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PoetryCHaT

Naomi Shihab Nye

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ST: So we're grateful to be here today. And I'm just going to say out loud that we are here in La Conner with Naomi Shihab Nye, and she is here for the Skagit River Festival.

NN: Right, Poetry Festival.

ST: The Poetry Festival. And so that's why we've had this opportunity to conduct this oral history.

NN: Well I'm so happy it worked out. And you were the kind person who sent me the Golden Book, right? That has been Mr. Dog. I mean that is like top of my shelf. I've never forgotten. So when you wrote me, I thought, I would do anything she asked me. If she wanted me to go sweep her deck, I would go sweep her deck. And also, I want to ask you two, just in case I forget, do you know Ron Jobe of Vancouver, B.C.?

NJ: I do.

NN: Because, yes, I love that man. I know you're doing U.S., and he's retired and everything, but he would be an interesting person to interview just because you're close, because of proximity. And he invited me, a couple of times I think, up to Vancouver to do things with Canadian poets who worked for young readers. And so I felt like I got to meet this whole new community of people, people I've stayed in touch to this day, thanks to Ron and his own interests.

ST: We have a lot of cross border interactions -- just because Bellingham is so close to the border, and we have a strong Canadian studies program, and so absolutely.

NN: Oh, that's great. Yes, good for you.

But Ron is such a sweetheart, and every time I've ever gone up there, I always call him and say, you know, You want to come and have a beer? You want to visit? And he'll always bring me pictures -- he

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travels so much. I mean, now that he's retired, he's all over the world, going to exotic, interesting things. But I really like him.

ST: So I think we are really interested in your story, your narrative, about your experiences early on -- as you've done some autobiographical disclosure in the introductions of your books, but just hearing a little bit about your experiences as a writer and early urges and interactions with poetry.

NN: Sure, right.

ST: I noticed that in your *A Maze Me* introduction, you're talking about not wanting to grow up --

NN: Right.

ST: -- and yet, here are these poems that you write for children that really just sort of slice open the world. So they're reading your poetry, and you're offering them this opportunity to learn things and know things that are larger than themselves.

NN: Well, thank you for saying that. This morning we were seeing, the poets here at the festival, were seeing high school students who had fantastic questions, really good questions. I was in three different sessions with different high school groups, and I was very touched by their questions. But in one group, they were very focused on, with all the writers on the panel, When did you start writing? What gave you the courage? Or what gave you, even, the knowledge that a person could do that?

And so for me, early on I was very lucky to have parents who were quiet verbal. I mean to this day, my mother does a crossword puzzle before breakfast, every day, and finishes it before she has breakfast, and she's 88. My father, being a journalist and being an immigrant refugee, was very big on language, was a very articulate man, in both Arabic and English, and really cared a lot about transmission of story, not only journalistic story but personal story, like always -- he was always the person at any dinner party really finding out who's here, what's their background, what brought you to this place, this moment, this time? And so both of my parents were very curious, they were good talkers, and they exposed me early on, way before I could read or write myself, like early years, to hearing stories, hearing poems. At bedtime there were a lot of rituals. My dad would sit and tell stories. My mom would read, would sing -- had a beautiful voice. And so there was this sense of every day you heard text. And I think that really had a strong impression on me as a young child, that there was this other kind of text that was different from conversation, and I loved it. And so also going to the library every Saturday afternoon for the story hour, or the poem hour, that the librarians would do, was very important.

So exposure was big for me. I knew what a poem was at the age of 3. And I knew that it looked different on the page. I remember exactly where I was standing in my house thinking about lines from Emily Dickinson as a 3-year-old. I can remember what lines I was thinking about, what I was looking at. And just knowing that that kind of text existed was what made me, I think once I learned how to write, when I was 6, in first grade, made me want to write poems.

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And we were on a journey, I asked my father for paper in a hotel room. They'd taken me to Chicago on the train. We'd taken my maternal grandmother with me, and my baby brother, so it was this like three generation train trip to Chicago. And it was very exciting to me to see this new landscape of a city that I'd never seen before. And before bed -- now I'd only learned how to write like two or three weeks before. I was learning the basics -- I said before bed, Daddy, I need paper, I need paper. And he offered me the little, what they used to have -- I only had one piece here and I've already used it -- but the little tablet on the hotel desk, and I said, No, that's not big enough, because when you're in first grade, that little pad is -- his is not big enough. So I said, No, I need big paper, because we were writing on big construction papers at school. And so he took me down to the hotel desk -- this stayed in our family lore, I was in my pajamas already, -- and he said to the person at the desk, Do you have some big paper? We need some big paper. And they said, No, we don't have any big paper. And then we were frustrated and we went back upstairs, and in the closet he pulled down the old paper bag that was for laundry. In those days it wasn't a plastic bag, it was a paper, white bag. And he handed it to me, and he opened it to the side that didn't have writing on it and said put your laundry here. He said, Look, this is paper! This is big paper and you can write on this. So I wrote my first poem on that laundry bag, and was very happy about it, felt very satisfied after the writing, four-line poem, took it to my first grade teacher, you know, carried it home to St. Louis, took it to my first grade teacher, and she let me put it up on the bulletin board in the hall of the school. And three weeks later, a third grader came up to me and said, Did you write that poem about Chicago? And I said, Yes. And I remember thinking, oh, I've even forgotten about it and it's hanging in the hallway. I said, Yes, I did. And she said, I went there too. I know what you mean. And there was this -- that was a breathtaking, electric moment for me. My first poem, I'd already been writing other poems in the next weeks, but that feeling of this person who's older than I am, whose name I do not know, knows what I mean. I mean, it was like the essential reader-writer experience. And I remember saying to myself, and I have by the way a very acutely vivid, early memory, which I've always had, I got to do this forever. This is what I do. And it was like the first poem I ever wrote had that response. How lucky that was, how very lucky.

And so I went on writing poems that year, but I wasn't -- I was not inspired by first grade. I did not have a great teacher. But second grade, I had the greatest teacher. This was in Central School, public school in Ferguson, Missouri, now infamous Ferguson that no one had ever heard of then, unless you were in St. Louis. I had this great teacher whose name was Harriet Baron Lane, and she was old. She was the oldest teacher. I think she was 75 when I had her. She continued teaching to something unthinkable like 89 or 91, in public schools. And she used to give an interview. Everybody knew she was the oldest teacher because every year she would give this interview to the newspaper saying, Why should I quit when I finally know what I'm doing? And my parents were so attracted to this woman. I remember they were hoping I would get her, because she was in my school. Then I got her, and she was regal, she was tall. She wore those old 1950s bangle bracelets up and down each arm. She was stern with us. And she wore kind of high heels, chunky high heels. She was the best dresser in the whole school, very elegant, older woman. She was a widow. She had never had children. But she had this curriculum that was renown by this time as a poetry-centered curriculum -- first, second grade. And she had this room that had blackboards on all four sides of the room. It was a strange classroom. I never would be in a classroom like that again. And the school was a very, very old -- it's an old historic school in Ferguson,

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and it used to have a sign above the door when I went there saying, "The oldest school in continual use west of the Mississippi," and that sign has been gone for a long time, and I don't know if they found out it wasn't true or somebody stole it or what, but we were very proud of that, that we were in the oldest school. But this room had these big blackboards, and she had all these stepstools, which kind of intrigued us at the beginning. Well, 7-year-olds are short, so we had these stepstools and we would -- they were all around the walls. We were asked on Mondays -- there were blocks, it was all blocked off, and we each had a section of the board with our name in it. And I remember, it was like this patchwork quilt of blocks, and on Monday everyone was asked to go to their space, during sometime on Monday morning, and write a poem, or a part of a poem. And you had a choice, you could write a poem that you personally had written, or you could write a poem or a part of a poem that you had found that you liked. So every Monday you did that. And then -- so the whole room, we were completely exposed to these voices, the whole week. This was Monday morning. During the week, all through the week, she would call us to the front. She'd say, Okay, Joe, come share your poem with us. And she was very big on public speaking too, how you stood in front of a classroom, that you didn't mumble. She told us on the first day of school, By the end of second grade, none of you in this class will ever mumble when you have to present. And I remember we all looked around like what is mumble, what is she talking about, what does that mean? She had a real sense of dignity -- each child's dignity. And you would stand up and you would say, The poem I have selected this week is by Carl Sandburg. My poem is..., and then you would talk about it, and you would talk about if it was a poem you had selected, you would talk about why you had selected it. If it was a poem you had written, you would tell something about where or how you wrote it, or what you were thinking about. You know, you could just give a little context. And so every one of us did that every week of second grade. And on Friday after -- I mean this was really a genius teaching tactic, I think, and I've thought all these years about how it cost her zero, cost her nothing. On Friday, you would copy down, having heard and seen all the poems for the whole week, you would copy down the one you liked the best, plus the one you had put up there. So on Friday, the end of the day was you were writing down two poems, the one you'd written up there and then the one... Then she taught us to make these big books with big paper, and we all had needles and yarn, and we sewed these. We did four books during the whole second grade. She also used the poems for vocabulary, if there words that people didn't know, that would be our spelling list, our vocabulary list. Also I remember concepts, like if somebody brought in a butterfly poem with like some fact about butterflies, then we would be talking about butterflies in science. I mean, she connected -- she was amazing. She connected these poems to other things we talked about.

And I have said when people ask me about her, I do not remember learning any math in second grade. I don't remember there ever being numbers on the board, which was great with me because from an early age I didn't care about math, and so no numbers is good. But all these words and all this language. And I'm still in touch with two other people who were in that actual class, and they feel that they became artists because of her class. And then over the years when I've spoken in St. Louis I'll sometimes say, Is there anyone in this auditorium who had Harriet Lane, and there'll always be some hands go up because she taught for so many years. And also, I didn't realize it at the time that she hadn't always been at Central School. She'd been in like two or three other schools. So like even people older than me would have had her when she was younger. So I always say, Come see me afterwards, I

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want to talk to you. And then everybody always has said, She revolutionized my life, because she gave me a sense of myself as a reader, as a responder to poetry. I was exposed to all these voices. And you know, by the time we got out of second grade, you had this sense that all these voices were like part of your personal library, you know, William Blake, sure, Emily Dickinson, everybody, *Rabindranath Tagore*. Oh, and she also had -- we each had to memorize -- I can't remember really what the time, like did we have two weeks to pick a poem to memorize, but we would also have to say our poem from memory out loud. And so people from her classes were always asked to present at the school board meetings, at the PTA meetings. We were dragged off to the Lions Club and this and that book club, because they knew that Harriet Lane's students could talk, and we had a lot of things committed to memory. And she used to say, Everything that you memorize will be with you always. And even if you think it's not, the lines will come up in your mind when you need them. So I loved her. I loved her so much.

That was the year -- so did everyone -- that was the year that I started sending poems to magazines, and she was not the person who encouraged me to do that. The school librarian was. The school librarian said, You're always in here, everybody from your class, searching for poems for your assignments and things. You know, you could send your poems to these magazines -- and showed me, showed all of us, a bunch of us, the pages in children's magazines at the time that would accept work by students. She told us, You'll have to be patient. You might have to send out 20 poems before one is ever accepted. And I remember we would say things like, That's okay, I've got -- I said, I've got 28 poems, I'm fine. And I think I sent out about 8 to one magazine before one was accepted. My mother and she taught me about self-addressed stamped envelopes, all that stuff.

Mrs. Lane was very proud when my first poem was published that -- while I was in her class still. So I started sending out when I was 7, and first poem accepted when I was 7. And she was saying, Well that's kind of like -- that's like a special, going the extra mile, that you, that anyone could do. She was very, very pleased. One thing I've regretted all these years, even though I did see her again when she was 99 and was able to thank her, I was doing -- I was in my 20s, and I was doing -- 20s, early 30s, I don't know -- I was doing like my first public event I'd ever done in St. Louis, back in St. Louis, and I called someone in the old neighborhood and I said, Could you find out if she's still alive, and if she is could you bring her? And she was and they brought her. I was able to thank her publicly. It was so touching to me. I think I started crying. But to thank her in front of this audience for how she had changed our lives. And afterwards, her one comment to me was, Well, I wish we had more time. I have so many questions I could ask you. And I thought, that was how she approached us, curiosity, always. She was curious about us. She was curious about what our tastes would be, what poems we would put up. Nothing was ever above our heads. I remember people bringing in things that in retrospect might seem a little exalted for 7-year-olds to bring in, like something they'd gotten from their grandfather. She would never have said, That's above your heads. Find something simpler. She didn't really like cutesy poetry. She liked poetry of substance. I had this book that my mother had already given me in first grade, the Helen Ferris *Favorite Poems Old and New*, and so I had this tome -- it's like this thick. I still have my copy. It's all ragged now. -- this tome where I could always find a good poem to bring in if I was bringing in someone else's poem. But many of us by the time the year was halfway through were writing our own poems, and wanting to, and that was also kind of a little bit of a sneaky way to encourage us to write our

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own poems. Because if you forgot and it was Sunday night and you thought, Well I'd better write a poem really fast because I have to write it on the board tomorrow. I think people who might never have launched into poem writing did because we just knew it was going to be our time on Monday morning. But that was a great tactic.

Over the years I've met so many wonderful teachers of poetry, and I would say the word that connects them all is exposure, that they believe in exposing students to lots of voices and to lots of writing of their own so they get a chance to feel, to revel in the possibilities that they each have. A kind of tight curriculum with poetry is much less effective than this sort of expansive, loose, we're going to do it all the time. It's going to be with us all the year. This is what you'll be called upon to do.

Never again did I have a teacher who loved poetry as much. But the thing that I regret with Mrs. Lane is I do not recall any of us ever asking her if she wrote poems or inviting her to read one of her own, which of course if we'd been older we probably would have thought of. But when you're that age, you just don't think about -- it's all about us. It would have been so easy to do, to ask her, Do you write? Do you like to write? By the time I was in college, I always asked my literature teachers, Do you write? And one of them held out on me until only a couple of years ago. He never admitted that he wrote poems. He was also a teacher of the American novel. Only a few years ago, he started showing me poems he'd been writing over the years. I was shocked. I said, I can't believe this, because I had been his student assistant when I was in college. I worked in his office -- in the English department for four years. And I said, Here I was writing poems, editing the literary magazine, and you never let on you were writing poems? He said, Well, I don't know, I just never had that much confidence, you know, professors.

ST: And you had great confidence from a young age.

NN: I did have confidence, and I would attribute it both to my parents, who were not apologetic sort of people, neither one of them. They believed, you put your voice out there and if you make a mistake, who cares, or if you say something wrong, who cares. And my mother had gone to art school, and my mother had grown up -- well neither one of my parents grew up with any real exposure to the arts, but they had to find it on their own. So they both were kind of rough and ready, kind of tough, and my father liked literary things more and my mother more visual things. But they both sort of had to do it on their own. So because of that, I think they had a real commitment -- we want that to be part of our household. We want this to be a house where there are always books, everywhere, books from the library, books that we've obtained ourselves. My husband, for example, who is a huge reader, says he does not remember anyone reading him a book during his entire childhood. That is so opposite of my own experience where not a day went by that somebody didn't read to you. I was shocked when I heard that, when we first knew each other. I just couldn't believe, Well, what was that like for you? He said, Well school was hard, and reading was hard, and I wasn't confident at all with spoken voice or with stories. I didn't know the names of writers. I didn't know -- it just was not in his house.

ST: So putting things out there, I think that Nancy has something for you.

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NJ: So I could tell you a little story that ties in to your publishing. But before I do that, I'm curious. Do you remember what the journal or the magazine was you published in?

NN: Oh yes. It was *Wee Wisdom*.

Wee Wisdom, which came -- it was also in the state of Missouri. I remember that's why I kind of fixated on *Wee Wisdom* because I thought, well they're in Missouri, I'm in Missouri, but they're on the other side of Missouri. They were near Kansas City. And that magazine persisted for many, many years, and I was able to write to them while they still existed. I sent them a book or something, and I sent them a little note that said, I just want to thank you all for being the first place that ever published me. They wrote a really sweet note back and said they had heard from a few other writers over the years who said the same thing, and they named a few of them.

Over the years I have been a real advocate, maybe a little pushier than some writers and schools have been with kids, about sending their work out and saying, Really, what's the worst thing that could happen? It's an amazing experience when you're growing up to have that sense of your voice could be finding friends, just like you're reading -- someone could be reading your poems.

NJ: Do you still have that original magazine with your poem in it?

NN: I do not. I have not seen that magazine in years. I personally think it is in some ancient box my mother has, and I think she also has those books from second grade, because I don't have it.

NJ: So did you keep publishing? Did you keep sending in after second grade?

NN: Oh yes. I was always submitting. It was the hardest during my junior high years, because in those days there weren't many middle school type magazines. And also when my family moved overseas, but I made up for it there because my father was the editor of the newspaper, in both English and Arabic, *Double Daily*, and he edited it both. He was the first editor they'd ever had who edited both. And he let me have a column. You know, this sounds incestuous to think about it now, like I work up from -- My dad let me have a column? And I think some kids teased me about that, yeah, well her dad's the editor of the newspaper and she has a column. But it was like a once a week column, and I wrote about -- I didn't write about myself so much, I wrote about local things, from a teenager's point of view. And it said at the bottom, my father was the editor of the paper. I think also he tried to get other young people to write for the paper more. I don't know if he ever did. I can't remember that. I liked having my column in the paper. So that's where I published, that was when I had been a 9th grader.

NJ: I wondered how old.

NN: Yes, 9th grader. I was publishing my column there. And then I ended up later, years later, in San Antonio, I had a newspaper column. Now he had been also -- he'd been a reporter at the San Antonio paper, but then he had moved on by that time. So by the time I worked for the paper, he was gone. By the time I was a columnist, he was at *The Dallas Morning News* as an editor then. But it was a different

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world working, doing anything with newspapers, because everybody saw it. And so I'd be walking down the street in Jerusalem, and they would say, Oh, you're that person who has that column.

And also sometimes I did sort of exposés of things that I didn't think had justice, like a justice column. I would write about like music and things teenagers liked, kind of a teenager perspective. I don't know where those columns are. That's interesting. I don't have them. I don't know where they are. I don't know if they're in some archival box. I have gone through a lot of things for a couple archives in Texas for writers in recent years, and I've never seen any of that stuff, so I don't know where it is, or if anyway saved it. I would have thought somebody would have saved it in our house.

But I was always very democratic -- I'll kind of publish anywhere, I don't care, not like looking for the "best" magazine. Over the years, I've met some slightly arrogant university students, I would describe them as, who -- I once met a girl who said that *The Nation* had asked her if -- an editor from *The Nation* magazine had come to some reading she did, or maybe it was *Atlantic Monthly*, but it was some good magazine. And they heard her read a poem, at an open reading in Boston, and they asked her if they could have it for the magazine, and she said, No, I think I'm saving that for *The New Yorker*. And I thought, what an idiot. I said, Do you know how hard it is to get in *The New Yorker*? You could publish something else in *The New Yorker*. You should have let them have it if you have an editor standing right there. I thought about William Stafford in Oregon, how he would let anybody publish anything anywhere. That's always been more my attitude too. Like if anybody wants anything, they can have it.

NJ: So in this little envelope, I was a kid who didn't write poetry. Well, I did, but mostly I collected poetry. And I used to cut it out and put it in file folders, and I did that all the way until I was early teaching.

NN: Wow, nice.

NJ: So this, I came across this. This I had taped to my door at college.

NN: Oh my God! That's amazing! Yes, wow. I remember this. That is amazing. You taped it to your door --

NJ: The tape marks you can see.

NN: I remember this piece. I don't remember where it was published. By the time I was in high school, like in these years and my parents had moved to Texas, I did start publishing a lot in magazines like *Seventeen* --

NJ: That's what I guessed.

NN: It could have been *Seventeen*.

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NN: Because *Seventeen* in those days, I don't know if it's still true, would not publish a poem by anyone over the age of 20. Twenty was the cut off age. So when I found that out, I thought wow, that's great. Then you have a high probability of getting in there because you're not competing with a 30-year-old.

So that was cool, and I don't know though, if that was there. I don't know where that was. That's so amazing that you still have it. That looks *Seventeen*-y, yeah, it does. That's amazing.

NJ: Right.

NN: And there was a religious magazine. Some people had approached me, a magazine called *Power*. Did you ever see that magazine? It was from the Southern Baptist, or something --

NJ: Maybe that's why I would never have seen it.

NN: I would never have seen it, but someone brought it to me in, like in high school, and they said, You know, you send your poems everywhere. Have you ever sent to this place? And I remember looking at it and thinking, a little religious for my taste, but I would go on to be a religion major in college. I thought, well not all the poems are doctrinal in anyway. I thought, well, yeah it's a poetry magazine, and who cares if the Southern Baptist or Roman Catholics, or anyone, published it. I started sending there, and I published a ton in that magazine. It was almost a joke that I felt like they would take anything I sent them. And I remember someone coming up to me once and saying, Oh my gosh, you're the person who's in that magazine like on every other page. And I thought, yes, well it was just -- and I can't remember. I guess I just developed a relationship with the editors there, sending, sending, in high school. They didn't pay. *Power* did not pay. *Seventeen* paid very well. *Seventeen* paid $5 a word, even for an "and" or a "the."

NJ: No!

NN: Which in those days was a lot of money.

NJ: Wow!

NN: $5 a word? I mean, you would get like $100 for a poem. So that was amazing.

I also remember one of my friends teased me and said, I think your poems are getting longer and longer. Yes. And then I felt embarrassed because I thought, no, I'm not adding to them just for the sake of the money because I knew how much they paid.

ST: Another stanza!

NN: But I was learning. I think I learned really important lessons, because I was a young person who sent out actively as a young kid. One thing I was not attracted to was contests, but my teachers were. And so teachers would press me to enter contests, and they would say, Look, there's this contest here or there, like the national Scholastic essay contest. I would never have entered that. But my Texas high school English teacher said, You have to. I'm giving you that as extra credit, and you must do it. And I

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did win. But the first three essays that I gave her, and there was like a week's deadline. I didn't have that long to do it, and here I was with my old manual typewriter typing these essays up, and I remember saying to her, But I don't write essays. And she said, Yes, you do. You turn them in to me all the time. You just try it. And so I thought, okay, well that's true. All my papers are essays. The first three I gave her, and I had like a one-day on each one, she said, Nope, nope, another one, do another one. And so the fourth one I gave her, she said, Okay, I'm going to send this one in. And it won, the national contest. I don't think I would have entered contests without teachers encouraging me. I am very proud, and I tell kids this. To this day I have never worked with a publishing agent. I do not have a publishing agent.

NJ: Wow.

NN: Kids are surprised because they've heard other writers say, you know, you have to have one. If you're going to write novels or if you're going to do children's books, you have to have one. And I say, Well, no. I started early. I didn't ever have one. And I think it's been great. The only time I've wished I had one was regarding foreign editions, because it's very mysterious how foreign editions work. But that's the only time I've ever thought, I'm signing this Japanese contract and I have no idea what's in it. And if I had somebody to root for me.

And certainly the Internet has made sending out easier. I've had a magazine for three days now bugging me from Beirut for a poem, and the name of the magazine is *Rusted Radishes*. I just love that name. I think that is -- when I was a high school student, I would've wanted to have a poem in *Rusted Radishes*. And so this editor and I have been writing back as if we're bosom friends, and the fact that I can send her three different poems on three different days through the Internet and know that it's in Lebanon makes me really happy. I haven't read yet to see if she's accepted anything. But I think that it expedites -- for kids it expedites. They're sending their work out.

A lot of kids tell me they have this experience that of course we never had in our generation of posted poems on websites or on their Facebook page or on Teen.com or Poetry.com, all these different sites. And this girl in Arlington, Texas, one day said, she just came blithely into her English class and she said, I posted this poem of mine on Teen.com last night, and this morning I had 53 comments. And I said, But what kind of comments?

And she was calling it up to show me, and she said, They're really very helpful. And I was impressed. I mean, these were comments by other teens, thoughtful comments. There were a lot of questions about the mystery of her title. People were real, they were really textual comments, and I thought, Now, wow, see that is an experience that from our generation, we never got 53 comments on anything.

NJ: Teacher.

NN: Yes, we had the teacher, we had our friends and our writing circle. If we worked on the literary magazine, we might have those kids. Or if we were part of readings that we gave, we might hear a little response. But that seems incredible. So I think that's good.

NJ: Would you talk a little bit about the difference in an edited collection and your own collection.

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NN: Sure, well, an edited collection, I mean, you're always editing because you're editing your own poems. You're revising and editing. You're selecting and arranging poems for your own book. So that is a kind of -- it's kind of using your editing muscle as well.

But to make anthologies was not something I had intended to do, although I think Mrs. Lane was sort of setting us up for it from an early age. It was really teachers who encouraged me to make *This Same Sky*, which was my first anthology. Because I was taking poems from Iraq into classrooms during the first Gulf War period back in the 90s, these teachers said, Well where did you get these poems? If we wanted to go find Iraqi poems, where would we find them? I was kind of pushed and urged by teachers to gather poems that would be appealing to a high school or younger readers. I think it uses a different muscle of your brain. You have to use a kind of -- you have to stand back with a detached sense of why a poem might appeal to a reader of that age. I was always trying to pick poems for all my anthologies that would appeal to not just one very specific slice of age but a wide spectrum. With *This Same Sky*, my secret agenda, and I told this to my editor, she was anxious about it because she -- it was the first anthology she had ever overseen also, and both of us laugh now about how brazen we were to do a world anthology before ever doing any other anthology. But I said, I would like this book to be appealing to 5th graders through into adults -- through college students, all through high school age. And she said, That is a huge audience span. And I said, Iknow but I think it's possible because I still like poems that I read when I was in 5th grade. Why not? And so I tried really hard to make --   And of course, some of the poems in that book are more sophisticated and some are younger, but I felt like as a whole, they made a book that could be appreciated by a spectrum. And it's still in print after 22 -- 24 years now. I think it came out in 1992. Yes, so 24 years. It's still in print. It's had tons of printings. And it has been used with all those ages.

ST: And that's almost full circle when you were talking earlier about Mrs. Lane and all those poems on the board that aren't, that you weren't given restrictions on what you could bring in.

NN: Right.

ST: Here's the sense of 5th grade through adult. Well, yes, poetry as a form is kind of unique in that sense --

NN: Right.

ST: -- that it does have an inter-age kind of energy vibration.

NN: It does, and it wants to. It wants to. And to have the gift of having poems in our own lives for a long span of time now, and to be able to say, wow, I read this poem when I was 10, and when I was 20, and when I was 50, and loved it differently at all these different times. And in *This Same Sky*, there are two poems on facing pages by a Filipina poet named Benilda Santos, and I remember selecting those poems and thinking at the time, it's almost like there are four different people of different ages in the poems. But when I selected the poems, I had already been two of the people. By now I've been all four of the people -- the person with the young child and the person with the older child, and the younger

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mother and the older mother. She wrote these poems with a span of 15 years between them, and I just thought they were so amazing to print back to back like that. And she and I corresponded for years after they came out, and we talked about, after the book came out, and she loved it that she was like, I think, the only person in the book with two poems. Everybody else had only one poem. She had two, and right in the heart of the book. And I said, you know, I just felt like they had to be together. But I said, as we grow with poems, it's as if we become -- we experience the poem differently and we become more of the characters in the poem. In the past -- this is interesting to me. In the past year, I have had the opportunity to have dinner with Longfellow's granddaughter and Sherwood Anderson's grandson, fascinating to me. I mean, it's just mind blowing.

NJ: How did that come about?

NN: Well, the Longfellow granddaughter was completely a fluke. I mean, just a wild card that we even met this person, and now we are like buddies, writing notes when we're going to get together in three weeks again in Texas. She's coming back. It was just insane that we even met her. We had invited one of our dear neighbors to go out to dinner on the spur of the moment. We're going down to the Mexican cafe on the corner to have rice and beans. Do you want to go? And he goes, Yeah, sure, I want to go. And then he calls us back and said, Hey, I have a house guest. Is it okay if I bring her? And we said, Sure, bring everyone. We go down, and when we sit down at the table, suddenly he startles and he looks at me and he said, You know, she really needs to tell you who she is. You'll be interested. And so she said, My grandfather was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. And I'm like, What?! I almost passed out at the table. And I just said, How can this be? I mean, wait a minute, how old are you? You're not even that old. So it was a crazy thing -- having ages, people having children late in life, and really like long lifespans. That just blew my mind. We never talked to our friend again hardly during the whole dinner, we talked to her. My husband and I are like, What?! And I had just given a reading in Longfellow's Garden in Cambridge. I had just won this award that is given every year, the Golden Rose Award, in his garden, under his Linden tree. So our minds were blown. My husband and I went home that night, and we said, Whoa, we could so easily have missed this person.

Then recently, I was invited to Guilford College, a Quaker school in North Carolina, under the auspices of a grant from the Anderson Foundation, and when I got there they said, By the way, you're having lunch tomorrow with Sherwood Anderson's grandson. I said, Are you kidding me?! He is a charming man, a delight, a brilliant photographer. His name is David Spear, because his mother was Sherwood Anderson's daughter. He has books out of his photographs and text, just a beautiful, beautiful human being.

He and I had a really interesting conversation about identifying as an artist. And for him, it was so hard because he had this legend in his own family. He had pressure from his father, who was not even Anderson's child, to be as great as your grandfather. So of course that made him clam up and feel like, I can't do anything, nothing I do is as good. So he said, he was in his 50s -- he's 78. He's in his 50s before he realized, look, I don't have to live in the shadow any longer. I could do my own art and maybe it's not writing. But he is actually a very gifted writer, and he's written these texts in his books of photographs that are amazing. They're just off the charts. In fact, I selected one of his books to be a text for writing

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students. I'm going to have graduate students at the Michener's Center for Writers in Austin, where I'll be teaching this fall. I just decided, we've never used a book of photographs and focused on the text that's written by the photographer, and it's just so great. And he said, I will come and speak for you, for free. I'll just come and speak. I said, Fantastic.

So to meet these people who are to me connected to legends, it makes me think about how we're all, as readers, feeling so much like overwhelming awe to even be in the presences of someone who's a direct genetic relative of these icons, has been fascinating. And to think about how they grow up with the person -- I was able to tell Longfellow's granddaughter that actually he was the only poet that my maternal German grandfather ever read out loud to me. And then she -- that started interesting me. I started asking my mom, well, this was your dad. Why? And she said, Well, I don't know. I think he just felt -- he felt a bond with Longfellow. He wasn't a person who would read poetry out loud. It wasn't his style.

Just to see how different people connect to different voices, and how we all go back, and I don't know. That's a long, random digression, but pretty amazing that, to me, that we can meet people in the world. I start thinking, Wait, does Mark Twain have any great-great-grandchildren wandering around somewhere? Where are they? Let's find them. Let's go talk to them.

NJ: Probably.

NN: Yeah, I'm sure he does. I'm sure all these people do. That would be an interesting book. Yes, somebody to go find these children with very literary legacies. Probably someone's done it already, don't you think? I've never seen that book. I don't know. I'll ask both of them about it. Maybe they should do it. One of them could do it.

ST: Well, and your own children will have a literary legacy.

NN: Yeah, we have one son, and now he has a son. And it's been touching to me, his son is only 3 months old, that I feel as if already our relationship to our own son is changing. Things he's saying to us about his own son, and it's interesting. Like I feel like I'm connecting as a writer to our son differently because of his son.

And being a devoted, you know, wanting to read to kids as much as I was read to. I've already -- I mean, this 3-month-old is sitting there avidly looking at every page of every book, and we're all amazed at his attention span. So sweet, so special. But to feel that ongoing, that ongoing thread to future generations through language too.

NJ: So when you write poetry that is in a book like this -- it's definitely for a younger reader. When you write poetry that, this, or poetry that's clearly not for 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 18-year-old -- how do you even approach that? Do you think about that, or does the poem just come out and then eventually it finds its audience?

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NN: Yes, that's a great. *Come With Me* is an odd book because I really haven't done any other book like that. And I don't know why I haven't. I would like to. I would like to do some more kind of thematic -- that has the journey, the daily journeying as the theme.

I'd like to do more books like that. And I don't know why I haven't really. I don't know, because I remember when I was working on that book, I just felt very -- I would think about it as I walked, I would go out walking. And to me that was very much a book that came from walking, and walking with a child, and walking. I think you have different kinds of memories when you walk. A student said to me recently, I can only -- I thought this was so beautiful -- I can only forgive myself when I'm walking. I can never like sit in a room and forgive myself for bad things I've done, but when I'm walking. And I said, Wow, that's so beautiful. You really need to write about that. Why do you think that is? And she said, It's like the movement in my body -- the movement of walking, the rhythm and the pace, it's like time passing. Someday that bad thing you did will be forgotten. Somebody will -- it will be forgiven, and then I can forgive myself with the pace. But I think for a book about journeying, to walk made complete sense to me.

NJ: And did you come right back and write or?

NN: I was always writing. Probably I wrote ten times as many poems as are in the book -- that had some link to the topic, and then I completed some. You know, one thing that's been really haunting to me about this book -- this is something I don't tell very often because it was so emotional. On the day of September 11, 2001, I was at this amazing school in Tulsa, Oklahoma, called Holland Hall. And the teachers there had given their younger kids this assignment. This page was their assignment.

ST: And this is page 32 --

NN: Page 32, the "Torn Map" poem. The teachers had all brought in all these old maps they had in their garages and drawers and car glove compartments, and they said to the kids, Okay, let's read this poem, let's talk about it, and we're going to give you maps, or you can go through all these maps. They had maps strewn everywhere. And you can tear some of them, and you can make silhouettes, you can do anything you want, collages, you can add -- they had magazines in there, all kinds of collage stuff. But the thing is, you're going to mount them and you're going to write poems like this page. Well I'd never thought of this as a writing assignment tactic, this page. I love by the way what Dan Yaccarino had done. This was one of my all-time favorite pages.

So the kids went nuts with this assignment. They loved it. And the teachers said to me the day before they took me to see it in the gallery. They'd made a whole gallery show. They said, We're going to take you tomorrow when you're in the high school, because it was a school that was in the high school one day. And they said, The kids went nuts. The kids were saying, But I want to do four of them. Can I do six of them? I want to do one for my grandmother and one for my aunt. And they were saying, You know, this is really a good assignment because it was just right in that pivotal moment when people were kind of stopping looking at print maps, starting to go to the GPS. I hadn't gone to GPS yet. I'd

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never used a GPS at that time. I still was using real maps, in 2001. And they said, We feel like someday soon maps are going to be obsolete, so maps are going to be a precious item.

Anyway, I was looking at their exhibition of amazing, amazing, amazing poems, when the news came through about something terrible is happening in the world, and it haunted me so much afterwards because I thought, wow, look at this, this was a time of -- and the kids were with me. They were all like dragging me, Come see mine, come see mine -- this time of beautiful connection, Look, this is a map to Indiana. My grandmother lives in Indiana, and we would always go every summer. Just the ways they had configured these beautiful art pieces. And I was saying to them, This is an art piece. Your family wants to have this on the wall forever. Your grandmother wants this. This is amazing.

So all this connection and positiveness and using scraps of maps, and then all these lives being shattered and devastated, and it was just so haunting to me afterwards to think about what overlays in life. And this is the only exhibition of that kind I've even seen, and it was that day right at that time.

I'm always touched by ways teachers figure out to use a book. Like this book has been very used I've found. Like some classrooms, everybody has had to write about a time of anger, from this page. I never would have thought of that. Teachers have told me, Well, writing about anger is really a positive experience for kids because they've all been mad, so they can't say, Oh, I've never experienced that. They've all experienced it, and they want to talk about it. They want to talk about who they're mad at and why. And so this poem --

ST: They want to illustrate it.

NN: Yes, they want to illustrate it, and the teachers always say to me, Well we like this poem because your mother, the mother figure in the poem is redeemed in the end. You're coming back to her. You're saying, Oh she knows something about me that no one else knows. So it ends up positive. You're forgiving. The anger's going away.

And so this has been used -- a bunch of these, where I got my map. This one has been used. What are things that you have done that no one knows you've done that help guide you? Or what's something you really need courage about? So this book, which I really did not think of as a book that would be used as writing exercises or things to make someone else write -- I'm happy that it has been used that way, very happy. And that's all been thanks to teachers. Yes, and this one I love.

And Dan Yaccarino, whom I have still never met --

NJ: What?

NN: I've never met him. I should. It's my own fault, because I've been in New York five million times, and I've never -- I should make an effort to meet him. But I've met a lot of kids in New York public schools who know him. And they say, Oh, his kid went to our school, or, He came and talked to us. He's great. And I say, I don't even know what he looks like, because look at his author photo. Yes, but we

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should meet. We should meet someday. We did write each other a lot of letters, after the book came out, and, he told me things.

NJ: So you don't have any of his original art.

NN: I don't think I have original art from this book. I do from my other picture books. I don't think I do from this book. I don't know why. No, I don't think I do. But I would like to meet him. I would like to meet him. And I would like to do another book of that style.

NN: I would like to do a kitchen book. A kitchen, a food book that is all food things. And because I've had so many kids write about food over the years and I've written my own stuff about food, but I've never thought of making a kids' book about food. Why not?

ST: Food and games, dominoes.

NJ: Yes.

ST: are so prevalent.

NN: Yeah, dominoes, that's true, because there were always Arab men playing dominoes in the corners of every room that I was ever in as a child. Dominoes is very popular in the Middle East, all kinds of dominoe tricks. I'm glad you had Tanya let me in here too, because just recently I've had the occasion to meet a whole lot more of the people in here. Because I had not written -- and you know, it is 26 poets, under 25, that was my mistake.

But Henry -- Henry was one of the few that I had met, when I put -- I heard him at an open reading in Washington, D.C., and I chased this guy down and I said, Who are you? I need some of your poems for this book. Recently I've met five of the others, which has been fantastic. Looking back, people always say -- I've looked this girl up recently, Laura Lee Beasley, and she's doing amazing things with her poetry. I think she has a book coming out. She's been an editor. But this was fun because I thought, okay, I want to do poets of this age, and I want to do ones I don't really know. How am I going to find them? So I wrote to a person here, a person there, and said, Okay, who are some talented poets, under 25, just ask three of them to send me work. I knew I wasn't going to be able to pick everyone, so I kind of had to branch out around the country to find them. And then some of them whose work I didn't select, I ended up like urging them, You should send your work here, there. This was a different kind of project. It was fun. I felt like I had 26 kids for a while, they were all writing me constantly, and I loved them.

I did feel also when I was making this book, this will be my last anthology. I really felt that the whole time, because I had thought I was only going to make seven, but this was my eighth. It was my eighth anthology, and I thought, that is a good number. It takes, again, okay that muscle in my brain has been worked, and now I'm getting older. I don't have that many muscles in my brain. I'm not going to do that anymore, other people can do it. But I'm so glad I did eight of them. And I'm so glad they're out there. And I really, really loved doing *Salting the Ocean*, which was younger kids. I love that book, which is out of print. That's the first one to go out of print. And my editor told me it would because she

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said people do not respect the voices of children. That book will not sell as well as the other books. And it hasn't. This book has surprisingly sold much better, because people in writing programs --they didn't see these as children. Oh, these are talented young writers, let's take this book. So this one has had re-printings and stuff. *Salting the Ocean* did too, but for a shorter period. *What Have You Lost?* has been a very big hit and has been in multiple copies, in paperback; not in hardback, so this is now a rare edition.

NJ: And your husband did the photographs.

NN: My husband did the photographs, yes, he did. And he right now -- this is funny to me -- he's working on three books. He's never had a book, of his own. He's working on three books all at once, and he's very overwhelmed because he's also working on a really big show that he's been working on for years, and so he's got so much going on. But it's funny watching him now deal with how he's going to put his books together, how they're going to be. But he's a really wonderful photographer. Most of his photographs that have ever appeared in print anywhere were in this book.

NJ: Yeah, wow.

NN: I know I've talked too much.

NJ: Oh, no. I mean, we've kept you --

NN: No, no, I love talking to you all. It's very fun.

I did write my first baby book last week. It was really after a couple days of keeping Connor, here in La Conner. I say his name, Connor with an "O." Connor, little baby Connor, I kept him, and this baby book -- I'm reading him all these hard board books now. This baby book poem came into my mind, so I wrote it and I sent it to Virginia Duncan, my fabulous editor for all these books for young readers, and I said, What do you think? And she wrote back, I love it. Send me a revision -- so sneaky -- and I'll make some comments. Well I'm still waiting for those comments. I really would like to have a baby book, a board book. And she said, I think this would be a good picture book. But I want it to be a board book. I want it for babies. So, I may have to cut it more, to do that.

ST: Some picture books become board books.

NN: Yes, they do.

ST: *Goodnight Moon*.

NN: Yeah, *Goodnight Moon*.

NJ: Some with too many texts do.

NN: Right, right.

ST: *Going On a Bear Hunt* has a board book version.

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NN: They do, that's right. I would like that. That could be my little negotiation.

ST: Yes, there you go.

NJ: So Virginia has been your editor for --

NN: Virginia has been my editor now since -- we started communicating in 1991 or so, or '90, and she had read some of my poems, here and there, scattered around in other people's anthologies, and she just wrote to me. And I still have her first letter saying, Have you ever considered doing books for children? And I said, I have al -- I wrote her back, I have always considered that. And I have some that I have done, and yes. And so I sent her, we still joke about this, I sent her like three manuscripts for children that I had, and she rejected all of them, and they've never been published. And so I've teased her because there's one of them, at least, that I still think is publishable, and it's called *The Endless Breakfast*.

NJ: Food.

NN: Yeah, food again. But then, the first book we did together was not a picture book. It was that anthology, which in retrospect seems crazy. Neither one of us can believe we did that first, because we really didn't know each other that well yet.

NJ: Is she also your editor for your novels?

NN: Yes, she was, she has been. And she also pressured me. She was the pressure behind *Habibi*, which has been my most selling book of all my books.

NJ: No way.

NN: Yes, and it's also the only one translated into five languages. So it's been -- for which I don't believe I've ever seen one cent because I was signing those contracts without a foreign editor. But you know what, I don't care. But I'm glad that it's been in five languages. I'm glad when I go to Japan that kids have read it in Japanese, or in Germany they've read it in German.

She was the person who really pressured me. I didn't think I could do it -- just like those teachers when I said, I don't write essays, and they said, Yes, you do. I said, I can't write anything in a longer form, and she said, Yes, you could. You just need to try.   She was, the hard believer.

NJ: Pay yourself, pay yourself $5 for every letter.

NN: Well, I don't think it's been that.

NN: She is a great editor, and I feel -- Do you know her?

NJ: Mm-hmm.

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NN: Yes. I feel so lucky to have worked with Virginia all these years. I just love her as a person. I love her husband, her son, her parents, her whole realm that she's in, all the people on her staff. We were together when she was at Macmillan, then I went to Simon & Schuster with her, then to Greenwillow with her. And she's just the greatest. She's fantastic. She's so, so smart, and so -- so right.

NJ: So when she says no --

NN: Yes, when she says no or I don't think this is going to work, I listen to her. She's funny too, because she's such a modest person, I mean, such a shy -- she seems shy and quiet, but as I said in the beginning of *Habibi* in the dedication, she knows when to drink Vietnamese coffee, iced coffee, and when to crack the whip, and she really is a whip cracker. I mean, she is hard! When she knows that something is not right yet, she'll say, Another draft, you have to do it.

I just won this thing and I thought she knew all about it, she didn't know anything about it. I just won, of all awards, I think this is the award that means the most to me, of all awards, and it sounds crazy because there's like no money -- no money, no big acclaim attached to it. But I received this big envelope, and I thought it was coming from Virginia. I thought she knew, I thought she'd forwarded it. It was from the American Association of Geriatrics, or something, longevity, geriatrics and longevity. And *The Turtle of Oman* has won the prize for being the most positive depiction of an older person.

NJ: Awesome.

NN: Yeah, like they give this prize at strange intervals.

ST: That is tremendous. Congratulations

NN: And so I get this out of the blue. And so I wrote Virginia an email and I said, This award means more to me than any other. And she wrote back, What are you talking about? So I wrote to her and I told her about it, and she said, That's so cool. That's great. But she didn't even know. I don't think she'd ever even heard of the award. I certainly hadn't.

ST: Speaking of things that mean a lot to people, this just meant so much to us, that you took some time.

NN: Oh, you're so sweet! Thank you, both.

I brought you both my favorite postcard. Let me grab it here. It was such an honor to be with you. You may have this already, but this is the William Stafford. He wrote this. I love this poem!

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