WRITERS MOSAIC

Roger Robinson and Johny Pitts

in conversation with Colin Grant

Colin Grant (CG): So yeah, welcome to WritersMosaic Live, which is a collaboration with WritersMosaic, which is a division of the Royal Literary Fund. Who's heard of the Royal Literary Fund? Okay, well check them out. They're pretty cool, not as cool as us but they're getting there. They will get even cooler the longer they remain together with us. When I say 'us', we're WritersMosaic and we are a network of writers of the global majority. And I think everybody here is part of the global majority, so welcome. If there are any writers who might fit the bill, let me know or let Gabriel know, and we'll maybe squeeze you into the family. So we're delighted to have a full house and we're going to have two halves. So in the first half we're going to have Roger Robinson [pauses for applause] and Johny Pitts. Roger is one of the stalwarts of WritersMosaic and Speaky Spokey. I think Roger's been on the bill three or four times now. And so Roger, as you all know, maybe you don't know, but he previously won the T.S. Eliot Prize for poetry. And you don't get much higher than that. I won't say much more because I'll prompt Roger to talk more about himself as we go along. And he's joined by his compadre tonight, Johny Pitts, who is also a prize winner. So we have two prize winners tonight, Jhalak Prize winning author

of a book called *Afropean*. And it's a combination of poetry, chat, and images. Johny and Roger put this combination together, it's called *Home is Not a Place*. Let's get Johny and Roger on the stage, please. Johny and Roger.

Roger Robinson (RR): Hi, everyone. Thanks for coming out.

CG: Yeah. So listen, let's just kick off by getting an understanding of the title. I know that Baldwin is involved. So you're going to kind of riff together, I'm just going to prod. So tell us about the title.

Johny Pitts (JP): It's weird, the idea came before the title, I usually work the other way around. Like—I like titles and it seems like *Afropean*, it was a portal into the rest of the work. So I often begin at a title whereas this was something different. It was a collaboration that was going to be about black Britain. But what is—who is black and what is Britain? It's such an amorphous sort of thing. And so we were thinking about what we do to try and make sense of our position as black people in Britain, but also about the community that we belong to. And it was just literally a case of Roger just sending through lots of different titles and then suddenly *Home is Not a Place* came up—really landed. And especially because it was connected to *Giovanni's room*, actually, where Baldwin's really talking, I think, about sexuality. But it's the notion, the full quote is, ‘Maybe home is not a place, but simply an irrevocable condition.' That notion of the ‘irrevocable condition’ for me was quite interesting. Thinking of Britain post Brexit, I

was living in Marseilles at the time. We came up with the idea and then COVID hit, and I wanted to be close to parents and my community. I wanted to go home, actually. And that's when it was like, this place that I've really fallen out of love with is still my home. But maybe—it wasn't the place, actually. It was the community and the people I grew up with. And so that's kind of how I—why it really resonated with me, but I don't know.

CG: Roger, yeah.

RR: To some extent, Johny has had me on a trip from *Afropean* to try and find out a place to live where it would satisfy lots of things that we'd like. It satisfies culture, it satisfies diversity, it satisfies a good standard of living for our children. So I visited Johny in Marseilles and I really, really liked it before Brexit. And so Johny was showing me around and I was like, 'Marseilles is all right, it's not bad.' I mean, I've learned a lot of things about Marseilles since then, but I'll check in with that on you. But—and so my wife was asking me, 'Can you live here?' I was like, because Johny was showing me around literary places and places to be, I said, 'Yeah, I think I could pretty much live here, it's not necessarily a bad place.' And she said, 'Can you live anywhere?' And I was like, 'Once I have the internet and transport to an airport, I pretty much could live anywhere once I have my family with me', you know what I'm saying? It's just like—and then I started to think about home really being my family, you know what I'm saying? And also home being a kind of psycho-geography where a lot of the friends I have now, especially during COVID, I contact them online

but they may be in Atlanta, they might be in New York, but we talk regularly. And so all of a sudden, there's a group of friends who I have around the world who we talk regularly, like we're neighbours, but they just live in different countries. But, I mean, the interesting thing about *Home is Not a Place*, is that at a certain point, Johny was just like, 'Yo, we need a title poem for the book.' And this was like three quarters the way through, I was like, 'Oh, damn it, because with title poems for the book, we had already decided to put it on the back of the book, so it had to be slamming. So the good thing about me and Johny is that Johny will actually tell you when something doesn't work, real quick, you know what I'm saying? So I sent him a couple of posts, he's like, 'Nah, this is not it, nah, this is not it, nah, this is not it.' And then I read him something and he's like, 'Yo, this is nearly it.' And then we kind of went through it together, you know what I'm saying? And he kind of came up to something, he's like, 'Yo, that's it, I love this.' And all the things—reasons why he loved it, this poem, *Home is Not a Place*. Then what happened was, the editor said— [CG signalling to interject]. Oh, sorry, you want to say something?

CG: No, let's hear the poem.

RR: I'm going to say it.

CG: Okay.

RR: Yeah, yeah. Then what happened was, the editor edited the poem and took out a lot of things that Johny—the copy editor took out a lot of things that Johny said. And Johny was just like, checking back after, he's like, ‘Yo, what happened to the poem?' I was like, ‘Dude, the editor said the angel thing didn't work, and the editor said that ending with love was kind of cheesy, so I took that out too.' He was like, ‘Fuck what the editor says, change it back.' And that's the only thing he insisted on. I'll read it, I’ll read it.

JP: Editors, I'm not really that difficult to work with. I promise.

RR: He was just like, I actually have the first text he sent me. He says, ‘Roger, I have to talk plainly, man’, that’s the beginning of the text—‘I just have to say.' Anyway, so this is the poem that Johny put back everything, even down to commas in, and we went with this. And he wasn't like that about the whole thing, but this particular poem it was. *Home is Not a Place.*

[RR reading *Home is Not a Place*]

‘Home Is Not A Place
for suffering. Be it house, hut or tent
turn down the volume of the outside
world and rest. Replenish; home a refuge,
the room you return to
and if there's no return, home the dream.

Home a blessed space; a glowing hearth from which seraphim

hold in their hands offering of bright orange embers.
Home a space of solace
for the bones in your skin to relax.
Perhaps there'll be space to grow;
where weary minds can bloom.
And the spirit of a room? The spirit
of all rooms are degrees of warmth;
and people; and talk; so too the spirit
of a home love.'

CG: Thank you. Thank you. Yeah. So—

RR: Johny was talking about like, perhaps the editor didn't have a kind of cultural resonance for the idea of love. You know, that when we're talking about love in our community, we're not talking about necessarily cheesy love and we're not talking about something— So it's past the cultural resonance of it landed differently.

JP: Yeah, I think love in so many black cultures and diaspora—African diaspora cultures is a complex thing. It's something that you will always hear artists talk about is like, they say, 'What's the—what motivates you? What's the topic?' You could speak to Marvin Gaye or—and they'll say

love, it's not something that's simple, it's something that's—something that I think really resonates with displacement. And when—especially if you look in the African-American tradition, where you have men and women and families that were torn apart by transatlantic slavery and didn't know how to be together, that notion of love was something very complicated and powerful. So I could see the copy editor came in and was doing their job, but I felt like there was a rhythm encoded in Roger's poetry that came out the best the first time. That there's something there that the editor wasn't seeing.

CG: Well done for enlightening them in that regard. Now, I read in the book that you were going to craft images with your pen, Roger. And you, Johny, are going to make poetry with your camera. And can we turn—? [RR signalling to interject] I got it from the book, man. I read the *ting!* And let's just clear this up once and for all. Let's have this first image. And spoiler, that's not Johny, right, Johny? Who's that?

JP: So funny, because one of my friends was a photographer—is a white guy. And he said, 'Oh, we're going to put this on the cover.' And he said, 'It's a bit of an ego fest to put yourself on the cover.' And I'm like, 'We don't all look the same, you know, Robin.' And then Gabriel said the same thing today: 'Is that you?' So I realised it wasn't just that—. But no, that's not me. And what was the question, sorry?

CG: Well, you anonymised, don't you? You're not going to name any of these people in the book?

JP: Yeah.

CG: Why did you make that decision?

JP: Yeah, there were no—much to Roger's chagrin as well, there's no page numbers in there so it's hard for him when we're doing readings. The idea is that it's going to be like a dreamscape where I don't want the information to interrupt the flow of the images that we're trying to create and the journey we're trying to take you on. And so—and also just thinking of me and my friends. Back in the nineties, I remember being a kid, and we'd watch MTV. And it's like, to be into hip hop then you had to be really be into it. Like, now hip hop is pop music, it's the undercurrent of everything. But back then, you had to really be into it. And we'd always watch music videos. And we might see a video by Method Man, and there'd be a cameo from Biggie in there or something. That's a bad example. But you would—if you knew hip hop you'd say, ‘Oh, did you see that cameo?’ But do you see that? You know, that's—that's Redman or that's, you know.' And in this book, I like the idea of like: this is not performing for anyone, this is—rather than being a document about black people, it kind of—I wanted it to come from the—from black people. And so it's like, you either know who these people are— Some people are street sweepers, or they're working as nurses. Some people are award

winning writers, Yale University professors. They're all there as well, or former Lord Mayors. But I like the idea of just, if you know them you know them, if not you don't, but it still has to work visually.

RR: Yeah, I think what one of the interesting things, I was so ignorant about this entire process. Johny had been to Afro, all across Europe, talking to African communities in Europe and stuff. So he had it down pat. So Johny would pick me up and we probably—we started getting some food from a Chinese restaurant near us. And then we started driving to a town. And the first day we went, I was like—Johny jumps out the car, [JP:] 'Let's go.' I was like, 'So what are we actually doing?', you know what I'm saying? He's like, 'We're just gonna walk around.' [RR:] 'We didn't plan to meet anybody here? [JP:] 'No, we're just gonna walk around and see if there are any black people around, and meet them and take some pictures.' I was like, 'What, just walk around?' And—but he had a kind of working system that was really interesting because there was a democracy to who would be chosen for a portrait. And then you didn't have a kind of hierarchy of status. And surprisingly, the first day we did that—when we was walking around we meet somebody, [unnamed person:] 'So you have to talk to my friend, Cleo, she used to be the ex-mayor of Bristol'. And bring up Cleo. And then Cleo said, 'Oh, meet me by the mural.' And then you meet Cleo and then Cleo was like, 'Oh, you have to talk to my friend', this— And then you just get referred to people. And on sunny days, people talking over walls and stuff like that. So it was a really interesting idea to kind of not have a kind of status.

CG: And when you're walking around, did you get the black nod?

JP: Yeah.

RR: The black nod. Well, you know in places like St. Paul's, everybody there was black.

CG: Can you explain the black nod to people who don't know what the black nod is?

RR: Black nod. You talk about this a lot, don't you, Colin? The black nod. Okay, so this is what it—

CG: One tune, brother, one tune.

RR: Okay, so the black nod, specifically for men. Like you go to different countries, and you see a black man. My black nod is specifically with other men most times, rarely with women because they just get it wrong. Yeah. So with other black men who you don't know, you just see them and you just give them a nod. And they'd be like, 'Yo', and they give you a nod back. But also too, one of the things for me—like they have several tests for in different areas. Like if you go to—I remember when I went to Berlin the first time when the wall came down, I was trying to black nod with all the black people in Berlin, not one person nodded back to me. And so you

can really test how disaffected a community is if nobody's nodding back to you and they're kind of looking at you like, *what, what are you doing?* But black nod is international, and it's a kind of recognition of the continuation of a people for me.

JP: And the struggle.

RR: And struggle. Yeah, and struggle. And the continuation of I see you, you're seen. Yeah.

CG: Can we just zip up to the next image and maybe Johny can talk about the idea that I read that you included in your book? You can say that the images are shot with ‘casual attention’. Can you explain that concept, Johny, and maybe refer to the image behind you?

JP: Yeah, that might not be the best example.

RR: Yeah I was going to— [inaudible]

JP: But yeah, I mean in a way—in street photography you have this idea of the decisive moment that sort of was, not coined by Henri Cartier-Bresson actually, but sums up his method of working where everything just fits perfectly and it's like super tight frame. And I think I was trying to sort of do something a little bit different with my photography and I was—going back to that notion of poetry is— One of the first things is I actually used a

compact film camera for a lot of this so some—I mean, this image again—why it's probably not the greatest, it was shot on my X-Pro3 with a Leica Summicron lens.

CG: Can we zip through to one that may take to your liking? Maybe—

JP: That's a good example. That's not a bad example. Yeah, that's not a bad example. It's sort of where there's a sort of off-kilterness to the imagery where something's slightly wrong about it, maybe it's not—it doesn't adhere to the rule of thirds. And it's me sort of saying, 'This is interesting', not me going, 'Right, you stand there and let's—' It's trying to get as close as possible to a black vernacular aesthetic that you might find in a family album. And trying to throw out all of the stuff you learn about photography, and try and get this casual approach that doesn't feel like it's anthropological or documenting from a distance, but has this sort of interplay between the taker and the person who's being photographed. Yeah.

CG: Well, you're just mimicking my approach to interview me to look at 'casual attention'. So we're just liming tonight, I haven't prepared much because I know these guys really well. But Roger, maybe you want to read something now, yeah?

RR: Yeah. I mean, following on from what Johny says, very early on when we was travelling, Johny was kind of developing this idea called the 'B-

side aesthetic'. Yeah. Where the B-side—like taking the B-side of dub in particular, where they weren't necessarily trying to have a hit or make money, but they were probably trying to be even more experimental or let mistakes happen because that wasn't the side that was needed to make the cash. And that a lot of creativity came from the B-side and a lot of B-side creativity was representative of like seventies and eighties black culture, especially in records and stuff. So the book is part travelogue, part memoir, part poems, part talking to people. But it's—I'll read a little bit of *Johny Tell Me About the B-side Aesthetic*. One of the things you have to realise about Johny is that one minute you might be talking about the top five MCs in the world, and next minute he'll be talking about Foucault and you're like, 'Whoa, whoa, how is this connected?' You know what I'm saying? It's just like—and it's because he's a real mix.

JP: Postmodernism.

RR: Yeah. He's a real mix. He's a real mix of theory, B-boyism, nineties music. And, he sees—he's like a— I see right with a magpie. He does not understand high—he doesn't take high or low culture. But if something's good, there's something to derive from it. So this is *Johny Tell Me About Leaving London with a B-side Aesthetic*.

[RR reading *Johny Tell Me About Leaving London with a B-side Aesthetic*]

'As soon as we get past the junction and onto the M25,

Johny starts to tell me about his B-side aesthetic theory. It's

already dark and the digital radio is lighting up the side of his face green neon like he was in a nightclub or a shebeen. The dub maestro scientist is pulsing through the speakers at a low enough volume so that we don't have to shout. A manifesto of sorts based on the B-sides of records being made in the spirit of culture, innovation, and aesthetics rather than an economic demand for hits that can corrupt the purity of art. The B-sides has led to some of the best and sometimes most underappreciated music that has stood the test of time. Like all really good aesthetic theories, it feels to me that it has always been around and what he has said, like all good poets, has revealed something previously below the frequency to be understood. It struck me that perhaps this is Johny's superpower, don't want to guess you, to reveal hidden but experienced culture. As the lights on the M25 begin to flash in time with the hi-hats, Johny says that the aesthetic can be applied to any art form. But he envisions that in photography there can be pictures that play with the edge of failure, that bleed, that blur, that use expired film for non-standard results, and the materiality of film warping can be photographic technologies that enhances a picture's artistic qualities. I start talking about whether the B-side is a combination for black people particularly, of a surfeit of creativity clashing with a lack of economic opportunities. Albums made from samples only

from the one dollar bin of the record score, the suffra-chic styling in Jamaica where a suit jacket sent by a relative in US is worn with a string vest and sandals, or even Lee Scratch Perry's Black Ark using studio equipment for sounds that they weren't specifically made for. We both agree that the B-side on vinyl and as an aesthetic encourages taking part regardless of financial restrictions. And as the conversation unfolds, so too do the bass rhythms all the way to Glasgow.'

CG: Great, thank you for that. So—

RR: Johny's started doing a B-side manifesto, you all should check—you have it up online, yeah? Yeah, yeah, the B-side manifesto is great.

JP: It's actually Roger—he says you need to make a manifesto out of this. So as we've been on tour, we've been coming together with a list of about 20 things. Almost like the Dogme 95 manifesto of those great filmmakers from Scandinavia in the eighties and nineties, it's like that kind of thing. So it's like—yeah, it needs work, but yeah.

CG: We're going to get to Margate shortly but before we go to Margate, let's have a detour in Brighton. What did you learn from me? No, you interviewed more people than me. I mean, my brother here—Trevor's here, Trev's here as well. And we didn't make the cut, but never mind. We

can talk about that later. But you met some other folk. What feeling do you get about Brighton and its place for people like me to live a commodious life?

RR: I actually talked to Dr. [inaudible] too. One of the things I got from speaking to people is that, believe it or not, people are looking for a home, and that home also involves other people who are similarly looking for a home. And they gather together, because it might just take—especially with black communities, and especially in Brighton, it might—like you and Trevor, it's just like, 'Oh, I'm thinking about looking here, oh, there's this guy, I can move here because he's like me.' So when you find those like-minded people, and Dr.—

CG: Yeah, so I'm here because of Trevor, yeah.

RR: Yeah, and Dr. [inaudible] was saying—or what one of the things—because she travelled—she had travelled lots of different countries. One of her tests was, if you were to go up to someone and ask the time, if they would flinched and look at you like you were dirty, that was a test for her. And that where she's living in Brighton, that didn't happen. And I mean—and it—because you live slightly outside of Brighton, right? Not Brighton, yeah.

Dr. [inaudible]: Oh no, I live in Hanover.

RR: In Hanover. Where it didn't happen where she was, so that was probably a good space. And the people were into music, so it's just like the kind of surroundings that you have, you know. You know what I'm saying?

CG: Yeah.

JP: And the thing is as well that's quite interesting with this, it wasn't really like, as Roger said it, a planned journey. But you were definitely there, Colin, you know, you were. And so many other people, like I met up with the great African-American actor, Ray Schell. I don't know if anyone's come across Ray Schell in Brighton? Who wrote one of Maya Angelou's favourite books. Help me out—

RR: I can't remember.

JP**:** It begins with a— I want to call it Zero, but it's not. It's about a middle-class black man who succumbs to drugs. A really amazing, amazing—I forget the name—the title of this book.

CG: Does it have 'ice' in it?

JP: *Iced*. So yeah, it's *Iced*.

CG: That's why they pay me the big bucks.

JP: And he was actually in a musical with my dad back in the day so he's known me since I was little, and he lives in Brighton at the moment. But all these conversations that we were having, and the people that we knew, and the things that they'd said to us about where they live. And talking not just with you actually, Colin, but with your daughter, Jazz, who was included in another book that I put together which was all about the B-side, it's called *The B-side*. And looking at Jazz's work with her amazing montages. So one of the things that took discipline and restraint, I think, was to know people, meet people, and have all this wealth of information. And then create something that was—going by that maxim that simplicity is the zenith of a long journey, not the starting point. And trying to just reduce it, and take out the information, but feel or trust that the—that all the things that we saw, and the people we met, and the interviews that we had, haunt the work somehow.

CG: So moving to Margate and Turner. What's the importance of the sea, Turner, Margate? What did you learn, and what was the inspiration for going there?

RR: In Margate, I met this collective called People Them Collective. And I'd been to Margate before, I never met them, but how I could miss them, I do not know. Because they're so active, and they have such a beautiful venue, and they're really, really smart people. A lot of them—they weren't born in Margate, they all kind of migrated there. But they definitely have a kind of collective thing in Margate. In the light of Margate's history of being

such a kind of racist area, it's really, not mad but it's really to see how strong a community that People Them Collective have there. And then there was something else that was happening a lot everywhere we go, that even people in Brighton had a link to the sea. And that—one of the essays inside here is about how black people see the sea—black and brown people see the sea completely differently from other communities.

CG: I remember—is Jacob Ross here? I'm going to steal a line from Jacob Ross now. So Jacob Ross, you know Jacob?

RR: Yeah.

CG: He's a great writer from Grenada. He talked about the fact that there's so many Africans threw themselves overboard, or thrown overboard in the Atlantic slave trade, that you could walk a path on their bones from Africa to America.

RR: And if there's more information, like when we went around, there's information we couldn't put in this book. But there's new information, historical information coming out that's going to come out soon, where there are over 50 boats that—it was so easy to get insurance money for, that instead of actually coming in with the slaves, if the slaves were [inaudible] anyway, they'd just throw all of them overboard, and then get a new boat with insurance the next day, you know what I'm saying? It's just

like—and sometimes you can just feel those types of things in the places you are, you know the resonances of it.

CG: Johny, there's some lovely images here. And the people are confident, and they're confident about you taking their image. Tell us about this photo.

JP: This image was taken during one specific day that I really remember well. A guy of Ghanaian heritage, who lived in Brixton, called Eddie Ochere. One of the great, great photographers—underrated photographers of this—in this country, who actually helped us piece this book together. He was in—with Shoair Mavlian, who's the director of Photoworks. There's a group of people who helped us piece together the stuff. So this was the first time I met him. This day, I went to Brixton, he was doing a workshop. And it was amazing, he was in like a mechanics shed. And he's like a crazy scientist so he does everything on film. And he set up a makeshift darkroom, and he had all these chemicals out and these film cameras, and he said, 'Don't bring your own, use one of mine.' And so we—I went there, and we went out walking around Brixton together. And it's—I felt like I knew Brixton fairly well, I mean, I live in Peckham now. But he'd grown up in Brixton and to see it through his eyes was incredible. And we walked together and made some photographs. And this was one of the images that I made that day. And I saw her and I just thought *she looks great,* and I asked her if I could take a photograph. And she was really up for it. And I think you can see in the look, is—there's

a slight embarrassment but also pride that comes through in there, as I was taking an image. And after I took the photograph, we went back to Eddie's mechanics yard and he developed it on the spot that day, and so that's a bit grainy. But that became the standard by which all the other black and white images that I took should be judged. That there's a—he believes that you take in your emotions into the darkroom and that the way that you move through the print, as you—as you're printing affects the contrast. And so there's a certain amount of personality that comes up with each print. And so it just felt like a real Brixton moment. A lot of this is about the periphery. And I'm from the periphery of black Britain, I'm from Sheffield, I'm not from Brixton. But this is one of the images that I feel like really emerges from the heart of Brixton, and has a real Brixton story attached to it.

RR: [Inaudible]. Like, the way her posture and everything—because sometimes I just react to something that Johny shot, and write something creative.

JP: Could you read the poem that goes with this?

RR: Yeah, yeah.

JP: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I think there's a beautiful poem that Roger wrote. And very often this—these are parallel journeys. So we're travelling together, I'll go off and do my thing, Roger will go off and do his, and we'll

see how it all lands at the end. But I think this is one of the few images where Roger's really responding directly to the photograph.

RR: Yeah, and also, like what you talk about, there's a shame but there's a pride, you know what I'm saying? And I picked up on that in this actual poem. This poem is called *Story*, and you have to imagine me as a black woman, middle-aged. *Story.*

[RR reading *Story*]

'My body Is a shape of my journey,
Babies? Yes, I've had a few
and the stretch marks on my stomach and hips?
Designed by God they are beautiful.
The flare of my nostrils is my grandmothers
(which skipped a generation to centre my face.)
Two fully grown men still prefer my food
over their wives cooking. It's not my problem their wives
can't cook; and I crave no man
who doesn't adore this storied body,
because it's mine and it's the only one I've got and
it has no space for shame, mine or yours.
If your body isn't telling your story
it means someone else is using your body to tell
theirs and you better solve that problem.'

CG: So you're in a Mini Cooper, you're driving around the coast, what kind of conversations do you have when you're driving? And I love the kind of thoughts you have when you're in motion as opposed to when you're stationary. Did that help, being in motion?

RR: You know what? I think—but so I don't drive, right, so Johny drove the whole time. And he was in charge of the music, the entire time. He wasn't even asking me what I wanted to hear at any point, not—at no point. The black man rules, I'm driving, I'm controlling the music. And also too, there's a thing where, not a lot of people know that Johny only listens specifically to nineties music. So you'll be driving along and you could see the sea, and you listen to Keith Sweat, and SWV, and you're like, *yo*. This is like—it's like you have that kind of clash all the time. It became a thing, that kind of clash between urbanity and ruralness, and how these things kind of came together. And so there were certain—actually, let me read, let me read this poem. So there were certain points where you're just like, how blackness would exist in nature, and where you have clashes with it. *City Kids See the Sea.*

[RR reading *The City Kids See the Sea*]

‘For many the first time;

these kids of tower block

and tarred playgrounds

now running towards the scene
of sea with its blended blue sky
and wave breaks of silver tip froth

Most don't even bother
to take off their shoes
or roll up their trousers

Instead they run right in
splashing each other
with arcs and sprays of delight.

Sunlight threading gold
along the seas rippling
swells all around them

till the sea became the colour of smoke
and the sky lead; hijabs drip
and Nikes squelched back to the bus

Oh city children you are as ancient
as water, as warm as the evening sun
as calm as the tide slowly pulling away.'

RR: That was actually in Brighton, yeah. You know they have those buses that bring kids in. And also too, there was another time where you have that kind of clash. It's like, we were hanging out in Dover, and in Dover we were outside a car park. So we were coming out, and we just looked up and there were like 20-ish parakeets, just hanging out.

CG: Can we hear that poem? Can we hear that poem?

RR: Yeah we can. It's coming. My man ain't got no patience at all, boy. Let me set it up now, let me set it up now. So there were 20-ish parakeets.

CG: How many?

RR: Twenty-ish. Twenty-ish parakeets hanging out. But here's the thing, parakeets aren't from England, you know what I'm saying? It's like, what are they doing here? Johny told them—told me that apparently, all the parakeets that exist in England now, are from two parakeets that Jimi Hendrix let go in the seventies.

CG: Oh yeah, yeah, true fact [sarcastic tone].

RR: Yo, look, put it in Google right now, you know what I'm saying?

CG: Dr Google is always wrong.

RR: Okay, so this is *Twenty Parakeets*.

[RR reading *Twenty Parakeets*]

‘Not the common caw of the crow, not
ripened fruit, not blossoming
flower, nor flames.

Not an imagined tropical film set
nor festive Christmas lights.

But twenty parakeets at home in a tree
outside a Dover car park as content
as in any mango tree in Curaçao.

Ignoring the calls of being illegal immigrants
and the murmurs
that there may be a danger to local birds.

They seemed assured in their fellowship
enough to sing their calypso
and look down on the city’s streets
as people march by carrying orange
supermarket bags, watching the streaks
of red brick lights from passing cars

and children pointing at them shouting

Look, look at the birdies mum, look at them

dressed in their bright yellow anoraks.

CG: So Johny, lockdown sent you back to Sheffield and your mum's preserved the room for you to have all your archive. What did you learn from being in there and how did the images that you found there resonate with your project here?

JP: Yeah, so I was living in Marseille and dead set on staying there. And then yeah, the coronavirus pandemic happened. And my mum has got a—it's this house that I grew up in. It's a terrace house on the outskirts of Sheffield but it's got a garden. And my mum was good with my daughters, with my daughter at that time actually, Sylvia hadn't been born yet. But so we just thought well, we'll go to where it's safe. And I knew it was safe because its—my neighbours are still there: Yemeni family on either side of the terrace that I've grown up with, more like family than friends. And so it just felt like a safe place. And but—yeah, while I was there it's—two things happened. One was that I realised, gosh, like a lot of people, I think, there was a lot of—it became a bit of a buzzword didn't it in the lockdown, 'archiving', you know everyone was archiving. And that's what happened with me. It was like—suddenly it's like I realised I've got this sprawling series of images from about the last 15 years. Also I started looking through our family albums that my mum had kept. And I was looking through it all and thinking, *oh yeah I remember that image, that image*.

Because they're the images of the superlative moments: the graduations or holidays or— But then, what—I asked my mum, I said, ‘Oh have you got—have you kept all the negatives?' And thank God, like most people throw out the negatives once they have the prints which is the big mistake, you should keep the negatives which is where you can get the high quality scans from and the work. And she kept every negative ever, but they weren't all in the—so I spent like about a month going in the coal, we'd call it the coal house, and then under the stairs and in different bedrooms. And I got all the family negatives together. And as I was looking at these negatives, you'd see that's the one shot out of the 36 that was in the album that is the high moment. And then you've got all these other moments where my dad's laying on the carpet listening to his BeBe and CeCe Winans album, or you've got a photograph of my brown skin sister with a blue-eyed doll. All these nothing moments, these everyday moments that actually for me, spoke about—more about our family than these high moments. Because that's what we do, we tell—especially I think in the black community, a lot of photographers, they want to take photographs of the black community in their Sunday best. And I understand that urge because you want to—they wanted to counteract a negative depiction of black people. But I think that what sometimes gets missed is this everydayness. And so I was amazed by these images. And so that led to two things. So one thing, I had my own images that I'd now archived and could build upon. And when Roger came to me I thought, well I've got this foundation to work from. And as I go forward, as I take more photographs around the coast, I'm gonna use these everyday

moments. I'm not gonna look for that big hitter necessarily, I'm gonna look for these everyday moments that might have been left out of the family album. And using that as a metaphor for the black community that gets—often gets left out of the kind of metaphorical family album of Britain.

CG: We'll skip to *Carnival Posse 18*. And I'd love to have your reflections on it, Johny, and also to hear the poem if that's okay?

RR: Fine, yeah.

JP: This is one that I kind of resurrected from the archive that I just shared around the table of these core people that we trusted, and they just thought it worked. And then, especially when Roger wrote a poem, it was everything came together. And initially, I wasn't sure that—about it. And then I think, the more the time has passed, this—because I thought it was too on the nose. I was thinking the poem and the photograph almost worked too well together. As time has passed, I think it's one of my favourite moments.

RR: And we had this code, like if it is that we wanted to stand up on something else somebody did, yeah, you had to say 'Get behind me Satan' or Not today Satan.' And so when he was saying he wanted to take it out I was like, 'Not today Satan, that's not—that's staying in'. Because I responded to it. Because I've been to Carnival loads of times, you know, I'm an older dude. But I've seen these young women going and

I've heard their conversations, *oh that's interesting*. So this was based on the conversations of a young woman. So now you have to pretend I'm a young black woman. It's not that hard, come on now. *Carnival Posse 2018.*

[RR reading *Carnival Posse 2018*]

‘I done told Janine to stop
handing out her number
to these crusty boys outside
Mc Donald's when they
won't even buy her a small
fries.

I don't know why we're always
waiting around for Lynette
because it takes so long just
to do her hair and
her hair is always like the most
f’ed up part of her outfit.

And Yasmin was coming out
to Carnival in her brand new Huaraches
and we told her not to because they will
get destroyed. She ignored us
by the first day the shoes looked

100 years old. Jokes, my days.

And Suzette always insisting on thinking
some guy been trying to check her which
they wasn't and if there was she wouldn't
even know what to do because she is the only
girl in our crew with absolutely no bants.

Anyway these are my girls
and I got big love for my crew
and we come to dance but don't think you
can slide up behind us because we're not—we
ain't having it.

We came out together and we're heading
home together and if you're fighting one
of us you're fighting us all, trust.

CG: Can I ask you both to reflect on what you got from being in each other's company? It's lovely to—hearing you speak here. And sometimes I tell myself, I'm not honest about the way I write because I'm only really honest when I'm with people I feel comfortable with. And what's nice, I think, from what you've done, you've allowed yourself to go a bit further and to reveal yourself maybe more than you would do if you're writing and performing by yourself.

RR: For sure, for sure. I mean, from the time me and Johny met each other there was a kind of—I don't know if the word is polarity, where you know, the discussion— Like even on the way up here, we met in London and we talked all the way up here. If the time we get picked up—it from the time he would come and pick me up at Northampton, if we go into Glasgow, we'll talk all the way to Glasgow. So we spark off a lot of ideas in each other and we have similar thoughts, we both have children the same age, we both have similar aspirations. So there's a lot where we bounce off each other and a lot of things we similarly interested in. But, and also, I have a relationship with him, you know what I'm saying? It's just like, from the time we met we became friends. So if he's doing something and I can help, I'm like, 'Yo, I got you, here have it, take this, take that.' And so I found that interesting because I often thought that sometimes collaborations work better with someone who's completely different from you, you know what I'm saying? It's just like—but I'm older, so there's a difference there. But no, we have a similar kind of mindset, and things he says and does inspire me, and I—hopefully is the same way on that side, you know.

JP: Nah, not at all [sarcastic tone]. No, absolutely. I always think like—I think what it is, is we're both a bit eccentric as well, in a way. And it's a word that sometimes doesn't get used with black people, like I don't— But I think that actually—that there is a huge amount of eccentricity that emerges from blackness. It doesn't get called surrealism or eccentricity.

And I think we we go on these long, winding conversations. But also I think —something that—we have so much in common. But I think that also—I think any good relationship—I think you know when you're in a good relationship when you can argue well. I can totally disagree with Roger and we can have this big, almost like, we enjoy it, it's like a fun disagreement. But—and we come out of it with a different perspective, each of us. So I think, yeah if you can argue really well with somebody, that's a true sign of a good relationship.

CG: Can you give us an example?

RR: Ooh.

CG: Come on.

JP: Roger has—

CG: Dig deep.

JP: Roger has—

RR: So his sense of humour is insanely bad. So he likes British things like Morecambe and Wise.

JP: He's lying. That's not true.

RR: Like, that’s the kind of stuff he likes. It's like Morecambe and Wise.

JP: It’s not true.

RR: Not even like—what’s it? There’s one good, really good British comedian called Peter—what’s his name? Peter, Peter—what? Peter Kay. He’s hilarious, yeah. But he likes everybody else who's just whack, just terrible. And he don't like any American humour. So I'll send him somebody like Katt Williams and he's like, ‘This isn't even funny’, you know what I'm saying? He wouldn't even laugh once, he wouldn't laugh once.

JP: No, that’s true but how can you say that Katt Williams is funny and you said that Richard Pryor is overrated? Richard Pryor is overrated. The godfather of African American—

RR: No, no, no. What I said about Richard Pryor is that he doesn't tell jokes, he tells stories. That doesn't mean I think he's overrated, you know what I'm saying? Anyway, humour is a constant thing. Like his humour is so bad, oh my God.

CG: I think we're gonna call this one a draw. Listen, let's have one word from Johny and then we're gonna—final poem from you.

RR: Okay.

CG: So Johny, would you do it again?

JP: Oh, in a minute. Yeah, yeah yeah. And I wouldn't say that with *Afropean*. Some people have said 'Oh you could do that journey again, with—going through the countryside of Europe and stuff like that, you only went through cities.' For me, that book's done and it was a slog, and it was a tough time. And I'm very proud of that work but I wouldn't do that again. With this, because I had Roger there, I would—yeah I would do it in a heartbeat, yeah for sure.

CG: Would you do it with other cultures, other sensibilities? Would you do an Irish version?

JP: It's interesting because I have Irish heritage on my mum's side. My grandmother's maiden name is 'Rogan' so we have a lot of Irish heritage.

RR: I have Irish heritage too.

JP: Yeah, yeah. I think everyone who's ever done a DNA test that I know has some Irish heritage in them, yeah. But yeah, no for me I think that—also it's interesting saying, would I do it again. I see in some ways this has been my sort of farewell to Britain, actually. So like, I'm not sure I'd do it in this country again. I mean, I'm eager to get back to Marseille to be honest.

But in terms of working with Roger on a similar project, yeah anytime for sure.

CG: So Roger, let's—do you need some preparation or can you—just gonna read it?

RR: I'm just gonna read it, yeah. I might introduce it if it's alright with you. This is a poem called *On the End of Seasons*. Like travelling with Johny, you just—being out in nature, I began to see different things and really perceive nature in a different way. And I also weirdly hate nature poems and poems who write about nature, and then just being out in a kind of rural environment there's certain things I began to see and then I got really into it. *On the End of Seasons*. And this is for my wife. *On the End of Seasons*.

[RR reading *On the End of Seasons*]

'All day the sea eagles do their work
pulling the last currents of summer
with their flat white tails.

And as the colder nights draw in
there are stacks of books my mind
will curl around in front of the fire
under our Moroccan honeymoon blankets.

And the pin headed stars shall look
on nightly through the window
with bets that I'll be asleep
before the second chapter.

And mornings I'll rise early to stoke
the ashened fireplace as the frost
lies quietly resting in the corners
of the window as the house warms.

In this transition, many millennia
older than us, the end of this season
requires warmth as a change
and stillness as a response.

And Beloved so to do we bid goodbye
to the season of our youth, now gone.
The shock of white in your hair
and my growing snowy beard,
my acquired distaste for rushing
and remembering now only that
something has been forgotten.

We have lived longer than we will live
but still pleased by the slow but marked

changes of this life, (we persist) in this world

of wonder and quiet marvels.'

RR: Thank you.

CG: Nice one my brothers. Nice one. So let's have a big hand again, Johny and Roger.

RR: Thanks for having us, thank you.

JP: Thank you for having us.

CG: So we have a trio of musicians tonight. We have Fiorella [pauses for applause]. We have John Bay-Axworthy [pauses for applause], and Isaac da Luz. Check these guys out.

Fiorella (F): Hello. Cool, so we're gonna play a couple of songs for you guys that we have written together. Take it away. This one's called *I'll Leave Early*. Cause I'll always leave work early, if I can.

[*I'll Leave Early* plays]

F: Thank you. Thank you. This one's called *Roots*. Yeah.

[*Roots* plays]

[Untitled song plays]

CG: So, weren't they good? So Fiorella, John, and Isaac, yeah. Well, such a lovely way to end the evening. I hope you've enjoyed it as much as I have. But do check out WritersMosaic. You'll find Roger there, Roger Robinson was one of our first profile writers. And you'll find Johny Pitts there, he did an amazing essay called *The Identity Parade*. A whole host of really, really good writers. I'm even there. But listen, we're gonna come back and we're gonna hopefully entertain you, inform and educate you, next time here, probably in the beginning of January. But until then, the bar is still open and here's to you all.

Roger Robinson and Johny Pitts were in conversation with Colin Grant
A recording of this interview can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**