

Script

SONG

I'm walking through the desert, and I am not frightened, although it's hot. I have all that I requested, and I do not want what I haven't got. I have learned this from my mother. See how happy she has made me. I will take this road much further, though I know not where it takes me.

VOICEOVER

I've been trying to write you a poem, but all I have is what I've been given. Some people believe that poets help us with the present by singing of the past. For them, voice in a song is time. Shaped like a river, it turns backward on itself, curling itself around a chorus of others just waiting to be joined. Their song is of beginnings, middles, beginnings. Their singers, the voices of grandparent, mother, and child. In this chorus, each beginning speaks to another, sings to another. Each song makes another possible. Other poets sing to cast the chorus out. They banish it into the womb of a jackal. They sing to ensure that the one that guarantees life is not guaranteed it. They sing to make a voice tremble and break. If a song can no longer birth another, the future is forced forward into our past. Against this current, a poem becomes a song that no one wants to hear, and the poet, a truth-teller in a world full of lies.

READING: THERE ARE NO HONEST POEMS ABOUT DEAD WOMEN

This is, in many respects, the second poem after 'Stations.' There are no honest poems about dead women. What do we want from each other after we have told our stories? Do we want to be healed? Do we want mossy quiet stealing over the scars? Do we want the all-powerful, unfrightening sister who will make the pain go away? The past be not so. Mother's voice in the hallway. 'You've done it right the first time, darling. You will never need to do it

again.' Thunder grumbles on the horizon. I buy time with another story, a pale blister of air. Cadences of dead flesh obscure the vowels.

VOICEOVER WITH OVERLAPPING SOUND

So I've been listening to poets and writers talk about how they come to shape the things they want to say into the things they want to make. And I wanted to show you these drawings by Sarah Kane, where she differentiates between story and plot, and how she decides what she wants to make visible and what she wants to hide.

The top line is her first play, *Blasted*. Here she said her process was a direct response to the material as it began to happen. What she means by that is that she begins with this idea to write a play about a man and a woman in a hotel room, a complete power imbalance that leads to a rape. But then something outside of that story starts leaking in, because of what's happening outside of what she's making.

One night, when she's taking a break from the writing, she's watching the news, and she sees this old woman in Srebrenica weeping and looking directly into the camera, asking for help. And as she's watching, she's struck by the futility of this woman's pleas, and she asks herself: how many times has she seen a woman like that in another town in Bosnia, and how many times has she witnessed that nothing is done? She starts to feel really terrible for writing a ridiculous play about two people in a room. What does it matter? What's the point of carrying on?

But she realises there's something about this that she feels called to write about. So she tries, through the writing, to find the join between the hotel room in Leeds and what was happening in Bosnia. And through the writing, she realises that one is the seed and the other is the tree. So she writes a play to make the whole of this world, the seed and the tree, gradually emerge, to

confront the audience with what she has realised is bound together.

The lower line is another play she wrote called *Cleansed*, which also begins with two things that seem hard to connect. When she writes that play — mostly remembered for its graphic acts of violence — she's actually reading about love. She's reading Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse*. And in it, he compares the position of a rejected lover to the situation of a prisoner in Dachau, a prisoner of war in a concentration camp. She's struck by her disgust when she reads that line, that equivalence of pain. But then she begins to make meaning of what he said, and she begins to understand this circular knot of love and rejection as it relates to loss, like a systematic erosion of the self. She starts to understand that loss as a kind of madness, because it leaves you nowhere to go: you are imprisoned, labouring at it.

And as I'm reading about this, I think about the madness of repetition. Doing the same thing over and over again. And it makes me think that repetition might be in some way connected to hopefulness, that people will finally understand. And maybe that's what trying to find a new form is all about.

In this play, *Cleansed*, she drew this line that divides the seen from the unseen. Only the moments of spectacle — love, crisis, transformation — lie above the surface. Those are the only things we see. Everything else remains hidden. And it makes me think about being a child, and what you see about love in a family, and what love might look like to you if no one helps you to see what lies underneath.

Later this controlled release of image without the story starts to fall apart. In her last play, *4.48 Psychosis*, the story isn't aligned anymore from one point to the other, but is a circle that turns inward on itself, closed and

repetitive. At least that's how I see it. Here, plot has become completely separate from story. So there's this kind of series of disconnected atomic fragments, alone, together. And I guess it's making me think about form as the shape of a desire — a desire to be known, or to be seen, to hide, or to want something to take shape in a different way.

In psychosis, responding to the material as it begins to happen means you're no longer held together by the story of yourself that got you here. You lose a sense of reality, experience life in pieces. You're unprotected by a fixed sense of experience, a fixed sense of time.

And I know it's a leap, but I think a lot about how that connects to having a daughter and being one. How experiencing this relationship is to break down, and in that breaking, how difficult it is to understand what is real and what is not. If things are really happening, if your mum says they are not. What is fear and what is doubt, refusal? What is just in your imagination, and what is seeing things clearly and an emergency?

Maybe our relationship is like this map I've tried to draw you. Fragments out of time. And to notice what takes shape between us is a meaning of what is possible between us. One affects the other. One acts on the other.

And I should tell you, it's been hard to do this. I know there is violence in this accumulation. In each act of remembering is a dismembering, a new cut, a new edge, and in this rearrangement, an attempt to imagine a whole without denying the break.

SPEECH: *THE SOURCE OF SELF-REGARD*, 1992

The embrace of history and fiction is what I was concerned with, or rather the effort to disentangle the grip of history while remaining in its palm. Now I want us to

agree, for purposes of the rest of this talk, that all of our education — whether it's in institutions or not, in homes and streets or wherever, whether it's scholarly or whether it's experiential — that there is a kind of a progression. We move from data to information, to knowledge, to wisdom, and separating one from the other, being able to distinguish among and between them: that is knowing the limitations and the danger of exercising one without the others, while respecting each category of intelligence. That is generally what serious education is about. And if we agree that purposeful progression exists, then you will see at once how dispiriting this project of drawing or building or constructing fiction out of history can be, or that it's easy and it's seductive to assume that data is really knowledge, or that information is indeed wisdom, or that knowledge can exist without data. And how easy and how effortlessly one can parade and disguise itself as another. And how quickly we can forget that wisdom without knowledge, wisdom without any data, is just a hunch.

FILM DIALOGUE: IS THIS JUST A STORY?

क्या पागलपन है? तो और क्या करती? पर अब जी कर क्या करना है? यह क्या? तूने कभी कुछ कहा तो होता। कहने से भी क्या होता? मेरा दम घुट रहा था। मेरे से बस सहा नहीं जा रहा था।

FILM DIALOGUE: *MOLKARIN*

ये पुणे शहर की नौकरानियां बहुत से घरों में बर्तन और कपड़े का काम करके अपना संसार चलाती हैं। दिनोंदिन महंगाई बढ़ती जा रही है। सारे दिन मजदूरी करके भी दो जून खाना मिलता नहीं। जब एक दूसरे से मिलती तो यही बात होती थी। कुछ करना चाहिए ऐसा सबको लगता था। पर मालकिन को कहने की हिम्मत किसकी? तनख्वाह बढ़ाने का कहा नहीं कि काम छूटा। और एक दिन ऐसा ही हुआ। सुभद्रा ने तनख्वाह बढ़ाने के लिए कहा। तनख्वाह बढ़ाना तो दूर, मालकिन ने सुभद्रा को कहे बगैर कम पैसे में दूसरी नौकरानी काम पर रख ली। सुभद्रा रोज की जैसे काम पर आई। [So that the National Institute of Public—] क्या कर रही हो तुम? क्या? यह काम छोड़ना है तो तुम्हें कैसे पता चला? [The annual rate of inflation came down to 2%.] क्या चाय है

या पानी? [The Finance Minister said—] यह क्या कर रही हो? कैसे करती हो? मैंने तो कुछ भी करना है नहीं कर रहा है। तुमने छोड़ दिया। तुम्हें क्या छोड़ना, मुझे परवाह नहीं है। इसलिए मैंने छोड़ दिया। आदि से कुछ करने-करने की सोचती थी। कि भारत की इन सब के लिए क्या नहीं छोड़ दिया। फिर भी हमारा— चलो दोनों ही चली जाओ।

TV DIALOGUE: QED GLIMPSES OF DEATH, 1988

It happened the night after I had my first baby, and I'd had a very painful, long drawn-out labour, and I'd been very frightened. And at one point I had prayed that I would die because I found the pain so agonising. I was put into a room, and I went to sleep, and I had a lot of after-pains. It was great discomfort. The next thing I remember, my nose — what I thought was my nose — was two inches away from the ceiling. A very textured ceiling, which I didn't recognise. And I realised that I was too close to be viewing it from a bed. And then I turned around, and I looked down on the person in the bed. I thought it was my twin sister. And I studied the face and realised that it was my face. We've got slightly different noses, and that, in fact, it was me. When I realised that I was out of my body, I was slightly frightened for a short time, but after that, it seemed quite natural.

The next thing, I felt that I was in this long, dark tunnel with a very, very bright light at the end, so brilliant. It was more brilliant than the sun. Absolutely brilliant. And I felt it was very natural to be drifting towards the end. It seemed very peaceful and quite a natural thing to do. I didn't feel that I could go the other way. I just felt it was like a magnet being drawn towards the end. But as I got closer and closer, it was as if the light was more of a flickering light and I wanted to go there. But I arrived at the end, and I realised I had to stop there, that I couldn't just go through. I stopped there. And when I looked through, it was like looking through a window.

As I looked, I could, in fact, see it was like a small country garden. And then I could see a man, and he was dressed in a brown, lightly tweeded suit, no tie, and stood behind a fence. So he was just a few feet away from me. But he recognised me, so I felt as if I had a physical appearance. He asked me why I wanted to die. I can remember thinking, 'Is it Granddad?' I knew that he had died, so that I must be at the point of death. He'd died when I was nine years old. And I felt that if I went further from the point where I was, that I would die. And it's as if he was veering me towards a decision. He did say, 'Well, who would look after the baby?' And when I said, 'Well, I don't know who can look after the baby,' that's when I felt that I was back in my body, having made that decision, that I'd made a decision to live.

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SPEECH: *THE SOURCE OF SELF-REGARD*, 1992

Now, it is a part, this view, looking at that period in Black life — part of a rather sustained investigation I began with 'Beloved,' which was a look. I'm really looking at self-regard in both racial and gender terms, and how that self-regard evolves or is distorted or flourishes or collapses, and under what circumstances. In 'Beloved,' I was interested in what contributed most significantly to a slave woman's self-regard. What was her self-esteem? What value did she place on herself? And I became convinced, and research supported my hunch, my intuition, that it was her identity as a mother — her ability to be and to remain exactly what the institution said she was not — that was important to her.

When Sethe asks 'Me? Me?' at the end of 'Beloved,' it's a real movement toward a recognition of self-regard. But

the answer to her question seemed to me to come, or be available, a generation or two later, when the possibility of personal freedom and interior imaginative freedom — not political or economic freedom; those were still distant, although there had been some changes — but this imaginative freedom could be engaged. So it seemed to me that while the history, the data of traditional historians, both documented and denied this change in Black life and in the culture, the information available to me in the cultural signs suggested there were alterations in the formulations and the sources of self-regard. Music — its lyrics, its performers — held the first signs for me of this change in the culture.

TV DIALOGUE: *BLACK JOURNAL*, 1961

[*When you hear her sing and when you hear her talk, you begin to understand why Nina Simone is called the High Priestess of Soul.*] There's a reason why I'm alive and on this particular planet, though I would not tell you that I came from here. I don't think I came from here at all. I really don't. And I hope to live long enough to substantiate that. I really mean it. So that my music, to me, is very important. Every song that I sing, to me, is important, that it communicates something to someone. It is not just a sound. It's something that says something to someone. It's very much like poetry or a good play, something that communicates and gets into the soul of people.

That's why it's so important to me.

TV DIALOGUE: *ARSENIO HALL*, 1991

I've said that if I win, I won't accept it and I wouldn't want it. I wouldn't want it near me. As far as I'm concerned, it represents everything that I despise about the music industry. What people don't really understand is that when you stand on a stage, for example, singing, there's one of you and there's 5,000, or however many people, in the

audience, and whatever it is that you're giving out to people, they're giving back to you. You're getting it back 5,000 times, and that's worth an awful lot more to me than a piece of metal is. You know what I mean? So I don't want anything to do with that aspect of things. It's not really why I'm doing what I'm doing.

MADISON SQUARE GARDEN 1992 and
MONTREAU JAZZ FESTIVAL 1976

All right, I got to tell you, I'm real proud to introduce this next artist, whose name has become synonymous with courage and integrity. Ladies and gentlemen, Sinéad O'Connor.

[CROWD JEERS]

SINÉAD O'CONNOR: Thank You

NINA SIMONE: "I wish I knew how it would feel to be free". I wish I could break all the chains holding me I wish... I could say all the things that I should say that I say when I'm relaxed... I'd be starting anew. I wish I could be the bird in the sky. How sweet it would be if I could fly like that, so free. I wish I could share all the love in my heart. I wish I could break all the things that bind us apart. Well, I wish I could be like a bird in the sky. How sweet it would be if I found I could fly. Oh, I'd soar to the sun and look down at the sea. And then I'd sing 'cause I'd know, yeah. Then I'd sing 'cause I'd know, yeah. Then I'd sing 'cause I'd know. I'd know how it feels. I'd know how it feels to be free, yeah, yeah.

I wish I could share all the love that's in my heart. I wish I could break all the chains that bind us apart. I wish you could know what it means to be me. I want you to see, and you would agree, everybody

SINÉAD O'CONNOR: OK turn this up ...

NINA SIMONE: should be free. Because if we ain't, we're murderers.

Until the philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned, everywhere is war. And me say war. That until there are no longer first-class and second-class citizens of any nation. Until the colour of a man's skin is of no more significance than the colour of his eyes, me say war. That until the basic human rights are equally guaranteed to all without regard to race, this is a war. That until that day, the dream of lasting peace, world citizenship, rule of international morality, will remain but a fleeting illusion to be pursued but never attained. Now everywhere is war, war. And until the ignoble and unhappy regime that holds our brothers in Angola, in Mozambique, South Africa, in subhuman bondage have been toppled, utterly destroyed — well, everywhere is war.

VOICEOVER

So there's this text I wanted to tell you about, and it's in this book of Ambedkar's writing on Brahminical Patriarchy. In it, he's reading verses from the Manusmṛiti, an early Hindu scripture, a poem that was later turned into the first laws of the East India Company. And he's rereading them to trace the relationship between caste, social order, and the control of women. And I'm reading them to trace how these poetics were used to define the differences between us — the differences between the divine and the object, the ugly and the beautiful, the pure and the dangerous.

And I found this section where Sharmila Rege, who collected these writings, is talking about coalition — about listening and speaking and being heard across difference between people who say they want the same things. And she writes, 'The potential of such dialogues to become critical sites of coalition between Dalit feminists, Dalit

male activists, and non-Dalit feminists would require a sustained historical reflection on the critique and discord expressed by Dalit feminists.’

And this fragment of text led me to this kind of excess of accumulation, one thing building on the other. Because when I read that, I thought she was talking about a song or a poem — something that needs to transmute voice into a message, or something that is made and exists but can only do what it can do when it meets those who need it in order to be themselves. For those who will know need to know, but not those who don’t or won’t need to.

And then there’s this footnote, which connects to the word discord, which makes me think about sound and song again, where she references Bernice Johnson Reagon’s speech, *Coalition at the Turn of the Century*. And she says we mustn’t mistake coalition — working across difference for a particular aim — for home or for comfort. Because coalition is nothing like home. Coalition is a place you feel threatened to your core. It’s the feeling of dying. And I understand, but I also don’t. That distinction, I mean—

And you know that Bernice Johnson Reagon sang a song called ‘On Children,’ where she revoiced Kahlil Gibran’s poem of the same name. And in it, they both say, ‘Our children are not our children. They are the sons and daughters of life’s longing for itself.’

And then I thought about writing a poem or singing a song, but felt too ashamed to use my voice like that. And then I started to think how that impulse connected to the idea that speaking to a group of people is making something together. And maybe that’s really what I wanted. And that made me think that a song sung to a group of people is a message that gives as much as it receives, and what it gives back lands inside us and also between us. It is a space where imagination is given meaning.

All these threads — what I know and I don’t know, what I can say and I’ve been taught not to — have become entangled in this knot where family is not home, or home is not family, and mothering does not guarantee life, but is a coalition towards it.

A relationship we must make work, not one chosen.

And when I look at the knot I see how scripture has been turned into a colonial script, and it’s inside me and between me and others. When I think about how angry I am that I was taught to turn my power inwards, I want to release it but I don’t know how. Sometimes we need help to understand that the song that must be sung is the divine and abject together, is ugly and beautiful, purity and danger — and only we together can decide which is which.

READING: POWER, 1978

This is the last one. The title of it is ‘Power.’ And I should tell you, since this is San Francisco, right? In the house. That they’re shooting Black children down in the streets of New York. Oh, for real. I know. I just thought it might serve to know that we’re not alone. Okay. And this is a poem somewhere touching that. An incident, a 10-year-old boy, Clifford Glover. I wonder, is that name familiar to any of you here? Yes. Ah. I’m glad.

The difference between poetry and rhetoric is being ready to kill yourself instead of your children. I am trapped on a desert of raw gunshot wounds and a dead child dragging his shattered Black face off the edge of my sleep. Blood from his punctured cheeks and shoulders is the only liquid for miles, and my stomach churns at the imagined taste while my mouth splits into dry lips without loyalty or reason, thirsting for the wetness of his blood as it sinks into the whiteness of the desert where I am lost without imagery or magic, trying to make power out of hatred and

destruction, trying to heal my dying son with kisses. Only the sun will bleach his bones quicker.

The policeman who shot down a 10-year-old in Queens stood over the boy with his cop shoes in child's blood, and a voice said, 'Die, you little m—.' And there are tapes to prove this. And at his trial, this policeman said in his own defence, 'I didn't notice the size or nothing else, only the colour.' And there are tapes to prove this, too. Today, that 37-year-old white man with 13 years of police forcing was set free by 11 white men who said they were satisfied justice had been done, and one Black woman who said, 'They convinced me,' meaning they had dragged her four-foot-ten-inch Black woman's frame over the hot coals of four centuries of white male approval until she let go of the first real power she ever had and lined her own womb with cement to make a graveyard for our children.

And I have not been able to touch the destruction within me, but unless I learn to use the difference between poetry and rhetoric, my power too will run corrupt as poisonous mould, or lie limp and useless as an unconnected wire. And one day I will take my teenage — and connect it to the nearest socket, raping an 85-year-old white woman who was somebody's mother. And as I beat her senseless and set a torch to her bed, the Greek chorus will be singing in three-quarter time, 'Poor thing, she never hurt a soul. What beasts they are.'

[SHALAN, a 9-year-old domestic worker refuses to work on a holiday]

RADIO RECORDING RUUD AWAKENING, 1996