WARSAN SHIRE

(Kenya, 1st August 1988 -)

Poet, activist, editor and teacher, she is a *spoken-word artist*. Her poetry connects gender, war, sex and cultural assumptions, giving a voice to the displaced and acting as a healing agent for the trauma of exile and suffering. Her best known poem, ***Home***, has touched a nerve among people and helped understanding of the refugee crisis.

SECTION SUMMARY

1. W. Shire's LIFE & WORKS.

WARSAN SHIRE

- **1988**: born in **Kenya** to Somali parents, she migrated to the UK at the age of one. Her parents settled in London after **fleeing from the civil war in Somalia**.

This is what Shire says about her parents: "***My mum has always been this natural feminist***, *even though she spent her life as a housewife and didn't really get to go to school. She always relished seeing me be free.* ***My dad's a writer*** *and he was the reason why we had to leave Somalia.* ***He was writing*** this book ***about the corruption in the Somali government***, *there were* ***threats and intimidation***, *and ultimately, we had to leave just before the war broke out.*"

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Her father was the first person that **introduced** her to **the idea of being Afrocentric**, of pan-Africanism and the history of Somalia. He **made her feel really proud to be Black** from a very young age and he also taught her the importance of writing and sharing your stories. Thus, she spent her responsibility-laden adolescence combining writing with co-parenting her three younger siblings

- **2010:** after obtaining a Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing she released *Teaching My Mother How To Give Birth* (**2011**), her debut chapbook. She said:

*"It's about **women, love, loneliness and war**, in chronological order. Poems that focus on adolescence and young adulthood, married life, divorce, motherhood, growing old and death."*

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For her publication she chose **flipped eye publishing,** a company that publishes original poetry and prose on a **not-for-profit** model. This approach has allowed flipped eye to **focus on developing new writers with potential**, thus facilitating the emergence of truly unique literary talent.

- **2013**: she received the **Brunel University African Poetry Prize**, an award set aside specifically for poets who have not yet published a full-length poetry collection.

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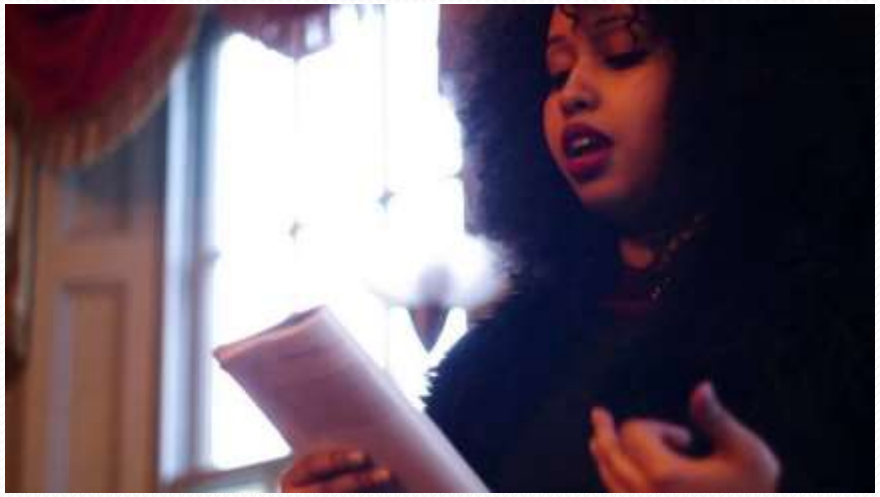
- **2014**: she was selected as **the first Young Poet Laureate** for London, part of a programme focused on **promoting arts and culture**, and chosen as a poet-in-residence for Queensland, Australia.



- **2015:** her poem ***Home*** (written in 2009) became **a viral anthem for the refugee crisis** and she published a new collection of poems, *Her Blue Body,* in which the **female body** is **associated with forms of literal and figurative death**, mutilation, as well as cancer and **cliterodoctomy**.

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That same year she **moved to Los Angeles** with her husband-to-be and she released **another collection of poetry**, *Our Men Do Not Belong to Us*, about how women deal with the violence of all kinds of exploitation.

- **2016:** her verse formed the backbone of **Beyoncé's album** *Lemonade* and its exploration of family, infidelity and the black female body.

- **2018**: she was elected **Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature**.

As a special initiative for that year the Society's governing Council decided to elect **40 writers aged under 40** to celebrate the talent and diversity of Britain's younger generations.

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- **2019:** she wrote *Brave Girl Rising,* a powerful short film which tells the story of **Nasro**, a 17-year-old Somali girl **living in Dadaab**, **one of the world's largest refugee camps**.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o5Rp8YEMe9M

- **2020:** she wrote the poetry for the Disney film *Black Is King,* directed and produced by Beyoncé, which deals with **black identity and black pride**.

- **2022:** she published *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head*, her **full-length debut poetry collection** on **migration, womanhood, trauma and resilience**.

She's still currently living in Los Angeles,
with her husband, Andres Reyes-Manzo, and their two children.

A CURIOSITY!

- Shire **writes in the most unlikely of places**! Far from requiring no distractions, complete silence or noise-cancelling headphones she writes **in bed watching television, in the cinema, in the loudest coffee shop around**! As she herself stated:

"I used to really love writing in Ikea, because it's so loud. I love when children are screaming, so now that I have kids, it's really inspiring! The more noise, the better! It's because I was parent-ified from a young age and had to look after my sisters. I just had to get on with it. If I was gonna write, I was gonna have to write in the middle of three screaming children, in the middle of cooking and cleaning and doing my schoolwork."

2. The poet's COMMITMENT.

«In Somalia everybody is a poet…»

- Poetry has always been part of Shire's everyday life: as a child she was around **people** just **reciting poetry and creating it all the time**.

- In Somalia they call it *"gabay"* and, as she explains:

  "it's used when a child is born, when somebody dies, when we go to a wedding, when you're courting somebody, when you're cursing somebody, when you're beating your children – ***there's something for every single activity in life****."*

- The commitment her poems reveal, though, was born out of what has been happening in Somalia since 2009…

Shire's commitment…

- As she herself explained:

  " I'm from Somalia where there has been a war going on for my entire life. I grew up with a lot of horror in the backdrop – a lot of terrible things that have happened to people who are really close to me, and to my country, and to my parents; so ***it's in the home*** *and* ***it's even in you, it's on your skin*** *and* ***it's in your memories and your childhood****.*

… in her own words.

And my relatives and my friends and my mother's friends ***have experienced things that you can't imagine****, and they've put on this jacket of resiliency and a dark humour. But you don't know what they've been victims of, or what they've done to other people.*

Cathartic writing.

Them being able to tell me, and then me writing it, it's cathartic, being able to ***share their stories****, even if it is something really terrible, something really tragic.*

Sometimes ***I'm telling other people's stories to remove stigma and taboo****, so that* ***they don't have to feel ashamed****; sometimes you use yourself as an example."*

3. GENESIS of «HOME».

How the poem *Home* …

- In 2009 Warsan Shire wrote *Conversations about home (at a deportation centre)*, a piece inspired by a visit she made to the **abandoned Somali Embassy in Rome** which some young refugees had turned into their home despite there being **no electricity** and **no running water**.
- In an interview, she told the reporter that

"… the night before she visited, a young Somali had jumped to his death off the roof."

… came to be.

- The encounter opened her eyes to the harsh reality of living as an undocumented refugee in Europe:

> *"**I wrote** the poem **for them**, **for my family** and **for anyone who has experienced or lived around grief and trauma in that way**."*

- This poem became the basis for *Home*, Shire's best-known work, which has been **shared** widely **across the media** and has been **read in a wide range of public spaces**.

4. «HOME»: the poem.

Home: structure & content.

- *Home* (2009) is an **eight-stanza poem** which provides an unmediated look into the **lives and struggles of those seeking asylum as they flee from** the war-stricken countries that they call "**home**".

- The poem gives **voice to** the **people** whose voices have been **silenced** as they deal with the constant struggles of life as a refugee.

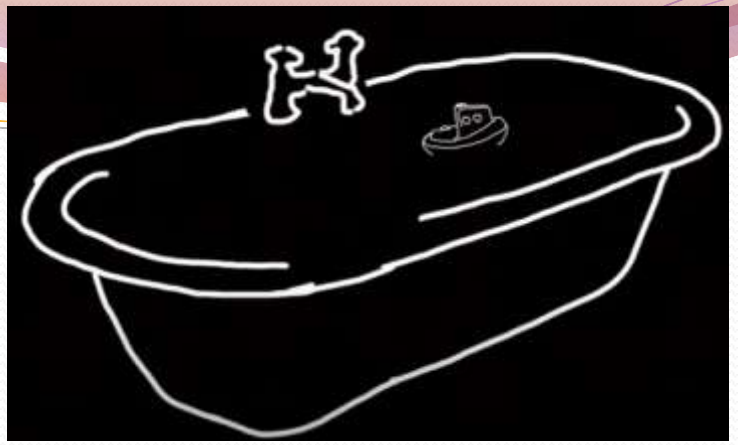
- The overall message of this poem is that **no one leaves their home unless they are forced out of it.**

Home

no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark
you only run for the border
when you see the whole city running as well

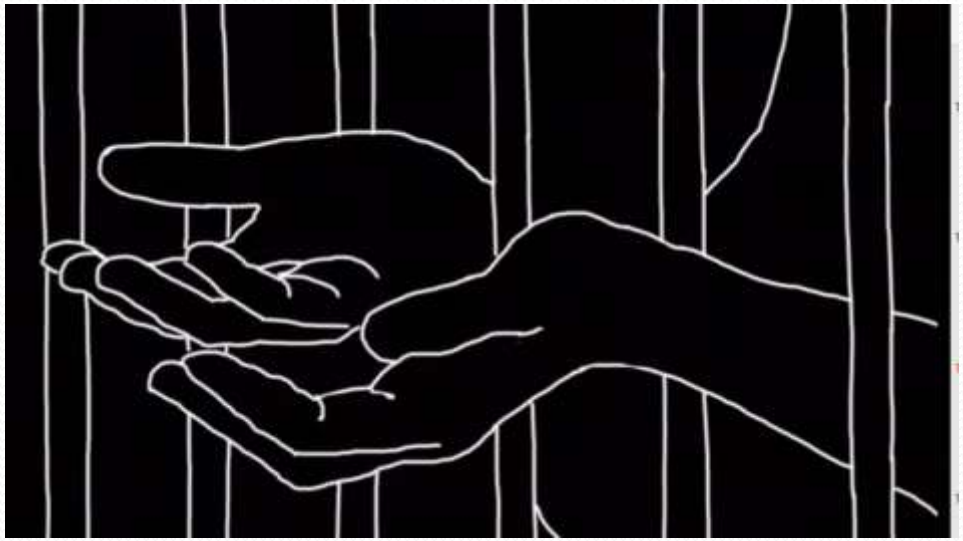
your neighbors running faster than you
breath bloody in their throats
the boy you went to school with
who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin factory
is holding a gun bigger than his body
you only leave home
when home won't let you stay.

no one leaves home unless home chases you
fire under feet
hot blood in your belly
it's not something you ever thought of doing
until the blade burnt threats into
your neck
and even then you carried the anthem under
your breath
only tearing up your passport in an airport toilet
sobbing as each mouthful of paper
made it clear that you wouldn't be going back.



you have to understand,
that no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land
no one burns their palms
under trains
beneath carriages
no one spends days and nights in the stomach of a truck
feeding on newspaper unless the miles travelled
means something more than journey.
no one crawls under fences
no one wants to be beaten
pitied

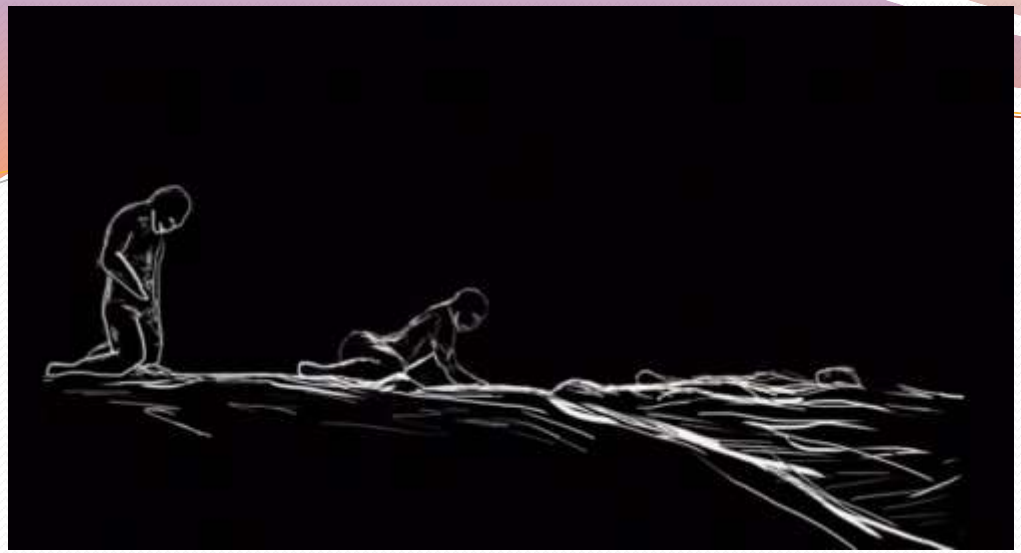
no one chooses refugee camps
or strip searches where your
body is left aching
or prison,
because prison is safer
than a city of fire
and one prison guard
in the night
is better than a truckload
of men who look like your father
no one could take it
no one could stomach it
no one skin would be tough enough



the
go home blacks
refugees
dirty immigrants
asylum seekers
sucking our country dry
niggers with their hands out
they smell strange

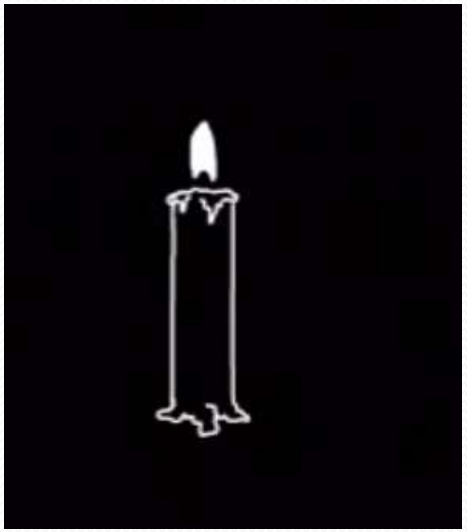
savage
messed up their country and now they want
to mess ours up
how do the words
the dirty looks
roll off your backs
maybe because the blow is softer
than a limb torn off

or the words are more tender
than fourteen men between
your legs
or the insults are easier
to swallow
than rubble
than bone
than your child body
in pieces.
i want to go home,
but home is the mouth of a shark
home is the barrel of the gun
and no one would leave home
unless home chased you to the shore



unless home told you
to quicken your legs
leave your clothes behind

crawl through the desert
wade through the oceans
drown
save
be hungry
beg
forget pride
your survival is more important



no one leaves home until home is a sweaty voice in your ear saying-
leave,
run away from me now
i dont know what i've become
but i know that anywhere
is safer than here

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nI9D92Xiygo

5. CONTENT & ANALYSIS.

CONTENT (st. 1 – 3)

- The poet starts by stating that *"no one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark"* from which you run only *"when you see the whole city running as well"* (**st. 1**).

- The speaker then describes how dramatically home has changed:
  - it is unrecognizable (*the boy you went to school with who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin factory is holding a gun bigger than his body*),
  - it is so dangerous that it *"won't let you stay"* (**st. 2**).

CONTENT (st. 1 – 3)

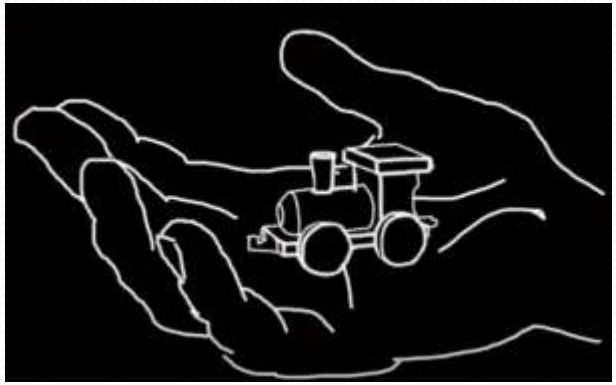
- Nevertheless no one leaves home unless they have no other choice because *"it's not something you ever thought of doing"* unless your life has been threatened (*the blade burnt threats into your neck*).

- Even then your sense of **attachment to your homeland** is so strong that

  - you carry *"the anthem under your breath"*
  - you sob while you're *"tearing up your passport in an airport toilet"* knowing that *"you wouldn't be going back"* (**st. 3**).

CONTENT (st. 4 – 5)

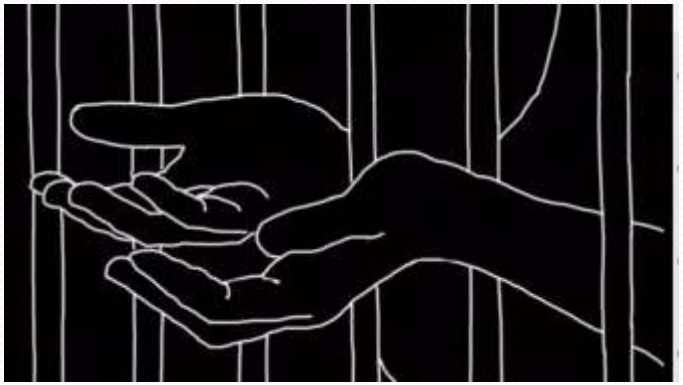
- In **st. 4** the speaker addresses us directly, telling us that we *"have to understand, that no one*
  - *puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land*;



  - *burns their palms under trains beneath carriages*;
  - spends *"days and nights in the stomach of a truck feeding on newspaper unless the miles travelled means something more than journey"*.
- No human being *"wants to be beaten"* but **no one wants to be *pitied*** either.

CONTENT (st. 4 – 5)

- The theme of **human dignity** is thus introduced in the last line of this stanza, immediately to be resumed in the first lines of the one which follows:
  - the indignity of *"strip searches"* in refugee camps or in prisons *"where your body is left aching"* can be borne only if *"prison is safer than a city of fire"*...



- ... and **for women it's ten times worse:** they find themselves forced to stomach the humiliation of *"one prison guard in the night"* because it *"is better than a truckload of men who look like your father"* (**st. 5**).

CONTENT (st. 6 – 7)

- In **st. 6** the speaker obliges us to face (and hear) some of the many racist comments we so often hear (and face… or, perhaps, even make):

  - the refugees have become *"dirty immigrants"*, *"niggers with their hands out"* who *"smell strange"*, *"savage"* and they are accused of "sucking our country dry";
  - after having *"messed up their country"* *"now they want to mess ours up"* too.

- How can such comments and *"dirty looks"* roll off their backs? *"maybe because the blow is softer than a limb torn off"*.

CONTENT (st. 6 – 7)

- Women and their even more tragic plight are at the centre of the first lines of **st. 7**:
  - racist comments and dirty looks are, in any case, *"more tender than fourteen men between your legs or the insults are easier to swallow than rubble than bone than your child body in pieces".*
- The cry "***i want to go home***" strikes at the heart of the reader: this is what refugees want! They want to go home… but they can't, because

  home is the mouth of a shark
  home is the barrel of the gun

- They have no choice but to *"crawl through the desert wade through the oceans drown save be hungry beg forget pride"* in order to survive.

CONCLUSION (st. 8)

- Home itself becomes the speaking voice in **st. 8**, telling its people to

  "leave, run away from me now"

  because it is no longer the place they grew up in, no longer the land they belong to.

- The conclusion is a bitter one:

  "i dont know what i've become
  but i know that anywhere
  is safer than here".

ORIGINALITY…

- The poem seems to **break** every traditional rule, ignoring both **rhyme scheme** and **metre**, as well as basic writing conventions such as **punctuation** and **capitalization.**
- The result is **a seemingly unstoppable flow** which mingles
  - the **speaker's painful considerations** regarding what forces people to leave their homelands;
  - the **chillingly realistic description** of what kind of difficulties refugees have to face;
  - the **offensive comments** that refugees are subjected to in the countries where they seek asylum.
- The **language** is extremely **effective**, at times even **crude**.

… & TRADITION.

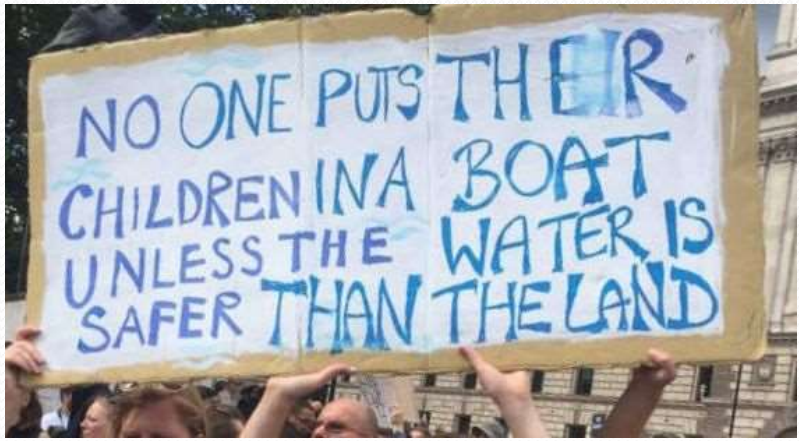
- Despite this break with tradition, Shire makes use of **a number of literary devices** such as
  - **personification** (home as a living being, transformed into a persecutor);
  - **metaphor** (home as *the mouth of a shark*);
  - **anaphora** (*no one, than, unless…*);
  - **metonymy** (*city* for citizens);
  - **enjambment** (*the anthem under/your breath, fourteen men between/your legs…*);
  - **repetition** (*no one leaves home unless…, home is the mouth of a shark…*).

6. A CALL to ACTION!

Home: achievements…

- Shire's **purpose** in writing this poem is to **reveal the emotional side of the refugee crisis** and **to create empathy and compassion**.
- She wrote for all those who do not understand why people will seek refuge or asylum… and she *has* woken them up to the reality of the refugee crisis!

In America, for example, many citizens marched the streets in protest of Donald Trump's ban on accepting citizens from Muslim countries into America. They held up signs with lines of *Home* written on them.



… and the «downside».

- The dramatic aspect, though, as Shire explained, is that

"although it's a beautiful thing that everybody can come together to connect with these words and have more empathy, the downside of it is that ***whenever I see it's being shared, I know it's because something really horrible has happened****…"*

- How the poem became viral is a case in point: **six years after** she had written it to highlight the situation of Somali refugees, it was given resonance by **Benedict Cumberbatch** who recited lines from it to sponsor the safe passage of unaccompanied Syrian refugee children from a camp in France to the U.K.

A CALL TO ACTION!

- From then on the situation has gone from bad to worse and the **refugee crisis** has become increasingly widespread: if we don't **bridge the gap** between "us" and "them", it will continue to be a large strain on society for future generations.

- Shire's poem opens the eyes of the readers and, by exposing them to the inhumane atrocities the refugees face, urges them to **start making a difference by acting NOW**!

- We need to "***promote peaceful and inclusive societies***" founded on "***respect towards people of different ethnic origins and religions***" in order to "***guarantee a life of dignity for all***" (see **Goal 16 of the 2030 Agenda**).