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Reading Article G2

Article #15: Newcomers in a Troubled Land

by Naomi Shihab Nye

Our four-year-old is printing his name on a piece of yellow construction paper. I bend to see which name it is today. For awhile he wanted to be *called* Paper. Today he's gone back to the real one. Each blocky letter a house, a mountain, a caboose . . . then he prints my name underneath his. He draws squiggly lines from the letters in my name to the same letters in his own. "Naomi, look, we're inside one another, did you know that? Your name is here, inside mine!"

Every letter of *Naomi* is contained in his name *Madison*—we pause together, mouths open.

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When I was small, the name *Naomi*, which means *pleasant*, seemed hard to live up to. And *Shihab*, *shooting star* or *meteor* in Arabic, harder yet. I never met another of either in those days. My mother, Miriam, whose name meant *bitter*, said I didn't know how lucky I was.

Hiking the tree-lined streets of our St. Louis borough en route to school, I felt common names spring up inside my mouth, waving their leafy syllables. I'd tongue them for blocks, trying them on. Susie. Karen. Debbie. Who would I be if I'd had a different name? I turned right on a street called Louise. Did all Karens have some region of being in which they were related? I called my brother *Alan* for a week without letting my parents hear. He was really Adlai, for Adlai Stevenson, a name that also means *justice* in Arabic, if pronounced with enough flourish.

Neither of us had middle names.

I admired our parents for that. They hadn't tried to pad us or glue us together with any little wad of name stuck in the middle.

Not until I was sixteen, slouching sleepily in the back seat of my best friend's sister's car, did I fall in love with my own name. It had something to do with neon on a shopping center sign, that steady color holding firm as the nervous December traffic swarmed past. Holding my eyes to the radiant green bars of light as the engine idled at a corner, I felt the soft glow of my own name stretch warmly awake inside me. It balanced on my tongue. It seemed pleasurable, at long last, to feel recognizable to oneself. Was this a secret everyone knew?

Names of old countries and towns had always seemed exquisitely arbitrary, odd. The tags in the backs of garments, the plump bodies of words. We had moved from the city of one saint to the city of another, San Antonio, whose oldest inner-city streets had names like

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one"—it felt like a concussion to know this.

Walking up South Presa Street later with my friend Sue, who'd introduced us, I asked dizzily, "What was his last name?" She said, "Nye, like eye," and the rhymes began popping into my head. They matched our steps. Like *hi*, like *why*, like *bye*—suddenly like every word that seemed to matter. She waved at her corner and I stood there a long time, staring as the crossing signal changed back and forth from a red raised hand to a little man walking. And I knew that every street I crossed from that moment on would be a different street.

Because I am merely a tenant of this name Nye—it is not the house I always occupied—it inspires a traveler's warm affection in me. I appreciate its brevity. Reading about the thirteenth-century Swedes who fled internal uprisings in their own country to resettle in Denmark in settlements prefixed by *Nye*—meaning new, or newcomer—deserves a

border-crosser's nod.

Hundreds of families listed in the *Nye Family of America Association* volumes gather regularly at Sandwich, Massachusetts, to shake hands and share each other's lives. I would like to join them, which surprises me. They started their tradition of gathering in 1903. R. Glen Nye writes, "How can we reach you to tell you how important it is for you to know your origins. . . . Those who read this are the oldsters of tomorrow . . . a hundred years hence, we will be the very ones someone will yearn to know about. Who will they turn to then, if we do not help them now?"

Because my own father came to New York on the boat from his old country of Palestine in 1950, I am curious about these Nyes who came on the boat just following the *Mayflower*, who stayed and stayed and stayed, who built the Nye Homestead on Cape Cod, now a museum pictured on postcards and stationery notes. They have kept such good track of one another. Thick volumes list them, family by

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did you get your energy? What told you to go?

Once my husband and I invited every Nye in the San Antonio telephone book to dinner. Such reckless festivity would have been more difficult had our name been Sánchez or Smith; as it stood, the eleven entries for Nye seemed too provocative to pass up. Eleven groups of people sharing a name within one city—and we didn't know any of them.

Handwritten invitation—"If you're named Nye, you're invited." Would they *get it*? I was brazen enough to style it a "potluck"—a gathering where the parties themselves would be a potluck—and asked all to RSVP. A week later each family had responded positively, with glinting curiosity, except one humorless fireman, whom I telephoned at the last minute. He was too busy for such frivolous pursuit.

Later I would remember how the picnic table in our backyard spilled a rich offering of pies

and green beans and potato salads, how the talk seemed infinite in its variety, how the laughter—"What a wacky idea, Babe!"—some Nye slapping me on the back with sudden gusto—rolled and rolled.

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