

Stories of Hope



Unlocking creativity and discovering stories
of EU citizens living in the UK

Delivered by:



Introduction

This publication is a collection of entries submitted to the two editions of the [Stories of Hope](#)⁽¹⁾ photography open call.

This art project was a part of [Common Ground](#),⁽²⁾ an EU co-funded project aiming to centre the lived experience and authentic stories in order to foster understanding and social contact between Europeans living in the UK and British society. The concept of the competition built on the success of [Stories for Change](#)⁽³⁾ project delivered by [the3million](#)⁽⁴⁾ and provided a platform to express oneself creatively and share one's unique narrative.

Through photography and storytelling we nurtured understanding, empathy, and solidarity within the diverse communities of EU citizens who call the UK their home and got to appreciate the richness of the social fabric woven by migrants in the UK. There were two editions of this competition.



(1) <https://www.ourcommonground.uk/stories-of-hope>; (2) <https://www.ourcommonground.uk/about>; (3) <https://www.ourcommonground.uk/stories-for-change>; (4) <https://the3million.org.uk>

The first edition, Stories of Hope took place in April 2024 and culminated with the winning entry being announced on Europe Day at Europe House, which is where the EU Delegation to the UK is based. 42 entries were submitted to this edition and posted on the3million instagram. The twelve with the highest number of likes were shortlisted and their authors invited to our outreach event coinciding with Europe Festival in London to explore the role of art and creativity in strengthening EU citizens networks and changing the public narrative and perception of EU citizens in the UK. With 15% of the votes **Monika Prorokova** who lives in Northern Ireland, but is a proud Czech, won the first edition of the competition and was invited to share her work and story with Common Ground project stakeholders at a networking event in Brussels in June 2024.



I visited Northern Ireland in 2006, only to spent my summer holidays here. Well, time flies and I've been living here for nearly 18 years.

We have a small Czech community here. It's always nice to speak in your mother tongue and not forget about your culture.



My home is here, but sometimes I feel uncertain where I belong. And this is the time to take camera and explore the rugged coastline, hiking in the mountains, or wandering through a tranquil forest.

In every corner of this enchanting land, there's a story to be told, a sight to behold, and a warm welcome waiting for you. You are more than welcome to join me on this journey.

Thanks to my passion for travelling and photography I meet many people from different backgrounds. Northern Irish people are kind-hearted and always willing to help you (in my opinion).

The second edition, [Stories of Hope. Diverse Voices](#)⁽⁵⁾ took place in October 2024 to coincide with the Black History Month and called for EU citizens from racialised backgrounds to showcase their artworks accompanied by their lived experience stories of their journeys, identity and belonging in the UK. There were 18 entries submitted to this call, however two thirds were not within the scope of the call as they were submitted by British citizens from racialised backgrounds rather than EU communities. This was really interesting as in stark contrast to the first edition whereby only two British people submitted entries. In the first edition, the entries from British people were inspired by their connection to the EU through travels or family, and their European identity whereas in the second edition it was the lived experience of being racialised that inspired the submission rather than any ties to the EU. Nevertheless, it showed that there is an appetite among racialised communities both European and British to share their stories. From the six eligible entries the winning one was determined via an online poll among the members of the [EU Citizens Campaigns Network](#).⁽⁶⁾

With 39% of the votes, **Marijo Alba Sanchez** from Spain was announced as the second edition winner during the Common Ground closing conference in London in November 2024.



I was born in a village in the province of Salamanca, Spain. My grandparents were shepherds and they practised transhumance. I lived in different places of Spain such as Denia, Lerida, Barcelona, Madrid and now I live in London since 2003. My homeland is the world with its universe. I was seduced by the process of photography in the dark room, and after having spent five years painting and drawing I decided to experiment with photography because the play between the camera intrigued me. I was looking for a new life with better opportunities than I had in Madrid. I shared a house with Spanish friends in Camberwell. I realized that the English I studied at school had nothing to do with real everyday English. I understood everything but my pronunciation was not adequate and the people did not understand me. After many months of looking for a job I got a job in a cleaning company, but my colleagues were from South America , so I needed to study English again to improve it. When I had money I started English classes in the evening at the Morley College.

(5) <https://www.ourcommonground.uk/stories-of-hope-diverse-voices>; (6) <https://the3million.org.uk/eu-citizens-campaigns-network>

Both winning entries as well as a selection of the shortlisted artworks from both competitions are included in this publication and were exhibited during the Common Ground conference as well as at the EU Citizens Gathering - an annual networking event for EU citizens in the UK convened by the EU Delegation to the UK.

They show a variety of photography techniques and the richness of stories and lived experience. Through the camera lens and through the unedited authentic commentary we get to know a group of people who chose to call the UK their home and we get to experience their journeys which are as unique as they are universal. ■



Adam Drewett



This Image is the first of the 3 Photographs, all of which are made of two individual photographs collaged together.

1 from Vienna and 1 from London. There are multiple locations across my life which I have grown to consider my home, the feeling transcends borders and physical distance. This image shows my mother gardening in our garden in London collaged on top of my dad and my Oma in our garden of our house in Vienna.



This image depicts my dad decorating a house in London, with my bed from our house in Vienna collaged in.

The old sheets, books and lamp shade of our house in Vienna contrasted against the fresh slate of our house in London where a new beginning was made. These two locations are both places which I consider home despite the distance between them, and I have attempted to join them together into cohesive photographs in this short series.



It shows my mother answering the phone in our house in London collaged over the top of my brother and my aunt in the living room in our house in Vienna. I believe this image demonstrates the connection between two completely separate, but linked domestic spaces which represent the two places which I consider home.

Agata Banc



Journey

When we came to the UK ten years ago, we had a plan to save up some money for our beginner business in Poland and go back home two years later.

Before traveling we sent over two huge parcels with all our belongings, jumped on a plane with hand luggage and we were ready for the trip! The parcels got lost and never arrived. At the beginning, we walked in the rain around six miles every day to send work applications to the local library. When the savings dried up we struggled a bit and had nowhere to stay for a while, but friends took us in. When we finally rented a house it turned out it was flooded as someone had left a tap on!

So our beginnings were with no family, no English and no money!



Belonging

Once we settled we brought our dog from Poland. A few weeks later somebody gave us a kitten too.

We walked a lot in our new town and discovered places and people and took lots of photos to share with family and friends in Poland. It was a culture shock, from the taps to the sheep and driving on the wrong side of the road. And the green landscapes.

And always a green landscape. It was starting to feel like home, but we were still homesick.



Identity

The joy of capturing people and faces, the breathtaking beauty of the landscape through my lens is what I love the most. My passion helped me survive hard times, not forget who I am and eventually thrive.

Last year my photo exhibition "TASTE", a multicultural project involving traditional Polish cuisine and local people was shown in a local museum.

I'm a part of a few photography projects and also running my own business. I think it is a place with a lot of opportunities for everybody, and we are delighted for our sons' future.

It was hard to leave my home and my comfort zone, but a better life doesn't come if we are waiting. Now I have two homes.

Alesja Aleksandrova

What does it take to be a civil servant? A prison officer? A job? A career? A forgotten hero? When you risk your life every day, when you put forward your duty above anything else, yet, unrecognised by the government, by your managers, by society, and not even by those in custody themselves. You go into the most oppressive and depressing place to save those, that society has rejected and locked behind the door to forget, those trying to commit a suicide and harm themselves and to protect public from those that have committed the most horrific crimes. It takes a lot, sometimes it takes everything. Sometimes it takes your physical or mental health, or both, sometimes it takes your family as well... But you know deep inside, someone has to be there. Someone has to be a prison officer, a police officer, a teacher, a firefighter, a paramedic...

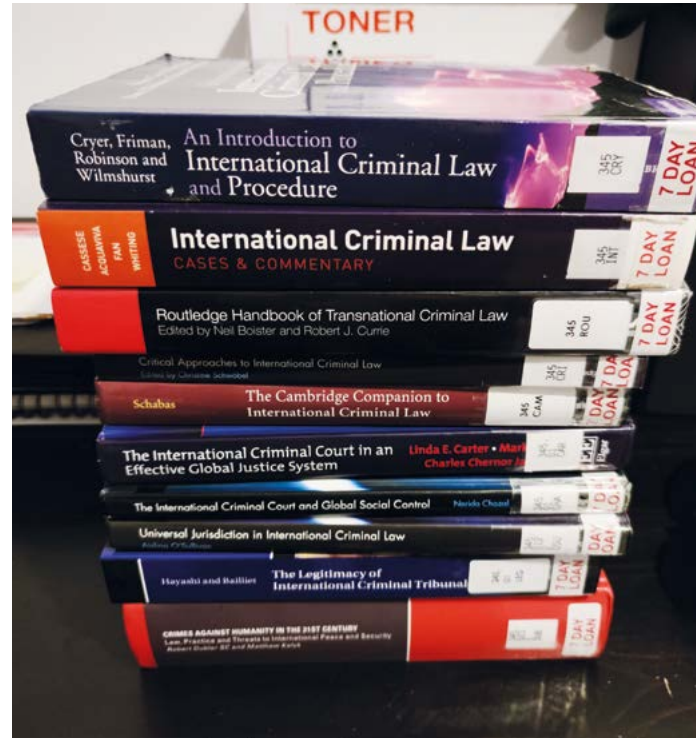
Once, a young soul embarked on a journey from Latvia to the UK, aged 18, it had gone through language barrier, human trafficking, domestic violence, homelessness and single parenting. Yet, amidst the struggle, resilience burned bright.

Undeterred by the adversities, this indomitable spirit forged ahead. With unwavering determination, they embraced education, fueled by a thirst for knowledge and a hunger for change. Against all odds, a first-class degree became not just a distant dream, but a tangible reality grasped with trembling hands.

Armed with newfound knowledge and unyielding perseverance, doors once closed swung open to reveal opportunities previously unimaginable. A better job became more than just a means to an end—it was a testament to resilience, and opportunity to purchase the first home, to provide stability and safety for the family and kids.

In the tapestry of life, woven with threads of struggle and perseverance, this story stands as a testament to the human spirit's capacity to rise, unbroken, from the depths of despair, and to carve a path toward a brighter tomorrow through hard work and resilience.

Aspiration - the only thing that should never stop. Only by having a sense of direction and momentum you move forward in life. Sometimes these are temporary goals, sometimes these are life long dreams. This photo shows my bedroom wall that has photos of beautiful places that I want to be at. It serves as a reminder of my dream every morning and every night. My life long dream is to have a log cabin in the woods. And I am planning towards it. I have a plan to save money, and move to northern Sweden to build a few little cabins to host guests that crave for peace, silence and unity with nature. So, this is what this wall represents... A sense of direction and a goal I am working towards.



Alexander Talver

As I pointed my beast of a medium format camera towards the chopped down tree, I realised the latent meaning it held. I could perceive the bitter end of a lifetime or the start of something new and fertile. My view changes depending on where I look from.

Life has taught me the true power of my perspective and I have always tried to look at everything through an optimistic lens, to a sensible degree.

My glass has always been half full. The tree is chopped down, but with the potential to fuel, heat and support a family home. This is a much nicer thought than the tree is chopped down, ending its life, as well as any possibility for new growth. I think that somewhere between rash optimism and hopeless pessimism lies the reality of my existence. The tree is cut down, I could speculate why, or I could just plant another one.

I moved to London from Estonia when I was 9 years old. This was the feeling of my tree. I looked upon my new home drenched with seething pessimism. I missed my friends, my family and my nature. The cold embrace of London made me shiver.

However, as I grew in age, experiences, failures and successes, I began to understand and even empathise with my situation. I still love and miss my sweet home, however, I now cherish the vibrant opportunities of London. I will be successful in this city, one way, or another.

The vine climbs up the wall, one way, or another. I find myself in this vine, inspired by its resilience.

To be successful is to be determined.

If I am to be successful, I need to be driven like this vine. Each part of it is genetically adapted to reach the sun, working in unison towards a unified goal.

One day, an Estonian person will read the newspaper and see my images on the front cover with the caption "Estonian Photographer Making Waves In London". I will make them proud to be Estonian, it will be worth every second of my struggle. Every second spent wishing I belonged, was born in London or feeling lost will be non-existent, merely a speck, overcome.

I am, and will forever be, my biggest supporter. It all has to start somewhere. I will sow the seeds for my life in London.

As I spent hours upon hours printing and scanning these images in the darkroom, I thought about my grandad Tiit and his love of developing film. He used to change the bulb in our bathroom light and transform our porcelain tiles into a red darkroom, with the bathtub containing the developer, fix and stopper. The process always seemed like black magic to me seeing the images appear in the sloshing liquid. Something sparked in me then. My life, my photography and my love of film began in Estonia. It will continue into the world.

Me and my friends used to only hang around my block in Estonia. They all lived in the surrounding blocks but we would always gather around mine.

I loved taking my dogs out to play with us. Everyone would throw the ball around for my dogs to chase. We would play game after game, cause ruckus after ruckus and then all return home at dusk. My summers were a rinse and repeat of this joyful cycle of youth and I grew up among my own. I felt a belonging there which I don't think I have really felt since.

My life has moulded and adapted me into the person that I am today. I would be lying if I said I wasn't happy with my life in London with everything I could ever ask for. But a part of me will forever wonder what it would have been like if I had never left. If I continued the joyful cycle of every summer and if I wasn't the boy in the group destined for a new life in the foreign land of England. I don't remember my last day with my friends and my dogs, but I know that there was one.

As I was taking the images for this project, I found this estate with a sign that read "no dogs allowed on these grounds". This sign struck me in profundity. I feel lucky to have grown up where I did. I wish this for everyone in the world.



Ally Zlatar



Growing up, I suffered from a severe eating disorder for over 10 years. It massively affected my health, leaving me with several chronic illnesses. My traditional Eastern European family didn't understand the depths of mental illness, and medical practitioners saw a diagnosis; they didn't see the person suffering behind the disease.

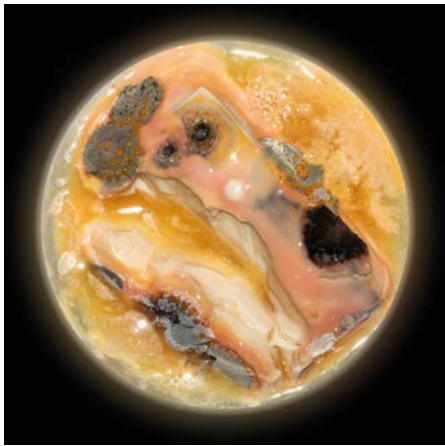


I was only able to find my voice through art, and it helped me connect and promote authentic and vulnerable communication around unwell bodies.



From there, it led me to start The Starving Artist, an art initiative that utilizes the power of creative voices to ignite people-centered solutions for systemic reform.

Angela Grabowska



Isolated human beings are doomed to a limited space surrounded by the walls of the house. Without external sensations, the created space resembled a closed ecosystem in a jar. The internal environment could flourish by drawing on what it was closed with.

My space was surrounded by black nothingness like a planet isolated by thousands of light years, an inner garden, doomed to itself instead of blooming, it rotted.



We live in a world made by humans, but we cannot forget the natural world, we are part of it, and we depend on it. Nature gives us a feeling of identification, deep understanding and, finally, a sense of the great community. Awareness of belonging to something much bigger than yourself.

I am the Earth And the Earth is me.
Each blade of grass,
Each honey tree,
Each bit of mud,
And stick and stone Is blood and muscle,
Skin and bone.
- JANE YOLEN



My journey is now in the right, happy place. I belong to my city, which I can call my "home". I am surrounded by diversity and I am part of it.

Corinne Fench



The first leg of our overland (and sea) journey from Malta to Scotland. A new dawn. A story of hope... and fear, at this point mostly fear. Leaving what we knew for 44 years. Putting our most important belongings in our car. Closing the door to our home... heading towards the unknown.



Aye? Will we be welcomed in Scotland? They voted out of the EU and want less immigration. And yet, we could not feel more welcomed by the Scots. Within days we felt this was the right step, within weeks we knew it. A year later we know that 'What's fur ye will not go by ye'... Like it's meant to be.



First night in the new home.
No table, this box will do.
Just folding chairs.
Burnt pies and a glass of wine.
Hope, hard work and happiness.

Daisy O'Neill



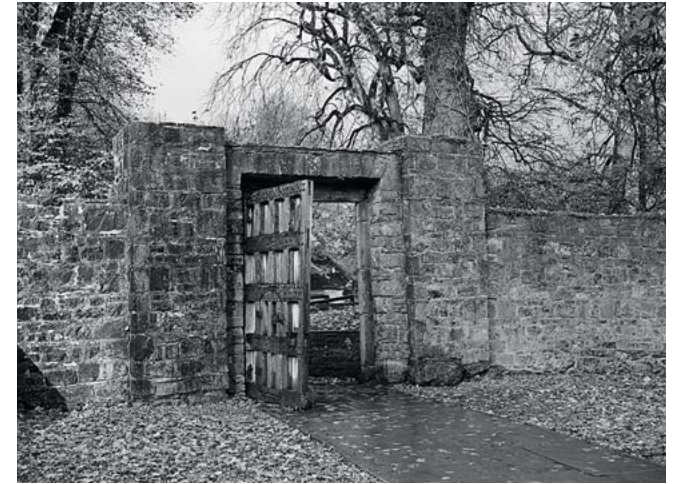
After the EU referendum
I went to Ireland.
Photographing my ancestral home
The paths my grandparents walked
The EU soil
I was greeted with such kindness
By my Irish family



Grandad stopped remembering
And then stopped speaking
So I went to the place he called home
The house on the hill, Killuragh

I'd been once before
And fallen off a wall into a pile of nettles
I made sure to tread more carefully this time

When I returned, I showed him the pictures
And he smiled



When you're feeling sad or scared,
Or if ever you're not sure,
Walk through the door
(You can always change your mind)

Daniella Sihler

Flowers among thorns

Just like in nature, life transitions in cycles. Changing countries feels like changing our own skin to survive in a new environment. A Cotyledon grows out of a seed with no user manual available. We are ready even when we think we are not, unaware of what's yet to come. Flowers wisely surround themselves with crowns of thorns to avoid the dangers of the outside world.

Transitioning in life as a trans person and as a migrant feels similar. Detaching from our initial cocoon, embracing the diversity of different cultures and restarting our story should be something to be cherished and not feared. A caterpillar is not aware of what will become, but still, it becomes beautifully. Life is not immutable and our destiny is not set in stone at birth.

Some flowers thrive, some shrink. The inner weather conditions are to blame. Our roots can be firm, spiky or cuddly with the soil when replanted but the uncertainty of what the future holds certainly makes us more cautious, aware of our surroundings and hopeful with the direction of the wind.

The endless bridge

When we start walking, the impulse consists of a mixture of body mechanics and intuition. I strongly believe in my intuition. Some people call it as a sign, luck, or a logical analysis of possible scenarios. The outcome might turn out to be better than expected or worse, would that make the journey less worth it?

The terms and conditions to cross the endless bridge: You shall cross it before it fades away forever, or you don't. No pressure. To move ahead we can only hope that there's something or someone waiting for us - beyond. Should we leave our past behind or should we carry it with us no matter how heavy it might be?

The current pathway made the bridge not only shorter but endless, it feels broken and unstable to walk. We know it's still there but it continues fading away each and every day more. The wait, oh the wait in a hope to one day to find peace and get to the finishing line in one piece. Will the bridge disappear under my feet before I get to the other side?

Tick-tock,

Tick-tock,

Counting the days, one step at a time, but what lies ahead for you and me?

The fully-booked vacant house

Is there someone home?

There's no time to waste, the season has changed and we have our plans pending. Bird houses are pretty things but very selective. Visitors are welcome to potentially become temporary tenants, not permanent. The entrance is narrow and it sends a clear message: If you don't fit inside our standards then you should try somewhere else to live. Out of touch and heart-crushing, I know, maybe a spokesperson would be handy. Would a government make things better or worse on our behalf?

Critical conditions demand critical actions if your nest depends on it. Squirrels swap houses carrying their offspring if there's a threat near by. Maybe we are just birds, we sing and move on.

The difference of a house and a home is the will to build and grow with it, to make part of our song. No one wants to fly away, we just want to have a nice cup of tea at home. If the weather or life conditions are not favourable or prosperous enough shouldn't a bird be allowed to migrate? It's the purpose of their wings, or legs. Why shouldn't us?

I'm afraid we have been told a lie. There is no such thing as a fully-booked tree since we are not landbirds of this place. I'm just a passenger enjoying the view from a branch, what would I know.

Please, don't let my house be carried away. I wouldn't be able to find my keys.



Dilyana Miteva

Journey

In September 2014, at the age of 30, I embarked on a life-changing journey with my husband and two young children, ages 2 and 6. We decided to leave Sofia, Bulgaria, and move to Glasgow, Scotland, in pursuit of a better future for our family. With no job offers or home waiting for us, we were fueled solely by our dreams of a new beginning.

We packed our essentials and travelled by car, a journey that spanned four days across Europe to reach our new home. The transition was stark—leaving behind Bulgaria’s clear, bright skies for Scotland’s shorter, cloudy days where darkness fell by mid-afternoon.

Finding a home in Glasgow was our first challenge. We settled for a place through a private landlord after discovering the long waiting lists for council flats. Establishing ourselves was daunting; banks demanded utility bills in our name for account setup, but we had just arrived.

As we navigated new educational systems, we enrolled our eldest in Primary 2, skipping Primary 1. Meanwhile our youngest attended a free club for toddlers run by the Salvation Army since nursery spots were scarce.

My husband found a job, and I faced the task of improving my English and following my dream of being a professional photographer. In Bulgaria, our generation learned Russian as a second language, so English was foreign to me. I began classes at a local college, determined to bridge the language gap.

This year marks ten years since that bold move to Scotland. It’s been a long ten-year journey filled with challenges and growth—a testament to our family’s resilience and hope.

Identity & Belonging

I am Bulgarian, deeply rooted in the traditions that have coloured my life, from the vibrant red of Easter eggs to the warm, welcoming scent of freshly baked bread at Christmas. In Glasgow, where my family and I have made our home, these traditions are a treasure chest I open with my children, teaching them to speak and read Bulgarian. They’re not fluent, but each word they master is a gem, preserved from the rich mines of our heritage.

Living in Scotland has shaped me in ways I never anticipated. The strong Glasgow accent was a challenge at first, and even after ten years, I still find myself asking for phrases to be repeated. But I love it here—the people, the parks, and the sense of order and opportunity this country offers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when jobs were lost and businesses struggled, I saw a community and government stepping up to support each other in ways that filled me with gratitude. My identity has evolved in this nurturing environment. I arrived as a Bulgarian, and while that hasn’t changed, I’ve also absorbed aspects of this new culture that has become just as much a part of who I am. I see a future here that is bright with promise for my children, a future perhaps not as certain in the country where I was born.

Scotland has become more than just a place to live—it is our home, and here, we are truly happy.

Aspiration

My aspirations are many, ranging from the wonderfully simple to the grand. This year marks a decade in Scotland, and with it comes my hope to apply for British citizenship. It feels like a natural step, a new door opening for myself and my children, while I continue to cherish my Bulgarian roots reflected in my European passport.

Another dream close to becoming reality is purchasing our first home here in Scotland—a place we can truly call our own. It represents stability and a tangible result of years of hard work and dreams. I also aspire for my children to receive an excellent education in Scotland, providing them with endless opportunities for their futures.

Professionally, I aim to be a well-known photographer. I’ve already set up a studio specializing in newborn, maternity, and family photography. Learning from the best in the field through one-on-one classes and workshops has been surreal, almost like a dream come true. I want to teach my children that anything is possible with belief, honesty, and dedication. Though Bulgaria will always tug at my heart and I cherish our summer visits to family and friends, I see our future here in Scotland. I envision another decade of growth, learning, and happiness in this land that has given us so much. It’s all been worth it, every step and every aspiration, as we build our lives in this beautiful place that we now call home.



Elias Tsigounis

Identity

In 2015, amidst Greece's financial crisis, I arrived in the UK as an EU citizen to another EU country. It wasn't my dream to come here, but rather a decision driven by the need to seek better opportunities and improve my quality of life. This, I suppose, defines me as an immigrant.

Working as a nurse for the NHS among thousands of other immigrants from all over the world, I found it fascinating to experience the diversity that thrives in London. I believe this diversity has significantly shaped my perspective and how I perceive the world around me.

The pandemic found me at the forefront, battling the virus in the hospital alongside my colleagues in the Emergency department and Intensive Care units. Many people fail to realize that these frontline staff who fight the pandemic, were mostly young nurses in their twenties or early thirties. Undoubtedly, this experience has not only shaped me but also impacted the entire planet.

In London, I seized the opportunity to pursue studies in photography, a dream that I may not have had the chance to pursue elsewhere. Through my lens, I don't just capture images but fragments of my journey, reflections of the experiences that have shaped me, especially during the pandemic.

Who am I? I am not solely defined by my profession or nationality but by the sum of my experiences, dreams, and connections that transcend continents. I am an amalgamation of resilience, adaptability, and the pursuit of self-discovery.

Belonging

In my late thirties, when I left Greece, I had already established a social life where I felt I belonged. Even during periods of solitude, I never experienced loneliness. However, upon arriving in London, nostalgia for my roots weighed heavily on me in the initial years. It was during this time that feelings of loneliness crept in. Perhaps this is the moment when one decides to put down roots and grow or return home.

Hundreds of Europeans left the country when Brexit happened, and even more did so at the onset of the pandemic. Despite the challenges, I decided to make roots here as a healthcare practitioner and as an artist.

Photography has always been an invaluable asset during my time in London. It has served as a means to express my artistic nature and navigate the challenges of living in a new environment.

I always yearn to return home to Greece to reunite with my family and friends, but now I am merely a visitor. Yet, upon my return, I find myself longing for the life I've built in London – where my work, my home, and my entire life reside.

Journey

When reflecting on my journey so far, verses from C.P. Cavafy's Greek poem, "Ithaca," come to my mind.

"As you set out for Ithaka
hope your road is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery..."

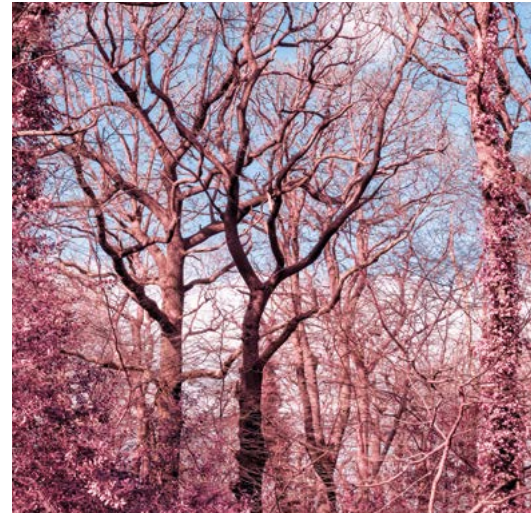
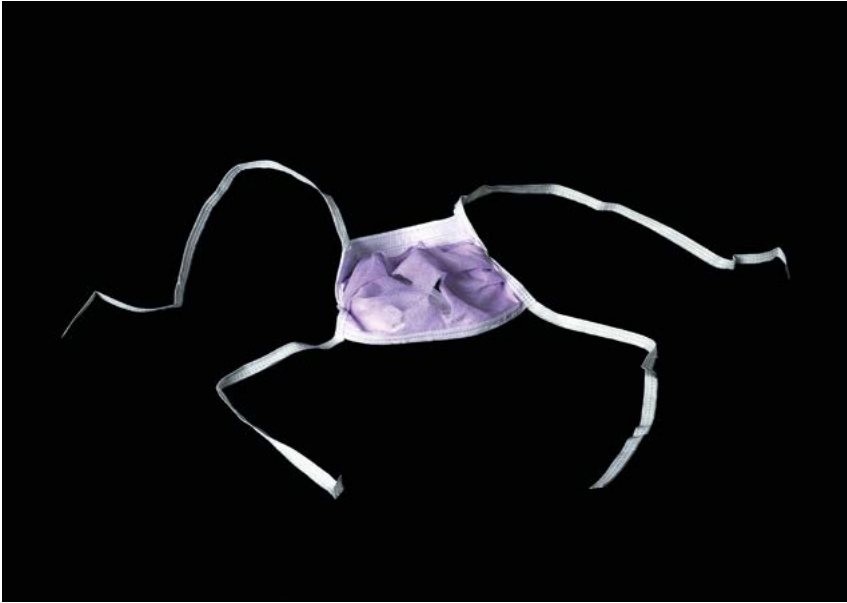
"... Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
wild Poseidon—you won't encounter them
unless you bring them along inside your soul,
unless your soul sets them up in front of you..."

"... Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you're destined for.
But don't hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so you're old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you've gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.

Ithaka gave you a marvellous journey.
Without her you wouldn't have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you'll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean."

I believe these verses perfectly encapsulate my perspective on the journey thus far, both in London and in life.



Heather Storgaard



Nearly-European, but clearly something else, Britain lies just west of our continental home. Yet that island identity is far less clear than that. Back when the sea was more of an opportunity than a hindrance, sail boats left these shores, sometimes returning and sometimes settling their passengers. Of course, others also sailed those same roots, leaving their traces hugging our shorelines. The East Neuk of Fife is some of the most picturesque, quaint coast of Scotland. Far removed from the rugged, wild Western Coast, the sweet houses and chocolate-box harbours appear almost foreign to the industrial, harsh realities of Scottish coastal heritage everywhere else. The legend is that fishermen from the Low Countries- Belgium, the Netherlands, Frisia - made these new coasts their homes, bringing a style that invokes Brugge more than nearby Edinburgh, blinking in the sun across the water. But the North Sea also invited locals across it- Danish Bishop and lauded song writer Thomas Kingo had roots in these villages, too. His surname a contraction of Kinghorn, the village from which his father emigrated to Denmark, Fife went with him across the North Sea. It's been said his songs, still sung today, have echoes of Scotland too- odd rhythms and slightly curious usage of language that doesn't come from Danish. I find something comforting about this – our journeys, challenges and joys are nothing new, but something experienced by Europeans on these shores across history.

Exploring Scotland, learning the stories of the landscape and how the locals pronounce the nearly-German, nearly-Scandinavian names, connects us to this ancient land of breathtaking geography. The real stories of how Scotland's rocky shores and peat-bogs were created outstrips even the ancient Gaelic myths – Teutonic plates shifting, Volcanic eruptions of centuries ago. In the West, the bastion of Gaelic, the beautiful musical language of the locals, there is also a more hidden message in the landscape. Search for the meaning of places, try to translate them from the roots, and rather than Gaelic, your googling will soon hit Norse. The Vikings left incredible treasures on these islands, the Lewis chess pieces, legends still told and rich burials still to be explored. They also gifted us part of themselves in the names we still use today. If it feels like half of Lewis is called something -bost, that's not from Gaelic, but from bo sted – literally "living place" in such simple Norse even us Danish speakers can still recognise it. Our roots in this land are as old as the Gaels.

Whisky is possibly the biggest symbol of Scotland out there in the world. Being Scottish in such an industry comes with kudos- as a local you are almost a tangible part of this spirit. I felt like somewhat of an interloper talking about whisky with a nearly-local accent that nevertheless mangled the Gaelic distillery names of the North. Distilleries from the Victorian-era tower over, foreboding and breathtaking in their history. In 2023 I was in Denmark, caring for my father-in-law for a third long winter in a row, the last. From muddy, flat Jutlandic farm country I logged on to a new programme in the whisky industry, aiming to support the progression and feeling of belonging for women. I joined Danes and Norwegians, Germans and Canadians with beautiful Vholinya-Deutsch ancestry that meant we had a shared love of both Slavic dumplings and German deserts. Suddenly, this colourful, cobbled-together bunch of women gave a new future to the industry for me. Since then, I've attended musical tastings with song in Gaelic and Icelandic, tasted Scotch lovingly bottled and imported to Germany independently, and broken records with experimental, historic Norwegian whisky. There's a sense that we're here and we're putting our own stamp on the spirit of a country we all love

Herbert Brindl



In a world often characterized by negativity and pessimism, children are a valuable reminder that there is always a reason for hope. They show us that despite all adversities, we can maintain confidence and look to the future with hope, because where hope awakens and is alive in young souls you can dream and believe that there is still a future!



Oh Britain you are so unfortunate, I really pity you, Beautiful you are indeed but now all hope and glory of the old times. What journey have you ended in this moment stress and peril shall now follow. I'm lingering in NACHTGEDANKEN and hope tomorrow morning a better future will prevail.



Piccadilly Circus, never stop dreaming and don't give up hope either There is too much you could miss. Don't say it's the way of life or it is what it is. You must always believe in your dreams, they show you ways to all the happiness, because dreams will propel you forward, not back.

Inese Pinke

I never had the chance to live abroad in school and so about 6 years ago, I made the decision to move from Latvia to the UK. I came to the UK at the right moment, before Brexit, so I have a chance to get the pre-settled status which gives me rights to live, work and study here.

Why did I move? I know I have to move abroad to leave my comfort zone and explore new places. And I never regret my decision.

Living in London is one of the biggest life lessons I ever have. It forces me to grow up, to start building a life and professional career from the beginning, to learn new cultures, to understand who I am and what I really want to do in my life. I appreciate this experience and all the things I have now because of the decision I made that day.

I believe so strongly that we all have defined our own roles in our life, but I can't just take a blueprint and expect it to fit me precisely, because me and you and we are all different and it's in our differences that we shine the brightest. Do you agree?

I've always identified myself primarily as a Project Manager and Admin Specialist in my professional life. That's until I have moved to London.

I've always had an interest in photography, but I truly fell in love with this passion when I started my first work in a professional photo studio in London. In the beginning, I didn't know all the stuff like the exposure or the ISO but despite that I've always tried to document things in my own way. I've learned that there are a lot of rules to follow for taking good pictures, but I also learned that authentic photos come from passion, from one's commitment to being able to bring something special and unique through a shot.

After finishing my work in a photo studio I went ahead and tested the waters with a couple of clients in London, which confirmed - I really enjoy and love capturing people, their laugh and humanity as the personal connection is where the magic happens.

And now I am working almost every day to improve my craft, and as a person and Photographer giving more than I can take.

And I can say anything is possible when you have the right people around you and it is never too late to start improving our world, starting with small acts of kindness. And we can be the start and there is always light and in days when you cannot see the rainbow create your own and do not lose hope. Hope is something special, it is inside ourselves where our dreams grow, and new beginnings are born. Never lose hope. Never.



Joanna Kiedrowska

Journey

Migrant journeys are never straightforward.

I was born 1838km away from my current home. I have been living in Birmingham for 18 years. Not too many inhabitants of Birmingham have their roots here.

We, our parents or grandparents came here from all over the World, mostly from post British Empire countries in India, Western Africa, Caribbean Islands.

I have visited 34 countries in my life.

My grandparents met in the Free City of Danzig before World War II. My grandmother was Kashubian, my grandfather German. They had an ecumenic wedding between evangelical and catholic churches. She was born in a village Stawiska by Koscierzyzna, he may have been born in Danzing, or one of the towns belonging previously to East Prussia: Grudziadz or Kwidzyn. 60-80 km between places they were born in.

My maternal grandparents met in the 30's of XX century as well. They were teaching in primary school in the village Smolniki near Suwalki, Poland. Grandmother was born in bread near Mariampol (currently in Lithuania), while grandfather was a Highlander from Stary Sacz. There are 700 km between places they were born in.

My maternal grandfather was murdered during World War II in a death camp by soldiers of the same army my paternal grandfather fought with- German Wehrmacht.

My children's father was born in Lagos, the former capital city of Nigeria, 3600 km from my birth place. Our two sons were born in Birmingham. They are smart, easily switch between cultures, languages, customs and adapt easily.

It is so exciting to support them in starting their own life journey.

Identity

I am not Polish anymore, I will never be British, even while possessing both nationalities and passports.

My children have ancestors in 4 different countries, are bilingual and need a couple of sentences to explain their identity.

I have been living in the UK for 18 years.

I still have a very strong accent that makes nearly every new person ask me where I am from.

I have been asked this question hundreds of times over the last 18 years while living in Birmingham.

When I spend my holidays in Poland, people also ask where I am from.

I am a woman in her mid years, a single mother of two and a photographer, but I am not asked about these facts by strangers.

One of the photo-magazines that published my works removed information about the impact of my motherhood on my work. An accent is a strong carrier of stereotypes and easily memorable information. How we say things usually is much stronger than what we really say.

Aspirations

I had passed a stage of my life when I was focused on achieving and possessing more and more.

My main aim is to be a good human being, look into my mirror every morning while brushing my teeth and be proud of my ethical values, and all traces I live behind me. I am privileged to use photography as a tool of expressing my emotions, opinions, and making people aware of important issues. I am passionate about street photography and document the surrounding world through my own perception, experience, and an artistic sensitivity. I aspire to be who I am and interact with people who step in my way, gaining from them as well as sharing my own experience, customs and other important bits and pieces that make us unique. Being mindful, present here and now, appreciating little things are my priorities and I do my best to stick to them in my life and work.



Katarzyna Nowicka

Journey

I said farewell to my friends and family, I left behind familiar haunts, I left my job and flat. I left my old life behind. I left Poland. I left for London to stay with my boyfriend, my current husband. The decision was quick and certain. The flight flew by. My big luggage, with some remnants of my old life, contained a piece of something current that would become part of my future. The mug I received from my friends at my "good bye" party said: "Viel Gluck! Tanta fortuna! Buena Suerte! Wiele szczęścia! Good luck!". Certainly some luck was needed but excitement and some deep positive feeling about this new life with my loved one prevailed.

Identity

After almost 14 years of living in London, my present life completely does not resemble the old one. Travelling with my husband and two kids proved to be more of a nuisance than a pleasure. Visiting Poland and other European countries have become less frequent. The yearning for the homeland and mainland has become greater and greater, especially after 31 of January 2020. I surprised myself by becoming more patriotic, while all I ever wanted living back in Poland was to discover, experience new things, and live abroad. My roots have become stronger and started calling me back. A Spanish friend left first, then an Italian one. A few Polish colleagues returned back home. Now the new life is getting smaller with each European friend going back to their homelands. But I have a little Europe at home and I enjoy listening to entries into the annual song contest in the native languages of the Dutch, the Moldovans or the Lithuanians.

Aspirations

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine was absolutely heartbreaking for me. My slavic brothers and sisters from the eastern border of Poland were in danger. Once Mr Johnson announced the UK would accept Ukrainian refugees I signed up to the scheme of hosting a family escaping the atrocities. I was so proud that the UK stood up to the expectations and extended a helping hand. Having the guests from Ukraine arriving in the UK seemed like bridging the island back to the mainland of Europe. Yesterday I read an article in the Guardian about the European Commission's cunning plan of introducing special visas for UK and EU young people to enjoy freer mobility between the countries. I do not know if it's going to happen but I do have hope. Anyway, my daughters have double nationality and I believe that they will be able to roam freely in Europe as I used to. It is unfortunately my husband that lags behind at passport control at the moment. He said to me that he wants to visit Ukraine as soon as possible to help their economy.



Kinga Kosiorek

*Push this trolley further;
Move it wherever you wish.
There is no need to lock the wheels
Unless you feel it's time to settle.*

To begin—to me—simply means to go. Sometimes, a man needs to embark on a long journey to understand the meaning of one of the first words he learned in life: “home.” The more I ponder this, the less certain I become about what this word truly means to me. There are as many definitions of the word “home” as there are people in the world. It’s like love; it means something different to everyone. Moving to London a few years ago made me realize that nothing is black and white; nothing remains the same. People are different and have different needs. We, expats, try to create our homes and a sense of belonging wherever we go. I feel it’s a natural purpose of a human—to be able to settle and create a home wherever life might make you stay. It’s so important to have a feeling of having a real home wherever you are. I believe that home is the place we all need to go to for self-reflection.

I remember my very first place to stay in London while looking for accommodation—I stayed in a small hostel for students. The photo I took was in one of the toilets there. I had just moved to London because of my partner, who works in science and got a job here. I started my life from scratch, working as a waitress and receptionist. Plenty of hard jobs are behind me. I don’t remember how many times I wanted to give up. It’s like abandoning your own pride and becoming modest—you are not good enough to get a better job because you don’t have English skills and you are an expat. Do not expect that you will be someone. Is it actually the purpose of life? To be someone? To have a great job? It is not, but it helps—even in renting a flat. London taught me how to be patient and surprises me every single day. I cannot stop being surprised at how people believe in positivity only and lead themselves to a point where they are afraid to show anything other than positive aspects of their lives. Don’t you feel that people have started creating a culture of fake positivity? I would say do not flush your hopes and dreams, but do not think that every dream will come true. It’s great to have hopes and dreams, but only if you remember that even if they won’t come true, you will still breathe and find your way to live.



Marie Claire Parker

A nation of animal lovers

Brits love their pets. I am half French half Portuguese, and came to the UK for work 25 years ago. I wasn't a cat person. My husband, who is British, is, and we now have 5 cats. They are all rescues and Marmite, pictured here, was found by him as a kitten lost in a car park in Yorkshire. I've learned to love cats, and I consider them as my children.

Marmite is now 12 years old, and has been recently diagnosed with diabetes. She is the second cat in the UK on a new medicine that is supposed to replace insulin shots. We're hoping it's going to work, as it won't be easy giving her two daily insulin shots because she is semi feral. Apart from this health issue, Marmite loves to play with our other cats, hunt, and likes to cuddle, but on her own terms, which is usually in the middle of the night.

I love that pets are very important to people in the UK, and I like the fact that there are many charities that care for and rehome stray, unwanted or abused animals, as well as organizations caring for the local wildlife.

Oxford

I live in a small town close to Oxford. Oxford is a beautiful city, where the University is an integral part of the city, and you see students around every day. There are loads of beautiful buildings. I particularly love when it is sunny and that the sun reflects on the stones of the buildings, making them look very yellow.

I discovered the work of J.M.W. Turner during an exhibition of some of his paintings at the Ashmolean museum. As a result, I tried to capture a view similar to that of one of his paintings, namely High Street, Oxford, in my photography. You can still see University College on the left, All Souls College on the right, and the spires of All Saints Church and St Mary's Church.

I feel privileged to live in such a beautiful part of the UK, and I was very sad at the results of the Brexit vote. I believe that there is space for everyone in the UK, no matter what your origins and background. Here, you get given a chance at a new role (I came to the UK 25 years ago for work as I couldn't find a job in France).

The Royal Family

I have been living in the UK for over 25 years and it still amazes me how much the Brits love the Royal Family. Coming from France, this is something that we don't have there, and that I am not used to. I was particularly touched when Kate Middleton announced her cancer recently. A lot of people across the UK showered her with words of support and their best wishes.

I went to a party in Abingdon to celebrate Queen Elizabeth's Platinum Jubilee in the summer of 2022. The event took place at the historic Abingdon Airfield and there were lots of activities to cater for everyone's taste: British tribute acts, air displays, hot air balloons, skydivers, and fireworks. The atmosphere was relaxed and festive, and everyone was really friendly.

I took my camera with me to capture the day, and I particularly like this photo. It shows how relaxed the atmosphere was, and how people didn't take themselves too seriously. I had a great time, and particularly enjoyed the Spice Girls tribute band.



Noel Fenech

Doubt - [Maltese - Dubju]

“What we are experiencing right now will never happen again. And therefore, we must value each moment like a beautiful treasure” Garcia and Miralles, Ichigo Ichie, 2019 pg 3.

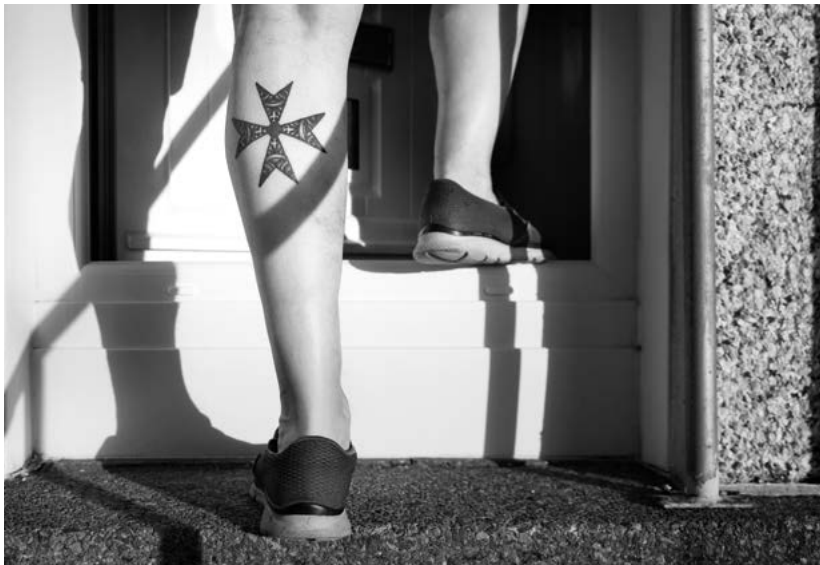
Moving from Malta to Scotland for us felt like uprooting a tree which had grown strong and steady roots... then planting it somewhere totally new, without any guarantee that the soil would not kill it.

Happiness - [Maltese Ferh]

Malta is etched on my skin and in my heart forever. Yet entering a new home, in a small village called Carluke, making new friends, feeling welcomed and taking long walks in the countryside, brought a newfound joy. Scotland may not be etched on my skin (just yet), but it is also in my heart forever. That is the joy of having two countries you can call home.

Hope - [Maltese Tama]

Min jistenna jithenna - a Maltese proverb which says whoever waits will find happiness. Hope is what keeps us going. The ups and downs of starting a new venture and becoming a freelance photographer after 30 years of employment. The rollercoaster of disappointments, excitement, fear, joy, worry, calmness, doubt, shame, anxiety, happiness. The journey is long, but as another Maltese saying goes - Fejn hemm it-tama hemm il-hajja... where there is hope there is life.



Sandra Socko

Journey

After my parents' divorce, I have moved to the UK with my mother and older brother, in search of a better future. Even though we had never been to the UK before, we left everything we knew - our house, the city where I had lived my entire life, and our family - for a new country that was completely unknown to us.

It was November 2016, when we arrived in the UK, shortly after the Brexit referendum. At that time, we believed it was the last call to get there, as the UK will soon officially leave the EU and then it will be too late for us. It could not be further from the truth, yet I still believe it was a good decision, as it guaranteed me a pre-settled status.

My journey was not an easy one. Our first landlord was Polish and has used all kinds of abuse (verbal, physical and economical) towards us. This resulted in us being homeless for a while. He even stole my ID, which was returned by DWP. Luckily, amazing people from the Citizen Advice Bureau, Police, Homeless Office and my School were kind enough to help us and got involved.

As I was under 18, I was unable to get a new passport, so I had to wait for three years before I could apply for one. During those years, I was unable to visit my home country of Poland, but this helped me to get used to the UK.

Belonging

Home for me is wherever my family is. I am living with my mother and brother, which makes it easier to adjust to living in a new country, as I've my close family with me at all times. They were going through the same experience as me, and I could talk to someone who would understand.

I feel like this is my home because I have started to build a life here. I finished high school here, and now I am continuing my education in college. I am even starting University next academic year. The UK is a place where I have friends.

Sometimes I feel like an immigrant, especially when I do not understand what my friends are talking about. However, I have found friends who are patient and happy to explain things to me.

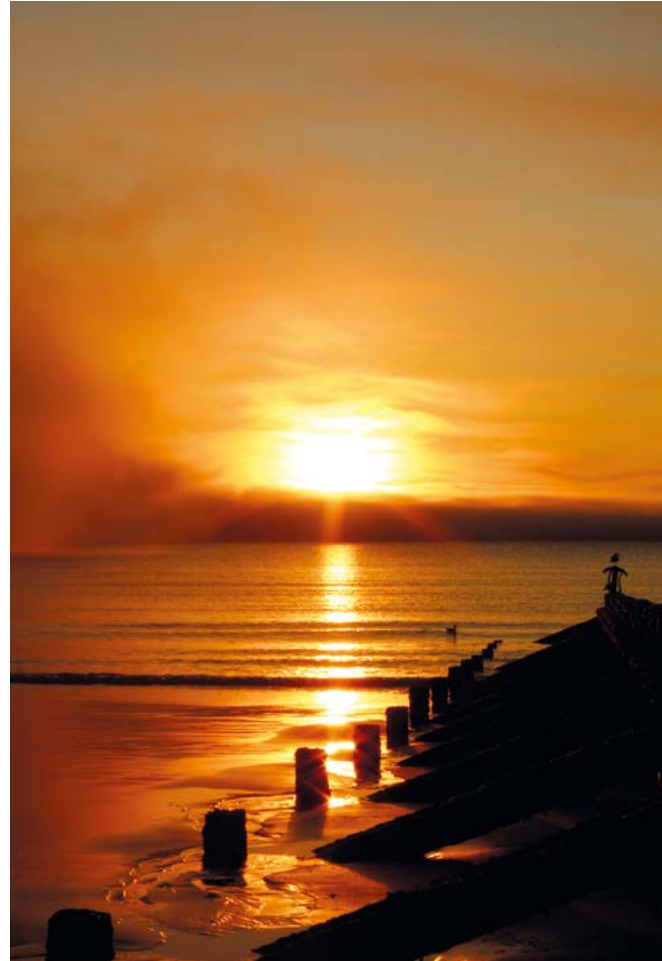
One thing that I miss is being able to visit my family whenever I want. Now, I need to plan my trip and fly to visit them. My whole life is here - my close family, friends, and my education - so I feel like this is my home. I often visit my family in Poland, and it will always be a part of me, but it is not my home anymore. I feel like a tourist when I go back. I moved to the UK when I was 15, so I know how things work here, where and to whom I need to go. Unfortunately, in Poland, I don't, and I feel lost.

Identity

When it comes to my identity, of course I am Polish, as this is where I was born and have spent 15 years of my life. Then I feel European, as this is the culture I was growing around. Additionally, my generation does not remember borders within Europe, so for me it is like a country with different regions, languages, and cultures. All easily accessible within a few hours. Lastly, I feel Scottish, as this is the place where I entered my adulthood and spent the last 8 years. I only regret that Brexit has divided not only the European continent, but also people, even those within the UK itself.

I do not think of myself as an immigrant, as the UK is a mix of nationalities, making it easier to feel like a part of it, and not an outsider. Although I cannot speak English as well as local people, and English will always be my second language, I feel part of the local community. I like being here, and my accent always opens conversations. People are curious about where I am from and want to know more about my home country.

The UK is my real home, a place where I plan my future. I have experienced a lot here, and I have grown and become more confident and accepting. I have learned and faced many challenges during migration that have shaped my personality. If it weren't for the UK, I wouldn't have the chance to discover and develop my talents.



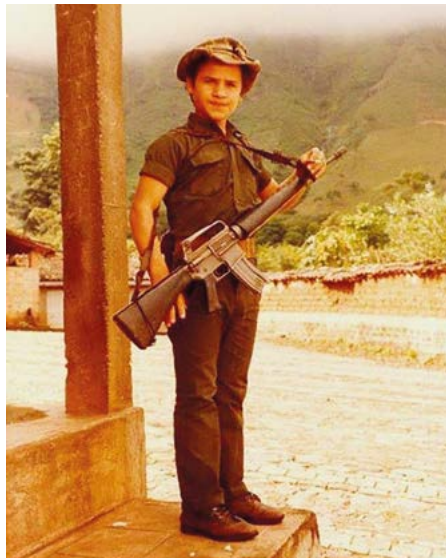
Patrycja Folta

Me and my memories
Left alone
No one else can see us
No one else can hear us
Silence
Hope
Memories



Jean Pierre Ferraroll

In 1986 I was working with a French voluntary organisation Aide Medical International in a war zone of El Salvador, in a village in Chalatenango, a zone controlled by the guerilla (FMNL). For more than a year I witnessed the life in villages and struggles of their inhabitants. We were twice arrested by the army and put in secret jail, and each time we managed to return to our village to continue our medical and educational program. Many of my pictures depicted children with smiles , young fighters...



Luminita Esanu

I moved to Northern Ireland in 2018. At first it was very difficult, I didn't know the language, I didn't know the place or the people, but I bought a camera and that changed my whole experience here. It was like a rainbow in my life. There's no place I go without taking my camera with me, it's become like a little obsession for beauty and peace of mind. This is how I connect with nature, with the mountains, with the ocean. Now I take the same picture twice, first with my heart, then with my camera.

I keep saying that I have two hearts, one beats here and the other is still in Moldova, but I clearly see my future here, this country is my home now and with the camera I can relate much more than with words.

All these 6 years I have thought that everyone has to find their own way in life, we are not born to stay in the same place, we are born to explore, to try new things, to travel, to take photos and live adventures. Taking photos is not just for memories, it's to live the same moment every time you feel alone, it's to remember the feeling you had in that photo. What I mean is don't be afraid of change, go and explore different countries and cultures and try to find what suits you best. And if you still haven't found your favorite thing to do, buy a camera and go to the mountains :)

While there is perhaps a province in which the photograph can tell us nothing more than what we see with our own eyes, there is another in which it proves to us how little our eyes permit us to see. The mountains are calling, and I must go!



Celine Maria Corhea

On my kitchen wall, a single, hand-painted plate from Romania hangs beside a wooden cross, both constant reminders of where I come from and who I am. The plate, a gift from a dear friend, is adorned in deep reds, blues, and greens—the vibrant colors of my homeland. Painted with traditional motifs, it's more than just an object; it's a living piece of my roots, an echo of the Romanian hillsides and villages, of celebrations, songs, and voices of loved ones I left behind. At the heart of this plate, one word is inscribed: ACASĂ—"home." It's a word that resonates deeply, a word that holds both the comfort of familiarity and the ache of distance. In my native tongue, "acasă" speaks of warmth, belonging, and the quiet peace of being where you truly fit. Yet, standing here in my kitchen, in a place I've come to call home, I sometimes wonder—can one ever belong entirely to two worlds? The cross beside it represents faith—a guiding force on this journey, a grounding reminder of resilience and hope. Together, these two objects symbolize my journey: the faith to find my place and the courage to honor both worlds that make me who I am. My hope, my aspiration, is to build a life where I can feel at peace in the in-between, to create a sense of 'acasă' here, where both my past and present can coexist. As a 17-year-old, I have lived most of my life as an immigrant, first in Norway, where I spent nearly seven years, and now in Northern Ireland. Here, I study A levels in English Literature, Government and Politics, and Sociology, all subjects that align with my deep sense of

justice and equity. I dream of becoming a human rights lawyer, driven by a conviction to stand up for others, to speak for those unheard, and to make my own place in a world of intertwined cultures. Although I live with deafness, this has only strengthened my desire to advocate for others and bridge divides between people. The challenge of hearing has never silenced my voice or limited my ambition. Instead, it has fueled my passion to ensure that all voices are valued, that no one is left out or overlooked. To me, these objects are more than decorations. They represent the journey, the strength to start anew, and the hope to create a sense of "home" wherever life may lead.



Ruxandra Stancu

Hi, you wonder what my picture does here with this custom and what I hold in my hand?! This photo was taken during the Romanian Saturday of the Dead celebration. I wear a traditional Sudanese costume (TOB) in Sudan to represent my unique identity. Also, I hold a big tray called (COLIBA).

In Romania it is a memorial dish symbolizing my deep connection to Romanian heritage. When I prepared myself for a photo session at Belfast Intercultural Romanian Community (BIRC) traditional Sudanese (TOB) and held (COLIVA) I was distracted by the light of the candle and travelled through the time 30 years ago to remember my childhood. My name is Ruxandra, I was born in Romania to a Sudanese father and a Romanian Mum. My Dad traveled to Romania to study and met my mum, then grew a love story between them and brought me to life. Life sometimes doesn't continue as we wish. When I was 8 years old my life turned upside down, my mum passed away and we had to go back to Sudan. Sudan was a new stage in my life, a new language I had learned, (by the way they speak Arabic), a new culture, and a new community. At that time there was no internet or mobiles as nowadays just post mail. Communication from Romania was cut off and I forgot most of my mother tongue (Romanian Language).

In Sudan, I grew up with a lot of contradictions, more than 99 tribes, languages, and cultures, and extended warm family.

An unstable country with a lot of civilian wars until now in 2024, but despite difficulties I could make a temporary future for myself but not for my daughter. I finished college as an accountant. I got married and divorced with a lovely daughter.

When she was growing up, year after year it became clear to me that we don't have any future in Sudan, so I decided to travel to Northern Ireland.

It comes to your mind why I did not go back to Romania. It was hard for me because of my mum's memories, but my destiny in Northern Ireland got me back to my roots. In 2022 was a big event in August and when I found out about it, BIRC* participated in it. I felt my childhood come back again.

Here in Northern Ireland, I combined two parts of my heritage.

*BIRC is Belfast Intercultural Romanian Community



Common Ground is a project delivered in partnership by [Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini](#),⁽⁷⁾ [the3million](#)⁽⁸⁾ and [British Future](#)⁽⁹⁾ supporting communities of EU citizens in the UK to thrive.

Common Ground aims to facilitate new activities, conversations and dialogues to strengthen the network of EU citizens in the UK, enabling grassroots groups across the country to have their voices heard and contributions celebrated.

Through events, workshops and campaigns informed by research, the project works with civil society organisations and grassroots leaders to build even stronger and more positive ties between the UK and the EU.

Co-funded by the [Foreign Policy Instruments](#)⁽¹⁰⁾ of the European Union, the project mission is to inspire more empowered EU communities in the UK by building connections, celebrating our shared European identity and sharing knowledge, with the aim of building a more positive relationship between the UK and the EU.



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Website and contacts: <https://www.ourcommonground.uk/>

Common Ground is a project co-funded by the European Union delivered in partnership by Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini, the3million and British Future, exploring the future UK-EU political relationship and supporting communities of EU citizens in the UK to thrive.

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(7) <https://www.fondazionebrodolini.it>; (8) <http://www.the3million.org.uk>; (9) <https://www.britishfuture.org>; (10) https://commission.europa.eu/about/departments-and-executive-agencies/foreign-policy-instruments_en

