

Shared Words, Shared Worlds by Naomi Shihab Nye

□After learning my flight was detained 4 hours,

□I heard the announcement:

□If anyone in the vicinity of gate 4-A understands any Arabic,

□Please come to the gate immediately.

□Well—one pauses these days. Gate 4-A was my own gate. I went there.

□An older woman in full traditional Palestinian dress,

□Just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly.

□Help, said the flight service person. Talk to her. What is her

□Problem? we told her the flight was going to be four hours late and she

□Did this.

□I put my arm around her and spoke to her haltingly.

□Shu dow-a, shu- biduck habibti, stani stani schway, min fadlick,

□Sho bit se-wee?

□The minute she heard any words she knew—however poorly used—

□She stopped crying.

□She thought our flight had been canceled entirely.

□She needed to be in El Paso for some major medical treatment the

□Following day. I said no, no, we're fine, you'll get there, just late,

□Who is picking you up? Let's call him and tell him.

□We called her son and I spoke with him in English.

□I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane and

□Would ride next to her—Southwest.

□She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for the fun of it.

□Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and

□Found out of course they had ten shared friends.

□Then I thought just for the heck of it why not call some Palestinian

□Poets I know and let them chat with her. This all took up about 2 hours.

□She was laughing a lot by then. Telling about her life. Answering

□Questions.

□She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies—little powdered
□Sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts—out of her bag—
□And was offering them to all the women at the gate.

□To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a
□Sacramento. The traveler from Argentina, the traveler from California,
□The lovely woman from Laredo—we were all covered with the same
□Powdered sugar. And smiling. There are no better cookies.

□And then the airline broke out the free beverages from huge coolers—
□Non-alcoholic—and the two little girls for our flight, one African
□American, one Mexican American—ran around serving us all apple juice
□And lemonade and they were covered with powdered sugar too.

□And I noticed my new best friend—by now we were holding hands—
□Had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing,

□With green furry leaves. Such an old country traveling tradition. Always
□Carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.

□And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought,
□This is the world I want to live in. The shared world.

□Not a single person in this gate—once the crying of confusion stopped
□—has seemed apprehensive about any other person.

□They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women too.
□This can still happen anywhere.

□Not everything is lost.