ways to Pray* and which is also included in her two other books of poetry *19 Varieties of Gazelle* as well as *Words under Words*:

There was the method of kneeling,  
a fine method, if you lived in a country  
where stones were smooth.  
The women dreamed wistfully of bleached courtyards,  
hidden corners where knee fit rock.  
Their prayers were weathered rib bones,  
small calcium words uttered in sequence,  
as if this shedding of syllables could somehow  
fuse them to the sky.

There were the men who had been shepherds so long  
they walked like sheep.  
Under the olive trees, they raised their arms—  
Hear us! We have pain on earth!  
We have so much pain there is no place to store it!  
But the olives bobbed peacefully  
in fragrant buckets of vinegar and thyme.  
At night the men ate heartily, flat bread and white cheese,  
and were happy in spite of the pain,  
because there was also happiness.

Some prized the pilgrimage,  
wrapping themselves in new white linen  
to ride buses across miles of vacant sand.  
When they arrived at Mecca  
they would circle the holy places,  
on foot, many times,  
they would bend to kiss the earth  
and return, their lean faces housing mystery.

While for certain cousins and grandmothers  
the pilgrimage occurred daily,  
lugging water from the spring  
or balancing the baskets of grapes.  
These were the ones present at births,  
humming quietly to perspiring mothers.  
The ones stitching intricate needlework into children's dresses,

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forgetting how easily children soil clothes.

There were those who didn't care about praying.  
The young ones. The ones who had been to America.  
They told the old ones, you are wasting your time.  
Time?—The old ones prayed for the young ones.  
They prayed for Allah to mend their brains,  
for the twig, the round moon,  
to speak suddenly in a commanding tone.

And occasionally there would be one  
who did none of this,  
the old man Fowzi, for example, Fowzi the fool,  
who beat everyone at dominoes,  
insisted he spoke with God as he spoke with goats,  
and was famous for his laugh. (1-48)

The poem gives a detailed account of Muslim rituals of prayer in terms of kneeling down and pilgrimage equating them with the daily rituals of ordinary people's life such as eating, drinking, harvesting, shepherding, filling buckets from a water well, balancing baskets full of grapes, helping out mothers in labor, stitching children's clothes, etc., as if to affirm the inherent value and the shared character of both kinds of rituals. Nye seems to endorse everyday rituals of life since she associates religious rituals with suffering and troubles while common life's rituals, though generally burdensome, with content and happiness. She even goes so far in her endorsement of daily rituals of life by the end of the poem as to hold them in high esteem, disparaging religious rituals when she points out how younger generations of Muslims who have been to America sink into apathy towards any form of prayer while an old non-practicing Muslim such as "Fowzi" who enjoys himself all the time is in very good terms with God insisting that "he spoke with God as he spoke with goats" (45, 47).

In the first stanza, Nye depicts the hardships Muslims go through when they perform their prayers, particularly during kneeling down. Lucky Muslims are those who "live in a country / where stones were smooth" (2-3). On the other hand, unlucky Muslims, especially

women, "dreamed wistfully of bleached courtyards" since it is their domestic chore to wash and clean clothes as well as of "hidden corners where knee fit rock" (4, 5). These Muslims attend their prayers in the open air and apparently in severe weather conditions since their "prayers were weathered rib bones" (6). The fact that their rib bones protrude from their chest implies that they are emaciated or, at least, skinny, probably due to observing the ritual of fasting, fatigue, destitution, or all together, which attests to their devoutness and piety, being able to pray despite their weakness and exhaustion or wearing themselves out in praying. Saying prayers in "small calcium words" suggests that their mouths are almost always open that one can see their teeth, which reveals that they are so absorbed in uttering their prayers out of commitment and dedication that they seem in a trance: "as if this shedding of syllables could somehow / fuse them to the sky" (8-9). The Muslims Nye is portraying here appear to live in a primitive society or an undeveloped country since they conduct their prayers in a courtyard that is not paved or floored, let alone covered with carpets, and outdoors rather than in mosques and since they are skeletal on account of poor health or impoverishment, which proves that Nye's notion of a Muslim country or, at least, the notion the poem presenting is an outsider's or foreigner's.

The second stanza sheds light on a different kind of prayer, namely the daily rituals of the happy, though painful, life of shepherds. The shepherds' long career seemingly has bearing on their character so much so that "they walked like sheep," which means in Christian symbolism that they are very peaceful and submissive, i.e., they would tolerate pain without complaining. Thus, part of their prayer consists in lifting their arms up under the olive trees while calling on God: "Hear us! We have pain on earth! / We have so much pain there is no place to store it!" (13-14). The most important part of their prayer, however, lies in carrying out their daily chores of harvesting olives and preserving them "in fragrant buckets of vinegar and thyme" by day while eating "heartily, flat bread and white cheese" by night (17). The fact that these shepherds have a good appetite despite their crude food and backbreaking toil testifies that these chores or, rather, rituals of everyday life are the source of their happiness, hence their importance. Consequently, Nye concludes the

stanza joining the independent clause in line 17 with a complex sentence to form a compound-complex sentence whereby she emphasizes that these men "were happy in spite of the pain, / because there was also happiness" (18-19).

In the third stanza, Nye draws the reader's attention to another fundamental ritual of Muslim worship, that is, pilgrimage. She gives a meticulous description of the various essentials of the pilgrimage such as the kind of outfit the pilgrims wear, the transportation they usually use, the holy city they head for, and the services they perform there. Traditionally, pilgrims enfold "themselves in new white linen," traveling often by bus "across miles of vacant sand" of Saudi Arabia's deserts, aiming for the holy city of Mecca (21, 22, 23). At Mecca, "they would circle the holy places," the honorable Kaaba to be exact, "on foot, many times," seven times to be precise, and then "they would bend to kiss the earth," in reference to kneeling down during prayer (24, 25, 26). However, Nye seems to raise serious doubts as to the validity of the important Muslim rituals of prayer and pilgrimage when she reflects that after bowing to kiss the ground the pilgrims would "return, their lean faces housing mystery" (27). The epithet "lean" once again highlights either the exhaustion or the poor health of the Muslim worshippers.

The fourth stanza presents a secular kind of pilgrimage that takes place on day-to-day basis in contrast to the Muslim one that is made once a year. Pilgrims here are very likely Nye's Palestinian "cousins and grandmothers" (28). By "cousins" here, Nye seems to refer to the female ones since she joins the two words "cousins" and "grandmothers" together through coordination and since she associates them with such activities as delivering women and stitching clothes. In keeping with the shepherd's daily rituals of prayer, the pilgrimage of Nye's next of kin comprises everyday domestic chores of "lugging water from the spring / or balancing the baskets of grapes" (30-31). It also includes soothing down women in labor by singing softly to them: "These were the ones present at births / humming quietly to perspiring mothers" (32-33). Last but not least, the Palestinian woman is taken to embroidering children's dresses: "The ones stitching

intricate needlework into children's dresses" (34). That Palestinian women conceive of their daily chores as holy rituals, that they help one another out in need, and that they tire themselves out with stitching needlework onto their children's clothes unmindful of "how easily children soil clothes" demonstrate how happy they are or, at least, how far they enjoy their life as well as themselves (35).

In the fifth stanza, Nye shows that though some Muslims prefer the ritual of prayer while others favor that of pilgrimage, the young Muslims who have been to the States are completely indifferent to any form of Muslim prayer or worship, considering it a waste of time. That these young Muslims view their religious rituals as useless underlines their impiety and profanity. Accordingly, they are reproached by old Muslims, who pray to Allah to guide the young who are led astray, "the twig, the round moon," to the right path by fixing their minds: "The old ones prayed for the young ones. / They prayed for Allah to mend their brains" (41, 39-40). Referring to young Muslims as a small stem or a full moon underscores both their youth and their immaturity simultaneously. The fact that old Muslims speak to the young impious "suddenly in a commanding tone" testifies to their fanaticism or, at least, their rigidness and intolerance. Thus, both practicing old Muslims and non-practicing young Muslims are complete failures from Nye's point of view, which raises a big question mark with regard to the validity of religion in general.

The sixth and final stanza acquaints the reader with a peculiar type of Muslim. In contradiction to the old uncompromising Muslims of the previous stanza, in this stanza Nye introduces an old non-practicing Muslim who is not committed to any of the preceding prayers either the religious or the secular: "And occasionally there would be one / who did none of this, / the old man Fowzi, for example, Fowzi the fool" (43-45). The adverb "occasionally" accentuates the peculiarity of the Fowzi Muslim type. The epithet "fool" is obviously used by the old rigid Muslims of the fifth stanza, which implies that what Fowzi does is not endorsed by them, and hence by conservative Islam. The only daily rituals Fowzi performs is enjoying himself in life through such recreational activities as playing dominoes, which he is very good at since he beats everyone. For him, such secular rituals actually stand for the religious ones or, at worst,

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make up for them because he "insisted he spoke with God as he spoke with goats" (47). The fact that Fowzi leads a happy life, being "famous for his laugh" side by side with the fact that Nye depicts his secular rituals of having fun in religious terms palpably indicate that Nye is arguing in favor of everyday minor activities and against religious practices of various kinds, most likely against religion itself (48).

Unmistakably, however, Nye's poem is an expression of her faith in diversity. It is an invitation to prejudiced people in general and Muslim extremists in particular to acknowledge and tolerate the other, for this will help promote world peace and avert war. In an interview with Joy Castro, she articulates:

Well, people who consider the world an interesting place filled with delicious variations always hope to get to know many other people who are unlike themselves in certain ways: different colors or cultures or food-preferences or song-styles or religions. . . . We'd have fewer school shootings if kids could remember this. Those people unlike us: how to have empathy with them, for them? Those lives seemingly unlike our own: how are we connected, ultimately? We all sleep, eat, have dreams and loves and hopes and sorrows. I want writing to be connected to all of this. ("Nomad, Switchboard, Poet" 227)

Thus, Majaj comments on the poem, explaining, "Although Nye clearly evokes her Palestinian Muslim background here, this is not simply an 'ethnic' poem. Rather, it uses the imagery of an Arab landscape in order to make a larger point about diversity and commonality." Furthermore, she turns the reader's attention to the crucial fact that prayer for Nye is not "modes of kneeling and making pilgrimage," but "it also includes – in what is for Nye a characteristic homage to dailiness – such activities as 'lugging water from the spring / or balancing the baskets of grapes'" (153). Seeing eye to eye with Majaj, Tigerlily remarks with reference to the poem, "Naomi Shihab Nye stitches alchemy, dailiness, and prayer into the handwork of maintaining family needs" (169).

Nye seems to follow a dichotomous technique in that the odd

stanzas talk about religious rituals while the even stanzas talk about secular rituals, namely daily activities.

The third poem of interest with respect to everyday life details is "The Small Vases from Hebron." The poem is published among Nye's poetry collection *Fuel*. Like "Different Ways to Pray," "The Small Vases from Hebron" is about Palestinians: their life, habits, and customs. It throws light on the reality that for people under occupation and on the brink of death day in day out, little things of everyday life and little lives themselves are of great significance and value, hence deeply appreciated by them. The poem is inspired by the cowardly attack on a mosque in Hebron while Muslims and their children are praying:

Tip their mouths open to the sky.  
Turquoise, amber,  
the deep green with fluted handle,  
pitcher the size of two thumbs,  
tiny lip and graceful waist.

Here we place the smallest flower  
which could have lived invisibly  
in loose soil beside the road,  
sprig of succulent rosemary,  
bowing mint.

They grow deeper in the center of the table.

Here we entrust the small life,  
thread, fragment, breath.  
And it bends. It waits all day.  
As the bread cools and the children  
open their gray copybooks  
to shape the letter that looks like  
a chimney rising out of a house.

And what do the headlines say?

Nothing of the smaller petal  
perfectly arranged inside the larger petal  
or the way tinted glass filters light.  
Men and boys, praying when they died,  
fall out of their skins.  
The whole alphabet of living,

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heads and tails of words,  
sentences, the way they said,  
"Ya'Allah!" when astonished,  
or "ya'ani" for "I mean"—  
a crushed glass under the feet  
still shines.  
But the child of Hebron sleeps  
with the thud of her brothers falling  
and the long sorrow of the color red. (1-34)

Here Nye describes the Palestinians' habit of adorning their dining tables with small beautiful vases in Hebron. The vases, though attractive, are tiny and inconspicuous. They come in various colors: "Turquoise, amber, the deep green" and have fluted handles (2-3). However, they are "the size of two thumbs" with small rim, elegant neck, and mouths tipped "open to the sky" (4, 1). The Palestinians use this small, almost invisible vase to keep a life just as small and invisible like a "sprig of succulent rosemary" or "bowing mint": "Here we place the smallest flower / which could have lived invisibly / in loose soil beside the road" (6-8). That these plants grow undetectably on the side of the road indicates that they are most likely subject to annihilation or, at least, negligence, which is the reason why the Palestinians single them out for special care and attention: "Here we entrust the small life, / thread, fragment, breath" (12-13). The epithets "thread, fragment, breath" highlight the vulnerability and fragility of this life. Thus, Nye remarks that such delicate plants "grow deeper in the center of the table" than by roadside (11). The little details of the small life of these plants go hand in hand with the little details of the Palestinians' everyday life. For example, as the vulnerable plant "bends" and "waits all day," "the bread cools / and the children open their gray copybooks" to do their homework (15-17). Yet these minor details of simple lives, though they constitute the basic essentials of their own lives, are disregarded by world as well as public media: "And what do the headlines say?" (19). Such prejudiced media miss the beauty hidden in these simple lives. For instance, they do not call attention to the symmetrical arrangement of the petals inside the

flower with the little ones growing inwards while the bigger ones growing outwards nor to the way the translucent glass tinges light passing through it with its mesmerizing colors: "Nothing of the smaller petal / perfectly arranged inside the larger petal / or the way tinted glass filters light" ( 20-21). The mass media focus their attention only on the major catastrophes befalling the Palestinians of Hebron such as the atrocious attack on one of their mosques while they are attending a prayer, and even then they transiently touch on their life in terms of the figures of dead bodies: "Men and boys, praying when they died, / fall out of their skins" (23-24). The terrorists do not discriminate adults from children, murdering all. The fact that Palestinian victims pray to God proves both their piety and their peacefulness. The media's silence on the little details of Palestinians' life and their total neglect of the latent beauties of these details can not wipe Palestinians off the face of the earth or diminish their value as human beings for "a crushed glass under the feet / still shines" (30-31). The "crushed glass" here is a reference to the obliteration of small lives such as the glass vase plant and so to the disregard of everyday life details. After all, "Nye uses the vases, fragile glass containers," as Ibis Gómez-Vega explains in her essay "Extreme Realities: Naomi Shihab Nye's Essays and Poems," "as a metaphor for the many fragile lives damaged by the violence in the Middle East" (125). In other words, Nye argues that by discounting these people through reducing them to just a number of fatalities, one is belittling not only their lives in toto, but also the small details underpinning these lives, which shows the significance and worth of these details for Nye. Consequently, she contends that the men and the boys who die daily are more than flesh and blood, providing the reader with minor details of their life such as the way they use language, saying "'Ya'Allah!' when astonished, / or 'ya'ani' for 'I mean'" (28-29). These people are a "whole alphabet of living, / heads and tails of words, / sentences" (25-26). This is why Nye states with regard to violence and war, "I simply cannot believe that people could commit acts of violence so easily if they imagined one another's lives" (qtd. in Ahmed). She also cites the famous Arabic scholar Salma Jayyusi, who reasons, "If we read one another, we won't kill one another" (qtd. in Nye, "Letter from Naomi Shihab Nye"). Nye concludes the poem, emphasizing the media's

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negligence and apathy. She does this by underlining a different kind of negligence and apathy, this time a positive and innocent one; namely that of sleeping children. Again, the image of sleeping children, child being another example of a small life like the fragile plant, accentuates the importance and value of little details of everyday life: "But the child of Hebron sleeps / with the thud of her brothers falling / and the long sorrow of the color red" (32-34). Nye specifies children in particular since they are the only beings liable to sleep under the circumstances.

Commenting on the poem in her essay "The Politics of Poetry," Sumaiya Ahmed emphasizes the importance of details in delineating one's life and defining the identities of things so that people might get to know one another and see how close and typical the lives they lead are:

Without the details that underline the humanity of a place, places remain just that, places. Once we notice the details . . . it is easier to comprehend how close to our own lives seemingly disconnected situations hundreds of miles away really are. We may grow numb to numbers, the body counts after conflicts, but it is difficult not to be permeable to the fragile, silent moments of beauty to which Nye's poetry gives voice.

By the same token, in her article "Arab American Women's Writing and September 11: Contrapuntality and Associative Remembering," Sirène Harb believes that Nye's interest in the minute details of her native people's life serves the cultural purpose of undermining negative stereotypes about them: "Nye's use of the autobiographical and her revelation of intimate details about her life, family, and friends work to counter not only stereotypes about Arabs but also about Americans" (25). What both Ahmed and Harb say is in accord with Najmi's understanding of Nye's interest in details as fulfilling the function of bringing people together mentioned earlier. Najmi also adds that such social function helps people avoid violence and war, which is in keeping with Nye's suggestions on how to end violence cited above: "A sense of shared humanity enables empathy, which

renders violence against one another irrational, homicidal, and self-destructive" (152).

Another poem that addresses the issue of minor details of everyday life, this time not in relation to insignificant activities and habits but, rather, in relation to common objects and things is "Famous." The poem belongs to Nye's book of poetry *Words under Words* and reads as follows:

The river is famous to the fish.

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

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

The tear is famous, briefly, to the cheek.

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

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

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

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

I want to be famous in the way a pulley is famous,  
or a buttonhole, not because it did anything spectacular,  
but because it never forgot what it could do. (1-21)

By resorting to parallelism through the employment of the recurrent structure ". . . is/be famous to . . .," Nye brings together a number of articles that share one remarkable characteristic, i.e., they are known and important only to things that are somehow associated with the way they fulfill their function and serve their purpose in life. Otherwise, they remain obscure and irrelevant to the rest of the world.

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The word "famous" in the poem is a synonym for "identified by" and "relevant to." Thus, the river is identified by the fish and is relevant to them because it signifies life for them. On the other hand, the river is not quite familiar to or necessary for the whale, the ship, the lighthouse, and the like, let alone such utterly irrelevant things as the car, the bus, or the train. Equally, the "loud voice" is quite known to and closely associated with "silence" since silence is considered the negation of voice at large. If voice cancels out silence, it is natural that loud voice "would inherit the earth," a fact silence recognizes the first time there is voice, i.e., early on "before anybody said so" (3-4). Similarly, the cat snoozing on the fence is absolutely familiar to the birds monitoring it from their birdhouse for both happen to live in the same garden and are situated within each other's sight. Meanwhile, it is totally unknown to birds in the garden next door or anywhere else. The tear is also identified by and relevant to, though temporarily, the cheek over which it runs but is not identified by or relevant to such parts of the body as the back, the waist, and the legs. The idea one carries within one's chest, Nye goes on, is important only to the one thinking it over not any other man. Likewise, the boot one wears is more common to the ground it treads than the dress shoe, which is common merely to a floor. Finally, the bent photograph is very much known to the person who keeps it while it is entirely unknown to the person it depicts. Nye then expresses her desire to be famous like ordinary nobodies who cross streets every day, dragging their legs out of exhaustion, and yet manage to "smile while crossing" as well as smile back at one another, or like little children who smear themselves with candy while their parents wait in the grocery line (16). Nye's wish to associate herself with common, inconsequential people and young children spotlights the familiar and insignificant nature of the objects and things described above. The fact that these ordinary people take the initiative to smile, and the fact that the small children are enjoying themselves eating candy attest to the happiness underpinning the life of both. Correspondingly, the fact that ordinary people care to smile back proves their courtesy and decency. In other words, by underlining the positive aspects of these people's simple, obscure

lives, Nye affirms their intrinsic value and hence the value and importance of the immaterial objects and things inventoried in the poem. The message she wants to get across is that though these things and people are of no consequence, on the face of it, they acquire their worth and significance through embracing their vocations and performing their roles in life. She graphically sums up this message in the final stanza when she reiterates her desire to be famous, this time, like "a pulley" or "a buttonhole," seemingly two trivial objects, "not because it did anything spectacular / but because it never forgot what it could do" (20-21).

The following poems draw attention not to little details of everyday life but, rather, to one minor detail or insignificant object exclusively. Other details may be touched on transiently throughout the poem, but are not the be-all and end-all of the poem. The first of these poems is "Yellow Glove," which is the title poem of Nye's collection of poems *Yellow Glove* and is also published in her poetry collection *Words under Words*. The poem is written in prose, and it relates the story of how as a child, Nye loses her yellow glove only to find it three months later, and what it represents for her:

What can a yellow glove mean in a world of motorcars  
and governments?

I was small, like everyone. Life was a string of  
precautions: Don't kiss the squirrel before you bury  
him, don't suck candy, pop balloons, drop watermelons,  
watch TV. When the new gloves appeared one  
Christmas, tucked in soft tissue, I heard it trailing me:  
Don't lose the yellow gloves.

I was small, there was too much to remember. One day,  
waving at a stream—the ice had cracked, winter  
chipping down, soon we would sail boats and roll into  
ditches—I let a glove go. Into the stream, sucked under  
the street. Since when did streets have mouths? I walked  
home on a desperate road. Gloves cost money. We  
didn't have much. I would tell no one. I would wear the  
yellow glove that was left and keep the other hand in a  
pocket. I knew my mother's eyes had tears they had not  
cried yet, I didn't want to be the one to make them flow.

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It was the prayer I spoke secretly, folding socks, lining up donkeys in windowsills. To be good, a promise made to the roaches who scouted my closet at night. If you don't get in my bed, I will be good. And they listened. I had a lot to fulfill.

The months rolled down like towels out of a machine. I sang and drew and fattened the cat. Don't scream, don't lie, don't cheat, don't fight—you could hear it anywhere. A pebble could show you how to be smooth, tell the truth. A field could show how to sleep without walls. A stream could remember how to drift and change—next June I was stirring the stream like a soup, telling my brother dinner would be ready if he'd only hurry up with the bread, when I saw it. The yellow glove draped on a twig. A muddy survivor. A quiet flag.

Where had it been in the three gone months? I could wash it, fold it in my winter drawer with its sister, no one in that world would ever know. There were miracles on Harvey Street. Children walked home in yellow light. Trees were reborn and gloves traveled far, but returned. A thousand miles later, what can a yellow glove mean in a world of bankbooks and stereos?

Part of the difference between floating and going down.(1-41)

That Nye chooses to write about her childhood is in keeping with her obsession with familiar minor details, for people usually underestimate the life of a child as well as the events and objects pertaining to it. Besides, children have a good eye for details, which may be the reason why she "wrote about all the little stuff a kid would write about: amazement over things, cats, wounded squirrels found in the street, my friend who moved away, trees, teachers, my funny grandma," as she comments in an interview with Rachel Barenblat ("Interview with Naomi Shihab Nye"). Moreover, both children and old people, Nye believes, have the power to appreciate the underpinning value of life. "Maybe when we're recently arrived or

soon-to-depart, we're more perceptive? . . . Life feels more precious, fragile, immediate, when we're very young and very old?" she states in another interview with Book Wholesalers, Inc. ("Author Interview"). Nye begins her poem with a speculative question that sarcastically casts light on its theme, namely the significance of little things of daily life: "What can a yellow glove mean in a world of motorcars and governments?" (1-2). The sarcasm issues from the fact that the answer expected by people interested in "motorcars" and "governments" to this question is very likely: "A yellow glove means nothing." She singles out "motorcars" and "governments" for comparison with the yellow glove since modern technology and politics are among the most appealing and fundamental topics to most people as if to say that her little glove is as valuable and important to her as these topics are to other people. She introduces the second stanza by stressing the idea of smallness: "I was small, like everyone" (3). Then she sets out to define what a life of a small child is like, illustrating that it is a list of obnoxious restrictions s/he has to put up with: "Don't kiss the squirrel before you bury / him, don't suck candy, pop balloons, drop watermelons, / watch TV" (4-6). Out of this bleak atmosphere, there looms up on the horizon "one / Christmas" an object she dearly cherishes and is fascinated with, that is, the yellow gloves, "tucked in soft tissue" (6-7). She becomes attached to these gloves so much that she imagines that they whisper this admonition into her ears: "Don't lose the yellow gloves" (8).

Drawing on parallelism, Nye begins the third stanza with the same clause she uses to introduce the second stanza, namely "I was small," so as to reinforce the idea of smallness and therefore, enhance the theme. The parallelism also aims to underscore the fact that little children have a gift for observation and a photographic memory whereby they can recall events and scenes with great precision: "I was small, there was too much to remember" (9). Thereupon, she embarks on giving the reader an insight into the details of the yellow glove story, dwelling on insignificant specifics. She relates how one of her pair of yellow gloves slips out of her hand while she is waving it alongside a freezing street stream. With the weather getting warmer and the snow thawing as a result, the current of water flows rapidly carrying the glove away where it disappears under the splitting ice:

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One day, waving at a stream—the ice had cracked, winter chipping down, soon we would sail boats and roll into ditches—I let a glove go. Into the stream, sucked under the street. (9-13)

The young Nye is deeply shocked and returns home in despair: "Since when did streets have mouths? I walked / home on a desperate road" (13-14). Her concern over losing the glove stems from three reasons. First, she is aware of the trouble her parents take to purchase these gloves since the "gloves cost money," and apparently, her family is in dire financial straits: "We / didn't have much" (14-15). Second, she fears that she may break her mother's heart on the grounds that her mother's failure to buy her a new pair of gloves will cause her to feel guilty of not keeping her daughter's hands warm, and being of a very sentimental nature, she would cry her eyes out: "I knew my mother's eyes had tears they had not / cried yet, I didn't want to be the one to make them flow" (17-18). Third, she wants to "be good," which is both the prayer she mutters while performing her daily little chores such as "folding socks" and "lining / up donkeys in windowsills" and the promise she gives to the roaches inspecting her closet if they keep away from her bed (19-20). The roaches "listened," and so she "had a lot to fulfill" (22, 23). Nye's extreme distress at dropping the glove shows her sensitive and caring nature. Accordingly, she decides to keep the matter secret, and she devises a plan to cover up the missing glove by wearing the remaining pair of glove while tucking her other hand into her pocket: "I would tell no one" (15). Nye's reference to the minor activities and habits of her everyday life as a child such as doubling her clothes, aligning her toys, and watching roaches is in line with her predilection for details and hence with the poem's theme.

In Stanza Four, Nye points out that three months have elapsed since she loses the yellow glove, giving a detailed account of the various activities she conducts, the strict instructions she has to comply with, and the attractive places she prefers to visit day after day during this period, which are all little particulars of her daily life that do not matter to anyone but herself. Thus, she indicates that months slip by "like towels out of a machine" in a reference to the hygienic

practice of drying oneself or domestic objects, which is another minor everyday activity undertaken by all members of society including herself (24). She then explains how she spends her days singing, drawing, and feeding her cat. She also remembers that wherever she goes, she is directed: "Don't scream, don't / lie, don't cheat, don't fight" (25-26). However, she is fond of playing outdoors in fields and by streams where she can stumble upon pebbles, which are precious objects she treasures, for a pebble teaches her "how to be smooth, / tell the truth" (27-28). Besides, she likes fields because a "field could show how to sleep without / walls" (28-29). She also frequents streams probably hoping that she may come across her lost pair of glove. Knowing that a "stream could remember how to drift and change," one day the following June she could stir "the stream like a soup, / telling my brother dinner would be ready if he'd only / hurry up with the bread" (29, 30-32). Just at that moment, she chances upon her dear missing glove spreading over a twig like a flag and completely soiled: "A muddy survivor. A quiet flag" (33). The image of stirring the stream as if it were a soup is also taken from Nye's trivial domestic chores of everyday life. The flag image is suggestive of the victory both Nye and the glove achieve against the stream, in the glove's case, and against disappointment and despair, in Nye's case.

Nye begins the fifth stanza wondering about the whereabouts of the yellow glove during the three bygone months. Now that her vanished glove has been retrieved, she can wash it and tuck it in her winter drawer side by side with its counterpart with no one noticing, which underlines the fact that she manages to keep the matter secret. Once again, she defines her relationship to the glove through the daily petty chores such as washing and folding clothes. She reads the event of recovering the glove in terms of miracles, remarking that this miracle is among other three miracles that take place in her street, the other two being children going home in the sunshine and the rebirth of trees, both are of no consequence for grown-ups:

There were miracles on Harvey Street. Children walked home in yellow light. Trees were reborn and gloves traveled far, but returned. (36-39)

The poem comes full circle when Nye concludes it on the same

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speculative note she begins with, questioning the significance of her yellow glove, which has traveled a long distance, in light of modern-day life's interests such as money and state-of-the-art technology: "A thousand miles later, what can / a yellow glove mean in a world of bankbooks and stereos?" (39-40). This time, nevertheless, she provides the reader with an insightful answer. At its face value, the answer discloses the fact that the gloves are as important to her as or, even, more important than these public interests, a fact which constitutes "[p]art of the difference between floating and going down," namely the difference between keeping the gloves and losing them (41). This difference is only peculiar to Nye and common poor people like her family, who are strangers to fancy life of bankbooks and stereos. On an allegorical level, the answer can be interpreted in a didactic sense as referring to the difference between perseverance, i.e., "floating," and despondency, i.e., "going down." In other words, the soiled lost glove stands for people like the young Nye, who, despite the endless troubles they have to run into and the appalling hardships they have to endure, hang on so as to achieve their goals in life, in Nye's case "to be good," and therefore, end up successful, flying the flag of victory.

The second poem among those that center upon one little object in particular is "Hello," which traces the night journey a rat makes to a dining room table. Like "Yellow Glove," "Hello" belongs to Nye's collection of poems *Words under Words*:

Some nights  
the rat with pointed teeth  
makes his long way back  
to the bowl of peaches.  
He stands on the dining room table  
sinking his tooth  
drinking the pulp  
of each fruity turned-up face  
knowing you will read  
this message and scream.  
It is his only text,  
to take and take in darkness,

to be gone before you awaken  
and your giant feet  
start creaking the floor.

Where is the mother of the rat?  
The father, the shredded nest,  
which breath were we taking  
when the rat was born,  
when he lifted his shivering snout  
to rafter and rivet and stone?  
I gave him the names of the devil,  
seared and screeching names,  
I would not enter those rooms  
without a stick to guide me,  
I leaned on the light, shuddering,  
and the moist earth under the house,  
the trailing tails of clouds,  
said he was in the closet,  
the drawer of candles,  
his nose was a wick.

How would we live together  
with our sad shoes and hideouts,  
our lock on the door  
and his delicate fingered paws  
that could clutch and grip,  
his blank slate of fur  
and the pillow where we press our faces?  
The bed that was a boat is sinking.  
And the shores of morning loom up  
lined with little shadows,  
things we never wanted to be, or meet,  
and all the rats are waving hello. (1-43)

The first stanza describes the rat's night journey to the dining room table in details. The rat sets out on its nocturnal journey not on regular basis since Nye restricts the journey's time to "[s]ome nights" (1). Nye then draws the reader's attention to the most distinctive physical feature of a rat, particularly for children, namely its "pointed teeth," which are both its defense against enemies' assaults and its tool of nibbling at food (2). That the rat "makes his long way back / to the

bowl of peaches" highlights its utmost caution in terms of the detours it has to make to avoid being spotted by others, which is why it undertakes its journey by night in the first place (3-4). As soon as the rat reaches the dining room, it stands on the table and begins gnawing at the peaches, "drinking the pulp / of each fruity turned-up face" (7-8). Nye takes the rat's act of biting into fruits as a message to frighten people away, "knowing you will read / this message and scream" (9-10). Sneaking up on people while asleep and vanishing before they wake up is the only text it can create to get its message across. The image of man's giant feet treading the squeaking floor, which must be naturally wooden, as well as the description of the rat's route as being long at the outset of the stanza demonstrate Nye's deep empathy with the rat so much so that she depicts the household surroundings from its own standpoint.

In the second stanza, Nye expresses her great wonder at the secrecy and mystery surrounding the rat's life, which runs parallel to the life of the household without their being entirely aware of its existence. Therefore, Nye raises such curious questions about the obscure details of the rat's life as "[w]here is the mother of the rat / the father, the shredded nest"? and "which breath were we taking / when the rat was born" or when it is sniffing "rafter and rivet and stone" (16-17, 18-19, 21). She then compares it to the devil, being as stealthy in movement and sinister in appearance as him. She also calls it "seared and screeching names," that is, names that signify its dark color and squeaking sound (23). Considering these menacing attributes of the rat, Nye would never dare to enter the rooms frequented by the rat "without a stick to guide me," without the light switched on, or without trembling nevertheless (25). She can know its whereabouts in the room through "the trailing tails of clouds" of "the moist earth under the house" it leaves behind (28, 27). Thus, she finds the traces of the rat "in the closet" and "the drawer of candles" where it has bitten the wicks (29, 30).

In the third stanza, Nye inquires what people's reactions and feelings would be if they knew that they coexisted with such creepy, filthy animals as the rat. What would they do if they were aware that

despite their locked doors and hiding places, i.e., their fortified houses, they are not immune, nor are even their very sorry shoes, from the intrusion of the sneaking, hence invincible, rats into their lives? How would they feel if they realized that their most intimate, private belongings such as "the pillow where we press our faces" has been clutched at and gripped by the rat's "delicate fingered paws" or rubbed against by "his blank slate of fur"? (38, 35, 37). Nye's detailed description of the rat's paws and fur is in keeping with the general theme of the poem as well as her inclination towards little things of everyday life, which the theme reflects. With the approach of the morning, rats start flooding back to their holes across the bed, which, now "lined with little shadows," Nye compares to a drowning boat, playing on the wise saying, "like rats deserting a sinking ship" (41). That one's most private places like the bed is infested with "things we never wanted to be, or meet" and that "all the rats are waving hello" on their way home underscore both the rats' defiance and mockery and man's helplessness and vulnerability (42, 43).

The poem abounds in alliterations such as "rafter and rivet," "leaned on the light," "trailing tails," and "could clutch" whereby Nye tries to simulate the scurry of the rat's feet and the way it nibbles at food (21, 26, 28, 36).

The final poem under examination whether in the paper's selections or in the group focusing on a minor specific object is "The Traveling Onion." While "Hello" traces the night journey a rat makes to a dining room table, "The Traveling Onion" follows the long journey undertaken by an onion from India until it ends up in Nye's kitchen. The poem is among Nye's poetry collection *Yellow Glove* and also appears in her book of poetry *Words under Words*:

*"It is believed that the onion originally came from India. In Egypt it was an object of worship — why I haven't been able to find out. From Egypt the onion entered Greece and on to Italy, thence into all of Europe." — Better Living Cookbook*

When I think how far the onion has traveled  
just to enter my stew today, I could kneel and praise  
all small forgotten miracles,  
crackly paper peeling on the drainboard,  
pearly layers in smooth agreement,

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the way the knife enters onion  
and onion falls apart on the chopping block,  
a history revealed.

And I would never scold the onion  
for causing tears.  
It is right that tears fall  
for something small and forgotten.  
How at meal, we sit to eat,  
commenting on texture of meat or herbal aroma  
but never on the translucence of onion,  
now limp, now divided,  
or its traditionally honorable career:  
For the sake of others,  
disappear. (1-19)

The poem teaches the reader a lesson in never underestimating, let alone ignoring, little details of everyday life. It consequently sums up Nye's interest in these details, which is the reason why one finds it appropriate to conclude the paper with this poem. Nye starts the poem with an epigraph that documents the onion's long journey through the Old World so as to add an air of authenticity to the poem's content, show a seriousness of tone, invest the onion with a historical grandeur, and in so doing, attach a particular importance to the insignificant onion. Besides, the fact that the onion was an ancient Egyptian deity surrounds it with a halo of awe and veneration. Likewise, the onion's travels from its place of origin India to Egypt, Greece, Italy, and then all of Europe, thus paralleling the chronological order of the emergence of the ancient civilizations, may indicate that the cultivation of onions goes hand in hand with the development of the ancient world. This again enhances the historical significance of the onion and increases its value as a common object. It is, therefore, natural that Nye should look at the onion in a new different light, thinking of it as one among "small forgotten miracles" she "could kneel and praise" (4, 3). Everything about the onion now seems peculiar and unique such as the "crackly paper peeling on the drainboard" and its "pearly layers in smooth agreement" (4, 5). Even the process of chopping it on the chopping board has itself become more than a routine step in cooking food, acquiring a historical

dimension: "the way the knife enters onion / and onion falls apart on the chopping block, / a history revealed" (6-8). In the face of this long-standing tradition of seasoning food with onion, Nye makes up her mind never to chide the onion "for causing tears," taking them to be an expression of regret and repentance for disregarding the crucial role such little things as the onion play: "It is right that tears fall / for something small and forgotten" (11-12). Tears here, being a reflex action caused by chopping onions, are, of course, a pun on wailing, i.e., crying out of sorrow and regret. Nye then directs the reader's attention to the fact that the role the onion plays in seasoning the food perfectly exemplifies people's apathetic attitude towards minor details of everyday life since people, when they "sit to eat," almost always comment "on texture of meat or herbal aroma / but never on the translucence of onion, / now limp, now divided" and seldom mention "its traditionally honorable career," which Nye sums up in terms of self-denial or, rather, self-sacrifice: "For the sake of others, / disappear" (13, 14-16, 17, 18-19). So, the onion represents daily little things or average nobodies that no matter how devotedly and sincerely they perform their functions in life, their efforts go unnoticed and hence unacknowledged like their entire, obscure lives. Nye's obsession with little details is acted out not only on the thematic level but also on the descriptive level as she gives a thorough account of the onion's appearance, parts, and fabric, along with the cooking skills and techniques, which testifies to her experience as a cook.

In her article "Counter Narratives: Cooking Up Stories of Love and Loss in Naomi Shihab Nye's Poetry and Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*," Lorraine Mercer and Linda Storm interpret Nye's treatment of food in her poetry as an attempt on her part to endow food with a threefold function, namely lyric or emotional, transcultural, and national. First, they believe that "in the poetry of Naomi Shihab Nye, food functions as a complex language for communicating love, memory, and exile." Second, they argue that food helps connect people through bridging their ethnic, cultural, class barriers: "food also becomes an avenue for questioning boundaries of culture, class, and ethnicity. Food is a natural repository for memory and tradition and reveals the possibility for imagining blended identities and traditions" (33). Last but not least, they contend that food enables Nye to be in touch not only with her native home but also with her host one:

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In the kitchens of Nye's poetry, onions, Arabic coffee, and simple ingredients take on a sacred meaning that reflect her Palestinian American roots. Her descriptions of mint-filled gardens on the West Bank, or of a day-long search for the ideal peach in Fredericksburg, Texas, depict stories of loss, cultural traditions, and political histories. (33-34)

Therefore, in their critical appreciation of the poem, they declare that though the poem draws "attention to small culinary details," this attention "points to larger truths." One of these truths, already implied at the end of the poem, as pointed out above, is inspired by the texture of the onion: "The onion's translucence reminds the reader of the invisible work of domestic labor." Another truth has to do with the cross-cultural function of connecting people from various ethnic and cultural origins bestowed on food just mentioned: "Nye portrays the onion as integral to the flavor of the stew; in doing so she celebrates individual and cultural histories as essential to understanding our differences and connections" (34).

In conclusion, having examined both Nye's views and poetry, one can categorically declare that Nye's interest in minor details of everyday life constitutes not only an ingrained habit or a natural disposition, but also a distinctive aspect of her poetry. As she points out in her interviews, essays, and other prose writings, she has cultivated this habit and shown this disposition at an early age as early as the age of three. Like the Romantic poet Wordsworth, she has felt the compulsion to see into the lives of things. This is the reason why, as a young girl, she developed the habit of peeping through windows so as to watch the magical scene of the shadowy houses in the twilight before they completely disappeared, glancing at the various contents of the rooms. It is a habit she falls into as an adult when she is accustomed to sit on the steps of her porch to contemplate the sunset. Nye ascribes her interest in the little specifics of ordinary life to the fact that these little details enable her to comprehend the latent truths of life, and help keep her sensible. Therefore, she values poetry, accounting for its strong appeal for her on the grounds that it is poetry's major function and characteristic feature to zoom in on minor details, dwelling duly on each detail and thus revealing its inherent worth. She argues that since people lead a very hectic, busy life, they

need to read poetry because poetry slows one down, requiring one to take time and reflect on life, especially in moments of crisis when mass media deliberately aim to obliterate little facts of life. Nye's predilection for the small minutiae of common life is articulated not only in many of her prose writings but also in few of her poems that address this predilection explicitly such as "The Traveling Onion," "From Here to There," "Breaking the Fast," and "The Story, Around the Corner." It is also attested to by many a critic and a scholar such as Mercer and Storm, Najmi, Majaj, Bromfield, Orfalea, Townsend, Gómez-Vega, Colloff, Blakely, Harb, and Tigerlily. This inclination to focus on minor particulars of daily life is a crucial aspect of Nye's poetry both on the thematic level and on the stylistic level. For example, her poem "Daily" celebrates some of one's daily activities that may go unnoticed due to the deadening effect of habit or their insignificant roles in life such as planting seeds, folding T-shirts, and cooking tortillas as some sort of holy worship. In "Different Ways to Pray," she compares the inconsequential activities of everyday life to the holy act of worshipping God, as represented by the Muslim rituals of prayer and pilgrimage. "The Small Vases from Hebron" throws light on the reality that for people under occupation and on the brink of death day in day out like Palestinians, little things of everyday life and little lives themselves are of great significance and value, hence deeply appreciated by them. "Famous" treats the issue of petty trivia of average life this time not in relation to insignificant activities and habits but, rather, in relation to common objects and things such as the importance of the river for the fish. Last but not least, her poems "Yellow Glove," "Hello," and "The Traveling Onion" draw attention not to little details of everyday life but, rather, to one minor detail or insignificant object exclusively, namely the yellow glove Nye has lost as a little child, the night journey a rat makes to the dining room table, and the onion's long trip from India until it ends up in Nye's kitchen. Eventually, one cannot help but wonder how far this fundamental aspect of Nye's poetry permeates her other literary genres such as juvenile novels, short stories, and picture books!!!

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