Quarterly 04

# Talismans of migration

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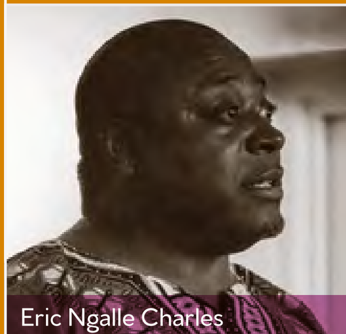
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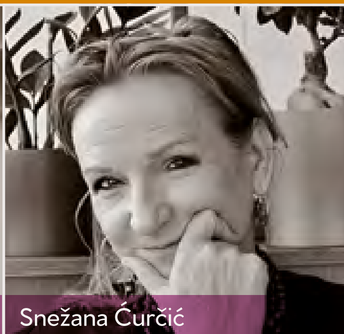
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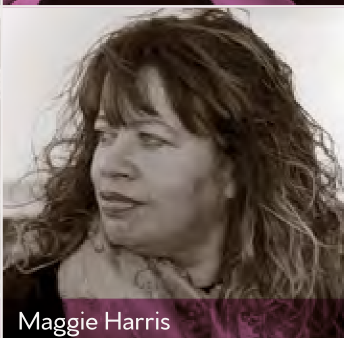
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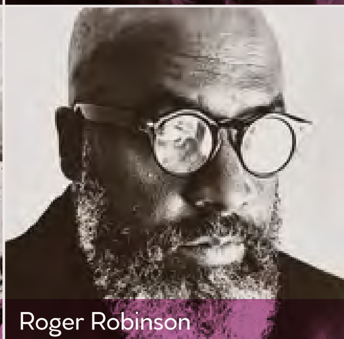
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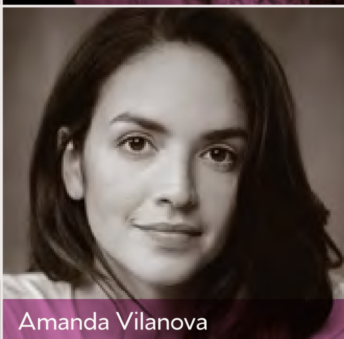

Amanda Vilanova

## *WritersMosaic* Quarterly 04

*WritersMosaic* Quarterly features a series of essays drawn from *WritersMosaic* Magazine, showcasing UK writers, especially those from the global majority. Previous issues of *WMQ* have celebrated the centenaries of James Baldwin and Malcolm X and new writing by Iranian women.

In this fourth edition, writers reflect on the power and poignancy of objects of migration.

*WritersMosaic* Magazine, a division of the Royal Literary Fund, can be found at **www.writersmosaic.org.uk**

# Editorial

It takes enormous courage and faith in your destiny to up sticks and travel thousands of miles to begin a new life in a foreign land. I am the child of such pioneering migrants: in 1959, my parents set out from Jamaica to Britain. They rarely spoke of the emotional cost of the rupture with their pasts and what might have been lost. But what do pioneers leave behind when they migrate to a new country, and what do they carry with them physically and emotionally wherever they land?

This is the premise of *What We Leave We Carry* – an oral history of migration to Britain over the last six decades, composed of transcribed extracts from a *WritersMosaic* podcast of the same name, which is to be published in June 2026. I commissioned several *WritersMosaic* writers who, like me, travelled Britain and listened to stories of migration – foundational tales of arrival, of love and of loss.

Everyone we spoke with recalled the heightened emotions of their departure, leaving behind relatives and friends whom they might never see again. Something that helped the soon-to-be migrants on their journeys and for the first daunting moments of their arrival – in what seemed for many like a perennial fog – were parting words of comfort, gifts and treasured objects. These talismans of migration provided succour and stirred remembrance, even today.

One of my favourite stories in *What We Leave We Carry* is told by Mira Erdevički from Slovenia. She carried a present from her grandmother, who raised her – a little wooden stamp used to mark a *Slavski kolač*: a traditional bread. Mira's grandmother had taken vicarious pleasure in her granddaughter's adventures, and still, every year, on St. John's Day, Mira brings out the wooden stamp and presses it into the dough of her homemade bread, commemorating her beloved grandmother.

There are many such tales among the nine writers in this collection too. All are migrants or the descendants of migrants and they share the secrets of those objects of migration and their talismanic properties.

**Colin Grant**

SNEŽANA ĆURČIĆ

# The list

The only time that I can remember barking at my father was when he first mentioned 'The List'. 'Are you serious? I've barely arrived in Belgrade after a long time away and you are already asking me something like that. Have some mercy and let me enjoy being at home!' I poured out in one breath.

My father went quiet and appeared confused. All he had asked me to do was to write a wish list of home-made delicacies I'd like to take back with me to my new home in England. He was an old-school man with the mind of a strategist. He and my mother needed to know what produce to source, what dishes to prepare, and how to pack it all in time. Proper Serbian cuisine could not be found anywhere else, my parents thought, and I didn't rush to correct them. So they gathered together *ajvar*, *sarma* and, my favourite of all, *burek*. *Burek* is an indescribably tasty cheese savoury pastry shaped into a spiral. *Ajvar*, a roasted red pepper spread, is often referred to as the vegan caviar of the Balkans.

When she was preparing items for The List, my mother would morph into the

main character from one of my favourite movies, *Babette's Feast*. Like Babette, she would pirouette around the cooker, preparing the most lavish meals. It was her generous way of protecting me and my young family abroad. The kitchen would be quickly converted into a military headquarters, the table piled with knives, scissors, pots and lesser-known kitchen utensils. My parents were also getting increasingly creative and resourceful with the packing materials. Nothing was thrown away that could be re-purposed: ice-cream containers, yoghurt tubs and cola bottles with Fanta caps.

Over the years, I gradually gave in to The List and became a full-blown accomplice. After all, there was enough

**I landed at Heathrow airport, loaded like a mule,** my worn-out Samsonite brimming with Serbian delights.

Photo: George Ho

food to last for at least a week upon my return to London. The List was like an extended spoon, stretching out our time of being together. It was our family code, a sign language and a ritual.

On one occasion, I landed at Heathrow airport, loaded like a mule, my worn-out Samsonite brimming with Serbian delights. As I strolled towards the 'nothing to declare' exit, I spotted a customs officer raising a hand and nodding at me to stop for a random luggage check.

My heart high-jumped with shock; my mind sprinted through the inventory in my suitcase. I had The List, but then the officer presented his own. His was a laminated sheet showing pictures and description of items that were banned from being brought into the UK, including rough diamonds; foreign, prison-made goods; firearms and ammunition; torture equipment; invasive alien species; drugs; and indecent and obscene material.

'I hope not to find any of those,' the official said.

'No, of course not,' I muttered, praying for a twist in this nightmarish movie plot.

With his hands in white latex gloves, he rummaged through my stuff and pulled out a package secured with brown sellotape, marked in black pen with my father's neat writing in Cyrillic. Then, like a magician producing rabbits from a hat, the officer pulled out one package after another.

'What is this?'

'Um, well, my parents insisted on giving me a little something for the road.'

'Like what?'

'Home-cooked *sarma*, for instance, made with pickled cabbage leaves stuffed with meat. You know, I am not very good at making it, and also you can't find it here,' I rambled.

'Are you aware that it is strictly forbidden to bring meat or dairy products into the UK to prevent disease, unless they are pre-packed?'

My embarrassment went through the high airport roof when he asked me to take the rest of the food out and place it into a container. I felt like a suspect from a most-wanted list. He didn't go into much explanation, but loudly pressed a big stamp across the page of my passport instead. The words included a note of hefty fines and even a prison sentence if I was ever caught again.

'For now, I am giving you a warning. All the details are there.'

I have no idea what possessed me, but I quietly tried my luck.

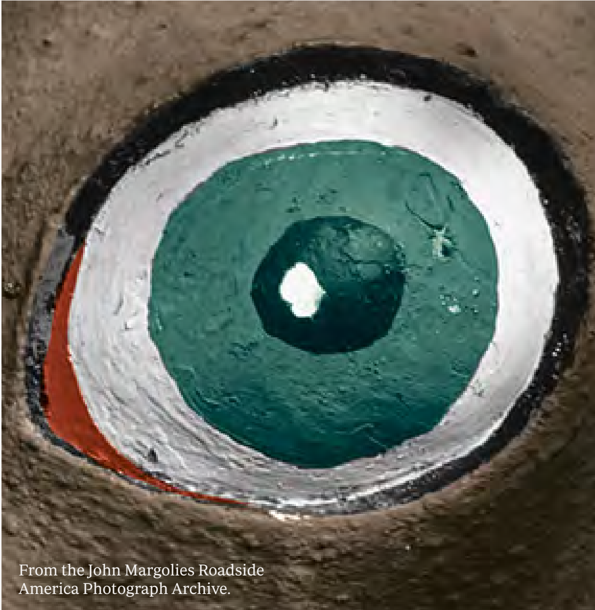
'Excuse me, sir, is there any chance I take that package with vegetarian *ajvar* with me? Just this time, please.'

The officer stonewalled me without even looking at me.

In a single sweep, my List of Love, into which my mother and father packed all their worries and care, was cancelled by The List of Law, for good.

ERIC NGALLE CHARLES

# The last ritual


From the John Margolies Roadside America Photograph Archive.

‘If you let them kill you, **I will come to Russia, dig you out of your shallow grave,** and kill you again.’

On a breezy evening by the Wouri River, I watched the flickering lights of Douala airport. Its gentle glow cast shadows on the stone walls and reflected on my mother’s face. My mother, Sarah Efeti Kange, or Iya (a term of endearment), sat on a wooden flower box in her blue kabba, her hands folded under her chin. Her yellow-and-black head tie resembled a swallowtail butterfly’s wings. Nearby, my friends Victor and Kulu, and my nephew Collins chatted. My sister’s late husband, Mr Paddy Ndanga, who had played a fatherly role in my life, walked proudly among them. They had all come to the airport to say goodbye to me.

As I wondered what lay ahead, my mother moved towards me like Mami Wata rising from the River Wouri. Her head tie now looked like helicopter blades, propelling her forward. She avoided my gaze, then placed her left hand on my shoulder, drew me closer, and rested her cheek on my forehead. She embraced me, still avoiding eye contact, but I saw her tears mingling with her make-up and running down her face like a black stream. She took my hands into hers and, slowly but steadily, gave each of my fingers a gentle bite, paying tribute to an old village adage,

knotting and sealing the fact that as I struggled to climb, the thoughts and prayers of my relatives would be with me, as mine would be with them. And that wherever my travels took me, my ancestors would bring me back to her while she was still alive, and not when she was navigating the corridors of her grave.

That is how I left Cameroon in May 1997, six months before I turned eighteen, carrying the memory of my mother biting my fingers. I didn't grasp the full significance of her actions that day. Instead, her behaviour evoked two feelings in me: a fear that I might never see her again, and a fear of failure.

One year later, during the harsh winter of 1998, a group of Cameroonians held me hostage in Moscow, Russia, and assaulted me with hot knives to the extent that I begged for death. My ancestors intervened through my mother. She appeared in the room like a ghost and threatened me with the song 'Agwe Wolo' by the artist Njoh Ndeley, about a woman mourning the death of her children. My mother altered the lyrics to serve as a warning: 'If you let them kill you, I will come to Russia, dig you out of your shallow grave, and kill you again.'

By May 1999, I knew my course of action. If I couldn't leave Russia that year, I was prepared to take my own life. I had already tried that once at Kievskaya train station. A few months later, my ancestors intervened again, and I took a British Airways flight via Heathrow, with my final destination being Zimbabwe. I never arrived in Harare; instead, my

Wherever my travels took me, **my ancestors would bring me back to her while she was still alive,** and not when she was navigating the corridors of her grave

ancestors conspired to bring me to Wales.

In October of that year, the Home Office gave me a bedsit at 212A Clive Street in Grangetown, Cardiff. Although my stay was short, 212A Clive Street was my first official UK address. In the summer of 2000, when I opened my bedsit door, six men – two white, two black, and two of mixed race – attacked me with knuckle-dusters and bicycle pumps. They shouted, 'Go back home,' but I had no idea what they meant. A few days later, I woke up at Heath Hospital in Cardiff and found that my attackers had broken my nose. Now I live in Leckwith, and I have to walk past Clive Street on my way to the train station. Every day, I am transported back to the memory of the men attacking me.

At the hospital in Heath, I remember closing my eyes and seeing my mother arranging mangrove wood in the fire, her eyes red from the smoke, and I wondered if the ancestors would one day take me back to her, and I pulled my blanket over my head.

No one visited me.

My world was condensed into a square of pale linen, where day and night blend. In the slow rhythm of heartbeats and distant footsteps, my bed and sheets became a vessel of waiting, a raft adrift on a sea of uncertainty. I kept waking in a fright and asking myself, 'Where am I? What brought me here?'

In 2017, after receiving the Creative Wales Award – the Arts Council of Wales's highest honour, recognising my work on migration, memory, and trauma – I decided to visit Cameroon for the first time in 20 years. The night before leaving, I sat with my sixteen-year-old daughter, Iya Efeti, named after my mother. I held her hands, trying to mimic what my mother did at the airport. I nibbled her little finger, and she giggled. When I reached her index finger, she burst into loud laughter, saying, 'Dad, I will remember you. You don't have to be so dramatic.'

I sat on my mother's veranda, sharing how my daughter reacted when I attempted to pass on her ancestral knowledge. My mother chuckled and said, 'You don't only bite the fingers; you should first chew seven alligator pepper seeds.' I smiled briefly, wondering whether my mum's tears at the airport in 1997 were caused by the burning sensation from biting into alligator pepper seeds.

MARIA JASTRZĘBSKA

# The most wonderful object in the world

How on earth did my mother pack for us to leave Poland? She had to make it look like a holiday trip in case our bags were searched. After months, she'd finally obtained a passport and visa enabling her to leave Poland with my brother and me to visit her mother in London. There was no question of my father coming with us – we would never be allowed to leave all together. Secretly, Mama and Tata hoped he would be able to join us later so we could stay. In the event, it took another seven months before he could leave. By then, we had overstayed our visa and were living in the UK illegally.

I wish I could tell you we carried kilims, icons and meaningful artefacts with us. But we couldn't risk that, so we only brought clothes. In any case, we had little; we'd been relying on parcels from my grandmother, who sent over penicillin, vitamins, baby formula, powdered milk, clothes, shoes, fabrics, coffee and chocolate ... items that could be sold on the black market, traded or consumed.

I didn't look back, didn't say goodbye to Warsaw. Being the youngest, at four years old, I hadn't been told anything. All I knew was that I'd meet new grandparents on a holiday. Only the closest adult family knew of my parents' intention to leave for good. It was a time under communism of mutual suspicion, denunciations, and being watched by the secret police. Also, nothing was understood then about transitional objects for children experiencing separation. Instead, there was a fear I might blurt something out. I had nothing to bring, no keepsake, nothing to remind me of Poland.

But then something miraculous happened.

In 1957 there were no direct flights to London from Warsaw. We flew via Brussels, first on Polish Airlines, LOT, then from Brussels on Sabena, the Belgian airline. That's when we were handed tiny gifts by the kindly air stewards. To a child from behind the Iron Curtain, the sweets given to us on the plane, in their shiny, brightly coloured foil wrappers, were like precious jewels: chocolate, toffee, sticky centres of caramel or strawberry. They tasted delicious.

That wasn't all. Along with the sweets, I was then given the most wonderful object in the world – a delicate figurine of a cat, small enough to fit in my hand. The little cat was made of translucent resin or plastic, its body golden, its eyes and tail amber, its shape like a cartoon cat, with an arched back and curly tail. I'd never had a toy like it. I clutched it happily, this magic gift I'd

received in the sky as we sped towards the unknown.

I remember enormous windows and escalators when we landed – things I'd never come across before. Mama was calling out to us to look up. There, at the top of a flight of stairs behind a glass partition, stood two old people in overcoats, strangers. Mama was unable to speak her words properly. Tears streamed down her face and she gasped for breath. I'd known Mama to be cross before, but I'd never seen her cry. Instinctively, I drew closer to her and regarded the new grandparents cautiously.

'Wave!' she said, so I did, without opening my hand in case I dropped the little cat. With my other hand, I tried to hold Mama's hand, which was difficult as she was also gripping a suitcase. We began making our way out to meet Babcia and Dziadio.

'Kiss your beloved Babcia's hand,' Mama said. The stranger who stood in front of us had a direct gaze, as though she could see right through me. I was a little scared. She had long fingers. On one hand, she wore a large amethyst ring. I kissed her reluctantly.

We all made our way onto the escalator. Since I'd never been on one, I was enchanted. Stairs moving by themselves. My delight at gliding through space was short-lived as my new Babcia warned:

'Be sure to jump off quickly or these stairs will chop off your leg.'

I was first off, urging Mama to hurry too.

Anxious to forge a connection between us, Mama whispered that I should offer Babcia Kicia the little cat I'd been given, explaining that cats were what my new Babcia loved most in the whole world. The little cat was my most treasured possession, my only one. I couldn't refuse my mother, however – she made it sound so important. With immense sorrow, I dutifully handed over the little toy.

'A present for you.'

To her credit, my grandmother kept the toy cat on the bureau in her living room for the rest of her life.

'Civet cat', 1572
Anonymous artist

SUZANNE HARRINGTON

# A sick note

Historically, when Irish people came to Britain, they'd seek each other out. Irish pubs, Irish dancehalls, Irish churches. An umbilical thread to the motherland.

I, however, was so keen to cut the cord between myself and the Irish motherland that, in frustration, I'd been cutting myself instead. Which is why, instead of granny's rosary beads, I came to London with a psychiatrist's letter directing me to the nearest mental health facility. That's what I carried – a sheet of paper suggesting I was not entirely of sound mind.

I disagreed. I wasn't fleeing my homeland for any of the usual reasons. Despite the recession, I had a job back home. No, I was fleeing 1980s Ireland – war-free, famine-free, pestilence-free – because it was still in the chokehold of a theocracy emphatically opposed to girls just wanting to have fun. Any fun. Ever.

Self-absorption, emotional immaturity and fearlessness **born of cluelessness would see me through.**

Aside from some books and clothes squashed into a bag, what I carried with me when I arrived, bewildered with fatigue, at Victoria Coach Station in the summer of 1987, was this formal letter. Not addressed to me, but about me – one of those 'to whom it may concern' letters. A kind of psychiatric 'please look after this bear' letter, had Paddington's aunt in Peru been a distracted middle-aged Irish shrink from the pre-Prozac era, at a time when being under the care of even a counsellor – never mind an actual psychiatrist – was the equivalent of a full-page newspaper advertisement, announcing in banner headlines, 'She's Off Her Rocker'.

The letter I was carrying told whoever it might concern that this 19-year-old patient had discharged herself from the care of the psychiatric services in Cork, and was heading to London – against the best advice of

'To all appearances, it was a hand of flesh and blood just like my own', 1896, Odilon Redon, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain

these services – to start a new life. The letter told whoever would read it that this young woman, as well as being prone to self-harm, *totally lacked direction*. That's what it said.

It was those three words to which I objected most strongly. The cheek of it. I'd just propelled myself in an unwavering, south-easterly direction across the Irish Sea, arriving precisely on target in the mythical city of my teenage dreams. Bullseye.

It was a city where, admittedly, I knew nobody, had no job, nowhere to live and only the flimsiest of contacts, but such details were of little concern; I had a watertight plan. I would sign on the dole [unemployment benefit]. I would get a cool, easy job doing something cool and easy that paid cash in hand. I'd hang out in cool places I'd read about in *The Face* and the *NME* and make cool friends. Of course I would. Self-absorption, emotional immaturity and fearlessness born of cluelessness would see me through.

But first, I thought I should probably deliver the letter to whomever it was meant to concern. The mental health people in Cork had seemed to regard this as a priority. So, once I had signed on the dole and found

The London therapist was bound to be forthright and forward-thinking, **accessorised by a floaty scarf, maybe some outsized acrylic jewellery.**

myself a horrid little bedsit in a building full of psychopaths, I showed my new NHS doctor the psychiatrist's letter suggesting – urging – the continuation of my treatment. That is, twice-weekly therapy sessions for the foreseeable.

This new doctor, with his foreign English accent, cast a doubtful eye over the letter, then me, before scribbling something. An appointment was made at a place called 'the Whittington'. I'd always assumed the story of the boy and his cat to be a fairy tale, yet this seemed to be a hospital named after him. Off I went.

I had high hopes for the English mental health professionals; in Cork, I'd been assigned a trainee therapist whose eyes would widen at the slightest thing. In London, I was sure I would be allocated someone worldly and cosmopolitan, whose reactions I wouldn't feel obliged to manage. The London therapist was bound to be forthright and forward-thinking, accessorised by a floaty scarf, maybe some outsized acrylic jewellery. Abstract art on the walls, instead of overloaded corkboards pinned with notices about schizophrenia seminars. I fancied a bit of glamour.

Instead, I got a prescription for Valium. That was it. Turns out there were a lot more people a lot more off their rocker, in a lot more need than me, and further along in the queue. I stared at the prescription for a while, this new piece of paper with the name of a substance that would numb me out like a 1950s housewife.

I stared at it and then I chucked it in the bin.

I'd be grand.

ROGER ROBINSON

# Month One: the source

When I came to England from Trinidad in the late eighties, the cold arrived before anything else. It felt like stepping into a freezer, a cold so deep it seemed to dig past skin and fat and blood, all the way to the bone. The light was blue-grey; everything appeared less defined: the streets, the buildings, the horizon, the clouds.

Everything confused me. I couldn't understand the accents, the money, the food (oh Lord, the food had no taste). But most of all, I had no community. I lived with my disabled grandmother, whose angry countenance did not feel welcoming, even though I knew she meant well.

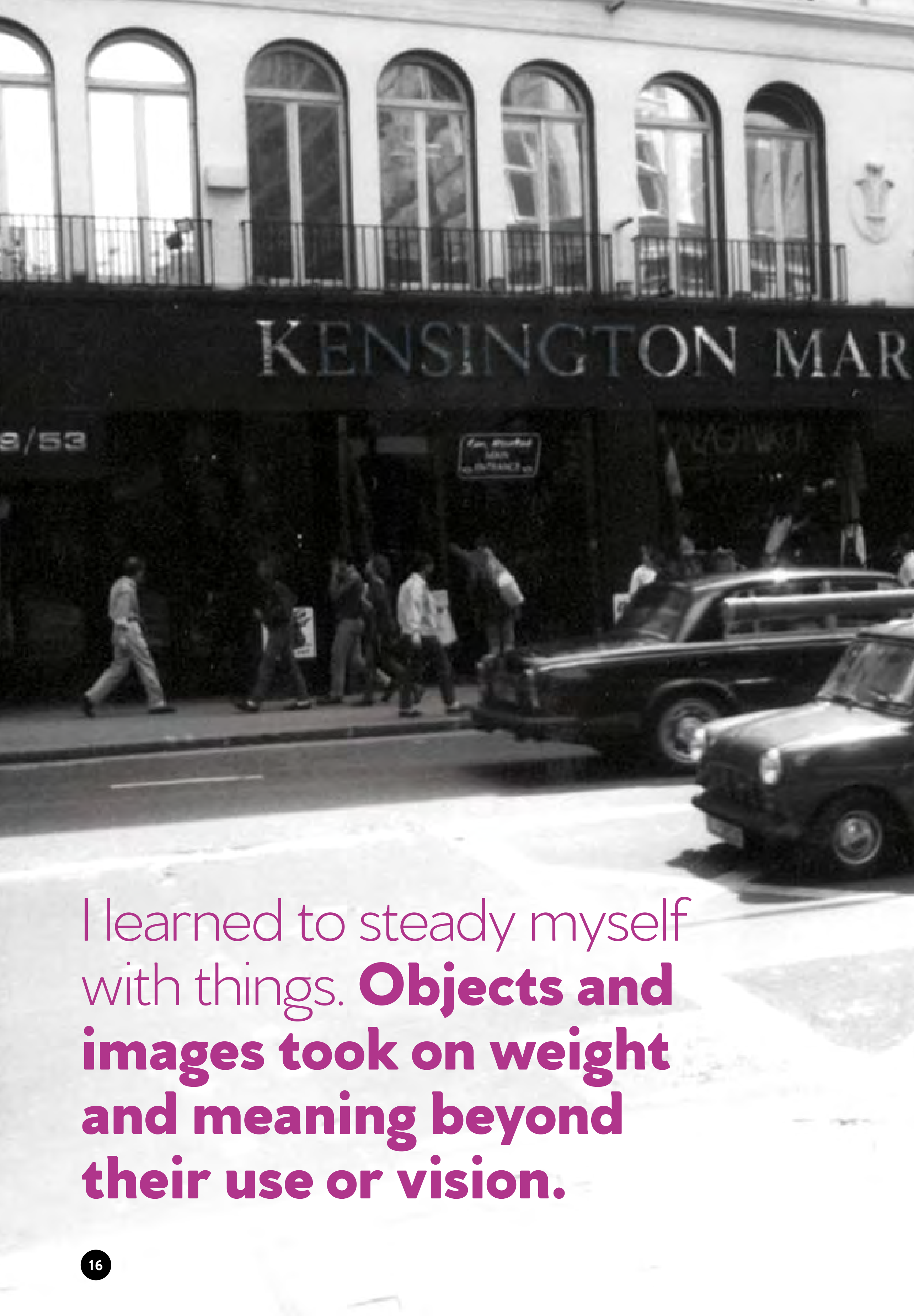
The sadness did not crash over me; it seeped in, settling during bus journeys, in the slow walk back to a cold room that smelled of fumes from a portable gas heater.

I began to notice the small adaptations in my body: the chalky dryness of my skin, the way my breath made clouds outside, the itchy redness of my eyes, the way the cold burned the tops of my ears. Each day felt like the making of time, not quite living, just counting days toward no particular event.

So I learned to steady myself with things. Objects and images took on weight and meaning beyond their use or vision. A loaned coat, a phone call home, a photograph, the glaze of frost on the windowpane, the glare of snow, the ghost of mist in the morning. Each small thing became a way of holding my place in the world, a way to remain present while everything around me insisted I was elsewhere.

I remember the taste of pepper then, not only the high it gave me, but the sudden rush of nostalgia it brought on for Trinidad. I couldn't find Caribbean pepper sauce in those days, but between Walthamstow Market and Sunday park football I could find Scotch bonnet peppers. So I bought some and rang my Aunty Monica, who had a very specific recipe for pepper sauce. Some of her instructions seemed to have very little to do with food, like she insisted on me leaving the peppers in a bottle and putting it out in the sun for a full day. Luckily, it was a warm summer. In the end, I produced a pretty good facsimile of her pepper sauce; enough to give me that feeling of home.

The story of the second-hand leather jacket in my poem, 'Month One', was that I'd arrived in England thinking I could get by with the jacket I'd borrowed from an aunt who had worn it when she was a student in England, but it barely buttoned on me, and the last thing I needed in winter was freezing air on my chest. That led to another problem. For reasons I still don't understand, coats




I learned to steady myself with things. **Objects and images took on weight and meaning beyond their use or vision.**

Kensington Market in the 1980s
Photo: Anette Bähren

in the winter of 1986 were prohibitively expensive, and I had very little money. So I bought a second-hand 1970s leather coat: think *Shaft* and you'll have the right idea. It was so cold that style was the least of my concerns. The coat was warm, and it cost ten pounds. I was still surprised when I put it down in the West End club Hippodrome and, turning back, found it gone. Waiting for the bus that night in a cotton T-shirt, I began to reassess what I was doing here.

The suitcase I had carried to England was my father's, from when he'd studied in England. Virtually indestructible, it was made of leather and canvas, with zips and buckles to hold it closed. Gigantic by modern standards, it had no wheels. The handle was like a briefcase handle, meaning you had to lug the damned thing everywhere. It was made heavier by the cricket jumpers my father had packed; he'd played county cricket in England and wanted to be sure I stayed warm. I told him not to worry, that I'd never wear them. He said when the cold hits you, you'll be glad they're there. He was right. Some days were so cold I left the house dressed like the opening batsman for Essex County and I could smell traces of my father's wood and whisky perfume for months before I finally washed them.

MAGGIE HARRIS

# Haunting melodies

It's strange how one small moment can define your life. When I was about twelve, my father wanted to teach me to play the guitar. I remember shaking my head no; I was frequently tongue-tied around my father. He was strict. West Indian strict. Strict that required children to be seen and not heard, no rudeness or slackness.

My father was born in the new century that carried the old one in its belly, with the bitter taste of enslavement, everyone foraging for a new way to live. He would spend up to a week away, travelling Guyana's Berbice River, after which he would sometimes bring the crew home for rum and guitar camaraderie. These sessions provided the opportunity for me and my sisters to scrounge ten and twenty cent pieces for crush ice and chocolate, as our dad mellowed under the influence.

The father that emerged during these sessions, and other celebratory occasions, is forever linked to music and for years the tune of a certain instrumental remained in my head; a haunting melody, fading away. But it feeds into my writing – the gathering of friends and neighbours, Christmas carols on the doorstep, singalongs, harmonies, the fluidity with which my father teased melodies out of his guitar. When he used the slide, it sent shivers down my skin, something indescribable but beautiful. These moments were windows on an otherwise dull life, in which, for me, music would become a door into poetry. He had a collection of records in the prized radiogram that included Louis Armstrong and Harry Belafonte. This was my father, the musician, not the disciplinarian; a man whose history would for the most part be forever lost to me when he died suddenly in 1969 when I was fifteen.

His guitar travelled with me from Guyana, losing its case somewhere along the way, and has barely survived the many moves over 51 years. It settled on the tops of wardrobes, coming out like a harvest moon for friends to admire and try to play – an impossible task as its frame split, the pegs became rusty, the bridge warped.

A writing workshop with Guyanese poet Grace Nichols involved a meditation, which led me to conjure the memory of the guitar in its case under my teenage bed, in the presence of a clutch of music sheets. He could read music?! Where could this knowledge have come from?

# **A childhood on the banks of the Berbice River** – site of abandoned slave plantations

'A Foggy Sky', 1872,
John Frederick Kensett,
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain

A childhood on the banks of the Berbice River – site of abandoned slave plantations – a farm where he milked cows and learnt carpentry? My mother remembers him reading from a music book, and a cousin remembers that our fathers had been part of a trio that entertained at weddings. The need to make music was always around us, from harmonicas to steel pans.

In 2023, *The Repair Shop*, a BBC television programme which attracts some 60,000 applications a year, accepted Dad's guitar for restoration. After 51 years, it had finally come down from the wardrobe, its restoration a physical manifestation of our journey and sense of loss, but also much recompense. Whilst I regret not saying yes to my father's offer to teach me to play, without a doubt I would not be the writer I am without the power of invocation gained and retained from the creative essence of him, which flowered from a dark place into transformation.

ISHY DIN

# Kafan

One of my father's last wishes was to be buried in Pakistan, the country of his birth. He had spent over 50 years in England, and yet he always considered Pakistan his home.

My mother, on the other hand, had a very different view of matters.

She was married at a young age, in an arranged marriage. Her own mother died when she was a child, eight or nine. Her father was a stringent character. A religious man, he had performed the Hajj pilgrimage at a time when it was unheard of in what was then rural India. He taught the Qur'an and led prayers at the village mosque. He could read and write when vast swathes of the population were illiterate, and he taught his children to do the same.

There is a saying in that part of the world: 'daughters are guests in your house'. One day they will marry and leave.

My mother was married young to a widower with a child, my half-brother. Her husband, my father, was illiterate. It was a tough life. She lost her firstborn. There was acute poverty, and a woman's lot was not a good one.

But things were about to change. Mangla Dam was under construction, and when it came time to flood the valley, displaced villagers were offered visas to come to England to help rebuild the country. My father took up the offer and arrived in the UK in 1962.

My mother and my elder siblings arrived in 1968. I was born in 1969.

Life was generally uneventful. In the late 1970s, my parents decided to go on Hajj. It was still a huge thing then, and we excitedly helped them pack. I was dispatched, alongside my older brother, to fetch my mother's old suitcase that sat on top of a wardrobe.

When she opened it, the only item inside was what I would describe as a white sheet. She treated this sheet with deference. She gently took it out and put it to one side, packed her other items, and then returned the sheet to the suitcase. It was going to Mecca and Medina with her.

But why?

I asked and was told, 'You're too young to understand.'

Many years passed. The white sheet was exiled to the deepest recesses of my memory.

My father passed away. We buried him in Pakistan. Upon our return to England, my mother asked me to bring down her old suitcase from the loft. Miraculously, it had survived – almost certainly because it hadn't been used for decades.

When she opened it, there was the white sheet. The memory came flooding back. This time, I wasn't too young to understand.

I was fascinated. Why had this woman kept **such a visceral reminder of her own mortality for so long?**

'Lace, 1740s',
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
Public Domain

I asked what it was.

'It's my *kafan*,' she replied. Her burial shroud.

I was fascinated. Why had this woman kept such a visceral reminder of her own mortality for so long?

I found out that not long after she was married, she had a raging argument with my father and went back to her paternal village, children in tow. She was met with a frosty reception. 'Your life, and your children's lives, are not here now,' she was told. 'They are back where you came from.' A stark reminder that her life had moved on.

It was a different time, a different culture. Divorce was unheard of.

She returned to my father's village with the realisation that in this hard, hard world one needs to be self-sufficient, prepared, aware.

When she came to England, she brought her burial shroud with her.

She had taken the *kafan* with her to taken the *kafan* on Hajj in order to wash it in zamzam – sacred water drawn from a well in Mecca, revered by Muslims for its purity, healing properties and spiritual significance.

Her religious learning had taught her that Muslim tradition dictates that, ideally, one should be buried where one dies. Speed is more important than location.

I get the sense that she had determined her journey was only forwards now. Forward from the village of her birthplace to my father's village. Forward from Pakistan to England. Forward from this life to the next.

My father hankered for the past: the country he left, the village he left, the people he left. My mother, on the other hand, invested in the future.

And one of the ways she did this was to have her *kafan*, washed in zamzam, sitting in an old suitcase, on top of an old wardrobe, ready for her final journey.

AMANDA VILANOVA

# Rolling luggage

I'm in a department store. The signs around me, all written in English, boldly advertise 40 to 50 per cent reductions on American products. The announcements on the store's loudspeakers, however, are all in Spanish. The invisible orator overpronounces every syllable to counteract the Puerto Rican accent's typical speed and alleged lack of clarity. How these contrasts capture my country's unique history is lost on me today, I'm too busy trying to keep up with my mother. She walks ahead of me, as usual. For most of my life, she's been leading the way with her swinging hips everywhere from parents' evenings and family outings to shopping trips and big decisions. She knows exactly where we're headed as she weaves through shoppers who wear shorts, flip-flops and jackets because it's boiling hot outside, but the air conditioning in the mall is always a tad too cold.

I imagine myself conquering the Big Smoke with one of them trailing behind me. **‘*Nena*, you'll look like a princess walking around with these.**

My mother stops in the middle of the corridor, pops a hip and points. ‘These are the ones,' she says. In front of us, poised on a plastic stand, are four matching rectangular boxes with wheels. Each metallic pink trunk shines under the store's LED lights. I grab a carry-on suitcase, push the button on the handle, pull it up and swivel, enjoying the seamless 360-degree turn. I run my hands down its hard shell, then knock on it twice to hear its hollow strength. I imagine myself conquering the Big Smoke with one of them trailing behind me. ‘*Nena*, you'll look like a princess walking around with these. You must be ready, you may just bump into Prince Harry,' my mother says with a wink. We laugh at the absurdity of her last statement but hope these empty rolling things are a gateway to the success of my aspirations.

After packing so much that the bags are fit to burst, my mother's expression changes. Suddenly serious, she invites me to sit on her bed, then places something in my hand. 'Your father gave me this ring,' she says. 'I want you to have it.' I feel the gold ring's weight; watch the amber stone with small diamonds on either side catch the light. '*Mami*, I can't take this,' I say. '*Sí*, you can,' she replies. 'If you're ever in trouble … you sell it. All women need insurance and you won't always call your mother.' I meet her gaze and understand the true meaning of distance. When my mother drops me off at the airport, she helps me glide the bags onto the conveyor belt, then waits until I go through security. We wave at each other, teary-eyed, and have no idea that this is the first of many goodbyes like this one; that this date will be a marker, cited as a 'before and after' when telling stories about our lives.

Photo: Missohio Studio

I arrive at my destination, the largest airport I've ever seen, and stand next to a conveyor belt. I spot the overfilled, pink containers gliding towards me and give a sigh of relief. I feel like a princess for all of two seconds, then am relegated to peasant status as I roll the heavy bags onto relentless trains and down streets that didn't make it onto London postcards. I pray that the room I've rented, via a random website, exists. I pray that the days to come will favour me. I pray that the weight of the amber ring on my finger won't have to disappear. When I finally unpack, the suitcases turn into empty wonders, all potential, like first days in new places.

Over the years, I will re-fill the bags and drag them from house to house. I will drop them down staircases, transporting props for my first show. I will watch them rolled along by those who become friends good enough to aid me. I will load them onto buses, trains, and airplanes. They will be laughed at and praised by my future companion. Their wheels will twist along south-east London streets I never knew existed but are now my preferred haunts. They will survive changes, hits, and bumps with style. The bags remain with me almost ten years on from my arrival. And on those sad days when I wonder if I will ever truly thrive so far away from my homeland, I stare at the metallic pink trunks, take in every little beaten-up section and remember what they represent. I came accompanied by my loved ones' care, strength, and faith in me. I look down at my left hand and smile. If I have an ounce of what these cases are made of and a pinch of my mother's dazzling authority, I may just conquer this conqueror's land with an amber stone poised on my left hand.

I came accompanied by **my loved ones' care, strength, and faith in me.** I look down at my left hand and smile.

COLIN GRANT

# Summer Wear

Summer Wear came to Britain from Jamaica in the 1960s. No one seemed to know his real name. He was called Summer Wear because of his predilection for wearing summer suits. Some wag, one of his fellow merchant seamen, gave him the nickname and it stuck. Summer Wear arrived at Southampton with very little luggage and only wearing a light tropical suit, just as autumn was sliding into winter. Apparently, Summer Wear had never owned a heavy winter coat, which would have been more appropriate for the snow which greeted him soon after his arrival.

The tropical suit and nickname gave him that elusive quality, treasured by every West Indian migrant I ever met: style! You could take away a man's livelihood, turn him out of his home, and his belly could be knocking on his backbone, but you could never deny him his style.

I was always drawn to the romance of the story of Summer Wear's suit; there seemed such charm and innocence to it and to the man himself. Summer Wear makes me think of the West Indians who descended from the last boat train of migrants from Southampton to Waterloo in May 1962. The suited man holding a coathanger in Howard Grey's photo from that time is not Summer Wear, but he is a great stand-in for him: glamorous, languid and carefree. He's dressed with the kind of distinction that would have met with the approval of Summer Wear, my father and his spars.

A few years ago, when composing a book about the Windrush generation, I wanted to focus on those West Indian men and women who were part of the background to my childhood in Luton. Sitting down to write, I could recall Summer Wear because of the familiarity of his name, along with other West Indians such as Tidy Boots, Anxious and Pumpkin Head, but I could not picture him. One day I asked my mum, Ethlyn, 'Whatever became of Summer Wear?' Without missing a beat, she answered, 'Well, soon after coming to Britain, he caught a chill and died.'

Ethlyn said it straight but the poignancy of the story has always remained with me, and perhaps accounts for my lasting affection for a man I hardly knew. Summer Wear, it seems, would never have countenanced being seen wearing a heavy coat, although it might have been practical to do so. After all, he was called Summer Wear; he had to live up to his name. His name and his tropical suit were talismans of migration. It was true of all of those West Indians, including my father whose nickname was Bageye - given to him because of the permanent bags under his eyes. Their nicknames

defined them, set them apart, spoke to their individuality, and were a reminder of how they were perceived and how they perceived themselves back home in Jamaica. Even if, as was true of Bageye, they didn't like their nicknames, they clung to them as badges of honour.

Ethlyn remembers that, for a while after Summer Wear's death, his friends took to honouring him by wearing suits whenever they gathered, even if it was to go to the West Indian pub, 'The Checkers', or to Mrs Knights' all-weekend poker game.

'They had style in those days,' says Ethlyn. She reminds me that back in the day West Indian men didn't skimp on clothing. 'The English man would have five collars and one shirt, but a man like Summer Wear, him would have five shirts! True dat!' I suggest to my mum that surely that can't be true, that she's talking about the glamorous, swinging sixties. 'Glamour?' She kisses her teeth. 'There wasn't much glamour in England then. Summer Wear, Tidy Boots, Anxious, all a-dem had style. You wan' look for style or glamour now? You have to close your eyes and imagine it.'

I ask Ethlyn if she knows what became of Summer Wear's suit.

'Last me see him, he still there wear it in him coffin.'

'So, he was buried in it?'

My mum fixes me with a long stare.'Cha, don't talk foolishness, Colin. The man bury in him suit. Nah Mus?'

'Windrush generation, May 1962, Waterloo'
Photo: Howard Grey

‘There wasn’t much glamour in England then. **Summer Wear, Tidy Boots, Anxious, all a-dem had style.’**

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