

Naomi Shihab Nye

FABRIC THROWN OVER THE CITY

He says, “You could call it a shawl or a scarf. I call it a fabric, but it’s thrown over the city and only a few pinholes of light get through.”

“Excuse me?” This is before a cup of coffee or anything. 6:30 a.m. on a weekday morning in New York City and the driver is pausing at a stoplight in his yellow taxi on the way north to Columbia University.

His voice is butter smooth and soft. “I think about the light, how it’s always been there, when the Indians were here and the old-time people and everything. And they thought their time was the real time and we think our time is the real time and no one’s time is really.”

“Have you been up all night?”

“No, I just got up before I picked you up. Why?”

“Just wondered.”

He says, “I prefer the morning. Do you?”

“I sure do. More energy.”

I feel as if a certain fabric has been thrown over – our car.

This time of day there’s hardly any traffic. That pre-buzz emptiness, pre-crowd, pre-everything. It’s your life before things happen. A sweetness beyond compare.

His damp, blonde hair is combed back in long waves. Odd how, with taxi drivers, you only know the sides and backs of their heads. There’s something very personal about it.

He keeps talking. “Sometimes the light seems like a strong beam and sometimes it’s very faded and drifts. You know? There’s a whole mood, the way light is. It’s hard to know how a day will be when we first begin it. Like, we really don’t know about today at all. Do we? We just

have ideas. And we think we're wise, but we're not. We just want to be. The world is not your oyster. It is not mine, either. The world is not an oyster, period. The world is the world. Whoever said it was an oyster, do you know?"

"I do not."

"Why are you going out so early? Who are you going to see at Columbia? Some wise people with big opinions?"

"Some teachers. Teachers are nice."

"Oh. People you know or people you don't know?"

I have to think about it. Then I say, "After a while it seems like you know everybody. Like all humans seem familiar a little bit, even if you've never met them before." His style is contagious.

He peers at me in the rearview mirror. "Do I seem familiar?"

"Yes you sort of do, but I don't know why exactly." I don't want to say James Dean. I have missed James Dean in the world since I heard he died, and I have always looked for him and have seen him in shades of a stance, a posture, an eyelid, a hand in a pocket, a tip of a head. Same with Jack Kerouac and a few other people. This guy has James and Jack both, and he's not even standing up.

"We are dreamers in a windy sky, see? Floating among buildings and schedules. All a dream. Like that row row the boat song. We're rowing right now, feel it? Today you will say things you can predict right now and other things you could never predict, don't think you can, and this day will never, no matter how long you live, happen again. Don't ever forget it."

"I know that. I like hearing it though. Thank you."

"If you look up right now, the fabric cracked a little."

