



witness

On film, poet Emtithal Mahmoud asks students to 'bear witness' to her experiences of genocide in Darfur. Students look at poetic responses to war and human rights abuses to understand that poetry can destroy silence and create remembrance. They then choose a photograph and let events speak through their writing.

witness

AIMS

- To explore poetry that responds to war and genocide
- To understand the importance of poetry to bear witness to events
- To write about bearing witness to a human rights violation

HUMAN RIGHTS FOCUS

Reporting human rights violations, war and genocide

YOU'LL NEED

PowerPoint, speakers and internet access
Resource Sheet 1 Bear witness images
Resource Sheet 2 Example poem
Whiteboard or visualiser
Notebook or folders (for students to keep their poetry in)

Film clip

Emtithal Mahmoud: A Young Poet Tells The Story of Darfur
(on PowerPoint)

Poems

Head Over Heels by Emtithal Mahmoud
You Have a Big Imagination or 400,000 Ways to Cry by
Emtithal Mahmoud
The Blood by Anthony Anaxagorou

STARTER

Explain to the class that you will explore how poetry can be a response to war crimes and genocide. Some of the content may be upsetting.

- Show slide 2, the map of Darfur. Explain that Darfur is an area of West Sudan. Armed conflict has been raging there since 2003.
- A large number of crimes under international law and human rights violations have been committed by Sudanese government forces, including the bombing of civilians and civilian property, the unlawful killing of men, women and children, the abduction and rape of women, the forced displacement of civilians and the looting and destruction of civilian property and entire villages. Evidence documented also suggests that the Sudanese government forces repeatedly used chemical weapons.
- War crimes are crimes that violate the laws or customs of war defined by the Geneva and Hague conventions, including targeting civilians, torture, murder or ill-treatment of prisoners of war.
- Genocide is acts committed with the intent to destroy, completely or partially, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group.

Show slide 3 and play the first seven minutes of the Ted Talk by Emtithal Mahmoud. In the clip, she confronts her experience of escaping genocide in Darfur and shares the poem *Head Over Heels*.

Teacher note The full TED Talk includes an additional poem by Emtithal Mahmoud called *You Have A Big Imagination or 400,000 Ways to Cry*. For reference, we have included a copy of this poem in this session.

Ask the class:

- Tell me about the poem.
- What did you like/dislike?
- Before her performance, why does she ask ‘Will you witness me?’?
- What does she mean by the term ‘bearing witness’?
- What are the dangers of not bearing witness?

Read out the following quote from the film clip:

‘I chose poetry because it is so visceral. When someone is standing in front of you, mind, body and soul, saying “witness me”, it’s impossible not to become keenly aware of your own humanity.’

Do students think poetry is a powerful way of breaking the silence? How?

ACTIVITY 1

Share *The Blood* by Anthony Anaxagorou (slide 4).

- Tell me about the poem.
- What do you like/dislike?
- Did anything puzzle you or feel familiar?
- Did you notice any patterns? Pace? Rhythm?
- What experiences is the poet trying to convey?
- Does it trigger any feelings in you?
- Do you relate to anything in the poem? Any part, word, image or phrase?
- Why do you think the poet chose to focus on blood? What does it symbolise?

Teacher note You may wish to expand the discussion on the significance of blood as a symbol (bravery, perseverance, defiance, life-force), its possible associations (pain, guilt, victory) and its use in other literature, culture and politics.

- What do you think the poem bears witness to?
- What lives on?

In groups, explore Resource Sheet 1 *Bear witness* images (slide 5). Consider what aspect or detail of the event will live on beyond the moment. For instance,

- a little girl still growing up in the rubble of a bombed-out town;
- the coastline along the Mediterranean that will continue to see the impact of people lost at sea.

ACTIVITY 2

Give each student one of the images from Resource Sheet 1 (or let them choose). Ask them to focus on a detail from that event.

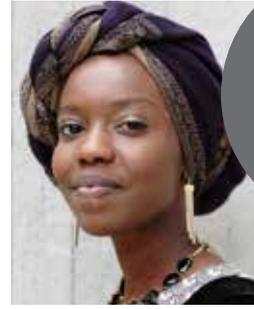
Ask them to write a poem expressing the way the event is witnessed and continues to live on using the frame from *The Blood*. If useful, share Resource Sheet 2 *The Walls* example poem. It takes the walls of the White House press conference room as its subject matter and is inspired by *The Blood*.

While students are writing, create your own poem on the board or using a visualiser so that they can see you being a poet at the same time, making choices and editing as you change your mind.

Would anyone like to share their poem? Ask students to add their poems to their notebook or folder.

EXTENSION

Ask students to map out a short animation that illustrates their poem or conveys their concept.



© Janek Rutkowski

HEAD OVER HEELS

By **Emtithal Mahmoud**

They hand me the microphone as my shoulder sinks under the weight of this dress;
The woman says,

The one millionth refugee just left South Sudan, can you comment?

I feel my feet rock back and forth
on the heels my mother bought
Begging the question,

do we stay, or is it safer to choose flight?

My mind echoes through the numbers:
One million gone, 400,000 dead in Darfur,
two million displaced

and this lump takes over my throat as if each of those bodies found a grave right here in
my esophagus.

Our once country—
all west, and south, and east, and north—
so restless, the Nile couldn't hold us together
and you ask me to summarize?

They talk about the numbers as if this isn't still happening,
As if 500,000 didn't just die in Syria,
as if 3,000 aren't still making their final stand
at the bottom of the Mediterranean,
as if there aren't entire volumes full of factsheets about our genocide and now you
want me to write one?

Fact: we never talked over breakfast because the
warplanes would swallow our voices.

Fact: my grandfather didn't want to leave home
so he died in a warzone.

Fact: a burning bush without God is just a fire.

I measure the distance between what I know and what is safe to say on a microphone.
 Do I talk about sorrow, displacement?
 Do I mention the violence?
 How it's never as simple as what we see on TV?
 How there are weeks' worth of fear before the camera is on?

Do I talk about our bodies? How they are 60 percent water, but we still burn like driftwood?
 Do I tell her the men died first? Mothers forced to watch the slaughter?
 That they came for our children?
 Scattering them across the continent
 until our homes sank, that even castles sink at the bite of the bomb?

Do I mention the elderly? Our heroes—
 too weak to run too expensive to shoot?
 How they would march them hands raised, rifles at their backs into the fire?
 How their walking sticks kept the flames alive?

It sounds too harsh for a bundle of wires and an audience to swallow; too relentless,
 like the valley that filled with the putrid smoke of our deaths.
 Is it better in verse? Can a stanza become a burial shroud?
 Will it sting less if I say it softly?
 Will the pain leave when the microphone does?
 If you don't see me cry will you listen better?
 30 seconds for the sound bite and now 3 minutes for the poem. Why does every
 word feel like I'm saying my last?

My tongue goes dry, the same way we died—
 becoming ash without ever having been coal.
 I feel my left leg go numb and realize that I locked my knees,
 bracing for impact.

I never wear shoes I can't run in.

YOU HAVE A BIG IMAGINATION

or 400,000 ways to cry

By **Emtithal Mahmoud**

I am a sad girl, but my face makes other plans
Focusing energy on this smile so as not to waste it on pain

The first thing they took was my sleep,
eyes heavy but wide open
Thinking maybe I missed something,
maybe the cavalry is still coming

They didn't come, so I bought bigger pillows

My grandma could cure anything by talking the life out of it and she said I could
make a thief in a silo laugh
in the middle of our raging war

War makes a broken marriage bed out of sorrow
you want nothing more than to disappear,
yet your heart can't bear to leave

but love, love is the armor we carried across the borders of our broken homeland
A hasty mix of stories that last long after the flavor is gone
And muscle memory that overcomes even the most bitter of times

My memory is spotted with days of laughing until I cried
Or crying until I laughed
Laughter and tears are both involuntary reactions
Testaments of human expression
So allow me to express, that if I make you laugh,
It's usually on purpose
and if I make you cry, I promise I'll still think you are beautiful

I learned love in France
My cousin Zeinab bedridden on a random afternoon
Dilated fibromyalgia –her heart muscles expanded until they no longer functioned

I hadn't seen her since the last time in Sudan together
And there I was at her bedside in a 400 year old hospital in Paris

This is for Zeinab who wanted to hear poems
Suddenly, English Arabic and French were not enough Every word I knew was
empty noise

And she said, well get on with it



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POEMS

I recited everything I could

It was the most important stage I've ever been on—
surrounded by family, by remnants of a people who were given as a dowry
to relentless war but still manage
to make pearls of this life

Who taught me not only to laugh
but to live in the face of death

Placing their hands across the sun and saying, *See that, I'll meet you there!*
and for Zeinab who on her death bed wanted to hear poems

Most days I am only sandstone, but
in her arms I felt like gold
And we laughed and we loved, and I asked,

Isn't it strange that the only problem is your heart was too big?

THE BLOOD

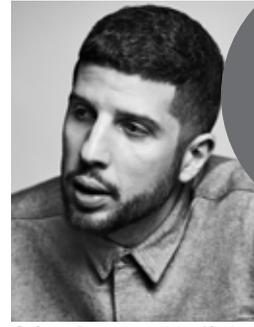
By **Anthony Anaxagorou**

They
slaughter body with bullets,
wound flesh with steel,
dismember limbs with bombs,
break bones with metal,
crush spirit with torture,
cripple hope with fear,
obliterate families with tanks,
deploy troops with flags,
trample life with boots,

they rape villages with screams,
burn graveyards with death,
loot temples with storms,
break history with books,
bury babies with drones,
kill mothers with disease,
kill fathers with smoke,
hang innocence with power,
chain muscles to walls,

but the blood
the blood they cannot get inside,
the blood they spill cannot be killed,
the blood which runs,
the blood which soothes each vein,
blood as silent as blood,
as old as blood, as alive as blood,
the blood knows,
the blood breathes and gives life to blood
the blood crosses an exhausted star to sing

the blood, the blood
will always be made of blood.



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POEMS



The director of the Human Rights Office at the Attorney General's Office examines bullet holes in the walls of the Reten de Catia Prison, Venezuela, where inmates were reportedly executed during the November 1992 riots. One of the country's worst prison massacres, it resulted in the deaths of at least 63 inmates, and the facility was demolished in 1997. © AI



The creeks of Kegbara Dere, Niger Delta are heavily polluted with oil. Mangrove trees along the banks have died as a result and the community has been severely affected by long-term damage and health issues. Everywhere is coated in oil. They can't grow anything; children can't play or swim in the river like they used to; there are no fishes in the water. Every year there are spills in the Niger Delta, but clean-ups by oil companies are often slow and ineffective. © AI



Refugees and migrants arrive by boat to the Greek island of Lesbos in January 2016 after crossing the Aegean sea from Turkey. The refugees, primarily from Syria and Afghanistan, were received by volunteers at the North shore of the island and escorted to Moria registration camp. From there most would travel via Athens into other European Union countries to seek asylum. Many refugees have been lost at sea trying to attempt this journey. © AI



Cluster bombs, which scatter smaller explosive bomblets over a wide area, were dropped in May 2015 by Saudi Arabia-led coalition forces in the centre of al-Magash, a village west of Sa'da City. Amnesty International found fragments of exploded sub-munitions between the houses and saw the impact of the explosions on the walls and doors of the houses and the trees. A 2015 Amnesty report revealed attacks on the city of Sa'da killed 100 civilians, including 59 children, and that many of the bomblets fail to explode upon impact, posing an ongoing deadly threat to anyone who comes into contact with them. © AI



Malala Yousafzai speaks after being presented with Amnesty International's Ambassador of Conscience Award at a ceremony in Dublin, 2013. When she was 11 years old, Malala began blogging for the BBC about her life in Pakistan under Taliban rule and the importance of education for girls. In 2012, the Taliban boarded Malala's school bus and shot her in the head. She continues campaigning for girls' education and showing 'once in a century kind of courage.'
© AI

THE WALLS

By **Farrah Serroukh** (inspired by Anthony Anaxagorou's *The Blood*)

They
scratch words with pens,
expose truths with flash lights,
seek out lies with microphones,
unearth conspiracies with persistence,
challenge authority with facts,
mask injustices with complicit irresponsibility
misrepresent with sensationalism

they inspire hope with words,
shape minds with insights,
starve nations with embargos,
damn communities with cuts,
crush spirit with reckless abandon,
cripple hope with fear,
obliterate families with tanks,
deploy troops with flags,
trample life with boots,

but the walls
the walls they cannot get inside,
the walls they fill cannot turn away,
the walls that stand tall,
the walls that stand firm,
walls as silent as walls,
the walls know,
the walls breath and bear witness to the walls
the walls stay rooted amidst calamity
the walls, the walls
will always be made of walls.

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Films

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Poems

The Blood by Anthony Anaxagorou © Anthony Anaxagorou, from Heterogeneous, Out-Spoken Press 2016.

Head Over Heels by Emtithal Mahmoud © Emtithal Mahmoud

You Have A Big Imagination or 400,000 Ways To Cry by Emtithal Mahmoud © Emtithal Mahmoud

The Wall example poem by Farrah Serroukh inspired by Anthony Anaxagorou's The Blood.