

Exile Things

Academy in Exile Contributors

When people are forced from their homes, their things carry symbolic weight and come to represent the tangle of human relations that constitute an emplaced life. Yet these things also stand for hope: they are a seed that must grow and bear fruit in strange ground. Such things are not necessarily judiciously chosen; they tend to be selected in haste and confusion. *En route*, things may be lost, gifted, and stolen, or jettisoned because they can't be carried any farther. What is retained acquires new meaning and may become the metonym for an entire existence.

Such things can make us question our connection to material possessions and to one another. We are prompted to reflect on what is most precious to us. What single thing stands in for a lost world? Is belonging defined in material terms? What if, in leaving, we can take nothing?

Vanessa Agnew

A selection from “Exile Things” forms the exhibition *What We Brought with Us*. The exhibition presents images of some of the things taken by scholars who left their countries of origin for Germany, where they were hosted by Academy in Exile at the Universität Duisburg-Essen, along with Freie Universität Berlin, Forum Transregionale Studien, and Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut Essen. Academy in Exile is now based at Technische Universität Dortmund, where it continues to support scholars at risk.

What We Brought with Us was first shown in the digital *Re:Writing the Future Festival*, subsequently at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach, The University of Cincinnati, the Goethe-Institut New York, Literaturhaus Berlin, Vilnius Old Town Hall, and elsewhere. The exhibition has been supported by the Universität Duisburg-Essen, Technische Universität Dortmund, Mellon Foundation, VolkswagenStiftung, Open Society Foundations, Allianz Foundation, University Alliance Ruhr, University of Cincinnati, Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes, and Goethe-Institut New York, among other institutions. It is shared with concern for those who are forced to live in exile as a result of oppression by authoritarian regimes around the world.

Photographs by Jobst von Kunowski; curated by Vanessa Agnew and Anika Roux

Child's shoe

This shoe belonged to me when I was a little girl. I found it among my mother's belongings when she died. When I went into exile, it was one of the few things I took as a memento of her. The other shoe is lost.



A pair of sandals, a souvenir from Grandpa

I couldn't be with my grandpa in his final days. This is the last thing he sent me. In looking at the sandals, I recall his words from my childhood, "Always choose the right path and stick to it." Rest in peace, Grandpa.



T-shirt

This motto was adopted by the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong. In carrying this T-shirt with me, I hope to spread the spirit of liberty afar. It should serve as a reminder to people who've never lived under an authoritarian regime or had to fight for democratic values. Don't take your freedoms for granted.



Dupatta

I consciously packed this dupatta. My grandmother, my mother, and my aunts all wore wide dupattas. The dupattas were scented differently, though. All of them might wear the same pattern and color, yet one could detect the difference. My grandmother's always has a peculiar mustardy smell, my aunt's a bit nutty, and my mother's smells of something that I have not been able to decipher. Perhaps it's the smell of love. I carried this wide dupatta to remind myself of the smell of love that awaits me somewhere.



Traditional tunic

This is the traditional clothing worn by Afghan men. Such garments are hand-sewn by women and sometimes made of silk. They can be really expensive and are treasured because of all the work that goes into making them. I was given the *kalmeez* by a friend of mine, and before that, it belonged to a bridegroom. Passing on a gift like this is thought to bring luck. I only wear it on special occasions. Hopefully, one day, I too will meet the love of my life and get married.



White fabric

Before I left, my mother wanted to be sure that my luggage with a broken zip wouldn't burst open, so she tied a white cotton cloth around it.



Sock

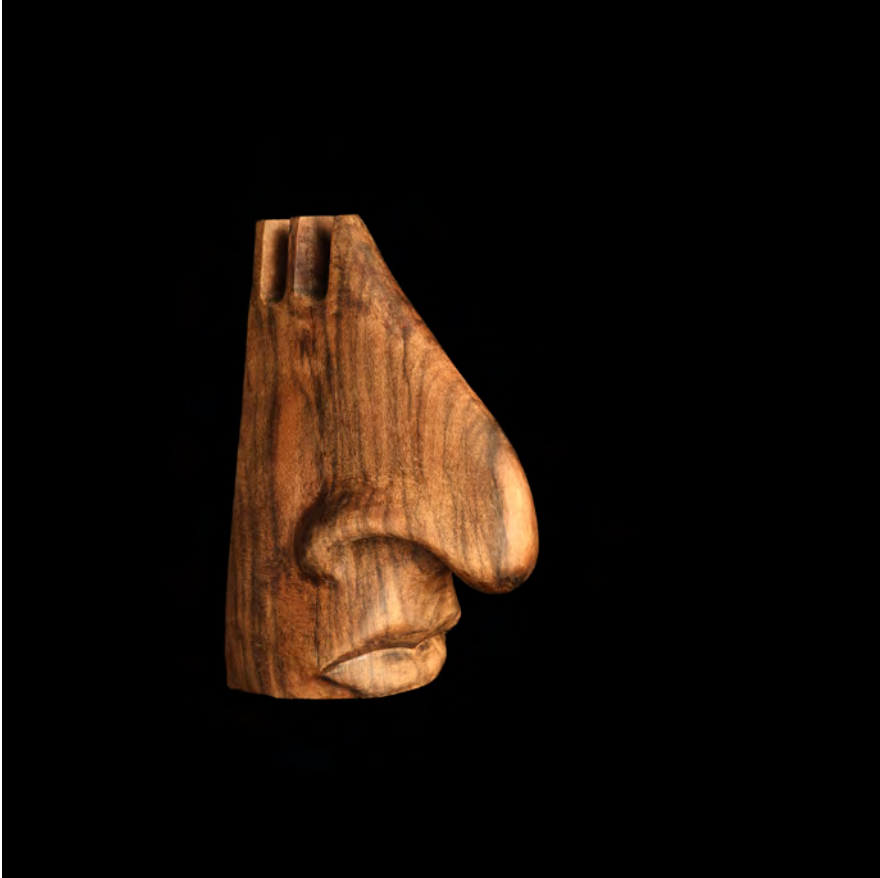
Some time ago, a dear friend from London sent me a nice pair of socks as a gift. One day, when I was packing up for a trip to Geneva, I could find only one of the socks. No matter how much I searched, the other one did not appear. Later, it transpired that the missing sock was in my hometown, Istanbul, apparently forgotten there during a visit. Today, one of the socks is in Essen and the other in Istanbul. I feel that I'm not so unlike these socks myself.

—Fırat Erdoğan



Glasses stand

I bought this nose-shaped glasses stand in April 2015 during our visit to Yerevan for the centenary of the Armenian Genocide. The nose belongs to Yeghishe Charents, one of the greatest poets and political activists of Armenia. Born in Kars, Charents sought a *yeryir* (homeland) in his works as a way of healing the traumatic loss of home. Here, this object—which, back in our house in Turkey, used to be a souvenir from Armenia—gained significance for us as a symbol of hope that we could make a new home in exile.



Watch

My father doesn't give gifts. It's not that he's not generous—he used to give me a quarter of his salary so I could study. But, as a rule, he doesn't make a thing of giving gifts. The watch was his. It's the only actual gift he's given me. It's a reminder of how precious time is.



Bracelet and watch

These things represent the hope my wife and I hold for our reunion. They are the last and loveliest gifts we purchased for one another before I had to flee. We exchanged the gifts: my watch remained in the hands of my wife and her bracelet accompanied me on my enforced journey. No matter what, they will always remind us of love, hope, and the passage of time.



Alarm clock

A friend in London gave me this alarm clock. I don't even know why I like it. It doesn't remind me of Palestine or my culture, but it does make me think of all the places I've lived. Maybe it symbolizes the process of making friends and a new family in exile.



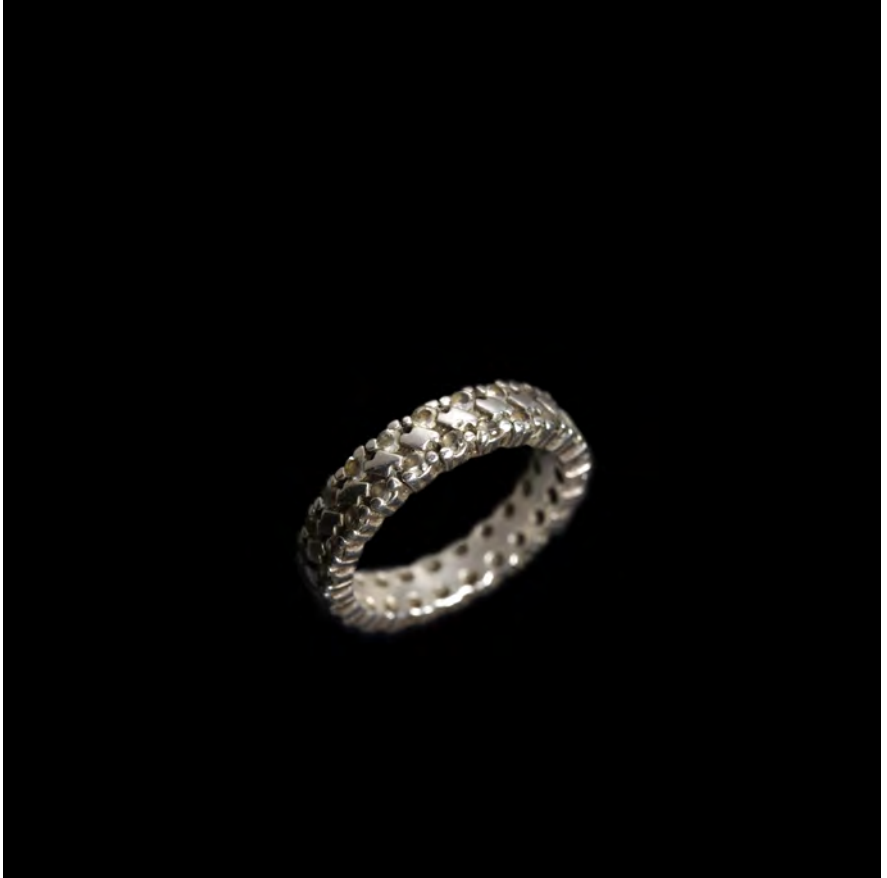
Torch

My grandfather gave me this torch when I left home. I was only eleven, and he gave it to me so I could find my way in the dark. After the government crackdown in Turkey, I had to leave the country. I took the torch as a memento of my grandfather when he died. He was my favorite person.



Ring

I had never thought of leaving my only sister behind. We spent lots of amazing times together, especially shopping, and I got together with her at least once a day. But I have been forced to leave my country and build a life somewhere that is more than three thousand miles away from my sister. I haven't seen her in person in eight years. I brought this ring with me, though. It was her present to remember the good moments that I shared with her back home.



Necklace

This is my mother's necklace. She inherited it from her mother. My grandmother didn't have enough jewelry to give as wedding presents to each of her five daughters, so she had a goldsmith convert her earrings into two separate necklaces. My mother passed this necklace on to me when I had my daughter. I've always worn it with pleasure, and naturally, I brought it with me when I moved to Germany.



Parting gifts

These were parting gifts from a friend. We met the day before I was scheduled to travel, both of us equally scared of what lay ahead. We somehow wanted to fill each other's absence with small things—a journal which was half written by him, leaving the other pages empty for me to fill.



Soft little toy

This soft little toy came as a marketing present with something my friend purchased. He knows I get fidgety when I'm anxious, so I need to have something in my hands—something to remind me of the warmth and texture of my *bobas'* (grandmothers') hands—so he gave me the soft toy to hold in case I got anxious.



Postcard

This is a postcard of Khanqah of Shah-e-Hamdan in Kashmir. I belong to Khanqah, everyone says. I was planted there as a child by my father. We made innumerable trips to the old Srinagar city, walking through the narrow alleyways. We spoke of history, food, faith, and love. Khanqah forms a center to my world and my work in myriad ways. My friend knew I would treasure this postcard.



Fountain pen

This LAMY fountain pen was a birthday gift from a friend to whom I no longer speak. The pen has been a curious witness to so much, knowing more than anyone else. One look at it and nostalgia for obscure things flares up. Forgetfulness does not pull me away, and memory does not draw me in close.



Letter

This letter is from my teacher, who became a close friend and nurtured me intellectually. On the back is a drawing done by her child. She gave me the letter when I returned after a long absence. Wherever you go in the world, you can find family. I am part of her family. You could say her family is a gift to me from the world.

or when I live...
in every moment...!
For the love
that opens up like a bud
just to bloom...
→ Bloom it will...
→ Through the hands of the old
→ That in all the gold
That such moments hold...
That is the blessing, one
must behold!
— With love for my son, our friend Richard
on his return from the hills —
(A/A)

Books

When the protests started in Syria, I moved to Delhi. Then Muslims were targeted at the university, and I fled without papers to Jordan. It was hard to choose which books to pack. The day I left for Berlin, it was Edward W. Said's birthday, so I said to myself, "Let me take those." The books used up my luggage allowance. Now my library is scattered around the world.



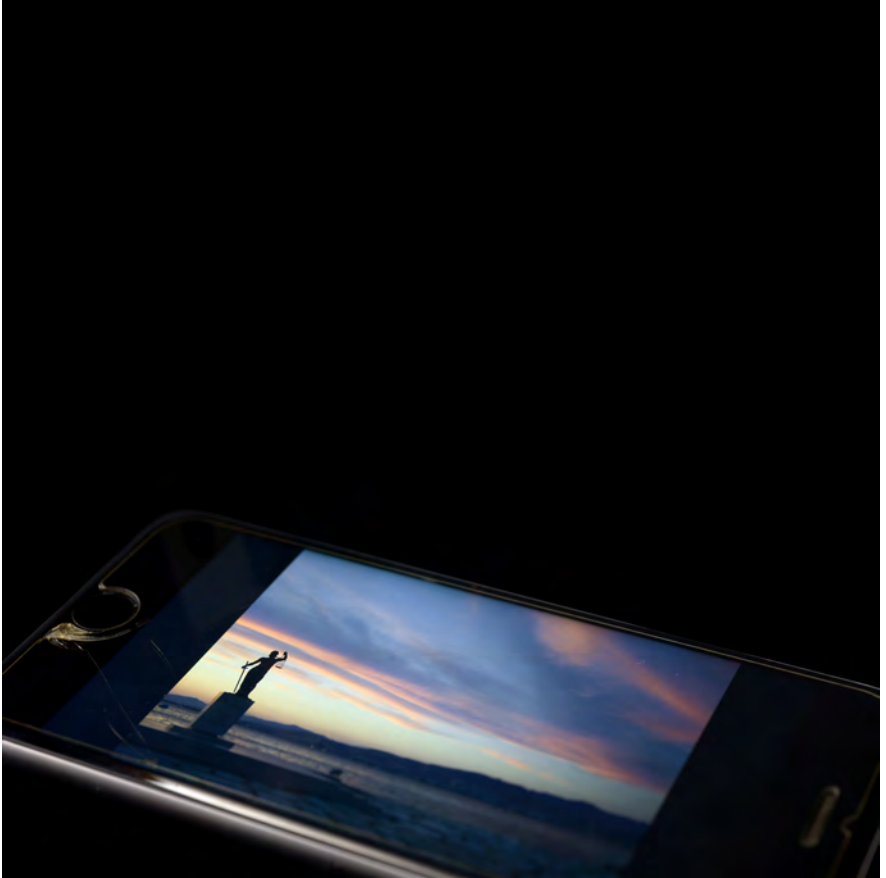
Notebooks

A friend gave me one of these notebooks as a present. I brought it with me to Berlin simply because it happened to be the journal I was keeping at the moment. I recall jotting stuff down on the plane without being even dimly aware of the significance that it would later hold for me. The rest of my journals are still in Ankara, lying in a dusty drawer in our apartment. I take some pleasure in thinking of them, their pages yellow and the ink faded, as if they were crafting a quiet place for themselves in Turkey.



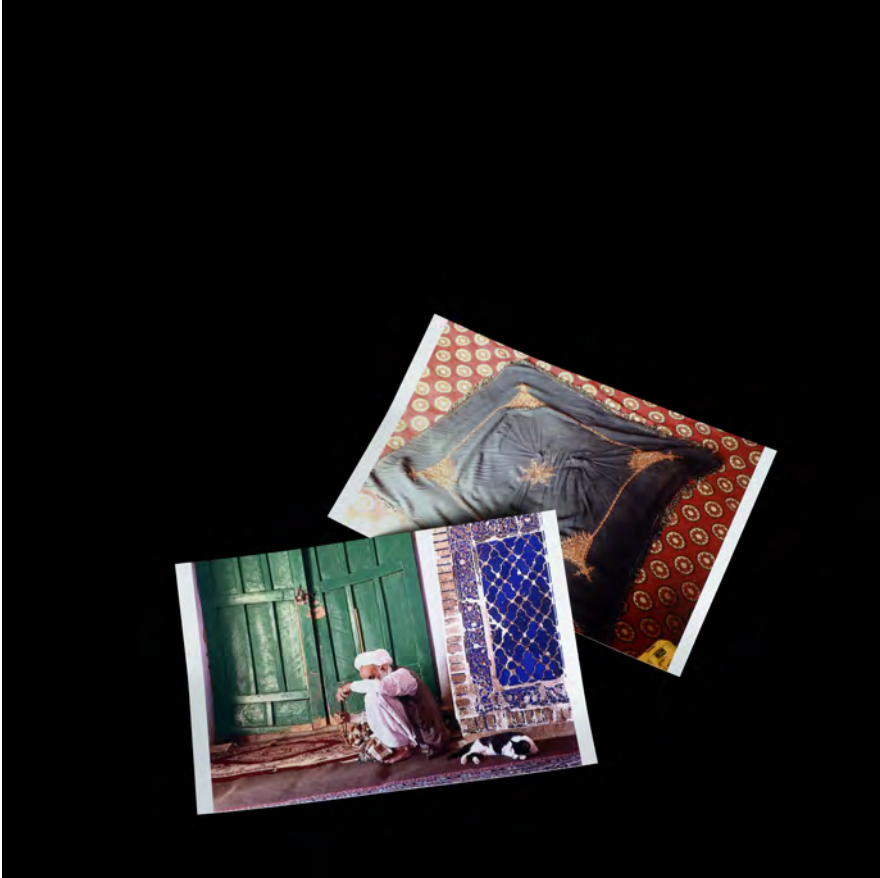
Kitschy photo

When I came to Germany, I planned on staying just five days. Now it's day 1,653 in exile, but who's counting? As a joke, my friend sent me this photo of where I used to live. It's so kitschy. When you look at it, you have to laugh. You can't get emotional.



Pictures of an old man with a cat and a hand-embroidered scarf

These two prints have always decorated my walls in exile. They remind me of my home and the people I miss. The scene of an old man and a cat symbolizes peace, tranquility, and colorfulness in a country associated with conflict, war, and radicalism. The scarf was made by the small hands of internally displaced girls in Kabul to help support their families.



Oil painting

This oil painting is by a physician-painter whom I met at my parents' house in my hometown during a summer break while I was still working on my doctorate in the United States. The painter gave it to me after an afternoon spent discussing art and literature. I took it with me to the United States, which at that time still seemed a place of no return. A new home. When I returned to Turkey, I took it with me. And in departing for Germany this time, I realized that I had packed it one more time, still unaware of the ways in which I valued it. I did not even have it framed all these years, nor hang it on any wall. I have this stubborn recollection that the painter told me he named the painting "Gathered Beneath the Storm," which of course cannot be true. Yet it's the only name this painting has for me now, a small testament to the power of art and friendship, qualities that possess no home in this world yet make home possible.



Queer flag

I got this flag from the Jewish section of Gay Pride. I marched joyfully, but fascism is rampant in Poland, and a bill in Parliament goes so far as to actually ban such events. In fact, they are referred to as “Equality Marches.” Equality is precisely what my country is lacking right now. Yet the joy of rebuilding Jewish, feminist, and queer Lublin has not been abandoned altogether, nor have I been crushed by persecution at the hands of Poland’s minister for education and science. Lublin was once a hub of Jewish, Ukrainian, Protestant, socialist, and atheist thought, and outstanding queer writers went about their work. Just think of lesbian writer Narcyza Żmichowska, author of Gothic novels in the nineteenth century, or Józef Czechowicz, gay poet of the interwar avant-garde! I took this flag with me to Berlin so as to recall the pluralism that is under threat in Poland. I dream of intercultural hospitality returning to my city, my country, the planet.



Keypad phone

This is the phone I brought with me when I left Myanmar last year. I kept it because it's a poignant reminder of life under military rule. After the coup of February 1, 2021, many people, including me, had to buy keypad phones. Most people use smartphones to access the internet and social media, and so switching to keypad phones would not be our choice. We are forced to use them although they have smaller screens and fewer technical features. Using these kinds of phones hasn't really made our lives, which are under constant physical and digital surveillance, that much safer. Popular social media platforms and texting apps like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Messenger are banned and have to be used with virtual private networks (VPNs) that most, if not all, of us once knew nothing about. VPNs are only installed on the smartphones we keep at home. There are many reports of the security forces viewing people carrying keypad phones with suspicion and ordering them to produce the smartphones they actually use.



Afghan flag

I keep this flag out of a love for my homeland and in memory of the friends and relatives with whom I spent my childhood. After a certain time, it became impossible for us to live together anymore. The flag is just a little piece of home that I took with me when I left. Now it hangs on the wall of my flat in Bonn.



Venetian silk purse

I thought I might be arrested at the airport in Islamabad. I put my travel documents in this fancy purse and flashed it around at immigration. The officials started whispering to one another, “Why does she keep her things in such an expensive purse?” They barely glanced at my travel documents and escorted me to the VIP lounge for tea while I waited for my flight.



Fur

This is a piece of fur from my dog. I have this one shirt with me that I have never worn since I left the country. One day, I took a closer look at it and saw the fur of my dog on it. I felt that this is the only memory of him that came all the way with me. I put it in a container and kept it with me. I really miss him.



Coffee cups

I had coffee with a friend I hadn't seen in a long time. We drank from disposable cups, but I kept them anyway. They've traveled with me from country to country. I didn't know if I'd see my friend in two or three years, or ever again, so I preserved these cups. War turns human beings into disposable things.



Ultrasound

When we set off, this ultrasound was the only object we had that belonged to our unborn daughter. Our journey did not end when we arrived in a safe country, but rather months later when she was born. When we first took her healthy form in our arms, it was only then that we could say, “Here we are.” More than for us, this journey was for you, our precious daughter. As a letter from you to us and from us to you, this ultrasound was the only thing that we couldn’t leave behind.



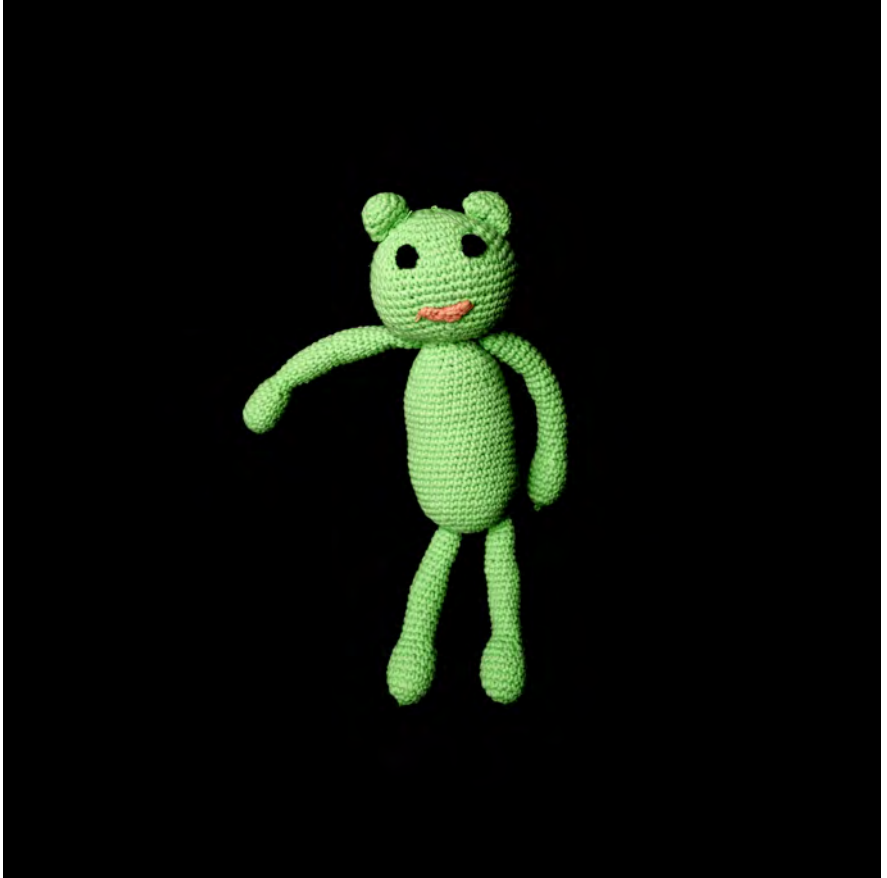
Toy bear

At the age of six, I became a homeless child. One day during my scavenging, I found this bear on a garbage heap. That was in the late '90s, and from then on, he has accompanied all my steps. He was with me when I left my Roma community, when I obtained my Master's in Media and Communication Studies, when I had my same-sex marriage, and when I defended my doctoral dissertation as well. More than thirty years later, I showed the toy to my husband. Ever since we met, he has called me Miśu, which means "bear" in Polish. It was he who noticed that the bear is sitting on a pile of newspapers. He said, "Miśu, it is you!"



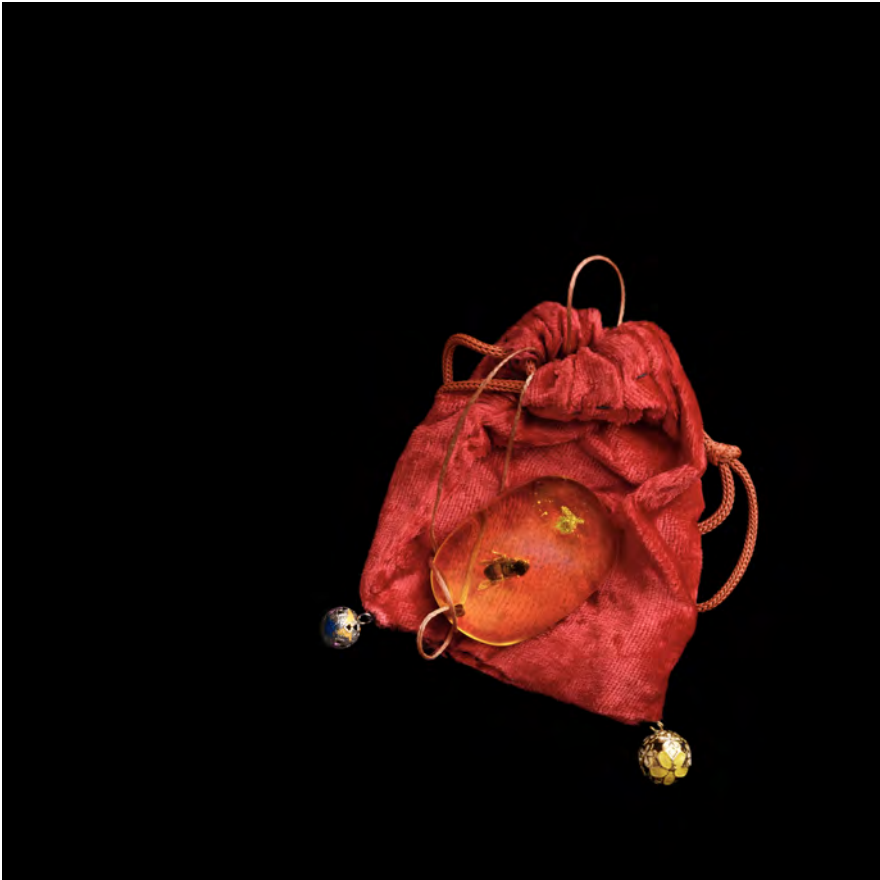
Green frog

My mother loves to knit. She made this by herself for me. I remember how surprised she was when she saw me really enjoy her gift. I couldn't leave this frog behind, and so I have taken it with me on this journey.



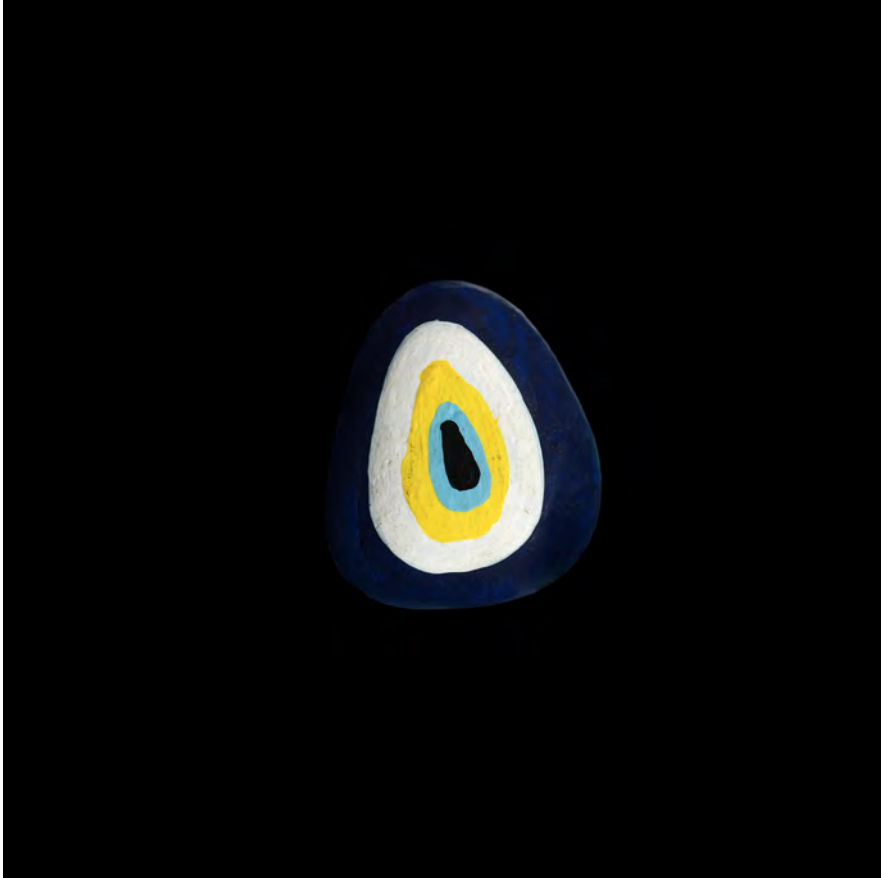
Amber with embedded insects

Whenever I pack my suitcase to move to another country, a country about which I know almost nothing, I toss this necklace into the corner of my bag. It's been there for more than a decade and seen six countries. Am I attached to it? Not really! It neither signifies anything nor even conjures up a particular memory. I only touch it once before departure when I'm packing, and one other time when I arrive at my destination. It has become a banal personal ritual. It serves as a tactile reminder that I've entered a new country and left one more behind. The first time I held it in my hand as a gift, it brought to mind the cruelty of containment. Now it conjures up the state of being always on the move. I like having it, though. It's a constant reminder that home is yet to come and that some people have to move fast enough to stay put.



Amulet

This amulet is called *nazar boncuğu* in Turkish. A friend of mine gave it to me. This is just one of the objects that I carried with me, hoping to be protected on my way to a safer place.



Keychain

A school friend in Syria gave me this keychain. I hope to return to see him, yet deep inside I know it'll be a long, long journey. The problem is, if you return, you return to someone else, and in the meantime, you, yourself, have become someone else. The object, with all its memories, freezes a moment in time. I cherish all small things that are gifted to me.



Indian misbaha

These were my mother's prayer beads. I got them from her just before parting. She used them to recall God; now I use them to recall her. When you're on the move, you just take what's most precious to you at that moment. You take whatever you can. But you always have the feeling that you should've brought more. That feeling is always there.



Syrian misbaha

While in India, a friend of mine came to visit. I already owned a set of prayer beads, but she gave me these because she said she never wanted me to forget Syria. The beads are black. That was her choice.



