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Moving On

A 159 double-decker bus rolls majestic through the early morning streets of South London. The route the bus takes is a part of the city's post-bellum superstructure. The 159 first voyaged from West End Green in North West London in November 1947, passing the Houses of Parliament and Brixton en route, to terminate at Thornton Heath clock tower in South East London. Nine months after the 159 was inaugurated, the former German cruise ship the *Empire Windrush* made its way up the river Thames to Tilbury Harbour. Some 500 passengers from Jamaica disembarked to start a new life.

When June Alexander talks about her life as one of this cohort of migrants, it is buses not boats that are a recurring setting in her stories, attesting to the power of mundane habit in the sedimentations of memory.¹ And conveying something of the migrant experience itself. Not simply of journeying – the stopping and starting, being immersed, heated-up, diverted, carried away, jostled – but the hopeful waiting and faith.

June remembers bus journeys when some passengers would get up and move somewhere else if she sat next to them. Others would alight and wait for the next bus. The enclosed spaces of buses with their singular sensations, rhythms and interred 'passing propinquities' can be especially prone to the excitement of conviviality as much as buried intolerance.²

Sitting or standing in lines, bodies are forced into encountering each other at tangents but within simultaneities, moving, vibrating, resting and swaying as one. Visceral intensities build and move quickly. The leaning away of a torso, the turning of a face, the sharp gathering-up of a coat, are small cramped gestures expansive in their injuries. All through those times June did not show her anger, hurt or disappointment. She was to become adept in the masking of

hurt and of self. As the cold shock of hostility turned to hotness in her cheeks, she had learned to focus her attention on another horizon. This network of contrapunctal³ allegiances and distant reference points, lifted her out of the present, redistributing and scattering space and time.

Perseverance was everything.

Well you ave to press through. You're in this country an you have your families bac ome looking to you. You can't go back. You have to try an do something that will let you press along. Yeah, you press along hoping that better days will come. Perseverance. An because of perseverance, ere I am. A lot of condition ave changed. The prejudice still goes on, but people are realising that we are not animals. They realize that we are people like themself, only from a different background. But then it was hard.

'It were rough. Very rough', June tells me when I ask about this time in her life. She recalls going to a church on that first Sunday in England. She had put on her best dress, a hat and gloves and had walked two miles to the nearest church. After the service, the minister had approached her. June was unprepared when he said 'Please, don't come back. It's nothing personal, believe me, but if you keep coming, some in my congregation will go elsewhere and I will lose them'. It would be months before she went to church again. June got through those times with a quiet dignity. And as she says, conditions changed.

Faith

June used to make her daily journey to work at St Thomas' hospital, on the Southbank of London on the 159 bus. She was a hospital cleaner or 'domestic' as she called herself. On a Thursday morning in February, the 159 took June on a wayward journey.

I was on my way to work in de mornin. I was standin at de bus stop. I was there for about an hour, waitin for de bus. It was very cold an as soon as de bus come, I grab onto de rail an my lef knee went in, but I eld on. I never turned back, seein that I was going to de hospital anyway. I knew that I would be seen at de Casual Department, so I continued with my journey. At de Casual Department, they have my knee x-ray. At firs they diagnose arthritis. A few weeks later they said it is something greater than arthritis and I would be requested for another x-ray. When I return an they had my x-ray, they said it was myeloma. I never understand what myeloma is so I ask them to write it all down on a bit of paper

so that I can take it ome an explain it to de family. Well my usband was quite shaken, but I know that de Lord is able. I tol him not to worry, it is in de hand of de Lord an I jus continue like that. But I was a bit shaken because once cancer has been diagnose, it's frightening because not many pull through. But I respond to de treatment. I have transfusion. I have chemotherapy. I have radiotherapy. An ere I am today.

And even after numerous visits to St Thomas' as a patient, June can still feel out of place when going into the hospital as a patient. She does not complain about the tests, therapies or the continuing struggle with pain and fatigue. The changes in her body are described almost dispassionately. She has always been diminutive but suspects that she has shrunk some inches since the onset of the disease.

I was much taller than this. An now I am lopsided, so I ask de head doctor if it is a stroke I had an is why I am lopsided an have decrease in height. She say no it's not a stroke I had, but is because de bones in my body collapse. They're not in de same form as they were an I will never be back to my normal shape. I was worried at first, but from when she make mention to me about that, I jus accep it. Well, I was sad because my shape, I have a horrible shape now. No waist an my bottom gone in an everything. If you see me naked you would be surprized. It takes a while to get used to it. I mean, I'm still learning.

June ascribes her ability to live in a relatively peaceful co-existence with her disease and her changing body to the power of prayer, fasting and healing, described by a Pentecostal pastor as 'instruments of humbling'.⁴

Over the time that I knew her, June came to outlive her prognosis by over 13 years. She is one of the 12 per cent or so of people in England and Wales to live at least ten years after being diagnosed with multiple myeloma.⁵ June is vaguely aware of the statistics. She is neither overwhelmed nor taken in by them. Open to the divine work of a *deus absconditus*, June has always been receptive to mystery as faith's infinite gift.

One evening I was coming ome from working at St Thomas. I was carrying my baby, but I never know that I was pregnant at de time. There was a lady, I didn't know her but in my distric back ome there was a woman like that. An when de lady come up on the bus, downstairs was full up, so the conductor say to her to go upstairs. When I look at de state of her condition I thought 'My God, can a woman like this go upstairs?' She was very handicapped, her foot plaiting an everything. An it's the second person I ave seen like that. The one I left in my

distric an de one that I have seen on de bus. An I get out of my seat an I say 'You can have my seat' an I went upstairs. When my child was born, he was normal, but de symptom was there. That day when I went ome I said to my usband 'Recall the woman Hatshepsut in our country?' He said 'Yes'. I said 'I have seen a lady today coming from St Thomas de same way'. An when I had de baby I went out to pay a visit to two friends. When I come back, my husband said to me 'You remember de lady you was telling me about? Mathew is going just like de lady'. You know, I stan there an I watch de baby. He was wriggling all over. It is difficult to explain. You would ave to see de person yourself an then you would understand. In de early stage of pregnancy you ave to be careful because if you see things an you are sorry for it, you can spoil your baby, mark it. So I said to my husband 'Give me three days unmolested' An that's what he did an I remember de Lord speak to me. He said 'Go three days of fasting an on de last day take de child down to de church an let de elders an ministers lay hand upon him an he will recover.' An that's what I did an within de space of that time Mathew return to normal. I have much to thank God for.

Opened out to the register of the divine, to life as a journey to a glorious destination, June says that she is not afraid of dying 'It must come one day. And when the rapture come, I won't die. I will only be changed'.