

Writing home

Ingrid Persaud

You ever eat cascadoux? It ain't easy to find – even in Trinidad. Sometimes, on the hard shoulder of the Solomon Hochoy Highway, you might see a line of little mud-covered fish selling. That is cascadoux. Oh geed, it ugly. And yes, you does have to scrub it and wash it with fresh lime two three times. But when that thing curry down with tomatoes and you throw some chadon beni leaves in the pot? Sweet for days. And this fish has special magic. They say if you eat cascadoux, no matter where you go in the world, all England, America, you will always return to end your days in Trinidad. Now, I haven't lived there since the age of eighteen but I've eaten nuff cascadoux. Read my DNA, and it's coded so when I'm ready to die it will automatically buy a plane ticket for Port of Spain.

Meanwhile, I'm here fighting up in England, this self-imposed exile. For all kinds of reasons, it suits me. Thirty-six years in south London and people are still asking me where I come from, how long I've been here, and when I'm going back. That same thirty-six years living in foreign makes the Trinis them watch me cut eye. I end up not English enough and not Trini enough. Never enough for a hug up and the words: you belong here.

That's just how the years have rolled. It's broken and remade my thinking. Them days for agonising over the push and pull of not belonging are done done done. If the problem lies with identity and nationality, then it's time to

stop looking at these issues in binary terms: being either an insider or an outsider, these are not the only choices or perceptions.

I've stepped away.

I choose to write from a place of non-belonging. In that liminal space, I can transcend labels and passports. I'm no longer fighting up with belonging or being seen to belong or not belong. From non-belonging I am simultaneously all and none of the places I inhabit.

This is an active liminal space, where I can access both memory and trauma, letting go and forgiving. Trinidad is a place I love bad, and non-belonging provides critical distance tempered by compassion. All those love letters can now be written. I pour everything onto the page – from the healing salty breeze down Mayaro to eating hot sada roti and tomatoes choka from a breakfast place in town.

And in the liminality of non-belonging there's no betrayal when, from under grey London skies, I also write about the crime and corruption in Trinidad. People living with over 500 murders a year. They wake to the daily trauma of newspaper photos showing the direct aftermath of those horrendous crimes. Bribes are so commonplace that only if you steal plenty – we talking millions – it will be taken seriously.

But non-belonging has also, ironically, allowed me to build a space called home that feels authentic to my lived experience. And when my time's up, the cascadox will carry me back to dead right where I was born.

Ingrid Persaud

Ingrid Persaud is a late bloomer to the world of literature. She began her adult life as a lawyer, having studied law at the London School of Economics. She'd always yearned for an artistic life, an ambition which took her to study fine art at Goldsmith College and Central St. Martins. Up until her 40s, Ingrid Persaud taught law at Kings College, London, and also worked as a visual artist, before undergoing the transformation into a writer.

Apart from her Costa First Novel award 2021, her prizes and awards include the BBC National Short Story Award (2018) and the Commonwealth Short Story Prize (2017) for 'The Sweet Sop', a story exploring themes of fractured families, death and terminal illness, through the medium of chocolate.

Persaud's work is mostly set in Trinidad and Tobago, where she was born and grew up before relocating to the UK.

A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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