

3poems

NAOMI SHIHAB NYE

Arabic Room

The last month of your life
you wanted to speak only Arabic in the afternoons
so the kind lady who simmers pots of cabbage rolls
came and sat heavily beside you and you told her
your Palestinian father had come back to you
for the first time in fifty years
in his old cloak with his staff
He told you firmly he was with you and your mother was too
and you told the lady from Baghdad what your parents said
as the hours rolled painfully forward and
the four of you sat together on the bridge between worlds
stretching back to countries
that will never be the same Palestine Iraq
but you felt calm on the bridge you told me later
I have no fear

Hello, Palestine

In the hours after you died,
all the pain went out of your face.
Whole governments relaxed in your jaw line.
How long had you been away
from the place you loved best?
Every minute was too much.
Each year's bundle
of horror stories: more trees chopped,
homes demolished, people gone crazy.
You'd turn your face away from the screen.
At the end you spoke to your own blood
filtering through a machine:
We'll get there again, friend.
When you died, your long frustration
zipped its case closed. Everyone in a body
is chosen for trouble and bliss.
At least nothing got amputated,
I said, and the nurses looked quizzical.
Well, if only you had seen his country.

For Aziz, Who Loved Jerusalem

A city trades prisoners, erects blockades,
people bulldoze homes and cars, buses explode,
back and forth, the army's roaring tanks
are never called terrorists.
Three religions buried inside a city's walls.
Some kiss the walls.
Some walk beside them, emptied of belief.

My father dies with two languages tucked
inside his head.
Now we will never learn Arabic.
For half a century we lived in mighty proximity
to the resonant underpinnings,
consonants and vowels.
Now, a seven-pound box of ashes.
After many months, we still have not
scattered or buried them.
They are not him, but I kiss the box.