

Our Men Do Not Belong to Us



Warsan Shire

Our Men Do Not Belong to Us is the opening noise of a poet who has already gained a significant amount of praise for her poetry. Warsan Shire's poems are direct, but they are works of such delicate construction and layered insight that one quickly realizes what seems "direct" is necessarily wholly indirect, questioning, uncertain, and vulnerable. Her poems are about how women deal with the violence of all kinds of exploitation, but they are never didactic or simplistic. Shire fills her poems with the effects of her complex sense of identity in transcultural Africa.

—Kwame Dawes

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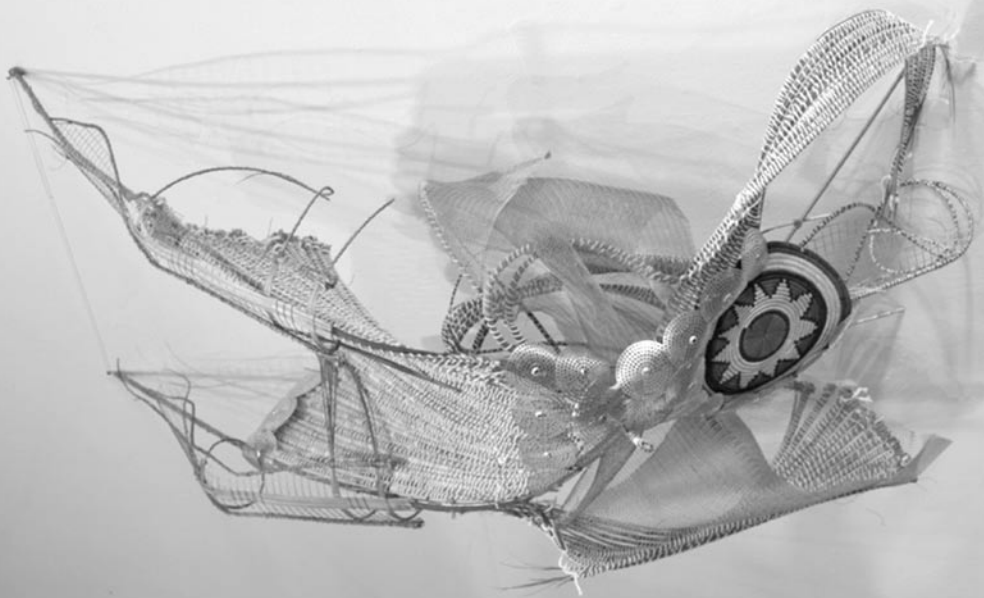
This inaugural box set of new generation African poets is dedicated to the memory of Ghanaian poet, Kofi Awoonor (1935-2013), who was killed in the terrorist attack at Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya.

Look for a canoe for me
That I go home in it.
Look for it.
The lagoon waters are in storm
And the hippos are roaming.

But I shall cross the river
And go beyond.

from "I Heard a Bird Cry," by Kofi Awoonor

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Warsan Shire



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AND THE POETRY FOUNDATION'S HARRIET MONROE POETRY INSTITUTE

POETS IN THE WORLD SERIES

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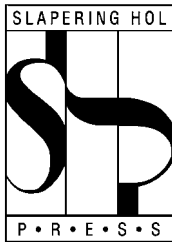
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Preface

By Bernardine Evaristo

I would like to introduce Warsan Shire as one of the brightest new voices in poetry. Born in Somalia, she lives in London, England, where she is fast making a name for herself on the poetry reading circuits.

To set a context for Shire's work, it is important to note that few African poets (or indeed black poets) are published in Britain and that most poetry published on the African continent, where poetry presses struggle to survive, does not reach an international audience. While the founding fathers of African poetry were, with the exception of Ama Ata Aidoo, just that—all male—it is incredible to consider that Anglophone African women poets are still invisible in the global village of the twenty-first century. The significance of Shire's poetry cannot, therefore, be underestimated.

Without wanting to limit or make assumptions about her readership, it is apparent from the cultural and gender bias of her writing that she will be keenly *heard* by African and Afrodiasporic women in particular. Also, rather refreshingly, Shire does not seek to emulate the kind of poetry that tends to be lauded and laurelled in Britain, poetry that is typically apolitical, aracial, and favoring the conventions of obliquity and restraint—what I call “the stiff upper lip of British poetry.”

Warsan Shire's poetry does its own thing; it is entirely her own voice—unflinching and sometimes shocking, yet also exquisitely beautiful, stunningly imaginative, imagistic, memorable—always deeply felt and eminently rereadable. Here is a poet who explores how the victims of civil war can end up as refugees in the sometimes hostile host communities of Europe; people who have lost everything—family, nation, home:

No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark. I've been carrying the old anthem in my mouth for so long that there's no space for another song, another tongue, or another language. I know a shame that shrouds, totally engulfs. I tore up and ate my own passport in an airport hotel. I'm bloated with language I can't afford to forget.

["Conversations about Home (at the Deportation Center)"]

Shire explores societies where dysfunctional male-female relations are the norm and where too many men are too often absent:

Our men do not belong to us.
Even my own father left one afternoon, is not mine.

My brother is in prison, is not mine. My uncles, they
go back home and they are shot in the head, are not mine.
("What We Own")

Here is a poet who writes about women inhabiting an intimate microuniverse of mothering, support, sisterhood, sensuality but also betrayal:

When she was my age, she stole
the neighbor's husband, burned his name into her skin.
For weeks she smelled of cheap perfume and dying flesh.
("Haram")

It is a place where female genital mutilation is a whispered horror:

My mother uses her quiet voice
on the phone:

Are they all okay? Are they healing well?

She doesn't want my father to overhear.

("Things We Lost in the Summer")

Shire's poetry is imbued with loss, longing, loneliness—indeed, a complex negotiation of emotions. She challenges us to consider and *reconsider* the lives of women usually spoken about but not heard. The past, the present, the lyrical, and the anecdotal—hers is a name to watch as she inscribes herself into the future.

Our Men Do Not Belong to Us

What We Own

Our men do not belong to us.
Even my own father left one afternoon, is not mine.

My brother is in prison, is not mine. My uncles, they
go back home and they are shot in the head, are not mine.

My cousins, stabbed in the street for being too or not enough,
are not mine. Then the men we try to love say
we carry too much loss, wear too much black,
are too heavy to be around, much too sad to love.
Then they leave, and we mourn them too.

Is that what we're here for?
To sit at kitchen tables, counting
on our fingers the ones who died,
those who left, and the others who were taken by the police,
or by drugs
or by illness
or by other women?

It makes no sense.
Look at your skin, her mouth, these lips, those eyes,
my God, listen to that laugh.

The only darkness we should allow into our lives is the night,
for even then, we have the moon.

Ugly

Your daughter is ugly.
She knows loss intimately,
carries whole cities in her belly.

As a child, relatives wouldn't hold her.
She was splintered wood and sea water.
They said she reminded them of the war.

On her fifteenth birthday you taught her
how to tie her hair like rope
and smoke it over burning frankincense.

You made her gargle rosewater
and, while she coughed, said
*macaanto girls like you shouldn't smell
of lonely or empty.*

You are her mother.
Why did you not warn her,
hold her like a rotting boat,
and tell her that men will not love her
if she is covered in continents,
if her teeth are small colonies,
if her stomach is an island
if her thighs are borders?

What man wants to lay down
and watch the world burn
in his bedroom?

Your daughter's face is a small riot,
her hands are a civil war,
a refugee camp behind each ear,
a body littered with ugly things,

but God,
doesn't she wear
the world well.

Things We Lost in the Summer

I.

The summer my cousins return from Nairobi,
we sit in a circle by the oak tree in my aunt's garden,
and they look older. Amel's hardened nipples
push through the paisley of her blouse,
minarets calling men to worship.

When they left, I was twelve years old and swollen
with the heat of waiting. We hugged at the departure gate,
waifs with bird chests clinking like wood, boyish,
long-skirted figurines waiting to grow

into our hunger. My mother uses her quiet voice
on the phone:

Are they all okay? Are they healing well?

She doesn't want my father to overhear.

II.

Juwariyah, my age, leans in and whispers,
I've started my period. Her hair is in my mouth when
I try to move in closer—*how does it feel?*

She turns to her sisters, and a laugh that is not hers
stretches from her body like a moan.

She is more beautiful than I can remember.

One of them pushes my open knees closed.
Sit like a girl. I finger the hole in my shorts,
shame warming my skin.

In the car, my mother stares at me through the
rearview mirror, the leather sticks to the back of my
thighs. I open my legs like a well-oiled door,

daring her to look at me and give me
what I had not lost—a name.

First Kiss

The first boy to kiss your mother later raped women when the war broke out. She remembers hearing this from your uncle, then going to your bedroom and laying down on the floor. You were at school.

Your mother was sixteen when he first kissed her. She held her breath for so long that she blacked out. On waking she found her dress was wet and sticking to her stomach, half-moons bitten into her thighs.

That same evening, she visited a friend, a girl who fermented wine illegally in her bedroom. When your mother confessed, *I've never been touched like that before*, the friend laughed, mouth bloody with grapes, then plunged a hand between your mother's legs.

Last week, she saw him driving the number eighteen bus, his cheek a swollen drumlin, a vine scar dragging itself across his mouth. You were with her, holding a bag of dates to your chest, heard her let out a deep moan when she saw how much you looked like him.

Haram

My older sister soaps between her legs, her hair
a prayer of curls. When she was my age, she stole
the neighbor's husband, burned his name into her skin.
For weeks she smelled of cheap perfume and dying flesh.

It's 4:00 a.m., and she winks at me, bending over the sink,
her small breasts bruised from sucking.
She smiles, pops her gum before saying—
boys are haram; don't ever forget that.

Some nights I hear her in her room screaming.
We play *surah al baqarah* to drown her out.
Anything that leaves her mouth sounds like sex.
Our mother has banned her from saying God's name.

When We Last Saw Your Father

He was sitting in the hospital parking lot
in a borrowed car, counting the windows
of the building, guessing which one
was glowing with his mistake.

Conversations about Home (at the Deportation Center)

Well, I think home spat me out, the blackouts and curfews like tongue against loose tooth. God, do you know how difficult it is to talk about the day your own city dragged you by the hair, past the old prison, past the school gates, past the burning torsos erected on poles like flags? When I meet others like me, I recognize the longing, the missing, the memory of ash on their faces. No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark. I've been carrying the old anthem in my mouth for so long that there's no space for another song, another tongue, or another language. I know a shame that shrouds, totally engulfs. I tore up and ate my own passport in an airport hotel. I'm bloated with language I can't afford to forget.

*

They ask me, *How did you get here?* Can't you see it on my body? The Libyan Desert red with immigrant bodies, the Gulf of Aden bloated, the city of Rome with no jacket. I hope the journey meant more than miles, because all my children are in the water. I thought the sea was safer than the land. I want to make love, but my hair smells of war and running and running. I want to lie down, but these countries are like uncles who touch you when you're young and asleep. Look at all these borders foaming at the mouth with bodies broken and desperate. I'm the color of hot sun on my face; my mother's remains were never buried. I spent days and nights in the stomach of the truck; I did not come out the same. Sometimes, it feels like someone else is wearing my body.

*

I know a few things to be true. I do not know where I am going, where I have come from is disappearing, I am unwelcome and my beauty is not beauty here. My body is burning with the shame of not belonging; my body is longing. I am the sin of memory and the absence of memory. I watch the news, and my mouth becomes a sink full of blood. The lines, the forms, the people at the desks, the calling cards, the immigration officer, the looks on the street, the cold settling deep into my bones, the English classes at night, the distance I am from home. But Alhamdulillah, all of this is better than the scent of a woman completely on fire; or a truckload of men who look like my father, pulling out my teeth and nails; or fourteen men between my legs; or a gun; or a promise; or a lie; or his name; or his manhood in my mouth.

*

I hear them say, *go home*; I hear them say, *fucking immigrants, fucking refugees*. Are they really this arrogant? Do they not know that stability is like a lover with a sweet mouth on your body one second and the next you are a tremor lying on the floor covered in rubble and old currency waiting for its return. All I can say is, I was once like you, the apathy, the pity, the ungrateful placement; and now my home is the mouth of a shark, now my home is the barrel of a gun. I'll see you on the other side.

Souvenir

You brought the war with you
unknowingly, perhaps, on your skin
in hurried suitcases
in photographs
plumes of it in your hair
under your nails
maybe it was
in your blood.

You came sometimes with whole families,
sometimes with nothing, not even your shadow
landed on new soil as a thick accented apparition
stiff denim and desperate smile,
ready to fit in, work hard
forget the war
forget the blood.

The war sits in the corners of your living room
laughs with you at your TV shows
fills the gaps in all your conversations
sighs in the pauses of telephone calls
gives you excuses to leave situations,
meetings, people, countries, love;
the war lies between you and your partner in the bed
stands behind you at the bathroom sink
even the dentist jumped back from the wormhole
of your mouth. You suspect
it was probably the war he saw,
so much blood.

You know peace like someone who has survived
a long war,
take it one day at a time because everything
has the scent of a possible war;
you know how easily a war can start
one moment quiet, next blood.

War colors your voice, warms it even.
No inclination as to whether you were
the killer or the mourner.
No one asks. Perhaps you were both.
You haven't kissed anyone for a while now.
To you, everything tastes like blood.

Chemistry

I wear my loneliness like a taffeta dress riding up my thigh,
and you cannot help but want me.
You think it's cruel
how I break your heart, to write a poem.
I think it's alchemy.



Acknowledgments

Special thanks to the editors of the publications in which versions of these poems first appeared:

Poetry Review: "What We Own" as "What We Have." Copyright © 2012. Used by permission of the publisher.

Wasafiri: "Ugly"

SPOOK Magazine: "At the Thought of You" and "Residue"

Neon 3: "Chemistry," "Residue," and "What We Own" as "What We Have"

"Ugly" also appeared in the anthology *The Salt Book of Younger Poets*.

About the author:

Warsan Shire is a Kenyan-born Somali poet and writer based in London. Shire has read her work extensively in Britain and internationally, including recent readings in South Africa, Italy, Germany, Canada, the United States, and Kenya. Her debut chapbook is *Teaching My Mother How To Give Birth* (flipped eye). Her poems have been published in *Wasafiri*, *Magma*, and *Poetry Review*, and in the anthology *The Salt Book of Younger Poets* (Salt). In 2012, she represented Somalia at Poetry Parnassus. Her poetry has been translated into Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese.

*

About the artist:

Adejoke Tugbiyele was born in Brooklyn, New York, to Nigerian parents. Her work has been on exhibit at Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art; Galerie Myrtis; the Museum of Arts and Design; the Museum of Biblical Art; the Reginald F. Lewis Museum; the Goethe-Institut in Washington, DC; the United Nations Headquarters; the Centre for Contemporary Art in Lagos in Nigeria; and the FNB Joburg Art Fair (2013) in Johannesburg, South Africa. Her short film, *AfroOdyssey IV: 100 Years Later*, will premiere in Spain at LOOP 2014 Barcelona and at the Goethe-Institut (Washington, DC, and Lagos, Nigeria). *AfroOdyssey III*, the previous series, will be part of the 2013–2015 international exhibition “Sights and Sounds: Global Film and Video” at the Jewish Museum of New York. Tugbiyele is an Artist-in-Residence at Gallery Aferro and the recipient of several awards including the 2013–2014 Fulbright U.S. student fellowship, the 2014 Serenbe Artist-in-Residence program, the 2013 Amalie Rothschild Award, and the 2012 William M. Phillips Award for best figurative sculpture. Tugbiyele holds a Master’s of Fine Arts in Sculpture from the Maryland Institute College of Art. Her work is in the permanent collection of the Newark Museum and significant private collections in the United States.

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THE HUDSON VALLEY WRITERS' CENTER, a nonprofit organization, presents public readings featuring established and emerging writers, offers workshops in many genres, and organizes educational programs for school children, people in underserved communities, and those with special needs.

In 1990, the Center's small press imprint, SLAPERING HOL PRESS, was established to advance the national and international conversation of poetry and poetics, principally by publishing and supporting the works of emerging poets.

The AFRICAN POETRY BOOK FUND, based in Lincoln, Nebraska, promotes and advances the development and publication of the poetic arts through its book series, contests, workshops, seminars, and through its collaborations with publishers and other entities that share an interest in the poetic arts of Africa. Together with *Prairie Schooner*, the University of Nebraska—Lincoln's international literary quarterly, the African Poetry Book Fund sponsors a yearly chapbook series.

THE HARRIET MONROE POETRY INSTITUTE (HMPI) is an independent forum created by the Poetry Foundation to provide a space in which fresh thinking about poetry, in both its intellectual and practical needs, can flourish free of allegiances other than to the best ideas. The Institute convenes leading poets, scholars, publishers, educators, and other thinkers from inside and outside the poetry world to address issues of importance to the art form of poetry and to identify and champion solutions for the benefit of the art.

Seven New Generation African Poets is part of a collaboration with the *Poets in the World* series created by the Poetry Foundation's Harriet Monroe Poetry Institute. The *Poets in the World* series supports research and publication of poetry and poetics from around the world and highlights the importance of creating a space for poetry in local communities. For more information about the Poetry Foundation, please visit www.poetryfoundation.org.

Harriet Monroe Poetry Institute
Poets in the World series: Publications, 2013–2014

Ilya Kaminsky, HMPI director;
Poets in the World series editor

Another English: Anglophone Poems from Around the World, edited by Catherine Barnett and Tiphonie Yanique (Tupelo Press)

Elsewhere, edited by Eliot Weinberger (Open Letter Books)

Fifteen Iraqi Poets, edited by Dunya Mikhail (New Directions Publishing)

"Landays: Poetry of Afghan Women," edited by Eliza Griswold (*Poetry*, June 2013)

New Cathay: Contemporary Chinese Poetry, edited by Ming Di (Tupelo Press)

Open the Door: How to Excite Young People about Poetry, edited by Dorothea Lasky, Dominic Luxford, and Jesse Nathan (McSweeney's)

Pinholes in the Night: Essential Poems from Latin America, edited by Raúl Zurita and Forrest Gander (Copper Canyon Press)

Seven New Generation African Poets, edited by Kwame Dawes and Chris Abani (Slapering Hol Press)

Something Indecent: Poems Recommended by Eastern European Poets, edited by Valzhyna Mort (Red Hen Press)

The Star by My Head: Poets from Sweden, edited and translated by Malena Mörling and Jonas Ellerström (Milkweed Editions)

The Strangest of Theatres: Poets Writing Across Borders, edited by Jared Hawkey, Susan Rich, and Brian Turner (McSweeney's)

Upcoming African Poetry Book Fund Series Titles

Kofi Awoonor, *The Promise of Hope: New and Selected Poems: 1964–2013* (University of Nebraska Press, 2014)

Clifton Gachagua, *Madman at Kilifi* (University of Nebraska Press, 2014)

Upcoming Slapering Hol Press Titles

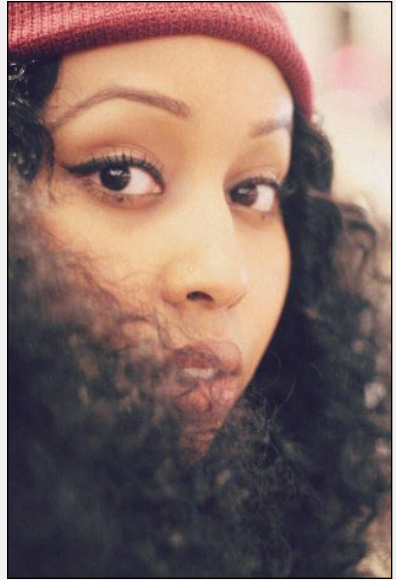
Richard Parisio, *The Owl Invites Your Silence* (2015)

Julie Danho, *Six Portraits* (2014)

Molly Peacock and Amy M. Clark, *A Turn Around the Mansion Grounds: Poems in Conversation & a Conversation* (2014)

Colophon

This book was designed and set in Eric Gill's Perpetua and Gill Sans types by Ed Rayher at Swamp Press in Northfield, Massachusetts. The text and cover stocks of this chapbook are Cougar Opaque. Digital printing by Printech of Stamford, Connecticut. Swamp Press hand-bound, letterpress books can be found in rare book rooms at major institutions in the United States and Canada. Ed is a poet, letterpress printer, and publisher of limited edition books of poetry. He has a MFA and a PhD from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. In 2015, his next book of poems, *The Paleontologist's Red Pumps*, will be released from Hedgerow Press.



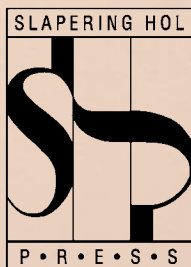
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—Bernardine Evaristo
from the Preface

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Ilya Kaminsky is the *Poets in the World* series editor.



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