

EN On the eve of the commemoration of the 22 March attacks, British poet and performer Sukina Douglas is going on a poetic pilgrimage through a city that was wounded to its core. “As dark as it may be, when I find the poetry, I find myself.”

— KURT SNOEKX • PHOTO: HELEEN RODIERS

The poetic pilgrimage of a hip-hop hijabi

Sukina Douglas

“We live in a time where there’s a lot of hate, a lot of darkness. I feel like it’s impossible for me to exist in this time and not seek beauty, not seek poetry. I don’t see how I would survive.” Sukina Douglas places immense trust in poetry. The Bristol-born Londoner is a poet, a performer (as in the KVS’s *Malcolm X*), half of the spoken-word and hip-hop duo Poetic Pilgrimage, and a warm, inspiring bridge builder. It is in the latter capacity that she came to explore our city in February and March, met the people who inhabit its nerve bundles and arteries, and, in a number of intense poetry workshops entitled Rise Up, helped to heal the scars that the 2016 attacks gashed into the urban soul. By sharing. With one another and with the public, which can see the results of those workshops in an intimate Poetic Memorial on 21 March. A day later, the poems will be installed around the city as commemorations.

At first sight, it may seem like Sukina Douglas is only throwing a little pebble into Brussels’s troubled waters, but the ripple effect on the few people that she touches can be immense. “Sometimes we’re disconnected with how we feel. How do you listen to your heart and let it speak? How do you activate that voice? So the first stage of the workshop is going inside, getting into your own skin. It’s about asking yourself really strong questions, like: ‘What am I afraid of?’ ‘What gives me hope?’ ‘What do I fight for?’ That in itself is already a big process. It’s important that people feel they are enough. Their story, their perspective, if that’s how they feel, it’s enough. Then I get them to write about the city from their own perspective, and after that we look at somebody else’s reality, which is completely different from their own, like a sex worker, a refugee,



Sukina Douglas at the KVS, the operating base from which she set out on a month-long poetic pilgrimage through the city.

or a homeless person.”

“Once you go into the soul of the city and look outside yourself and how the attacks affected not just you but the city as a living entity, your perspective changes. When you hear that the women from Molenbeek were in just as much pain for *their* city, you realize that we’re all grieving. We all want to be part of a dialogue, whether you’re an undocumented minor, a *sans-papiers*, an expat, a lawyer, or a writer.”

FLOW

“My experience with art and poetry is just overflow. It’s like you’re full and you need to get it out,” Sukina Douglas says. About 15 years ago, this overflowing head and heart led her and Muneera Rashida to found Poetic Pilgrimage, a hip-hop collective that is so extraordinary that Al Jazeera made a documentary about it, *Hip-Hop Hijabis*. “We just felt really underrepresented,” Sukina Douglas explains. “In music, in art, in culture. We were young British girls from a Caribbean background, studying at the same university, and we didn’t feel like we saw ourselves anywhere. There was no space for us. We were learning so much, absorbing so much information, and we had so much to say. The hip-hop community was defining itself. It was like: we’re not waiting for someone to tell us anything, we’re going to tell our own stories. There were times when I experienced hardship when I first started rapping and had to fight a big room of guys to get to the microphone and be present. There was something very empowering about it, something very spiritual.”

To complicate things even more, that spiritual side also crystalized in her conversion to Islam. “At the time I wasn’t interested in Islam at all. I was very much a free spirit, with long dreadlocks. [Laughs] I would go to Ethiopian Orthodox or Buddhist celebrations, I was really into the spirituality of yoga. I had kind of a patchwork relationship with God. Islam was never on the agenda for me, ever. Interestingly, I read the autobiography of Malcolm X for my studies. And even though I had read it before, maybe because I was studying it in an academic context, it was speaking to me in a different way. I’m so familiar with history, my whole childhood I’ve been raised knowing who he was. But this time it felt really different.” A book by the secular Moroccan feminist Fatima Mernissi about the relationship between women and Islam was a stepping stone. “She separated culture from religion, put it into context, talked about how what she witnessed in her culture was different from what she found in the texts. And even though I was really powerful in my perspective, I couldn’t deny what I felt when I read

it. It would have been weak of me to say I didn’t feel something.”

BE PRESENT

Sukina Douglas answered that call, even if it meant dealing with hostility, or being attributed with an unwanted pivotal role. “In the muslim community people would walk out of the room or shout things at us. When Al Jazeera made a documentary about us, we got death threats. That actually only strengthened our belief in what we were doing. Creating dialogue is essential. As Poetic Pilgrimage we perform in places where people have never spoken to Muslim women before in their whole lives. It’s almost like they ask us every single question they have about Islam. I don’t necessarily feel that I should be the spokesperson for my religion, but I don’t want to run away from the conversation.”

“For me, not doing art would be like losing a limb. Like someone saying: ‘Maybe I won’t be a black person’”

Instead she chose to build bridges. “A faith is a faith, and I’m a devout Muslim, but there are different ways you live your Islam,” she says. “Some people believe you shouldn’t be around non-Muslims, whereas my teachers always said: ‘Be present. Don’t remove yourself from society.’ Some people believe you shouldn’t engage in art, whereas I heard: ‘Engage in creativity.’ Not doing art never even crossed my mind. For me that would be like someone saying: ‘Maybe I won’t be a black person.’ It’s so innate to my being that it would almost be like me losing a limb if I didn’t do what I do.”

“You know, I descend from people who were stolen from Africa and taken to the Caribbean as slaves. The ocean is a cemetery for millions of my ancestors. Maybe the only way we survived was through our expression. The power of the word, the power to sing, to make noise and music. I don’t really see any different: this, for me, is a coping mechanism. As dark as it may be, when I find the poetry, I find myself.” □



PHOTO: JASMIJN POST

"I walk past places where the scar acts up, where it makes the wound seethe palpably. The wound of a loss, a farewell, a moment that was lived too intensely"

EN As I walk into the Tropicana on a Saturday in March, a woman enters my line of sight. With a lacklustre blend of hesitation and routine she asks, just audibly: "Vous cherchez une femme?" I answer with a "non", cloaked in a somewhat scornful smile that I almost immediately regret. Why did I not ask why she does what she does? How did she end up here? Where does she see herself in the future?

It is strange how tongue-tied people get in these kinds of situations. It is that inability to speak that I want to overcome in this bar with a history. At the Tropicana, Sukina Douglas stimulates the Rise Up of a city, almost two years after that crippling 22 March. The British poet and performer is spending a month in Brussels to visit people

and to build bridges in a community that was shaken to its core. She puts the stories of migrants, Muslim women from Molenbeek, refugees, and undocumented minors on the table at which the "ordinary" inhabitants of the city also sit. Through the prism of poetry. Through a workshop where you learn to write yourself and to leave space for the story of the other. If you were a place, which place would you be? If this city stood at your door, what would you whisper or shout at it? If the city was a body, which part of it would you be? "The eyes," I hear. "A helping hand," somebody else says. An ingrown toenail, a blood

cell, a drop of water, a beard, a voice, a scar... I chose the latter. Because it is on the skin, a place that shows healing, but is also the indelible witness of the wound that was inflicted. It struck me as an appropriate metaphor for myself, but in hindsight I think it is actually this city that is on and under my skin. I am not unprejudiced. I walk past places where the scar acts up, where it makes the wound seethe palpably. The wound of a loss, a farewell, a moment that was lived too intensely. This is a city that hurts, that sometimes makes you euphoric, that sometimes comes so close that it gets under your skin, and the next moment lies festering on its own streets.

These are all thoughts that were shared around that table at the Tropicana. Enthusiastic, unfinished, surprisingly intimate, sparkling, generous, after gentle nudging. Someone swears about how Brussels has lost its soul, someone else talks about how the city smothered her, but it was the only thing she had to turn to for support. "If this is how you feel, that's enough. You are enough," Sukina Douglas soothes. It is a heart-warming thought in a city where you can sometimes evaporate. Brussels has inflicted scars on the people around this table. Some of them got them in Syria, others from trying to penetrate the darkness. Still others saw Brussels through a cracked mirror, with the shards palpable on their skin.

Four hours after I walked into the Tropicana, I pull the door shut behind me. Thirty seconds later, the same woman appears. She does not recognize me and asks a second time, with the same furrowed look: "Tu cherches une femme?" "Not anymore," I answer. "Her name was My," I add in silent thought. "They found her about two years ago."

— KURT SNOEKX

ILLUSTRATION: WIDE VERCKOECHE