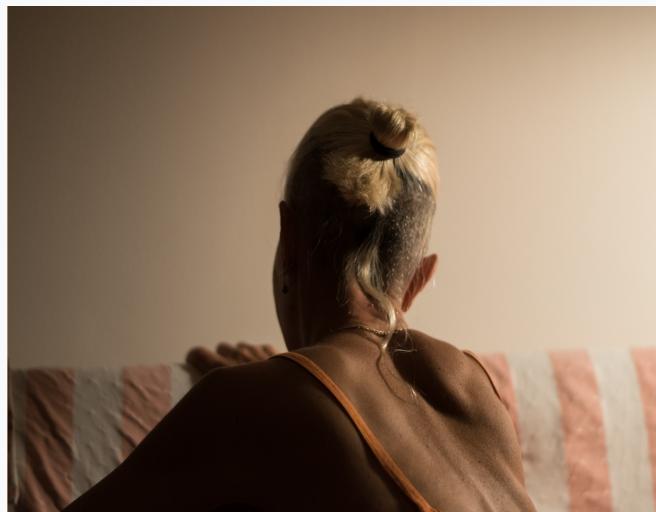


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Dissident Self-Narratives: Radical and Queer Life Writing



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She Voices If: On Blindness by José Saramago

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She Voices If On *Blindness* by José Saramago

Timothy Mathews

What's in an attachment? In the decay and renewal of attachments? Does it even matter? Do attachments help life or inhibit it? Where's the line?

I wonder where the impulse comes from to write about this, sitting at a different table in a different room, oh I think I'll just take advantage of the light and a belated explosion of colour out there, it's a nice long table too and they've all gone. I've been here before, the switch-blade of pleasure and dread.

When we walked into the theatre after more than a year of the Covid pandemic and the politicisation, once again, of health and death, anything to promote nationalist numbness and aggression; after more than a year of nostalgia, anything to undermine the democracy of care, I'm really not the same as you otherwise how could I be secure and better off; after more than a year of fear, attack and loss, of scorn and the attachments it constructs ready to be packaged and sold, a natural little community seemed to form outside the theatre, a community of people for whom going to a theatre was just a way to celebrate going anywhere. Or just a small community, nothing more, when still not many are allowed together inside anywhere, and when people still do care, in the moment, about the safety of one another. Physical distance, social solidarity. A small group of people who'd never met, and didn't need to either, was staying small so as to care, and to accept the gifts in the head of a writer and a performer, to be offered in a few minutes in ways that would never be discussed.

But something like a gift was still going to be discussed in the performance, although not necessarily how to accept it. But in any case, why not just say what can't be said, after all it happens all the time.

An attachment to a voice, and the memory of the person it belongs to—how strange, an attachment to a person whom I've never met. I don't know now all the films and shows I've seen her in, all the ways I've seen her perform, but recognition is light as the air while still burning deep, there's something about the relation of her voice to her features that's still surprising, unsettling actually. I haven't seen *Truly Madly Deeply*, maybe I will now that I've just written that, it stays with me anyway because of what I've heard so many people say, and what I've picked up about psychic pain and internal devastation. Perhaps the immensity of it makes me want to keep it indirect, and my relation to the film in the realm of hearsay, and maybe it's not just defensiveness but a way of honouring. Honouring the film by not seeing it? Are you that sure of yourself?? But sometimes there just isn't a need to confirm anything, just try and listen to people talking.

And then I heard her read the letters of Clara Schumann to Robert, a refashioned dialogue in letters about art, care and constraint; and I also remember her role as a dominating, psychotic academic. That surprising way in acting of coming together as a person differently each time...— I can imagine the craft involved, also the inner examination and honesty. I also imagine something to do with faith, and strength, and the belief that it's possible to speak to others from many different points of view. Pretence does seem to make it possible to imagine someone else, and to give people others to imagine. So, let's just go ahead and get on with the work.

In this play there was only voice, and only one voice. The few people who were there were sitting in one's or two's facing in opposite directions, in the way of some therapists or analysts like to work. Moreover, we were all sitting on the stage ourselves instead of in the auditorium – who's watching whom in the dark? From where? On the back wall of the stage, lost in their own context and emerging as a maxim, were the words: 'If you can see, look. If you can look, observe.' A maxim, then, or a rule of conduct. Saramago has put as an epitaph at the start of his book, and taken it from *The Book of Exhortations*. But why observe? You'd only observe if you cared already and wanted to learn. Or imagined what might happen if you didn't observe; or if you didn't observe the rules of society, however lost they are in their own history. Why observe? Or how is observing even possible?

Perhaps by adapting, if you can, and evolving; or taking the smallest steps, in the moment, away from the cycles of war and entropy. The little group was itself in the midst of an adaptation, watching but mostly listening to an adaptation of *Blindness*, the novel by José Saramago translated into English. On the front page of the translation it's called a novel, the translation by

Giovanni Pontiero that respects in every detail the words of intimacy with otherness, trauma with objectivity, and speaking with invading. In Portuguese Saramago calls the book an essay: an essay on blindness, but which draws on the forms of a novel. Essay and novel sit in opposite directions facing each other over the distances between them, like a translation and an adaptation in relation to an original, their companion.

It was an adaptation of voices into a voice. We were witnessing the birth of a voice by witnessing a fictional blindness, covered in the colours of art, the dream of art that whatever it does, it does in the world, with the world and with the people in it. Closer and closer still art came to being and not miming, to doing and showing combined. But is that what should even be hoped for, in life or art - to have things meet and conjoin, and have meaning for each other? And yet is there any meaning without attachments? And do I choose them, form them, break them, or just accept them, and the sense of time they involve, which I feel or simply hope that we share, if only as a sense and a shape. But people don't have the same attachments, maybe instead just an overlapping sense of chaotic drift from fragility to resentment.

So many invitations to wonder about, invitations to identify with something, and to care – sitting with the others I felt on the brink of the whole labyrinth of convention that sets responses going. It was mostly dark and black as we sat together, two by two, each facing in opposite directions. And in the head-phones of each one of us, there was Juliet's voice, I recognised it, along with a feeling of not knowing what to expect.

I find I'm leaving this piece and coming back to it, that's the rhythm of things this time, a confusion of rhythms, maybe one invasion after another. But there's a sense of privilege as well, also fear, I mean the very hope that sitting here re-telling a story will contribute anything to hope itself, and the prospect of generosity. But doubt prevails, on the brink of overwhelming me, and after intervals and joyous interruptions I'm sent diving back into nothingness as I take this up again, battling with fear, poised on the futility of love.

What next? With the others there that afternoon facing in opposite directions, I was being read to in the dark, as dark as dark can be, and as dark as the light streaming through the window as I write; taken hither and yon like only each one of us can when we read anything. But what is it in being read to, and not just reading a story to myself, that seems to join all the ages together? In a kind of texture made of intimacy and silence? Her voice took people listening over the imaginary intersections that made up this stage in the dark. A stage turned into a place of catastrophe - quickly, naturally, shockingly. And

she tells a story that tells us everything, leaving nothing unclear and everything explained: an omniscient narrator guiding, protecting, horrifying, enacting and interrogating the willingness to care.

A man stopped at a red light, and his fiancée. A thief. Another man already wearing an eye-patch. A woman intent on sensuality and anonymity. A boy visiting the optician on his own. And also the voice herself, telling us everything and unfolding herself in the telling: the voice of the optician's wife and his administrator. The voice that knows all that can be known begins to tell only what she knows. Which is that people have gone blind. For no reason, and with no warning either. The man at the light causes traffic chaos, he can't drive on, everything has gone white. The young woman with anonymous sex partners sees in white the orgasm she anticipates, and now sees white forever. The fiancée of the man at the light climbs resolutely with him into the ambulance, how could she just let him go, in a second it no longer matters she's blinded by the white as well. The optician scouring his books for an explanation finds none, and as he rests awhile late at night, everything turns white and nothing can be seen. Only the thief doesn't care, he's stolen the car of the man at the light, he drove him home in it and then he drove it away. But it makes no difference, troubled or not by whether it was a bad thing to do he's blind now anyway, walking away from parking his plunder.

But it's about caring nonetheless. Everywhere words of caring, even in the fear and the shock. Things like this can't happen, they can't, someone even says it, in fact she says it, in the voice of everyone, saying everything that can't be known. No-one's saying fuck off and die, as I heard on YouTube people say to nurses, and as people everywhere have said in sacking everything from Troy to Mariupol. No-one's saying it yet, anyway; but I'm not sure, even so.

Her voice settles. In these few moments she was the voice of everyone, a voice moving into everyone's, guided as much as guiding; guided like my own recognition of the voices she's telling. But there's very little 'our' in recognition, mostly refraction, distant memories of what someone might have shared, if only...; dreams of veils once kissed like the air, and now assumed and absorbed as codes, faced as you might be with never being absorbed at all. And yet through the veils, hearing a conventional third-person narrative stretching far back brought the sound of a person to life: there she is, in my ear, herself and her role combined, giving and receiving; settling further and further still into a voice both given and enforced. And so all the while the adaptation from novel to words spoken in dark has been fashioning drift in the positions and voices of narrative. Hers is now the only sighted voice in the prison that's been scrambled for the blind, the dustbin, the scrapheap, the

landfill, the pyre, boats capsizing on the high seas full of people young and the old chasing shreds of hope, dignity shredded all around them. Life in shards pure and simple, and the belief anyone would care.

A voice. Intimate and recognised, blurring the lines from inner to outer and back. Identified with. Right there in my head through the headphones in the dark. Sometimes close, sometimes further away, just like someone's voice in the mind, but also just a voice anywhere, moving around. It's all in the timing - the way an imaginary space can seem real, engaged with in real time. For a while now there had been just the voice through the headphones like an audiobook, then suddenly where we sat in two's and opposite directions, the darkness was the darkness of common light, punctuated, pierced and shattered by bars of neon coming and going, rising and falling to the rhythms of shock and the anti-rhythms of brutality.

She's gone with her blind ophthalmologist husband into the prison for the blind. Outside, the rest of seeing society must be protected at all costs from this epidemic of terror, blind terror at losing the sighted sight that suppresses their blindness. Blind fear. It isn't a prison so much as an indefinite quarantine, for which not a prison but a disused psychiatric hospital has been pressed back into service. Randomly, she hasn't been infected by the blindness, you might even say miraculously, there's no reason either way, whether inside or outside the confinement, within which to see is now to protect. The seeing outside have abandoned the blind inside, they wish to make nothing clearer to themselves, and to the blind, and to all the world; set aside at all costs all thought of love for the blind and the afflicted. Fuck off and die. Bury your dead in the yard. Oh we forgot the spades, you're right. You'll find a way. Aid...? Probably the blind die off quickly anyway, so no need. The main thing is to protect life, our way of life, those who run our way of life, ours.

Different kinds of organisation emerge for brutality and kindness, and different kinds of spontaneity. Her sightedness provides her with a framework for care, just as the sightedness of those outside is the framework for their exceptionalism and self-affirming violence. In caring for the abandoned, she discovers that the blind and the psychiatrically ill have been given the same destiny by the sighted, each consigned to the same pit: a disused psychiatric hospital. Fear of blindness, fear of insanity. Them, not us. She counts the beds in the ward, discovers the other wards. All empty for the moment. She's telling her blind and also silent ophthalmologist husband about her discoveries. And through my headphones in the dark I'm suddenly bathed in a unique light where the objective is absorbed in the intimate and embraced.

There are others in the ward, which for a long while she'll be the only one able to leave, an endless time of pleading for life. It's the people from that day in the consulting room, the day everyone turned blind, except those that didn't: the ones we were told about by the voice still carrying its quietly alarmed report across the divide from world outside to the internment inside. The boy who had come without his mother, the woman in the hotel with her interchangeable sex partners, the man with the eye-patch, the man at the traffic lights and his fiancée, and the thief. Her group - she cared for it in the waiting room, and the voice has started to drift from detached to attached, obscuring the line. It's a group the same as all groups on all days, with a dynamic that both invites and shatters community.

They're all in the ward for the blind now. The thief assaults the young woman, and in resisting she inflicts a wound in his leg which begins to fester, the voice can see the gangrene that no-one else can, she cares for it as best she can, the deceitful comfort she gives for what's hopeless matching the deceit that she's blind like the others. Like the others and not at all like the others, indistinguishably, like when a light flickers on and off. Now she's come close to her husband to whisper in his ear what she can see, that the others mustn't know she can see if she's to help them, serve them, serve the place of each among the others. So close that in the headphones I thought she was right there, I thought she was my lover next to me in the dark, or in the night. Me and not me. A line from the intimate to the uncompromising. From Love to the death of all respect for life.

A line from fiction to me, to you, to caring, to violence, a line that has nothing to do with metaphor, even association, let alone affinity; simply contiguity. In one ward there's caring, in the next one there's gangsterism. There's no transition at all, and the crowds of the blind multiply. Food is delivered by the police to the prison door, as though to cages containing predators. As though in solidarity the ward next door has stolen it, and started to demand money. They won't participate in burying the dead either. There isn't any money, she tells them. Jewellery then. Now that's all gone too. Sex then.

And suddenly she gives it up. The pretence that she can lead while blind. Negotiate with the police outside and the mobsters inside by acting blind. And the pretence that her blind-act gives a shape to her own fears and tensions and needs. She gives it all up. Abandons her fiction, in the same moment Saramago abandons that fictional premise in his own fiction. In combining, fictions have assumed the proportions of lived experience: it's not pretence that has passed but the need for it, the need for a fiction to get

anything done. Or the need for a symbolic narrative to understand something. But at the same time Saramago's fiction intensifies, even as the voice begins to shriek her role in my ears, into myself, the moment couldn't be closer to the real, and still not. What am I hearing as she shrieks, can I even hear her shrieks shrieking in my ear? Hear past the sound of a shriek? Do I even need to hear more than the sound of a shriek to care? Shrieks of anger, shrieks of despair at the capacity of people to hate and exploit. Her shrieks give way to a decision, a determination, a new reality, a new situation. Hers. Exclude to care. She's killed him. She went over there to the other ward and killed him with the scissors. No regrets. It needed to be done and she did it. She killed the gangster so they could all survive. Fuck off and die.

And now suddenly there isn't any more food to fight over anyway. No-one's bringing it anymore. There isn't anyone out there guarding the interned, or yelling their merciless commands with megaphones, obliterating pity, solidarity and life. Those who wanted life free of love have all gone. Nothing there. Gone.

Her whole voice changes once again. It told untold events that could happen to anyone, as they happened. It told the untold as it reverberates within. And now life resumes in the asphyxiating dark. In the service of others the voice finds its own voice in the dark, and in the dark an intimacy whispers that is yours, regenerated in the sound of a voice that is hers. There have been shrieks of anger and whimpers of despair. There's been filth. There's been the silence as her fist shaken at everything in a no-exit circle gives way to scissors in her fist plunging in. Sentences. Done. And now words are found for quite a different silence. No megaphones, no shrieks anymore, quiet sentences, sentences flowing, a rhythm of life is voiced, there's a voice now for life the other side of fear and hatred. Hatred and murder have fallen away – why, because there's nobody there? But there *are* people. Her voice, floating on the recognition of a loose group, then looking for me in coiled-up recesses of myself, then anyone's again in their own reading and remembering - Juliet has found a voice to give to the sighted and the blinded at once. She leads them out, she leads her listeners out, but it's a voice that leads, there's no need for the suspension of disbelief, the story I hear and the reality I live are that close: a story of imagined closeness, and closeness re-imagined: and of leadership without leaders. Outside, the camp guards have gone; there's nothing, everyone has gone, an abandoned city of disease and hatred, all abandoned. And the group roams, a group of the meek and the strong, the sighted and blind, abuser and victim, leader and led: a group. Roaming in the dark. The dark stage where we sat.

II

There's such an off-hand deadliness in the word dead, and the unsaid violence of the way it's used. Long dead, people sometimes say, as though time past emphasised the deadness and smothered smothering still more. There's so much everywhere about death and dying - reality shows, television dramas, psychology, life-style. In one Canadian TV police drama I saw a pair of characters coming to terms with the death of colleague in the line of duty, with what their responsibility was, or might have been, or should have been, how much better they should have done, how much they let her down. One of them says she's dead now, none of it matters; actually I think it was meant as a mark of respect for the reality of it. But it isn't true, or saying it makes no difference to the pain which continues to flood and infiltrate. The thought that I can do nothing about it doesn't stem the flow of material destruction everywhere, turned inward in grief. But it was a sympathetic thought nonetheless, I felt: it helps to help the people still there. Or to try and help. Helping helps rebuild from within, quite unlike the protectionist 'they're dead' that casts everything aside that can't be seen or heard or put to use.

Perhaps it's another story of rhythm. The rush to dump, to pile scrap high and deep, to construct oblivion from mess. Quick and dirty. Or on the other hand, the different rhythm of letting the sight of decay seep in. Which I suppose is a process, more like a disposition, more still like simply watching and waiting. For what? The distinction between things happening and making things happen has slowly eroded. All that's left is rhythm. I felt that Juliet's voice, her range of work and art, was serving the capacity to witness rhythm. With only standing next to others as a reward. Nothing metaphoric or redemptive. Just there. With others. Anonymous but unique. Waiting to happen again.

I had a dream about writing this piece, and as anyone knows who's ever thought about dreams, which is everyone at one time or another, what's remembered from a dream is always out of context. What context...? I was left with a description of what I'm doing, read out by a silent voice in a bright light: 'stoically re-writing'. At least I think it was talking about me, at the time it didn't seem to matter. Carefully re-writing what I heard, stoically setting aside the thought that I'm repeating instead of tracing a transition, instead of drawing a line from the novel, to the adaptation, to this memoir. Moments superimposing and extending at once. In calling his book an *Essay on Blindness*, Saramago himself sets fiction and essay seamlessly together - still side by side, though: not so much an overlap, more like when you see one, you can't see the other. Essay and fiction are next to each other without showing

where either of them is. Sometimes Saramago's piece in whatever voice sounds like an investigation, then it sounds like a story, possibly a parable, but one without a conclusion. And then a poem. One thing following another as well as flowing into it. Transitions. I'm trying to stay alive to them, one thing following another, life and death, each pushing the other aside.

A performance.

For a long time after she died I would say even out loud that she'd died as though it were a quality of the living, like she's an American, or she's gone to Australia, or she's changed her job, or she's got older. Part of the living, part of everyone I've known, some living, some living-as-having-died, some simply drifting off. It was another illusion, but a living one, clinging to continuity, keeping not there part of here, and talking with the dead like with the other voices in your head or anywhere. But here with Juliet voicing voices in Saramago's writing, and the ones in your head, there's a different continuity, there's an organic shape given to life absorbed and trauma allowed. There's been inhumanity, there have been attacks on humanity by disease, and by the politics of disease, suppressive and imperial. There have been shrieks of outrage and fury. There have been the quiet whispers of powerless witness. There has been a quietly determined assassination. And now it seems it's all been carrying the sounds of caring, and not just the sounds of hatred and fear. The violence needed to meet violence hasn't been forgotten or forgiven, instead violence and generosity stand next to each other, the one the memory of the other, the impulse of one as opaque as the movement towards the other. The timing of the impulse to meet exclusion with brutality remains as unexplained as the need to join, embrace, accept, reincorporate. Fragment, like a bomb: continue, like history.

It's an inward timing as well: that part of psychic life that's silently spoken, listened to in the distant company of others and heard alone in the dark, on a stage of our own making and beyond our reach. The voice Juliet is offering has slowed down and quietened. No longer the sounds of shock, fury, and despair: now there are moments you'd want to capture and set free at once, capture so as to set free, write down so as to witness and let go. There's no-one there beyond the walls of the prison-asylum: and she leads them beyond. The sighted and the blind are conjoined, an awareness that aches has merged with watching trauma simply pass, watching its passing, living. The whole city has been abandoned, shops, dwellings, streets are empty of people and weaponised people; the sound of silence is everywhere. And of flight. Of nothing. Of nothing silently smothered in something: the voice of wonder and not fear.

There's a pressure to begin, to begin to give. The pressure of the moment. She finds them somewhere to stop, a shelter in the urban desert for her damaged troupe; and goes out to forage. The voice has changed tone and shape once and for all, as though surfaces were being allowed to emerge on the mind and make the present, allow the present, covering the past full of trauma with a hope that bleeds through in the sounds and the imaginary colours of now. A rhythm of things absorbed and cast aside at once. A state of mind, with nowhere left for mendacity, thoughtlessness, or quick advantage. The sense of time has filled out and the spaces in between have filled in.

On an unstoppable journey from serious illness to death, moment by moment, there's the transient, unique companionship of carers, smothering despair as much as the eruptions of futile hope, the speechless inner terror of those watching, waiting, denying, watching, silenced. Only those speak who still can, more and more she lies dying, sinking into herself where there's only her, and only the voice of others left to voice her. And still it's her, beyond the voicing, beyond mine. Soon only the one who isn't there can ever answer the questions that remain. And burn. Questions. Answers. No matching, resolution, rediscovery or resemblance, only one thing following another. And a voice begins to follow in the footsteps of life, smothering, mothering, covering.

In the narrative as in life there are so many others like her. Like and not like, just like life and narrative, each too close to the other for metaphor to have any effect, the bridges it crosses don't seem to lead anywhere, the infiltrations of life and death have already happened. Life and death are blind to each other, too close to see; each displaces the other as pace and orientation change. Contiguity. Things barely touching, they never touch, just a space made of the breath between them, and the pain of loss, still annihilating, is never annihilated and lives.

There are others she finds in the same situation as hers. But what's to be made of it? There's a man alone in the deserted streets looking for food for his own blinded troupe. Not one searcher any more but two, and more, two and more blinded troupes as well. In the quiet tones now everywhere of abandonment and waiting, hope is rekindled in the shape of relations, not their content but their shape. The two seekers speak without needing to, their positions matching, and still unique. The seeing are in the service of the blind, knowing and unknowing are in the closest proximity, still not touching. Together the giving and the receiving of service are re-weaving society, a society barely remembered, growing not from memory but trauma, not shared experiences of trauma but shared positions. Not shared either but mimed; and

not following but leading. Each position and each space, imbued with its own lost memories, leads the others and follows. Each leader is fashioned by the group s/he leads, its movements, its decay and its resurgence.

And the voice fashions moments of darkness in the headphones of the people she leads, sitting on their own darkened stage. And black moments they are, no light, no-light, **no light**, the leader serving the blind is covered in black, not the mucous white of the blind in the eyes of the sighted. What is the colour of no-sight? Of seeing nothing? Where no allegory explains anything? What is the colour of nothing? Of incapacity in the body and mind and psyche? What is the colour of a beginning?

Perhaps seeing is waiting to see, waiting to give colours to an absence, waiting for absence to pass, waiting for it become a transition. Something unseen, waiting to be seen, is allowed to take shape. Something allows shape to be given. Boxes of matches in packets on a shelf in a storeroom that's full to the rafters with no light. How obvious, stores of matches in a storeroom, as clear as a gift received in the dark or the light, belonging to giver and receiver alike and never the twain shall meet. Find or don't find in the dark. Watch and wait. But always there's a choice, in the wind and the rain and a breath, between nurturing the movements of fragility and stamping on them in fury.

Telling stories, telling the story of a story, hoping to immerse readers in stories. Readers. Readers hearing about listening. Listening. All of it meeting, but never quite; shown, and performed, but not affirmed. But there's so much distress in incompleteness, nonetheless, so many paths to knowing, and helping and doing that fizzles out, as though in writing like this I were collaborating with high finance and its abandoned building projects, all dressed up in environmental care. I'm only hoping that you're there reading, in any case. I wanted to tell stories that move, and I've stoically reconciled myself to trying to bear witness to them instead: such are the stories I tell, it seems. Perhaps anything to do with art always engages at a distance, in spite of all the efforts to match art and life, perhaps art inhabits distances as well as transitions, perhaps that's its witness. Transitions everywhere that may never be completed. Or perhaps completed only by example, embodied in the moment when I sat with a few others on a darkened stage, while the empty auditorium and the empty seats and the faces of absent spectators were slowly illuminated.

The transition out of Saramago's story is buried within it. Or his allegory – the one that relates blindness to life, vulnerability, despotism, resentment, fear... An allegory seems to reflect life in the miniature before signalling a way back. Ways in and out of Saramago's narrative are embedded

in the way it unfurls. They've merged in an unfinished transition, the invitation to begin seems both ahead of us and behind, long gone. The ending is in the continuation, and the allegory of life and death closes before the end of the story: the epidemic of blindness simply passes, regardless of the intervention of anyone. But at what cost, leaving what behind, offering what sort of way of living now? And what example?

Images, perhaps, ways of thinking, and hoping – I've nothing more to offer either, to myself or anyone. The voice sets the passing of blindness aside, it isn't the disease that matters anymore, or the divisions it announced, claimed, clamoured, even abhorred; it's the manner of its passing, also its continuing, of people continuing to be diseased and live. How many writers, and now Saramago, abandon the message for the manner, and the self for the voice. After the odyssey in the black and the miracle of the matches, there's been food. She's led them from the leper colony to the abandoned apartment once hers and her husband's. The odyssey in the black common to the other gatherers in the deserted city, but known only to her, has ended in the provision of this food and shelter for her group. It's a group like any other, she has come to know this without thinking, just like her voice could be anyone's and is only her own: Juliet's own vocal mime of her relation to others and others to her. Others seeking relation, watching the dark on a darkened stage: listening and waiting.

The pursuit of validation simply peels away and disperses. It's like a miracle that actually happens, resting on experience instead of belief, at least the experience of some, people going around in small groups, immersed in the performative power of art. Sometimes, anyway. The orthodox relations in her group begin to dissolve, the property is communal, the one who provides and those cared for weave, interweave and re-weave all the fault lines of love, estrangement, respect, anonymity, disconnect, respect still, eros and agape, attachments and their collapse, the fear of loss but the loss of fear as well. Closeness.

And the rain falls. Standing on a balcony as though suspended, in a near-darkness powered by nothing, the rain showers them in moments of their own making, cleansing them of internment, filth and muteness. Disbelief takes shape and dissolves in wonder. Wonder, but not magic. Alienation breathes again, lives and speaks again. She voices rediscovery, not transcendence or cure. Selfhood is given and taken away at once in the language of everyone. Language, sentences and their organisation, the whole sorry story of subordination ingrained syntactically in the mind and the tongue. Language: loaded nonetheless with chance, with the meanderings of

sight and unsight, with spontaneity both alive and moribund, loaded too with innumerable possibilities of work, of connecting and re-connecting, losing and finding, step by comma by step by chance by rhythm by stroke and by breath, all making a voice that speaks from within the density of innumerable filters.

From nowhere Juliet speaks in two voices now, one in each ear, one either side of you in your head. ‘Don’t lose yourself’. Hear the sounds of loss living in your head.

On one side: keep a hold of yourself in memory and rhythm, the many rhythms of losing that shape us uniquely and the voices we hear.

On the others side: let all the voices and rhythms go, and all the attachments to them as well, for life to begin again.

Two voices. Which way to turn.

What change can ever come from inwardness?

Will brutality can ever be defeated by witness?

And love never dies, even when there’s no-one there to listen.

José Saramago. *Blindness*. Translated from the Portuguese by Giovanni Pontiero. London, The Harvill Press (Panther), 1997 (1995); adapted by Simon Stephens, designed by Lizzie Clachan, directed by Walter Meierjohann, 2021.