

HOME (2011)

by Warsan Shire

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 neighbours running faster than you,
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 would leave home unless home
chased you, fire under feet,
hot blood in your belly.

It's not something you ever thought about
doing, and so when you did -
you carried the anthem under your breath,
waiting until the airport toilet
to tear up the passport and swallow -
each mouthful making it clear that
you would not be going back.

You must understand,
no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land.

Who would choose days and nights
In the stomach of a truck,
Unless the miles travelled
Meant something more than the journey.

No one would choose to crawl under fences,
be beaten until your shadow leaves you
raped, then drowned, forced to the bottom of
a boat because you are darker, be sold,
starved, shot at the border like a sick animal,
be pitied, lose your name, lose your family,
make a refugee camp a home for a year or two or ten
stripped and searched, find prison everywhere

and if you survive
and you are greeted on the other side
go home blacks, refugees
dirty immigrants, asylum seekers
sucking our country dry of milk,
dark, with their hands out
smell strange, savage –
look what they've done to their own countries,
what will they do to ours?

The dirty looks in the street
feel softer than a limb torn off,
The indignity of everyday life more tender
than fourteen men who look like your father,
between your legs. Insults easier to swallow
than rubble, than your child's body
in pieces – for now, forget about pride
your survival is more important.

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 tells you to
leave what you could not behind,
Even if it's human.

No one leaves home until home
is a damp voice in your ear saying
leave, run now, I don't know what
I've become.

ABOUT THE POET

Warsan Shire, born 1 August 1988, Kenya

Warsan Shire migrated to England as a baby with her Somali parents. Many of her poems describe the lives of refugees and marginalised people, as well as her own experience as the child of immigrants in London. The tragic circumstances of war refugees in the late 2000s formed the inspiration for poems like Home and confirmed her as a human rights activist.