



# Five Dials

AUTUMN  
21

Legacies

# Five Dials

# ABOUT FIVE DIALS

FIVE DIALS WAS  
ASSEMBLED BY  
Hannah Chukwu  
Simon Prosser  
Craig Taylor  
Hermione Thompson

ARTWORK BY  
Dom Campistrone

DESIGN  
Andrew LeClair

DIGITAL  
CONTENT  
PRODUCER  
Zainab Juma

THANKS TO  
Kadija Sesay  
Mubanga Mweemba  
Courtia Newland  
Manon Zuffi

## COMMISSIONING RATES

### *Writers and illustrators*

*Five Dials* publishes electrifying literary writing of all forms and genres, by writers and thinkers underrepresented on bookshelves across the English-speaking world. Our commissioning rates are £200/1000 words for written pieces and £1000/issue for artwork. If you're working on something which you'd like to tell us about, you can find us on Twitter at @fivedials.

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# DEDICATION

This issue of *Five Dials* celebrates the 20th anniversary of *IC3: The Penguin Book of New Black Writing in Britain*. Later in the issue we'll hear about the anthology's ongoing importance from many of its contributors. We'd like to begin the issue by recognizing the lives and work of the *IC3* contributors who are no longer with us. This issue is dedicated to them.

Ben Bousquet  
1939–19 June 2006

Buchi Emecheta, OBE  
21 July 1944–25 January 2017

Andrea Lillian Okomore Enisuoh  
16 June 1970–13 February 2020

Amryl Johnson  
6 April 1944–1 February 2001

E.A. Markham  
1 October 1939–23 March 2008

Heather Imani Thomas  
1 August 1962–12 November 2015

# CONTRIBUTORS

UJU ASIKA (@babesabouttown) is a multi award-nominated blogger, screenwriter and author of *Bringing Up Race: How to Raise a Kind Child in a Prejudiced World*. In her spare time, she enjoys movies, dancing and being an 'Arsenal suffer head' with her husband and two sons.

COLIN BABB is an author, website editor, and former BBC radio producer and broadcast journalist. His latest book is *1973 and Me: The England v West Indies Test Series and a Memorable Childhood Year* (Hansib).

PANYA BANJOKO is a UK based writer, poet and PhD candidate at Nottingham Trent University. Her debut collection of poetry, *Some Things*, was published by Burning Eye Books in 2018.

HENRY BONSU is a British Ghanaian journalist and broadcaster, who comments on domestic politics and global affairs for a range of UK and international channels. He also works as a conference moderator for major development agencies, including the UN, the African Union, the African Development Bank, and the Global Partnership for Education.

BRENDA EMMANUS OBE is best known as an Arts, Culture and Entertainment Correspondent at the BBC. She is now a freelance Broadcaster, Journalist and live event host; Chair of Sir Matthew Bourne's New Adventures Dance Company and a Visiting Professor at the University of the Arts.

BOJANA GAJSKI was born in 1978 in Kikinda, Serbia (Yugoslavia). She has worked as a primary, secondary and college English instructor for about 20 years. All that time she has also worked as a literary translator. She also writes.

SALENA GODDEN has published several volumes of poetry, including *Pessimism is for Lightweights*; a literary childhood memoir, *Springfield Road*; and her debut novel, *Mrs Death Misses Death*, which was shortlisted for the Gordon Burn Prize in 2021. In November 2020 she was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

CYRIL HUSBANDS is a poet, author, and live performer. His writing includes nonfiction, poetry, fiction and literary and cultural criticism. Cyril's inspired by his lifelong interest in Pan Africanism, human rights and the ways in which people connect, compete and conflict. The biggest influences on his writing include his family, friends, African and Caribbean cultures and music. It's no coincidence he was a member of Rhythm Writers.

CATHERINE JOHNSON is an award winning author, screenwriter, and fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

KEVIN LE GENDRE is a journalist, author and broadcaster with a special interest in black music. He contributes to *Jazzwise*, *TLS* online, *The Independent* and BBC Radio 3.

## Five Dials

KOYE OYEDEJI is a writer who splits his time between London and Washington D.C. He has contributed to a number of anthologies, magazines and literary journals. He is currently at work on a full-length project.

SHEENA PATEL is a writer and assistant director for film and TV who was born and raised in North West London. She is part of the poetry collective 4 BROWN GIRLS WHO WRITE and her debut novel *I'm a Fan* will be published by Rough Trade Books in 2022.

IONIE RICHARDS is a Black British writer and poet from London. Her work appears in anthologies *Red: Contemporary Black British Poetry* (Peepal Tree), and *IC3: The Penguin Book of New Black Writing in Britain* (Penguin).

HAN SMITH, a queer writer, translator and adult literacy teacher, is the recipient of a 2019/2020 London Writers Award and has been shortlisted for the Bridport Prize, the UEA New Forms Award, the Mslexia Novella Award and the Desperate Literature and Brick Lane short story prizes. She has also been published/commissioned by Cipher Press, the European Poetry Festival, *Hotel, Versopolis, Litro* and *The Interpreter's House*. She is an associate editor at *Short Fiction Journal* and is currently working on two weird novels.

NICK MAKOHA is the winner of the 2021 Ivan Juritz prize and the Poetry London Prize. In 2017, Nick's debut collection, *Kingdom of Gravity*, was shortlisted for the Felix Dennis Prize for Best First Collection and was one of the *Guardian's* best books of the year. He won the 2015 Brunel International African Poetry Prize and the 2016 Toi Derricotte & Cornelius Eady Prize for his pamphlet, *Resurrection Man*. His poems have appeared in the *Cambridge Review*, the *New York Times*, *Poetry Review* and *Callaloo*. He is a trustee for the Arvon Foundation and the Ministry of Stories, and a member of the Malika's Poetry Kitchen collective.

SOL B RIVER, former Royal Literary Fund Advisory Fellow, is an acclaimed playwright, film-maker and producer, he was the first Black writer to have a collection of plays published by Oberon Books.

JOANNA TRAYNOR spends much of her time exploring the living narratives of others, helping people craft future stories that will allow them to be more authentic, peaceful and purposeful. She also helps organizations craft new scripts to live by, cleansing the workplace of toxicity and drama. In her spare time, she writes.

## CONTRIBUTORS

M. G. ZIMETA is an Ethiopian philosopher and writer based in Britain. Her PhD was on philosophy of mind and philosophy of art, and her journalism focuses on international relations and international development. Her writing has appeared in *The London Review of Books*, *The Paris Review*, *The Atlantic* and *Prospect*, among others; and she has broadcast with BBC World Service, BBC Radio 4, and BBC Radio 3. She is currently a grantee of the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.



# The Everything List

Cyril Husbands

Five Dials asked writer Cyril Husbands to send us a list of everything, or almost everything, he'd consumed in the previous month.

Over the past month of what has been an extraordinary couple of years, my cultural diet has slowly begun to return to something like normal. Very slowly. Staying in remains the new going out, of course, because the pandemic isn't over, notwithstanding the denial and obfuscation of the government and Tory backbenchers, so most of my cultural consumption is taken online.

The *Verzuz* gigs have been keeping me entertained and inspired. I can't decide which I like best between the Isley Brothers v Earth, Wind & Fire and Erykah Badu v Jill Scott. Happily, I'm very much enjoying my indecision—indeed, I'm revelling in it. Messrs Timbaland and Swizz Beatz devised the *Verzuz* concept in response to Covid-19, so it's fitting that it forms such a major part of so many people's cultural input while we're still learning to live with it.

My reading habits have been changed by lockdown too. I've found myself revisiting classics and really taking my time to pore over text passages or chapters that I love. Rereading Mariama Bâ's novella, *So Long a Letter* was particularly rewarding, as the entire text is brief enough to read thoroughly in a few days, or even at one sitting, if you're

## THE EVERYTHING LIST

determined enough. It remains as powerful, urgent, and relevant as it did when she wrote it in 1980.

I've also been revisiting Ahmadou Kourouma's *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote*, a deliciously politically incorrect novel that's so piercingly honest, funny, and frank, I'm still amazed he wasn't exiled, jailed, or worse for writing it. What I'm about to say next will shock and displease many but say it I must—while Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is an indisputable classic, for me it's not his best novel. That distinction belongs to *Anthills of the Savannah*. I've believed this ever since reading both novels and revisiting *Anthills* lately has reinforced my conviction. Hey, it'd be a boring world if everyone was the same, right? Other titles on my reread list over the past month include Patrick Chamoiseau's hauntingly beautiful *Texaco*, Toni Morrison's *Sula*, and Joan Riley's *Waiting in the Twilight*. The latter is the best black British novel yet written. Yeah, I said it.

My new reads include Abi Daré's fabulous *The Girl with the Louding Voice*, which is a remarkably fresh take on a coming-of-age novel, made all the more impressive by the fact that it's a debut. Also on the list, and as yet unfinished, is Bernardine Evaristo's award-laden *Girl, Woman, Other*, which I had to set aside time to read properly, as I really want to relish it. I'm about a third of the way through and all I can say is that it more than lives up to its billing thus far, and I'd be extremely surprised if that changed.



## Cyril Husbands

Netflix is one of the businesses that have done well out of lockdown, and I'm a late convert. Over the last month, I've devoured *The Fall*, a 2013 drama which centres a London detective's hunt for a Belfast serial killer. It is thrilling, unpredictable and has a genuinely shocking dénouement, so was well worth the effort of catching up with. My nerdy instincts were also tickled by seeing how old the tech they used seemed, even though the production's less than a decade old.

Daniel Kaluuya certainly earned his Oscar for his remarkable performance in *Jesus and the Black Messiah*, which I rewatched and loved even more the second time than the first. I was also captivated by the Colin Kaepernick drama documentary, *Colin in Black and White*, though I'm not sure my description of this six-part series fits. It's a reflection on his childhood as one of the very few black kids growing up in the small city of Turlock, California, interspersed with political and historical commentary from the athlete-turned-activist.

Music always has played a major role in my life, and always will. Over the past month, I've been indulging in old-school reggae classic from the likes of the legendary Dennis Brown, the Heptones, Slim Smith, the Mighty Diamonds, and the criminally underrated Ernest Wilson. Doing so has led me to a revelation: Slim Smith's *Born to Love You* is the greatest love song ever. I've no idea why it took me so long to realize this, but now that I do, I guess I'll have to be an evangelist for this

## THE EVERYTHING LIST

artist and song. Also featuring on my playlist over this period is the gospel funk classic, *Help is on the Way* by the Whatnauts, *Moving in the Right Direction* by Steve Parks and *Colors* by the Black Pumas. The combination of the latter song and its official video would be cathartic, beautiful and necessary at any time, but feels particularly so right now, which is partly to do with lockdown, but also has a lot to do with Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery and countless other Black lives lost to state and racist violence in the USA and elsewhere around the world.

The three artists who have had the most rotation on my playlist are Phillip Bailey, Earth, Wind and Fire's lead singer, for his debut solo jazz album, *Love Will Find a Way*; Ledisi, because everything this remarkable New Orleans soul legend does is wonderful; and Gregory Porter, because, well, Gregory Porter. And I must give a special mention to Michael Olatuja, whose *Lagos Pepper Soup* is as tasty as its title.

Al Jazeera impressed me with *Blood and Tears*, the news channel's documentary series on the shockingly, though unsurprisingly lethal end of French colonialism in Africa and Indochina, which as I expected, proved to be depressing but necessary viewing. That description also applies to *Ridley Road*, the BBC primetime drama about Britain's fascist revival, less than twenty years after World War II ended.

So, in many ways, my cultural diet has

## Cyril Husbands

been much like the times in which we're living. Unprecedented, different, memorable and a rare chance to explore things that wouldn't have been possible in so-called normal times. I'm grateful for this, and for the continued life and health of most of those nearest and dearest to me. I mourn those lost to Covid-19 and other causes, and celebrate the culture that has given me solace and sustenance in these troubled times. ◇

A READING DIARY

# Objects They Loved

Bojana Gajski

## BOOKS DISCUSSED

*Sophie's World*, Jostein Gaarder

*Winternight*, Katherine Arden

*Hamnet*, Maggie O'Farrell

When I was sixteen, I borrowed what seemed to be a children's book from my brother. Jostein Gaarder's *Sophie's World* is written in the style of a detective novel: A teenage girl receives mysterious letters containing the questions 'Who are you?' and 'Where did the world come from?'. She meets her unusual teacher, the philosopher Alberto, who offers her a course in philosophy. Sophie discovers the myths of ancient Greece and the ideas of the first philosophers while examining her own world. As the story goes on, the plot twists and twists again.

I read the novel during my highly structured childhood in which school was followed by Western pop music and Yugoslavian folk dancing lessons, Marxism and Coca-Cola. Where my own life was banal, *Sophie's World* was strange with its story within a story, its irony, wittiness, and multiple shocks. It was the only children's book I'd ever encountered with a cameo from Karl Marx. In Serbia, children are still taught to behave via myths and old-wives' tales. They are told that if they eat everything off their plate, their future spouse will be pretty. If they sing during the family meal, their future spouse will be crazy. If they play with crumbs on the table, they will be poor. If they whistle inside the house, they

## A READING DIARY

can expect an invasion of rats. Here was a book that celebrated rational thought and a child's capability to learn, to forge her own path.

My mother, a hopeless believer in books, had decided that this 'accessible and interesting history of philosophy' was the perfect gift for my older brother after he expressed an interest in the subject. The Serbian edition, purchased in Kikinda, claimed on its cover that the novel had sold millions of copies and was popular all over the world. At first, my brother was excited. But after a few days I saw him replace it on the bookshelf, as if he had expected something far different. The book's cover featured silky shawls, jewellery, fine bedsheets with notebooks half-hidden beneath. His reaction—and the cover imagery—were enough to make me curious.

I didn't understand much of *Sophie's World*. But every few years I would go back to it and begin again. Each time I'd encounter the same question: 'Who are you?' When I moved away from my parents' home, I left the book. It was, after all, my brother's copy. Years later, at the Belgrade Book Fair, a friend told me to choose any book as a gift from her. Since then, I've kept my copy of *Sophie's World* on the bookcase reserved for my most treasured volumes.

At times, I'd take it down to read a chapter or two at random and re-learn the salient points of whatever philosopher I stumbled upon. I'd ask myself questions. This, along with several other

books, became my safe haven.

In September of 2018, *Sophie's World* was on my nightstand during the last days of my pregnancy. One night in early autumn, I woke up in a circle of blood. My husband rushed me to the hospital. Several panicky hours later I emerged from anaesthesia a mother.

Fear was followed by pain. The joy—and there was so much joy—only came later. For a week, I saw my daughter for about an hour a day. No visitors were allowed to see me as that is still the rule in our town's hospital, and all I did was lie in my soiled bed, under a broken, flickering light, crying to the sound of ward nurses shouting at other new mothers. The state of hospitals in Serbia has not changed since I was born. My mother would tell stories that seemed like myths or nightmares. Cruel nurses. Angry doctors. Women treating other women horribly.

There was medicine for my excruciating pain, but the loneliness and powerlessness remained. I asked my husband to pack a few books and take them to the nurses to bring to my bedside. He gathered what he found on my nightstand. I tried a few but I couldn't read, not even a page. There was no comfort in what the books contained. The best I could do was take my copy of *Sophie's World* and hold it in my arms as I would my baby. I did not want my arms to be empty.

We had agreed earlier to name our daughter Sofia. I always knew; I've loved the name since I was a child and had encountered a few Sophies along

## A READING DIARY

the way that made me admire it even more: the anti-Nazi activist Sophie Scholl; an old neighbour who treated me like a granddaughter; and then the Sophie of the novel that brought me comfort when I was so weak. A friend of mine had told me I should name my daughter after the book, because at the age of 40 I'd finally achieved at least some wisdom. I was wise enough to have a child.

My mum was overjoyed at the prospect of a granddaughter named Sofia. She had been denied the chance to choose my name, as she had to name me after my paternal grandmother in accordance with Serbian tradition.

The first few weeks after Sofia and I arrived home felt like one long day of sleeplessness, compulsive checks of the baby's breathing, painful breast massages, and hormones that surged so that I'd cry inconsolably, then laugh hysterically the next moment. There was no time to read a text from a friend, let alone a page of a book. When I was finally able to make time for myself, I still couldn't take in an entire page. There was no joy, my mind wandered, I felt frustrated. I opened a book late at night, with my husband sleeping next to me on our bed and our daughter sleeping in her cot, and tried to read a page without feeling disheartened. Nothing worked. At first, I thought I needed the order and logic of non-fiction in my temporary world of chaos, so I read about trees and ecosystems. As much as I liked them, I couldn't stick with yews.

It was YA that had some sort of restorative



power. The trilogy *Winternight* by Katherine Arden is based on Russian folklore and history, and describes the struggles of a young woman considered by her society to be a witch. By the pale light of the baby lamp, I read about Vasya's world of domovois, rusalkas, banniks, and many other creatures of the world unseen, only marginally less scary than the creatures of the seen world: power-hungry rulers, lustful priests, and various insecure, jealous women and men.

I wasn't shocked by anything the books describe. The folklore of all Slavic peoples is, unsurprisingly, quite similar. We have our scary old women—Baba Yagas—as well as our house spirits, water spirits, beautiful and deceitful veelas, hybrid creatures, and vampires. Next to *slivovitz*, the word *vampire* is one of the few words other languages have adopted from Serbian. In our country, after a person is buried, it is customary that their family go to the cemetery the next day too. As my father once tried to explain to my nephew, 'We're going to check if everything is OK with Great-grandpa's grave and all.' 'We're actually going to check if Great-grandpa has turned into a vampire, do you know that?' I remember whispering to him after. The look of horror on his face amused me. I can be such a veela.

When I was a child, I was careful not to step on a frog because it meant my mother would die. I never threw any water over the threshold, so as not to make the spirits angry. I wore my underwear inside out for good luck. Every Easter morning,

## A READING DIARY

my mum brought a shiny red apple that stood in water all night and with its firm skin gently stroked my face. While I was pregnant, older women from my family tried to convince me I should wear a red thread around my wrist, spit if someone told me my child would be beautiful, and only buy baby clothes once the child had arrived. Such customs are still present in Serbian society and rarely questioned. I mostly rolled my eyes, for I'd read the explanation behind myths and superstition in *Sophie's World* when I was a teenager and by now I was very wise, wise enough to have a child. But I still winced if I happened to pour any kind of liquid over the threshold. I'll probably prepare a shiny red apple next Easter because I want Sofia to have the memory of her mother caressing her and assuring her it's for her own beauty and health. I'm still careful not to step on frogs, mostly because I don't want to hurt them.

As well as getting me back to reading, *Winternight* led me to reacquire the books I adored as a child, those that wound up lost or torn from overuse. For years, I've experienced a recurring dream: I'm in a bookshop, or a library, or even some place not immediately connected to books, and I don't know exactly what books I'm looking for but I know they're present and I know I read them as a child, and I'm happy, truly happy. This longing led me to search online until I'd find one. I'd glimpse the cover of a childhood book. I couldn't remember the title of some, only the feeling and

basic plot of others. I managed to find even those I faintly recalled by employing creative search terms. Packages arrived and my daughter watched me caress the books. I danced with joy when *La Petite Maison En Bois En Automne* arrived. I had thought I'd never see it again.

I reacted the same way to getting books when I was a child too. They were all given to me by my mother. Even in times of greatest scarcity, even in wartime under strict international sanctions, she somehow found books for me. When I started earning my own money, I reciprocated and bought books for my mother. Some authors we agreed upon, some not so much. Over the years, it became a sort of ritual for us to start reading the new book by 'our' Maggie O'Farrell at the same time. Together, we would wait impatiently for each of O'Farrell's new books to be translated into Serbian so that I could buy two copies and give one as a gift to my mum, although I could read them in English. It usually takes several months for her new work to be translated.

This tradition continued into 2021. A few days after I'd bought two copies of *Hamnet*, O'Farrell's story about the death of Shakespeare's young son, my mother had a stroke. It was early in the morning on Orthodox Christmas Day, January 7th. I was asleep next to my daughter when the phone rang. No one calls that early to wish a merry Christmas. My dad told me mum had been rushed to hospital.

In the days that followed, Mum was resuscitated

## A READING DIARY

twice in the hospital. She was always stubborn. Visitations weren't possible due to the pandemic and we were allowed one phone call a day with the doctor. He or she would inform us using the same tone about everything. 'She died last night, but we brought her back.' 'She seems a little better today.' 'We had to put her on the ventilator again and make a little incision in her throat.' On one of those days, the doctor on duty told us that mum's condition was surprisingly good and she had a great chance of recovery. The following night she died for the third time and didn't come back. It was early morning again and I was asleep next to my daughter when the call came. I knew before I answered the phone.

There are many death customs in Serbia, including the tradition of burying the deceased with the objects they loved. I'm not sure why we do that. To express our love by remembering their loves? To have them carry a piece of home to wherever they are going? To ensure eternal delight? I remember my aunt putting a few pieces of hard candy into my grandfather's coffin.

I placed a copy of *Hamnet* in my mother's coffin, next to her hand, along with the beautiful yellow rose I'd laid across her chest. The previous night, I'd sat at the chestnut bureau she bought for me when I'd finished my studies, and on the first page of *Hamnet*, I wrote her a message. Among other things, it said, 'Thank you, my love. That's what my soul is screaming right now: thank you! I love you the way it was intended at the beginning of time for a daughter

to love her mother.' I filled the whole page with my promises and gratitude. Never once did I pause nor did my hand shake. I finished as I always did when writing a dedication to her 'Enjoy the book.'

The next day, I gave the presents to my mother and kissed her on the forehead. The coffin was then closed and carried to the hearse that drove to our street with us following in my dad's car. In front of my parents' house, neighbours and relatives came to say goodbye, as is customary. The hearse opened and they approached one by one to kiss or touch the coffin and whisper a few words. Then they approached us, her family, and told us how sorry they were, and described her wonderful traits. We got in our cars and proceeded to the cemetery. We followed the rituals. The customs. Their purpose, I know now, is to keep a person sane. Follow the steps. They will prevent you from thinking too much. If you put all the pointless things in their rightful pointless places, you won't choke on your tears. One older relative threw wheat grains in the air when the coffin started its journey from the chapel towards the burial spot. Coins were given to children to throw into the grave and onto the coffin. The pallbearers, chosen according to their place in the family, tied scarves around their arms. The oldest grandchild carried the church banner and walked in front of the coffin all the way to the grave. The priests sang. We cried. When the coffin was lowered into the ground, I screamed. My father grabbed me and pulled me into his arms. People threw soil into

## A READING DIARY

the pit and we left.

Some days I see my mum everywhere—a woman with a similar coat to hers; someone who walks in front of me sporting a similar hairstyle. The book she was reading is still on her nightstand. My dad wipes the dust from its cover and from around its spine. I know we will have to move it one day. Every Sunday I go to the cemetery. If it's sunny, I place my hands on the soil of her grave and close my eyes and feel the warmth. Before I leave, I always whisper my thank yous.

As I write this, Sofia is sleeping next to me on our bed, and as support for my notebook I'm using a huge book about fairies that her grandmother bought for her. In it, there are proud and spiteful veelas, as well as the usual good fairies. It was the last gift she received from her beloved *baka*. I found it amongst the other Christmas gifts my mother was unable to give us in person. There's a pile of books on my nightstand, which includes my own copy of *Hamnet*. At the moment I'm too afraid to start reading it. I know I will have to. It's what my mother would want. She would want me to enjoy it and find strength in it, and in what remains behind, in another book that has, in its own way, already offered me a lesson. 'Life is both sad and solemn,' Jostein Gaarder writes in *Sophie's World*. 'We are led into a wonderful world, we meet one another here, greet each other—and wander together for a brief moment. Then we lose each other and disappear as suddenly and unreasonably as we arrived.' ◇



TWO POEMS

Nick Makoha



Icarus at the Fun Gallery in the East Village of New York

Fuck it, let's start with Canto 27:

*Now upward rose the flame, and still'd its light.*

Two birds perched on a jeep in the West Bank

Catch the air and migrate to the shores of Entebbe.

Have you ever decided anything in the air?

Neither intelligence nor intimidation are sufficient.

I bet Da Vinci when writing *The Codex of Birds*

would gather the most curious member of the audience

and ask of them *take my hand... angle my arm just so*

*and flex the wing.* I know they thought this was about birds.

If you calculate your power the small can stand up to the large.

Here is an angle: my father used to say he would catch me

looking into the sky, searching for its bounds to calm

my tightened lungs after the asthma attack. It was here

I discovered the wind and the falling body and the urge

to run across the sky. Imagine a pilot ejecting from a plane

Stay with me now? At that moment of release his back itches

wishing he was a feathered thing. That is what I almost

became.

## TWO POEMS

Basquiat asks the Poet to Paint him the Truth

00: 45

When the reporters had returned to their desks and the IDF had returned the hostages to their lives they left my country where it is and the plane on the tarmac. Uganda was just a stage set in which we had minor parts—villagers, natives, soon-to-be refugees. When I told the director this country was ours, to begin with, I could smell the alcohol on his breath. I was only two at the time and had already started growing feathers. When he showed me the bulletins 1: The American Embassy (A.E) is seriously concerned about disruptive effect of hijacking on international trade. 2: Given the above, he wondered if Jimmy Carter would need a little more information on the Palestine situation. And 3: Amin's stock like the price of corn is going down while Carter like the price of oil is coming up.

# Nick Makoha

01:23

And then he said—*did or did I not faithfully deliver on opening night, thank God you are not Angola, anyway, we just cast Charles Bronson. He is going down well in Europe.* He poured himself another glass while helping himself to everything. I knew we weren't going to get straight answers. He was selling democracy and asking for the copyright.

Basquiat: *Had your wings turned jet black at that time?* I haven't checked but my shoulder blades itched.

Basquiat: *And what about the sky?* In all versions, it was blue even when it wasn't—and eventually when I did use them—the wings—to leave the way that the reporters and IDF had done I drew diagrams to explain my choices. My body wanted to be in my country instead of above it. But I kept wheezing again and again to become a thing with feathers, to become a man among the clouds, a cocktail of gravity and light. I feel like Icarus above the sea.

Basquiat: *That's not how he died.* No! Are you sure?

Basquiat: No: let me introduce you to him. Make some room. He paints the same story [REDACTED] but in <sup>Ted</sup> sorry I meant <sup>red.</sup>

FICTION

# Stress Test

Han Smith

1.

My name is Very Glass, which is sort of funny, if you think about it. Not because my mother died falling through a window or anything like that. My mother is a careful person. She files her nails every other day and never smokes when she thinks she might be sleepy. I did have a cousin, or I think she was a cousin, who swallowed crushed glass in a bottle of Coke Zero, but she didn't die of that, however much she'd hoped to. She died of pills. She wasn't even called Glass. I barely knew her, and she was probably not that much like me.

2.

Imagine it's a little hamster that loves you, he said the first time. He was showing me something, and to me it looked bright blue, even though I obviously knew it wasn't.

It just needs a nest to hide in, he said. It just needs to burrow. You like hamsters, right?

Everyone likes hamsters, I said. I actually like field mice.

It's not a field mouse, he said. It's definitely not a field mouse.

I knew that field mice were more intelligent than hamsters. I knew that they performed much better in maze tests. It wasn't relevant but I could picture a hamster chewing its own stubby tail where

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the maze walls met. The picture in my brain was real because I'd seen it in a video set to music.

It's a hamster that just needs a place to be, somewhere sweet and very warm, he said.

It didn't work. It didn't work the next time, either. Certainly he tried. He was remarkably creative.

Imagine it's a ferret instead, he said. Imagine it's a lollipop. Imagine it's a veal-dog. Imagine it's a trophy made of crystal, or glass.

### 3.

Whenever he stopped caring that it wasn't going to work, he did something with himself instead, and that seemed to work fine for him, so I left him in the mattress room and went online to read more about the thing I'd found. The mattress room was how I thought of it because there was no bedframe.

The thing I'd found was a post that said: *Is it just me or does anyone else remember this?* It was written by someone called Paradoxide\_89. *That goddamn cereal diet?* they had written. *You had to eat just a bowl for breakfast and lunch and then a tiny mini dinner that could also be a bowl. That was what the rules were on the box.*

Then there was an image of the box. It showed a measuring tape twisted like a ribbon around a woman with tanned but white skin, flat across her stomach. The measuring tape was floating and the woman was also floating. Paradoxide\_89 had

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written: *Does anyone remember or is it just me lol?*

There were 391 comments when I first looked, and there were thirty or forty more each time I went back to check again.

*And the cut-out part that you could fold from the box that dosed the 33 grams for you? someone wrote. It made a shape like a square ice-cream cone.*

*Then: 33 grams was a handful of flakes. A handful was meant to be a meal lmao.*

*Then: I deadass passed out and spent my sixteenth birthday in hospital because of this because I'm dumb.*

### 4.

Sometimes I turned up the radio so that I wouldn't hear him in the mattress room. One time, a voice was saying: We are a society comfortable with violence. The voice was annoying. I considered pressing the up arrow until it reached the maximum volume, just to see if anything new would happen, but I pushed the down arrow instead. The voice was still talking but I couldn't hear it, and I was right next to the speaker, so stuff a bird if anyone else could. And the cereal box and the measuring tape and being sixteen were muffled too, temporarily, but really still there under everything.

### 5.

I'm sort of trying to think some things through and a list might help or it might not at all.

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Sometimes there are lists on the internet and sometimes there are quizzes. Like: *Which kitchen utensil are you? Which spirit animal gemstone flame are you?* Like: *You know you're a woman with monster calves if. . .* I'm sure I'm always failing those quizzes. I get a different result each time because I don't know what my real answers are. I'm the whisk or the squirrel or the mauve jade, except I'm not.

6.

Why a trophy? I said, the next time he tried that one.

His face was very close to mine, obviously. I guess I'm thinking like the Oscars, he said. Like that type of trophy. Like a figurine, but in nice shiny glass.

If I won an Oscar, which would it be? I said. You? he said.

Yes, I mean me, I said.

I'd win Best Supporting Actor, he said. That's just how I am. I'm a supportive guy by nature.

You wouldn't want the lead? I said.

Nah, he said. I'm fine. Take this, for instance. Look at me helping you out right here. It's just the way I am and pretty much always have been.

I could see him making the speech to the audience. He'd have something stuck on his lip, most likely. A micro-piece of food or saliva, but he wouldn't notice and therefore it wouldn't matter.

You'd be Best Film Not in the English



Language, he said.

He was already laughing and when he laughed he found it hard to hear, but still, I said, I don't speak anything that's not in the English language though.

I was wrong because he had heard. That's why it's so funny, he said.

7.

I called my mother to ask about the mower she'd picked up. She said it was second-hand but looked new.

I wouldn't have taken it if it hadn't looked brand new, she said. I'd have walked straight out of there like that. It's not as if I want to electrocute myself. It's practically the start of spring, for God's sake.

I asked her if the blades looked new as well as the outside plastic parts.

It looks brand new, she said. It looks perfect.

If I won an award for something, I said, what do you think it might be for?

She was quiet. Maybe she was filing her nails. The sound of an emery board basically was my mother, although I also felt bad for thinking that.

You won that one race when you were twelve, she said. Remember?

No, I said. I don't remember.

Or wait, she said. No, you didn't win it. That's right. You got a prize for the closest to average time. They gave you a prize for that. Some kind of cup?

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Oh, I said. Yes, I sort of remember. I think it was more like a medal on a loop, though.

Veronica, she said, before she hung up, 'it's the start of spring, almost. Just look out the window.

### 8.

I did look out of the window the next time I left him with the mattress. I stood in the kitchen and looked out across the dirty gap between the buildings to the window opposite. There was a woman in there doing sit-ups with her toes clamped beneath a small cupboard. The cupboard kept flinching and rising slightly every time she heaved up and bent forward, and she kept having to re-wedge her feet. After she had lain flat for several minutes, she turned onto her knees and crawled out of the room. She returned, now upright, holding a bowl. It was a thick, transparent bowl that was full of hairy kiwis, and from the way her arms were tensed it looked heavy.

She placed the bowl on top of the cupboard and laid down, jamming in her toes again. She was still for four or five minutes, like before. She was wearing a pair of shorts with a waistband that said: Play hard play hard play hard play ha.

### 9.

Here's something. At work I can almost forget my life. I'm responsible for the placement kids who

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need extra supervision, and because of this I'm paid a little more than the actual workers for doing much less work than they do. Even counting the kids' work with my own, it's still less. It once took me and two of them a whole day to hook twenty-five packets of rolled underwear over the metal rods.

I like the kids. I like their honesty. They only come for a week or two, at maximum three, and then they have to go back to their schools, which are called special schools or specialist schools. There are plenty who have no idea what a thong is, and I like giving them their certificates when they leave. The only one I didn't like had striped cuts like pristine batik all down her arm. They made me think of a time when I was always imagining punching through the shower door. I would slam my wrist, palm up towards it, my body already dulled under cold water, but it was stupid and I wasn't strong enough. I was probably fifteen, like most of the placement kids. I had a vision of shards, but the door was plastic anyway.

I pretend the signature on the certificates is mine. The manager never comes down to present them, and the kids believe me every time. I shake their hands. Sometimes I make a speech.

10.

I wondered if my mother had also told my sister to look out at the start of spring. I thought about calling my sister and then didn't. My sister once

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cried until she was sick on her own shirt, because she'd tried to tie her hair the way I had mine, and then I'd pretended to cut off my whole ponytail, and she really had cut off hers. I didn't laugh at her, although I did raise my eyebrows, or one of them, in a way I'd recently learnt to do.

It'll grow back before the summer, our mother said to her, which was a lie. My sister wanted to look like me for some reason that wasn't just hers and I knew that. The eyebrows I'd taught her—the up one and the down—knew.

I guess I miss my sister a lot but I've also always felt I've let her down. Besides, she never calls me either.

11.

If looking through windows is like looking through mirrors, it is something I actually know quite a bit about. I do mean looking through them and not into them. I guess I'm making this list to keep track of all the things I know about it.

12.

When I checked the next time, there were 96 new comments.

There was: *I weighed the flakes out and carried them in a sandwich baggie in my backpack. Such a special time.*

There was: *Omg and how we all pretended we*

*weren't doing it.*

There was: *It was such a thing.*

13.

There was no way to know whether the woman in the window read the messages about the cereal mess too, or whether my sister did, as a matter of fact. Why would they? There were so many things to read and click on. There were videos, and then there were postures, and contours, and products, and superfoods, and super-to-avoid foods. And then: *What kind of trash are you? Which celebrity princess vegetable are you?*

14.

The guy next to you in the dried goods and cans aisle is a total hunk! And what's this? Yes! For real! He's asking for your number! He says your eyes are diamonds and he wants to see you later!

You:

- A. Ignore him because his shirt is slimed with sweat.
- B. Ignore him because he's fine but he's nothing.
- C. Ignore him because he's fine but you are you.
- D. Let him put his hot wet hand over yours because you let him put his hot wet hand over yours.

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15.

My sister, and the woman in the window, and whoever else in whichever other window, either saw the same things as me or saw things just like them. Clearly, there was one way to know what they saw, and that was just to find them and ask them, and that was categorically impossible.

16.

I read something once about crazing resistance tests. Shiny, glazed ceramics can sometimes splinter without breaking, and the phenomenon is known as ‘crazing’. It’s like if you hit something hard but not hard enough or you drop something that doesn’t quite fall far enough to smash. Tiles and other solid things have to be tested to determine how far they can tolerate the pressure, and inevitably, some will not pass. It’s just weird because they’re cracked entirely but somehow they still hold together. Like a windscreen in mosaic and you keep driving on.

17.

On a night when he’d stopped trying, or I had, and to be honest I was thinking about the dried goods aisle again, or truthfully, the website where we’d actually met, we were eating lumps of milk bread on the floorboards. The lumps of the bread were

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steamed and doughy. The woman at the Lucky Joke Duck said she steamed them because they were better to digest that way. She slid them for free into the tops of the bags but only when it was me collecting.

We didn't know which silver box was which but we scooped from them anyway, and I stacked the lids stained neon.

You know I'm going to get tired, eventually, he said. I can't be waiting around forever.

He had dark green above his sharpest tooth on the right.

I'm a patient guy, he said. But patience numbs the mind.

I'm trying, I said.

You just need to use your imagination, he said. I can't be the one serving up all the creativity here.

He pooled what was left of each sauce into one container. They didn't mix. They were science experiment oils with different densities, all of them congealing in their own slick corners.

What if we just ate cereal? I said. A bowl of cereal, whichever you want, instead of a meal like this once a day.

That's a waste of imagination, he said. That's precisely what I'm talking about. Anyway, you're not even that fat.

18.

A few days later, I thought of calling my sister again,

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or my mother, and I went to the kitchen to look at the woman in the other building instead. She was crying. I hadn't seen her for a while. She was holding a letter in one of her hands and a ripped and crinkled envelope in the other. Even through the gap and the two panes, I could see that the letter paper was grainy. It was like the reminders I used to be sent for my appointments, which I always postponed until I had to be referred again. Sometimes when I threw them away without postponing, I felt guilty about wasting time and ink, but there was a feeling like escape as well. At least they'd only used the cheap paper.

The stuff in the toilet bowl then was also grainy, or gritty. It definitely didn't look like blood. It was like chewed cardboard or wet wood shavings, or tiny dead-ends of organs I didn't need. But nothing had ever hurt especially, and in the end when I went, they said it wasn't too serious, so it was fine to postpone, or to chuck away the letters.

The other woman left the room, taking her envelope with her.

19.

And then one of the work placement kids had her last day and I was thinking of what to say in my speech. We were in the underwear section again, that was where we always seemed to be. She hooked thongs and high-waists and casual shorties and secret tanga side laces together on a single rail, like



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all of them were the same.

It wasn't time for the speech yet, but I said to her, It's a good thing you don't see the difference, or don't care.

She asked me if she was doing something wrong and I told her that she was absolutely not.

It was her last day and there she was and I kept talking. The thing about a mirror, I said, is you can watch people behind you or right next to you and they don't notice, or at least you hope they don't. You can watch in the girls' changing rooms before gymnastics or whatever the ridiculous game with the benches is. You can see the one who they all say has too much hair, and even if she tries to be in the corner and even if she tries to become the corner, they find her. And they say she watches too much. They say she wants to lick another girl or she already has and she's a butch filth and freak. She's in the mirror but you never look directly at her. Christ, no.

I told her about the cracking in the surface that wasn't strictly total cracking. I remembered the line I had read which said: *Crazing will frequently precede a true fracture.*

I told her that it was through the mirror, brushing gums and spitting saliva that I would watch my sister when she started to think that she had to do what spotty boys wanted her to do.

The placement kid asked me what a Brazilian thong was and why it was different and if it was different. She showed me photographs of classic cars

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on her phone, which was what she did when she felt anxious or confused. But then she said, I don't want this week to be finished. And I didn't want it to be finished much, either.

I came back and he was lying where he always lay, and I thought about all the answers I had given to get him.

20.

It is funny, if you think about it. I suppose I think about it all the time. It's not that we're especially easy to break. But then, like I wanted to say to the kid who did not care about the shapes and styles of underwear and which were the best for lengthening legs, sometimes we hairline each other into bare pieces. I did try to send a private message to Paradoxide\_89. I sort of forgot what I was doing, but I kept typing, and then I think I was apologising to her, or to my sister, or to all of them. The reply I received was immediate and it said: *Remember Meg Ryan? Where she lives now is sad!* Then: *You won't believe these insane ancient tricks! For the you you've always dreamed of and deserve! Number 21 will shock women but just trust!*

I clicked on number 21, just to be normal. ◇



# Skin Hungry

Sheena Patel

I see it as a door floating in outer space. There are some who are allowed access through this door and there are the rest of us who have to queue outside in the pissing rain.

The only person who has touched me sexually through this pandemic is me. I have two toys from Unbound and since the outbreak of the Pana Cotta on Plague Island, I have serviced myself, fulfilled the bodily function of needing the release of an orgasm but there has been no joy in it. I come and then I lay there on my bed, one side jammed against the wall because there is no need for two people to have access to it. Afterwards I lay there blankly.

When the lockdown was announced, I was living with my family and although the months were good for sorting out the toxicity between us, I still live with them and it shames me. We do not touch one another. I am missing someone touching me like their hands have teeth and they want to eat me.

I watch *Normal People* on BBC iPlayer and sob during the sex scenes. I watch hardcore porn on Pornhub and don't even take my clothes off. I watch them touch and fuck and suck each other and I cry.

An Instagram friend messages me and says, what do you have to do to get touch in this world atm?

My best friend strokes my forehead when I fall asleep drunk at her house and it is the greatest gift. Her one long index finger delicately stroking

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the skin between my eyebrows sends me off into a blissful sleep.

Four months into the pandemic when it was illegal to meet another person outside of your household, I meet up with someone who wastes my time. We lay under a tree in Hampstead Heath and I ask him to hold me, touch my skin in the sun. He pats my back gingerly and asks, is that enough?

I cannot bear to look at couples as they touch each other so innocuously. I cannot bear to see this thing I cannot procure for myself bandied about in such wasteful abundance in front of me. I am starving. It is like they are eating a meal throwing food on the floor and I am begging, invisible. I look away.

I read the sex messages I exchanged with the last person I fucked. I read four months of our messages and I do this periodically. I haven't had sex since October 2019. Who is this person who so cavalierly says, I won't see you tonight, I'll see you in a couple of days? If I had known what was coming, I would have fucked him every day I was able to.

I watch couples kissing and I cannot believe I did this once, so readily put my mouth on someone else's mouth and exchanged fluids. Kissing has become this alien behaviour I can no longer get my head around. I cannot remember why I used to want to do this or engage in it, what was the need to put my mouth on someone else's mouth? I cannot remember.

Through the pandemic I think, the reason it is

so hard for me right now is because I made all the wrong decisions. If I am suffering it's because it is my fault. I stayed in a relationship I didn't want to be in for too long and I have held out for someone who couldn't make up their mind about me and this is why I am at my parent's house wanking into the night trying to forget the stress induced by this reckless, tory government who are forever riding high in the polls.

This idea of accumulation in a relationship is reinforced by our neoliberal late capitalist hell-system of more more more. You are in a relationship, you buy a house, have one kid, have a second kid so the first one isn't a cunt, trade the first flat in for a bigger home. There is a building and a moving forward. There has been no building for me, there is no moving forward. I start to feel left behind by my friends. They are all enclosed in circles of love they have found for themselves. I hear of friends of friends moving to Margate or Scarborough with their partners, they want to be near good schools or more green. I watch this through my phone. I have crossed no milestones, nothing has happened to me. I am asking strangers I never meet, whose faces I cannot decipher even after seeing the obligatory five profile photos, how many siblings do you have, what's your favourite colour.

The abundance of love is annexed with every creation of a family. Maybe I just miss my friends.

When the world eventually opens up, I start to work. When I meet men I like, they are already

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in relationships. When people get together and talk about their weekends spent with their children and their families, their holidays to Cornwall, their escapes from the city to their in-law's second homes, their flights to the Greek islands because they deserve it, showing me their puppies as if they are children and cooing to their screens, I stay silent. To what extent has the world really opened up? How can a relationship even begin in a time which demands all or nothing? My needs are so vast, the surface connections I make cannot meet them. How can I know if I actually like someone or if I'm merely trying to escape from the pain? I fear being with someone because I am desperate, but I am desperate to be with someone. The glint of hope I feel when I make someone laugh and then they turn out to be taken is crushing. If it's not true love I don't want it. I can't bear to demand so much from someone, to need so much from another person so I shut down and don't bother trying.

A friend tells me, when you can't afford a baby you get a dog, when you can't afford a dog, you get plants. I buy four.

I am on a job when a very handsome man flirts with me for three days straight. He is married with children but it's gorgeous to be teased and watched. I am premenstrual so my libido is off the charts. I lie on my bed and I put my dildo inside me and I ride it as I lay down and put my sucking vibrator on my clit at the same time. I think of him, I think of riding his cock and his mouth on my boobs trying to take



them all in, I think of our open mouths, I think of his arms and his strong legs and his hands pressing me into him so he's deeper inside me, I think of the sounds I would make, I think of him when he said, I will protect you, to a child we were in charge of and how I got wet—instantaneously. I come so hard and for so long, the orgasm is full, full of him, full of my desire for him and his body and for my body feeling desire. I keep my eyes closed and remember this is what sex used to feel like when it was centred someone you want who wants you. Tears flood my eyes, roll down my cheeks and I sob pressing my head back into the pillow, for all of the grief, the touch I haven't had, the mistakes with men I haven't been able to make, for all the sex. For love I haven't been able to secure for myself.

I am desperate for touch. I am a drug addict. I cannot wait for the hairdresser to wash my hair.

Walking through Soho is Dionysian largess, it's like the last two years haven't happened, like it was all a fever dream and we've abruptly woken up sweating on one another. I still give way on the pavement.

I agree to one date in the year I am on Hinge. It is the day before the tier system is introduced. I meet him around the corner from my friend's house at a pub close to my car so I can make a quick getaway if I need to without having to use the tube. I am early and he is on time and although we were quite flirty over messages when I see his face, all of the anticipation drains away. We enter

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the pub but every table is taken and we cannot go inside. What ensues is a gallop to every restaurant or pub on Roman Road like they are a life raft on a sinking ship, trying to find someone to take us in. We are met with refusal and apologetic restaurant owners blocking their front doors, saying they are full. We even try the racist old man pub. Eventually, right on the main road with cars revving past us enveloping us in fumes, we find an outside spot at an Italian restaurant, which is basically a garden table they have bought from B&Q. We are Parisian dining in October in our coats with a waiter in full PPE taking our temperatures as we take our seats and we are barely able to hear one another over the traffic. I have to keep leaning in and shouting, what? can you say that again? He occasionally looks at me strangely and I wonder if I have forgotten how to talk to people or make small talk. We see other couples desperately searching for a place they can romantically slobber over one another in privacy and I feel smug we have a place even if it is a garden set. It's a pleasant enough evening and at the end, I give him a hug goodbye. I leave feeling lonely, relieved not to be with him, unsure what he thinks of me. He messages later saying he hopes we can see one another again. I text back... maybe as friends. I can't tell my different types of depression apart, is this regular depression or corona depression or brexit depression or schmegular seasonal depression, or is it that I have not been fucked by anything other than USB powered and pleasure is a forgotten

language to me now? He asks for my number and I give it because I feel bad but I don't reply to his messages. He continues to text me once a month for six months with some variation of, here I go again, maybe this time I'll get a response, until I block him.

I check my phone every three minutes as if someone cares about me.

I dream that an old man, his belly hanging out of his jeans, stands behind me while I'm working. He puts his mouth on my neck and sucks my skin, as I talk to people and boss them around. He tells me he has a big dick and he can fuck me if I like, I feel him pressing into me. As he walks away, I sink to my knees, hold the edge of a mattress between my teeth hoping it reins me in and I look up at him. He laughs. When I wake up, I've come in my sleep.

A friend and I drive to the beach. I tell her I feel self-conscious about my body after the lockdowns, I barely exercise. I am soft and giving when I poke my fingers into my middle, I tell her I am shy about showing my body and she says she likes what she sees. We stride along the beach, she is built like an outdoor sculpture, like photos I've seen of Marie Thérèse-Walter, strong and outdoorsy, good and healthy. I enter the sea in a swimsuit and we stay in the cold water for an hour as we tread water, we scream, fuck corona fuck you fuck off fuck off fuck off you cunts. When we dry off, I say I need to open my heart and I do bridge pose for the first time in months. She makes an 'ugh' sound as I tip upside down, my chest is stretched out and I

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rock in place enjoying the burn down my body. As I come down, she says, you went really high and I say, oh I did these back bending exercises months ago, you just need to do this, and I show her puppy pose, I press my breasts into the sand and my bum goes in the air and she makes a gurgling noise like she's eaten something really tasty and then says, oh my god, I haven't seen someone do that in a long time. I want to fuck her immediately, I want to reach over and kiss her but I don't and I have to actively fight this urge. I invite her over for dinner but she says she has to get back. I think of her as I have a wank at home.

It's not that I want less for anyone around me, I just want some of it for my own.

We are in a period of acutely wanting to forget. I go out-out once. Most parts of the world do not have access to the vaccine, have not had one jab and here I am double vaxxed, using this privilege as a license to get pissed. I don't know how to download my NHS passport because I don't go anywhere and by the time I remember I have to take a lateral flow test, it cuts into my makeup time so I'm rushing out the door. We go to a day festival called Daytimers in Blackhorse Road, I sway with a hundred people on the dancefloor. I drunkenly kiss a young woman whose face I don't remember in front of my friends as if I am a teenager again. When I put my nose next to her nose, I realize my jaw is out of practice and it's as if I fight her with my mouth, I want to be open and closed. My friends tell me she couldn't take her

## Sheena Patel

eyes off me. When we leave to go to another venue, I don't take her with me and I refuse my friends' requests to take me back to find her.

Outdoor space is the new premium, it's how we communicate to one another of the changed reality, of our different priorities. I have my parents' garden but it is too bare to go out and enjoy it, too stark and open, too exposed to the neighbours. My dad takes pride in cutting the grass too close to the ground. ◇

A SALUTE

# IC3 at 20

How one anthology  
changed the landscape

*Featuring contributions from:*

Kevin Le Gendre, Joanna Traynor,  
Sol B. River, Catherine Johnson,  
M. G. Zimeta, Koye Oyedeji,  
Salena Godden, Brenda Emmanus,  
Uju Asika, Henry Bonsu,  
Colin Babb, Ionie Richards,  
Panya Banjoko, Judith Lewis

In 2000, Courttia Newland and Kadija Sesay co-edited a landmark anthology of Black British writing. For such an expansive subject, the title was comprised of just three characters: *I-C-3*. ‘Why did we call the book *IC3*?’ Newland asks in his section of the introduction. To provide an answer he quotes an email he sent to a contributor in which he outlined his struggle to come up with a suitable title: ‘I was searching for a name that defined Black British people as a whole. Lo and behold, there was nothing.’ For Courtland, *IC3* was the binding agent: ‘The fact that *IC3*, the police identity for Black, is the only collective term that relates to our situation here as residents...is a sad fact of life I could not ignore.’

In her own contribution to the introduction, Sesay announced that the editors were staunch in their belief that ‘with the calibre of writers in this anthology, we have taken concrete steps in recording some of the vast and varied expanse of our history.’ *IC3: The Penguin Book of New Black Writing in Britain* featured more than 95 writers. It mixed the new with the established, and served as much more than simply a record of its time and place.

Some contributors were already famous, others were on the cusp. Some felt the springboard effect of *IC3*. A few savoured publication in *IC3* as a career highlight.

*IC3* continues to have a lasting effect, both on the commissioning of new projects and the

## A SALUTE

rediscovery and reissue of older books. *The Fire People*, a poetry anthology edited by Lemn Sissay in 1998, will be republished in Spring 2022 alongside *More Fiya*, a new poetry anthology by Black British poets edited, curated and introduced by Kayo Chingonyi. *IC3* connects directly to the recent Black Britain Writing Back series of novels chosen by Bernardine Evaristo to celebrate and rediscover pioneering books from Black Britain and the diaspora. The momentum of this twenty-year-old project has never abated. After witnessing *IC3*'s impact, Benjamin Zephaniah set out to create Black Radical—a working title—an intensely researched poetry anthology, with Kadija Sesay.

After *IC3* was published, Sesay saw there was little critical work written on Black British Writers and commissioned a book of essays, *Write Black, Write British: From PostColonial to Black British Literature* (2005), that included chapters on individual poets and novelists born in Britain and writing about Britain from a specific British perspective.

As well as helping to historicize the movements the anthologies created, *IC3* foregrounded the achievements of individuals who, during the past twenty years, have won major awards. Notable amongst these are Roger Robinson, who won the 2019 T. S. Eliot Prize for Poetry for *A Portable Paradise*—only the second writer of Caribbean descent to do so. Bernardine Evaristo won the Booker Prize in 2019 for her novel, *Girl*,



## Five Dials

*Woman Other.* Kevin Le Gendre won ‘Jazz Journalist of the Year’ at the Parliamentary Jazz awards in 2009 and ‘Best Historical Research in Recorded Roots or World Music’ at the ARSC Awards for Excellence for *Don’t Stop the Carnival: Black Music in Britain*.

Award winners are not the only ones who have made significant achievements in the field of Black writing. Stella Oni’s 2020 debut novel, *Deadly Sacrifice*, broke through in the crime genre to introduce the first African British woman detective in Britain. Colin Babb told the editors of *IC3*: ‘It was your encouragement when I worked at the Beeb that inspired me to contribute to *IC3* and “restart” writing!’ He has since published a second book, the memoir *1973 and Me: The England v West Indies Test Series and a Memorable Childhood Year* (2021)—a work notable for its inclusion in a genre that has up to now included only a few titles by Black writers. Uju Asika’s *Bringing Up Race: How to Raise a Kind Child in a Prejudiced World* (2020) broke ground in its own genre, speaking precisely to parents the world over, offering life lessons for this fraught moment in time.

To celebrate the anthology’s twentieth birthday, *Five Dials* asked as many of the original contributors as possible to reflect on the experience and examine what’s changed for Black British writers in the intervening years. Do you remember, we asked, where you sat down as a young (or younger) writer to add your contribution to this kaleidoscopic view of the Black British experience?

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Why, we asked, was *IC3* so special? ‘It held us all together in a way,’ poet Salena Godden wrote in her response. ‘It archived us. It put the flag in the mountain to say, “We were here, we can climb, we do exist.”’ What was it like to pick up a finished copy and look at the table of contents? ‘The project included so many great names that I loved as authors,’ Brenda Emmanus wrote. ‘I felt like a stone being thrown into a bowl of rose quartz, diamonds, and rubies.’

### Kevin Le Gendre

I was at a very early stage of my life as a writer when *IC3* was published. In fact, it had been just three years since my first piece was published in a noted Black music magazine, *Echoes*—an interview with Wyclef Jean of the Fugees—and I was still testing the water, working out how to create buoyant narratives and stop from sinking financially. Looking back, I think I felt a wave of excitement and an undertow of uncertainty, if not fear, at the speed at which everything moved in journalism, from the turnaround time for copy to the shifting sands of editorial agendas and opinions.

Having fallen into freelance writing unexpectedly after a friend of a friend asked me to contribute to a short-lived lifestyle magazine, of which there were many in the late 90s, I was by no means convinced that this was the kind of work that would solidify into a bona fide career. Yet, I

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made a major step forward when I began writing for *The Independent*, and it was the first commission I received—a piece about the legendary 1960s Jamaican jazz artist, Joe Harriott, that formed the basis of my essay for *IC3*.

When Kadija Sesay approached me to contribute, I was both flattered and surprised. First because of my inexperience in relation to renowned figures such as Jackie Kay, Bernardine Evaristo, Ray Shell and most especially Linton Kwesi Johnson. Put simply I had bought the master dub poet's records when I was a teen, so to be granted the honour of sharing the pages of a serious book with him was properly 'tap-natch'.

Yet there were connections between myself and several other contributors, which I think reflected some notion of shared endeavour, if not community in Black London culture at the time. I had worked with Roger Robinson and Malika Booker at *Apples & Snakes* poetry agency. I had interviewed Courttia Newland for *The Independent*; I had come across Henry Bonsu and Diana Evans while gigging at *The Voice*; I had met Margaret Busby because any black writer *had* to meet as inspirational a figure as she. These people were part of what I'd call a whirlpool of energy. You bathed in it.

*IC3* may have opened doors for me because of the credibility it afforded, but I think that first and foremost it gave me far greater confidence in what I was doing and strengthened my sense of purpose. I

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remember writing about Harriott while holed up in a cramped bedsit in Finsbury Park and also travelling to Notting Hill to interview one of his surviving band members, the bassist Coleridge Goode. I felt fortunate to be able to come face-to-face with people like this, precious living vessels of our history.

In any case, the anthology was important because it provided a spotlight for emerging as well as established Black writers in Britain. The great success achieved by many in the collection attests to the vitality jumping off the pages twenty-one years ago, which seems like both another age and a yesterday that is worth keeping fresh. I can't think of a better way of marking the occasion than by blowing the dust off the sleeve of Joe Harriott's *Free Form* album and reminding myself of the sounds that gave me words.

### Joanna Traynor

Twenty-four years ago, my first novel *Sister Josephine* won the Saga Prize—an award for new Black writers, and henceforth I was herded into a field of literature I wasn't quite sure I belonged in. I didn't feel Black enough. When I was invited to write for *IC3*, I'd written and published two more novels and although well reviewed, they weren't a great success. And so, I shrank, in stature and ambition. Would I only ever be 'seen' in a field with other Black writers, in a ghetto of the Black experience? That's what it felt like.

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On reflection, my 'Black experience' credentials were very strong, if you paid attention to the mores and preferences of white mainstream media that is. I had grown up poor, disadvantaged and dispossessed, abused, rejected and having to struggle to make it through life, alone.

Unsurprisingly, I enjoyed a solid career of drug taking and law breaking, providing anaesthetic and resources for survival, respectively. I was an *IC3* gift to any police officer who came near me.

So what did 'being Black enough' *really* mean? To me? I needed to know something of my Black self, my Black family, culture, nationhood. I never got to know any of that stuff until I found my biological father via a search engine on the internet. The first Black symbol of belonging that I was ever given was a name.

I was given just one 'first' name as a child when everyone else had two. This always struck me as an act of sheer negligence. Raised by Catholics, at 11 years old, I was delighted to receive a confirmation name, Teresa. At 24 years old, I discovered that my birth mother had intended for me to be called Joanna Maria which made me feel much more 'wanted' even though the woman herself has never owned up to me. Name-wise, however, I was doing OK.

The African name, Omóbòowálé, which means 'the child has come home' was given to me a couple of months after I'd made first contact with my biological father and just before I was asked

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to contribute to *IC3*. After its publication, I went to Nigeria to meet my father in person, and at a special ceremony he addressed me as Omóbòowálé Rasheedat (my Muslim name) Mojidi (his name), and since I was living in sin, he also tagged my husband's name on the end, Miller. So within the year of *IC3* being published, if I'd been stopped and searched by the police I may well have told them my name was:

*Joanna Maria Teresa Omóbòowálé, Rasheedat  
Mojidi Miller Traynor'*

Somewhat more impressive than *IC3*.

## Sol B. River

Looking back to see where I was in my writing life in the year 2000 when *IC3* was first published took me on a brief journey. The last place I actually thought of looking was within the book itself.

I had retired aged twenty-something. I had retired from solely writing for theatre. Writing for radio, directing television and film seemed to be the new focus. I continued to explore the Black British Diaspora, moving from the past to the present. From *The Agenda Album* to *The Progressive Album* ... I'm still thinking about the tracks.

On publication *IC3* stood upright on the shelf, a coming together and a call to arms. A real example of ambition. *IC3* was not to direct or influence my movement, and any inspiration was for that time. One day at a time. The unpredictability facing a

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‘creative of colour’ could not depend on a heartfelt memoir. I think we were all aware that this was some kind of marathon. This life. I live in the north of England—Yorkshire, ‘God’s Own Country’. It’s greener here (not as much concrete) but it still can be harsh—not too dissimilar to the Deep South. Beautiful. My contribution to *IC3* was written here and at the same table as I wrote everything else. A small fridge, not room for more than one in the kitchen, and a short walk to the window.

The importance of *IC3* was due to a collective of groundbreaking talent; of soothsayers and artisans. Books can remain on the shelf, ready and patient; this is part of their attraction.

‘This is what I said ... back then, this is how I felt. This is what I wrote.’

I was and am privileged to have met and know a great many of my fellow authors. Their works line my walls. The shelves observe me from every angle. I can only encourage their longevity.

I will mark the reissue by reminding people of the book’s existence, I am honoured to be in such company. I will let my son hold it, if even for a moment, prior to him understanding what is in his hands.

## Catherine Johnson

I had been published for almost ten years when *IC3* came out; three children’s books with a lovely small press, a couple with OUP. I’d had some critical

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success but no sales to speak of. I was working part time in community literature, bringing up two children and living in Hackney with my then partner. My life now is completely different. I think the me of twenty years ago would not be disappointed. I am independent and self-sufficient, I live alone. I make my living writing, not books, which provides a light garnish of cash compared with the telly and teaching.

What would I do differently? I'd be more confident in my work, I'd value that work properly and I wouldn't be so damn grateful.

It was lovely being published with 'real authors'. It felt like a total privilege. And I hope my short story, 'Scary', (A Mel B ref) is quaintly vintage rather than dated and irrelevant.

## M. G. Zimeta

I was a teenager when I wrote 'Enter The Professionals', my essay for *IC3* on careers and vocations. My parents had raised me to identify as not-Black and not-British: I was an Ethiopian, born in Ethiopia to Ethiopians. Ethiopians were not Black, and Britain, my home since I was a baby, was not my home. But the fundamental premise of *IC3*, named after the police code for all Black people, required me to both recognise that others named me as Black and to name myself as Black, and to recognise that I am vulnerable to the coercive power of the British state.



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Names and naming: a few years after *IC3*, I decided that I'd make sure that anyone I worked with should know that my name is Mahlet—in case they mistook my nickname Milly, the traditional Ethiopian diminutive of Mahlet, as an attempt to disavow my Blackness. Within a year of *IC3* being published I stopped straightening my hair. (I explored this in, 'Did it have to be the hair?', a commentary on Rachel Dolezal for the *London Review of Books*, written, like my piece for *IC3*, in a thrilling state of joy and rage.)

'Definitions belong to the definers, not the defined,' observed Toni Morrison in *Beloved*. As someone who has been defined I've tried to be attentive about who I'm defining, and how, and why. When I was reporting on neo-Nazi militia in Ukraine, I set out to approach the subject without judgement; the conclusions I reached seemed counterintuitive and the piece was rejected by nearly 40 current affairs magazines before being published by *The Paris Review* as literary reportage, 'Letter from Kiev: reporting undercover on nationalism in Ukraine'. But it laid the groundwork for my current journalism project on Cambodia's Khmer Rouge, generously supported by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. I taught at a university where a high proportion of the students came from backgrounds under-represented in UK higher education—students who weren't white, students with disabilities, students who had come through the social care system. My peers at other

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universities would ask me if my students were ‘difficult’, but I found their intellectual voracity easy; what I found difficult was the presumption of my peers.

What’s taken me the longest to come to terms with is my vulnerability to the coercive power of the British state. For a while I focused on my academic career—dreaming over philosophy books in libraries in Oxford, Cambridge, London and York, and mostly feeling vulnerable to the coercive power of librarians. In York, I acknowledged myself as British for the first time—mainly, I think, out of my fierce respect for the Northern sense of humour. But it has only been in the last couple of years that I’ve started to believe there could be a role for someone like me in helping to shape the behaviour of that British state, in my role as a policy-maker for Data and AI.

*IC3* showed me that conceptual schemes, tools for understanding and making the world—my own and other people’s—can be fragile, and they can be tenacious, and sometimes they can be both. Like people. Sometimes this has been a disorientating realisation, and sometimes it has been a frightening one. But mostly it is a realisation that exhilarates me, because it means there is more for me to learn, more to create, more to do. The future is there to be written.

## Koye Oyedeji

‘Home: The Place Where You Belong’ might’ve been my first ever published short story. I’d won some citywide competitions prior to its publication and had published a poem in an anthology edited by Lemn Sisay. I was very young. I remember feeling the weight of the moment, the magnitude. I wasn’t familiar with half of the luminaries who were in the anthology, but I understood even then that they *were* luminaries and to be included alongside them was both daunting and gratifying for a young boy from South East London. Today, I have mixed feelings about the actual story. I’m proud of it, proud of that moment in time, the person who I was then and the achievement. It served as an endorsement of sorts, not just Kadija and Courttia saying, ‘Hey, we like your work,’ but the universe also putting it out there that, ‘Hey, your work, your voice, it has relevance.’ I’m a different writer today.

Back then, as an adolescent, a first-generation born to Nigerian immigrants, I was preoccupied with discovery, my identity and the space I occupied in the UK. I explored this through the lens of short-term foster care, which was often a practice of Nigerian parents in the UK during the sixties through the eighties. Without the communal kind of child-rearing that they were accustomed to back home, many Nigerians felt compelled to put their children in short-term foster care. It takes a village, after all, right? Well, these foster families were

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almost always white and were mainly based outside of London and other metropolitan areas. So you can imagine the kind of experiences that many of these young black children might've had, shipped out to places like Clapton and Portsmouth where hardly anybody looked like them back then. It was very hard for many of that generation and I tried to convey a kind of cultural schism in the story, the trauma that that kind of experience can have on a person many years later, how the past can shackle us.

Flash forward twenty years and there are many of the authors in the book that I've come to call friends over the years. Some of them are no longer with us. I think of them when I also look back at that moment in time. I do recall one reviewer lamenting that identity was all too apparent or heavy-handed or something like that. But some topics are just like that, you can't treat them with a subtle hand. I think that's the beauty of a film like, say, *Get Out* and a book like *IC3*. It felt to me that many of the young writers in the 'Crusaders' section of the book were feeling the raw explosion of the moment we were living in. There we were on the cusp of a new century, a new millennium; Y2K had arrived and it felt like there was an unspoken consensus: the world had not fallen apart after all. Well, we better start putting it together.

## Salena Godden

Twenty years ago, I was a struggling poet. I was

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travelling a lot and touring. I was trying to find my way, doing poetry gigs in smoky backrooms, in pubs and squats, raves and basements. Everything was DIY and homemade back then. I was self-publishing and printing my own zines. I was in my band, SaltPeter with Peter Coyte and we were producing our own CDs and albums, gigging lots. Back then I was performing poetry to punky guitars and ska and drum and bass beats in clubs, festivals and raves. It was a lot of fun and also a lot of uncertainty to live so precariously.

I was writing about all the things I was experiencing; I was exploring themes of identity and feminism, lots of sex and break-up poems, mixed up with comedy, politics and social commentary. Some of my poetry was being published in zines like *Rising* and *Full Moon Empty Sports Bag* and the occasional anthology here in the UK. *The Fire People* with Lemn Sissay was out then. I was also published in the US in indie poetry journals like *Barbaric Yawp*. Around this time I was touring with Coldcut and Ninja Tunes and the *Let Us Play!* album was huge. My focus was on collaborations, music and performance and trying to make albums, get good gigs that paid and hustle. The world of publishing and books was kinda closed off; it didn't seem to have space for me. I used to send poems off every Friday, I recall walking to the post office to post packages of poems to all kinds of poetry journals and magazines and publishers, little and big presses, all over the world. I dreamed of

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being published one day, to see my work published in my own book, it was all I was working towards. I love how in all that itinerant chaos and hunger there was always so much discipline and passion.

I was very proud to have work published in *IC3*. I think it is a beautiful collection, so many of my heroes, so many writers I look up to, Jackie Kay, Benjamin Zephaniah, Labi Siffre, Margaret Busby, Lemn Sissay. I have to say I will always be very grateful to Kadija Sesay and Courttia Newland. Massive thank you!

Why was *IC3* important? It held us all together in a way. It archived us. It put the flag in the mountain to say, 'We were here, we can climb, we do exist.' I have kept the press cuttings from this publication in a scrapbook. The fact I still have that scrapbook means something, it must have meant a lot to me to be seen and included in this book and in this way.

I think I remember writing it sitting in a rainy pub in Hastings, I have a memory of that—nursing a pint, trying to make it last and watching gulls out of the pub window.

## Brenda Emmanus

*IC3* was published at a significant period of my career. At the time, I had aspired to become a journalist but yet to decide on what platform—radio, television or print. The latter seemed the obvious choice because while undertaking my

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degree in Media studies, I had already started freelancing as a reporter for a news publication that had given me opportunities while studying.

Creative writing had been a hobby to me, but one I took relatively seriously at the time. I was participating in workshops and was particularly inspired by those I attended conducted by author and poet, Professor Colin Channer often dubbed 'Bob Marley with a pen' and the founder of the Calabash International Literary Festival. He was an encouraging soul, who navigated me through disastrous attempts at creating work inspired by the wonderful work of writers that I had admired at the time, and to delve deeper, be brave and find my own voice, even if it was not as sophisticated as published talent.

It was great advice. I began to write for writing's sake. Simply to get ideas out of my head, experiment with character development and learn to focus. I was not a confident writer, to me it was play ... I would ask, 'what if?' and then attempt to create the said scenarios. I remember being told not to write constantly about characters too close to my own experience, to push myself to think and develop ideas beyond my imagination. That would help to stretch me.

I remember the advice well but as becoming the next Bernadine Evaristo or Toni Morrison was way beyond my writing ambition, I did not always stick to the plan. I think in my head, if I had a choice, I would have wanted to learn to write

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screenplays as I could see clearly in my mind's eye the stories that I wanted to tell, but fine-tuning the skills to shape them into quality fiction seemed beyond my capabilities. It is no surprise then, that I found myself working in television where I could tell stories and share ideas with pictures.

That said, I was beyond thrilled when I had been asked to submit a piece of work for *IC3* and it was accepted. Being published in such a groundbreaking anthology, amongst some wonderful and inspiring talent was humbling. The project included so many great names that I loved as authors. I felt like a stone being thrown into a bowl of rose quartz, diamonds, and rubies. Somehow, just being a part of this ambitious project that shone a spotlight on an eclectic mix of creative writers was a prize big enough to suppress any insecurity about the quality of my little contribution. I had been part of something special.

Now as I look at the roll call of names in this anniversary issue, I gasp with shock and pride. The poetry, essays, short stories and memoirs include friends, associates and award-winning stars of the literary world. Some I have interviewed in my professional capacity, others I have shared late nights socialising with, and a few who have encouraged and supported me in my chosen career. This is a special publication for personal reasons, for political reasons and for pure pleasure.



## Uju Asika

When *IC3* came out, I was a grad student (magazine journalism) at NYU. Prior to that, I'd been an arts and culture journalist in London writing for *The Weekly Journal* (part of *The Voice* group) as well as publications like *New Nation*, *Touch* magazine, *Untold* and *The Guardian*.

Most of the stuff I was writing about explored identity, creativity and culture from a Black/multicultural perspective. Pretty similar to what I write today as an author and a blogger, although now it's largely through a parenting lens. Outside of journalism, I'd had some poems featured in a couple of anthologies. My very first published writing appeared in an anthology that was also edited by Kadija Sesay titled *Burning Words, Flaming Images Vol. 1*.

I felt proud and honoured to have my work included among such a range of UK talent. Poetry was something I did mostly in private, so I'll never forget the buzz of seeing my poem mentioned favourably by Maya Jaggi in *The Guardian* alongside Linton Kwesi Johnson, Dorothea Smartt and Jackie Kay!

Before the anthology, I had never actually heard of the police code *IC3*. It's such a reductive way to describe an incredibly diverse community. This anthology helped reclaim and transform that in a way. So now when I hear *IC3*, I think of Black people coming together to tell powerful, funny,

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truthful stories in our own voices. We've always had that ability to turn something shitty into something amazing.

I wrote both pieces while I was still living in London. The memoir 'Two-Tone Chameleon' is about my first day as a Black Nigerian girl arriving at an English boarding school. It's quite a visceral piece that just poured out of me. The poem 'Said the Moose' was inspired by a short article I read somewhere about a moose in Vermont who fell in love with a cow. I thought it was such a sweet, funny and romantic idea. Years later, I stumbled across a thesis someone wrote in which they'd analysed my poem giving it all sorts of layers of meaning. It was fascinating to read because I hadn't actually intended anything so profound. It was just a love story. But it was a reminder that anything you write is only partly yours—the rest is for the reader's imagination.

## Henry Bonsu

When *IC3* was published I was writing for a variety of publications, ranging from *The Times* to *The Express* to *Pride* magazine. As a journalist and broadcaster my columns were usually inspired by the news and current affairs stories I was covering on TV or radio. I'd developed a specialist interest in politics, race, mental health, gender relations and sport. I was a pretty confident columnist, sometimes turning around features at a few hours' notice, but,

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like a lot of daily news folk, not required to think much deeper about a subject. Nevertheless, when Kadija and Courttia approached me I seized the opportunity to try something different. It was pretty clear from their vision and from the quality of the contributing writers that *IC3* was going to be a significant piece of work.

It was 1999, the year of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report, when Britain was forced to take a long hard look at itself and found the reflection wanting. I wondered how I could help to capture this zeitgeist for the new book. By then I'd been living in Brixton for 6 years, and the community was in the grip of a Harlem-style gentrification—one that was generating all kinds of tensions. I decided to use a seemingly innocuous encounter outside a local nightclub to make deeper cultural points about some of the ethnic and cultural fault lines that had been thrown up by this phenomenon.

Although I was delighted with the way 'A Brixton Tale' resonated with many who read it, I didn't pivot in a literary direction. That was because then, as now, the tragic murder of a Black man triggered a clamour for more voices like mine. So I decided to pursue radio presenting full time. But I remain as proud now as I was then that I made a small contribution to a landmark tome that is as relevant today as it was twenty years ago. That's why I plan to re-read as many of the poems, essays, memoirs, and short stories as I can before we all meet again.

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### Colin Babb

I first met Kadija Sesay in 1999 when I interviewed her for a radio programme on African writers I co-produced for the BBC World Service. After the interview, I told Kadija I was searching for an opportunity to return to writing. Kadija immediately suggested that I should contribute to a book project she was editing with Courttia Newland. This was *IC3*. I was inspired by Kadija's generous encouragement.

For many years, I was interested in exploring the relationship between the Caribbean diaspora in Britain, West Indian cricket, and my memories of growing up in a Guyanese/Bajan household in 1970s Britain. These themes underpinned my contribution to *IC3*, 'Cricket, Lovely Cricket: London SW16 to Guyana and Back'.

I was pleased to be included in this anthology and fascinated by the contributions written by some of the other writers. Some of whom I knew or would meet in future years.

Writing for *IC3* wasn't just a turning point as a new outlet for my writing. It provided me with a launch pad for some of my future endeavours. After the launch of *IC3*, I continued to work for the BBC as a website producer, broadcast journalist and member of the radio and television audience services team. I produced studio sessions and interviews with Mahlete-Tsige Getachew, Bonnie Greer, Vincent Magombe and Véronique Tadjo for

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the BBC World Service radio programmes. All of whom were contributors to *IC3*.

In 2012, I completed a Caribbean Studies MA at the University of Warwick. One of the people who encouraged me to start the course was Professor David Dabydeen. David was the Director at the Yesu Persaud Centre for Caribbean Studies at Warwick. He contributed a poem, 'Carnival Boy' for *IC3*.

Some of the themes I explored in *IC3* filtered through two books I wrote for Hansib publications. *They Gave the Crowd Plenty Fun: West Indian Cricket and its Relationship with the British-Resident Caribbean Diaspora*, and *1973 and Me: The England v West Indies Test Series and a Memorable Childhood Year*.

I also contributed to *Homecoming: Voices of the Windrush Generation* by Colin Grant (Jonathan Cape), and *The Bowling was Superfine: West Indian Writing and West Indian Cricket* authored by Stewart Brown and Ian McDonald (Peepal Tree).

Some of my magazine and website work since *IC3* includes, writing for the Caribbean Intelligence website, BBC Food, BBC Learning, the Lobi news and current affairs magazine for Albanian language speakers in North Macedonia, Modern English Teacher (MET), and the online Dictionary of African Biography (Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University).

I worked as a librarian, and as a website editor for schools, universities and the public health sector. I worked as a freelance photographer in Antigua,

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Dominica and St. Lucia for an education book publishing company. I was a guest on television in Guyana and radio in Australia, Barbados, Grenada and Trinidad, and made guest appearances with the BBC TMS radio cricket commentary team.

### Ionie Richards

When my piece ‘Nine Nights’, a memoir about my father was published in *IC3* in 2000, I was ecstatic. It was my first piece of work published in an anthology amongst a long list of distinguished writers. For years I had written short pieces, essays, poetry, short stories, but here I was on the brink of launching myself into the world of a published writer.

I remember the invitation to the launch event that year and how desperately I wanted to go to celebrate but I was unable to do so. The year 2000 and many years to come was a period of challenging health issues so huge, it propelled me to write my own autobiography of that experience as therapy. It was as though ‘Nine Nights’ was just the start of what was to come and gave me confidence to write about that experience. Yet, twenty years on, where am I now?

In my writing and my thinking, I have always explored the economic, social and political underbelly of society, speaking about the underclass, migration and giving voice to the dispossessed.

I am currently developing an historical fiction

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novel based on my research into my slave ancestors, discovering more about who I am and my place in this world as well as exploring new ways of storytelling.

I am also developing a poetry series, preserving untold stories from Caribbean elders. These will be added to an extensive collection of poetry on the human condition produced over the decades, through my lens.

My writing journey has over the years reconnected with both editors, Kadija Sesay and Courttia Newland through retreats, writing courses and publications. My poetry appears in the anthology *Red: Contemporary Black British Poetry*.

The reissue of the publication of *IC3* in 2021 to mark its twentieth anniversary now gives me that opportunity to be part of a celebration of Black British writers who, while twenty years older, are part of a canon of writers who provided a snapshot of our collective experiences at the time. It is a legacy of what was achieved then, with the promise of what was still to come from many of us as contributors.

## Panya Banjoko

*IC3* unlocked new opportunities for me. I began writing in the mid-1990s and published poems in Nottingham magazines; *IC3* brought my work to a wider national and international audience.

The idea for my poem 'Brain Drain' came

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while I was in The Gambia on a writers' retreat organised by Kadija Sesay in the late 1990s. Looking back, it was the contrast between the Gambian and Nottingham landscapes that sparked it and how social media was beginning to influence our lives, but it was written well before handheld devices became the norm. Most of all, it was influenced by dub poetry, the style in which I was performing and writing, and the tension between writing for performance and writing for the page. Like many Black writers then, I worried that my work wouldn't stand up to literary criticism when the critical apparatus typically did not take account of poetry as a sonic performance and event, so being published in *IC3* helped me gain confidence that it could.

I quit my job and went freelance after *IC3* because I wanted to spend more time on writing beyond snatched moments between raising a family of four and holding down full-time work. I still freelance today in the heritage sector and, in 2009, founded Nottingham Black Archive. I changed direction after *IC3*, undertaking two MAs, one in Children's Literature and another in Museum Studies. I wrote two early years publications for the museum service, and have never stopped writing and performing. I have been published in several anthologies since and my debut collection *Some Things* was published in 2018 by Burning Eye Books. I've almost completed a practice-led PhD at Nottingham Trent University. My research mines Black literary history in Nottingham through



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Nottingham Black Archive and responds to its recovery via a new poetry collection. Some of the poems are forthcoming in *(Re)Framing the Archive*, slated for publication in June 2022, as the wider collection continues to build.

My poetry has taken me in many directions. It has featured in an exhibition by Black British artist Keith Piper at the Beaconsfield Gallery, at a British Film Festival and the International Film Festival Rotterdam. *IC3* helped me to build confidence in my creativity. I am grateful to Kadija and to Courttia Newland for helping me gain my footing on the first rung of the publishing ladder. They also inspired me to be proactive on behalf of others and in 2018, through the work of Nottingham Black Archive, I published an anthology of Black writers in Nottingham so they could experience the thrill of being published. Beyond personal benefits, *IC3* is an important cultural resource. I use it when teaching poetry, whether at Nottingham Trent University or in the community when leading writers' workshops. To mark the reissue of *IC3*, I will raise a glass of white rum with my eldest daughter, Asha Banjoko, who was also published in the *IC3* anthology at the age of sixteen.

## Maureen Roberts

I had not published my first collection when *IC3* was published. I was published in many anthologies and magazines at the time. A short story and a poem

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was accepted for *IC3*. In both pieces I wanted to document the experience of the African Caribbean community in London through my own personal experiences. So the poem ‘They Thought we Couldn’t Speak English’ was autobiographical. It’s about race and class and those first interactions with English people (good and bad) as a Caribbean child—the process of learning where I fit in the universe.

The short story is about alcohol addiction, isolation and the breakdown of family connections within the community.

A section of the poem was/is used on the Caribbean O Level exam. It talks about using Irish potatoes for West Indian soup. The poem connected that British experience to young people in the Caribbean, a couple of whom tracked me down and phoned to talk to me about the poem. It highlighted for me the importance of writing and getting stories out and how the young are influenced by that.

I’m due to do some workshops in Lichfield soon and will use this this poem which I haven’t read or talked about for a long time. I usually work with poems from my *Bogle-L’Ouverture* collection, ‘My Grandmother Sings to Me’.

## Judith Lewis

When *IC3* was first published in 2000, I had just become a mum to my daughter Taja. I had put my writing life on hold to concentrate on motherhood,

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with every intention of resuming it when parenthood offered an opportunity for creativity.

I have never been confident in my writing life, even now. In spite of many ideas, I fall victim to both procrastination and doubt. That said, I am sure in the knowledge that I am born to write. I hope to share my writing as a gift for good.

Publication gave me a sense of pride and allowed me the luxury of seeing myself as a writer in a way I had not fully grasped before. There was something quite magical about seeing my name in print in this way. The direction from there was very simply onward.

*IC3* opened a window on the talent of Black writers in the UK in a collection that allowed us to be seen in our full glory. Both established and new writers were able to highlight their work.

I have to admit that it was a rushed piece written in my bedroom. Even now, I can see myself sitting on my bed and thinking about a trip to the island of my parents' birth. During the trip, I recall trying to breathe in everything I saw and feeling quite overwhelmed. I wondered what it must have been like for my parents to walk those plantation roads.

I will mark the reissue by sitting and re-reading it. I will then share it with friends and family, hoping to engage the younger members of my family to author their own stories. As my birthday arrives in time for the 20th anniversary, I reflect on how far I have come not only as a person, but as a writer.

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Some years ago, a writer I respected, and still do, told me that I would not write my best work until I had lived a full life. That writer friend was correct, as one's senses become more attuned as a result of life, death and heartbreak. ◇



A SALUTE

# The IC3 Q&As

*Featuring contributions from:*  
Ray Shell, Gemma Weekes,  
Stella Oni, Richard Mkoloma,  
Diana Evans, Yvette Ankrah,  
Judith Bryan, SuAndi

## Five Dials

# Ray Shell

FD

Where were you in your writing life when *IC3* was published?

RS

Flamingo/HarperCollins had just published my first novel *Iced*. I was very green and was so chuffed when Courttia Newland and Kadija Sesay asked me to contribute.

FD

What themes and ideas were you exploring?

RS

I was very new to publishing; my editor, Jonathan Warner at Flamingo had just died and he passed before he explained genre publishing to me. HarperCollins wanted another two diary-type books and I stupidly turned them down because I wanted to be free to write whatever I wanted ... I didn't understand the value of building the audience of the readers I already had before switching to another genre. I was very anxious when my Jonathan passed. Flamingo was his imprint and he had about ten authors he was working with. Jonathan was our Daddy, and when he died the imprint collapsed and we writers were left fending for ourselves. I didn't know how difficult it

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was to be published because I was offered a publishing deal with Transworld Books before I had an agent.

FD

What effect did publication have?

RS

My story in *IC3* was extremely different in style and content from *Iced* so I don't know what effect it had, if any.

FD

Why was *IC3* important?

RS

Because it showcased a lot of Black writers writing in the UK at the time, many of whom I'd never heard of. I doubt if they'd heard of me.

FD

Where did you write your contribution to *IC3*?

RS

I was in East London, not too far from where my *IC3* story was set. I first met Courttia during this process and he has been a writing godfather to me.



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FD

Were you familiar with the work of any of the other writers? Did you track down any work by your fellow authors?

RS

I knew of Courttia Newland, Kadija Sesay, Labi Siffre, Floella Benjamin, Bonnie Greer, Margaret Busby, Benjamin Zephaniah, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Treva Etienne, Brenda Emmanuel, Henry Bonsu, Ionie Richards, Kevin Le Gendre, Leone Ross, so I was aware of quite a few writers. But the majority were unknown to me. I'm checking *IC3* now. It's rich and full of life. I've got to dip back into it.

## Gemma Weekes

FD

Where were you in your writing life when *IC3* was published?

GW

I was right at the beginning of my career. Barely out of my teens when I submitted the work!

FD

What themes and ideas were you exploring?

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GW

I was exploring what love meant—what it was and how my experiences of it had formed me as a person. As Rumi said: *‘Everything has to do with loving and not loving.’*

FD

Had you been published elsewhere?

GW

I’d been published the first time at 17 in a national St. Lucian newspaper. My creative writing teacher sent in a short story without my knowledge! It was called ‘The Fall’ and it was about suicide.

FD

Were you feeling confident about your writing life?

GW

I don’t know if I was confident, but I was *sure*. That certainty—that this is what I should be doing—has never wavered.

FD

What effect did publication have?

GW

It helped me to feel established as a writer and introduced me to a lot of fellow scribes who

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would go on to be in my life for a very long time. I didn't expand on the work in a direct way, but definitely thematically.

FD

Why was *IC3* important?

GW

*IC3* was and continues to be important because we were allowed to express whatever moved us. Instead of Black writing being treated as a genre, we were allowed to contribute whatever moved us, whatever we were interested in. It reflects the depth and multiplicity of experience through the lens of the Black diaspora.

FD

Does it bring back any memories?

GW

Fragments of old notebooks. Writing on the top deck of the bus. The smell of paper, ink and those gourmand lip glosses I was always wearing at the time.

FD

Will you mark the reissue in any way?

GW

I shall congratulate myself that I never stopped

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writing, and toast my son with a glass of non-alcoholic bubbly because now he's a writer too (at the ripe old age of 14). I shall also pat myself on the back because I could never write that flea poem about my current partner. He's all the things!

## Stella Oni

FD

Where were you in your writing life when *IC3* was published?

SO

I had written a full manuscript five years earlier and had not written anything after that till *IC3* came along.

FD

Were you feeling confident about your writing life?

SO

I had not had any success with being published and was busy raising my children. It was a kind of cold, dark place without writing. It was good to capture my state of mind during that period but unsettling to read it now.

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FD

What effect did publication have?

SO

I completed a full manuscript four years after *IC3* and moved in the direction of crime fiction.

FD

Why was *IC3* important?

SO

It was an amazing way of capturing Black writing talent at various stages of their journey.

FD

Where did you write your contribution to *IC3*?

SO

I believe I wrote this at home. It brings back memories but not great ones.

FD

Were you familiar with the work of any of the other writers? Did you track down any work by your fellow authors?

SO

I am familiar with the work of Bernardine Evaristo, Chris Abani, the late Buchi Emecheta and so many others.

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FD

Will you mark the reissue in any way?

SO

I have marked it on social media and it was exciting to follow its journey.

## Richard Mkoloma

FD

Where were you in your writing life when *IC3* was published?

RM

I was a young spoken word MC/poet and this was the first time my work had been published.

FD

What themes and ideas were you exploring?

RM

The piece was about my thoughts around the UK elections at the time. As with most of my writing, it was from the holistic perspective of a young Black male. My contribution documented personal experience, thoughts and feelings, as a part of a larger conversation with my various communities. This was my first published work, although I had made music. I was confident about my writing but generally knew I occupied a 'new and not always

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understood' space between poetry and rap.

FD

What effect did publication have?

RM

The work was a personal achievement, and I was honoured to be featured alongside mentors and contemporaries. I went on to produce a music album and perform. I continued to explore my experience through music, facilitation—working with young people—as well as a fashion career.

FD

Why was *IC3* important?

RM

The work represented a vibrant but fairly underground scene/community of artists that spanned word-, movement- and image-makers, and captured a collective moment in time that was ground-breaking and deservedly ambitious.

FD

Where did you write your contribution to *IC3*?

RM

At home in London. I was frustrated at the double-speak of politics, the disregard for the

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working class and the Black community. It was written as a nod to a UK hip-hop style that played on rhythm, rhyme and a reflection of a type of multi-dimensional mix of cultures. Memories—of politics, of an election I felt was important but also a bit of a farce, a no win. A feeling which at this time is unfortunately familiar.

FD

Were you familiar with the work of any of the other writers? Did you track down any work by your fellow authors?

RM

Quite a few were and are peers and still friends; it was an awesome body of work that connected us. We cross paths frequently.

FD

Will you mark the reissue in any way?

RM

Now that I know it has been reissued, it will be over my socials and may even feature in a reflective archival body of work I'm working on.



Diana Evans

FD

Where were you in your writing life when *IC3* was published?

DE

I was working on my first novel *26a* and working in arts journalism. I was also trying my hand at short fiction.

FD

What themes and ideas were you exploring?

DE

I was thinking about themes of belonging and cross-cultural marriage and family life, as well as potential meeting points between realism and the supernatural. I had had a few poems anthologized—my writing started as poetry and journalling. I was not yet confident in my abilities as a novelist or fiction writer but was simply exploring and enjoying experimenting with words. I was soon to do an MA in Creative Writing, which helped me find my voice.

FD

What effect did publication have? Did you expand on the work published in *IC3*?

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DE

It's always validating to see your work in print. The work I published in *IC3* was an early draft of components in *26a*, so I did definitely expand on it.

FD

Why was *IC3* important?

DE

Black British writing had not been celebrated before on such a large canvas. It was an important opportunity for writers to be anthologized among their peers and go on to develop relationships and artistic links, and for readers it provided insights into worlds too little seen in the rather selective, wider context of British fiction at the time. There is such an amazing breadth of writers in the book and it's quite a riveting thing to have them all in one place.

I was familiar with many of the names, such as Leone Ross, David Dabydeen, Buchi Emecheta, Malika Booker, Gemma Weekes and others, but many of them I was not familiar with, so it was interesting to see what other work was being produced and what other themes were being addressed and thought about.

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FD

Does your contribution bring back any memories? Any sense memories?

DE

I was living in West London at the time and my desk was in the corner of my living room. I used to work there late into the night sometimes, enjoying the silence and that meditative state that writing puts me into.

FD

Will you mark the reissue in any way?

DE

I will add it to my shelf of previous books.

## Yvette Ankrah

FD

Where were you in your writing life when *IC3* was published?

YA

I had not long graduated and was working in the media at the time when *IC3* was published. I've been writing since I was in my teens, and had written everything from articles, poetry to non-fiction pieces and had already been published in books and magazines by that point.

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FD

What themes and ideas were you exploring?

YA

I was exploring the end of a relationship and what that does to you when you're young. It's interesting how twenty years later that pales into insignificance with the other things that happen in life. Grief and loss are themes I do not write as much about now, having experienced much deeper and more raw losses. As I mentioned, I had been published in other magazines and books using a different name.

FD

What effect did publication have? Did you expand on the work published in *IC3*? Or head in a new direction?

YA

It is always lovely to see your work in print and the process of creating that work was quite cathartic, but I did not want to read it once it was published! My life has headed in a completely different direction. Writing for pleasure was no longer part of my world. However, I have always written for work in some way or another. I hadn't written for myself in almost twenty years and began writing again in the pandemic. It's interesting how things come full circle.

## Five Dials

FD

Why was *IC3* important?

YA

It was needed then and it is needed now. As a Black African woman born in Britain, hearing our stories and having our voice heard is incredibly important. At the time, African American writers and some from the Caribbean were far more prevalent. And they were still under-represented on our shelves and in our curriculum. We had started to see an emergence of writers such as Courttia Newland, Diran Adebayo and Andrea Levy coming out and receiving critical acclaim for their work. They opened the doors for more home-grown voices. *IC3* showed how much diversity and talent was here, much of it under the radar.

FD

Where did you write your contribution to *IC3*? Any details? Does it bring back any memories? Any sense memories?

YA

I was still living at home at the time, writing on the same machine that I'd written my final year degree on, in a room I spent so many hours with the person who I wrote about.

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FD

Will you mark the reissue in any way?

YA

The original book sits on my shelf in my living room, and I will probably take time to sit and read the reissue and reconnect with the stories.

## Judith Bryan

FD

Where were you in your writing life when *IC3* was published?

YA

My first novel, *Bernard and the Cloth Monkey*, had been published in 1998 by HarperCollins, after winning the 1997 Saga Prize for new Black British Novelists, and I had begun work on my second novel. (The novel was reissued this year by Penguin in a landmark series, *Black Britain: Writing Back*, curated and with new introductions by Bernardine Evaristo.) Back in 2000, I had also received a couple of awards, a London Arts Board Award and a K. Blundell Trust Award, and had a couple of short stories published in anthologies. So I was feeling very optimistic and excited about my writing career, connecting to other emerging writers and beginning to develop a sense of my tropes and obsessions as a writer.

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I was exploring themes of home, belonging and displacement (psychic and physical)—which continue to be my major pre-occupations as a writer. The poem in *IC3* reflects this. In it I recall time spent with my mother in different spaces, and her psychic and physical transformation on returning ‘home’ to Jamaica. There’s joy in the poem—mine and hers—and an underlying anxiety in the unstated question: ‘Where is *my* home, where is the place that nourishes and restores me?’

FD

What effect did publication have?

YA

Publication in *IC3* helped to confirm my identity and confidence as an emerging writer. It deepened my connection with a community of peers, several of whom are now lifetime colleagues and friends.

FD

Why was *IC3* important?

YA

I’m proud to have made a tiny contribution to this landmark compendium. It showcases the richness and variety of Black British writing, demolishing the myth that our literature is narrow or niche. The range of writing styles,

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forms and subject matter creates an immersive and endlessly fascinating text. It's an extended conversation between writers and readers, offering many surprises and fresh takes alongside recurring themes.

FD

Were you familiar with the work of any of the other writers?

YA

I already knew and respected the work of several of the contributors including Patience Agbabi, Bernardine Evaristo, Diana Evans, Jackie Kay, Hope Massiah, Leone Ross, Ferdinand Dennis, Lemn Sissay and many more (and, of course, Kadija Sesay and Courttia Newland). Over the past two decades, it has been brilliant to see so many of the contributors become established, critically acclaimed and prize-winning writers each with their own impressive body of work across all literary forms.

FD

Will you mark the reissue in any way?

YA

I'm marking the reissue by re-reading the entire anthology, and finding it to be as fresh and relevant now as it was twenty years ago.



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SuAndi

FD

Where were you in your writing life when *IC3* was published?

SA

I can't remember the year but I expect fairly established.

FD

What themes and ideas were you exploring? Were you feeling confident about your writing life?

SA

I was building my career, so accepting a wide range of work opportunities/commissions.

FD

Why was *IC3* important?

SA

It expanded the representation of Black writers.

FD

Where did you write your contribution to *IC3*?

SA

I wrote it in a cab as I left Soho.

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FD

Will you mark the reissue in any way?

SA

My first experience of a reissue.  $\diamond$





# Five Dials