

FABRIC

ALSO BY VICTORIA FINLAY

Colour: Travels through the Paintbox

Jewels: A Secret History

The Brilliant History of Color in Art

FABRIC

THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF THE MATERIAL WORLD

VICTORIA FINLAY

P

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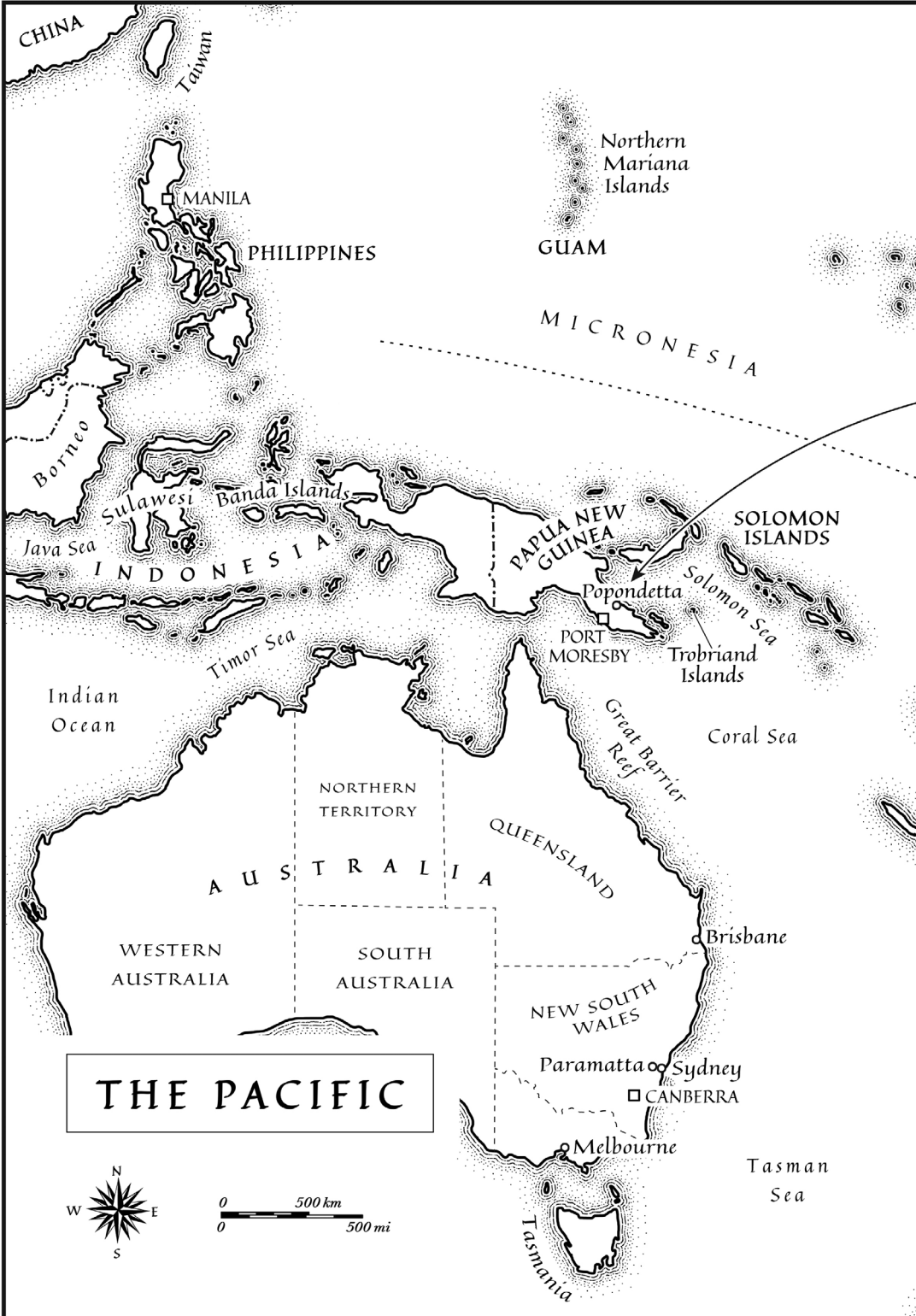


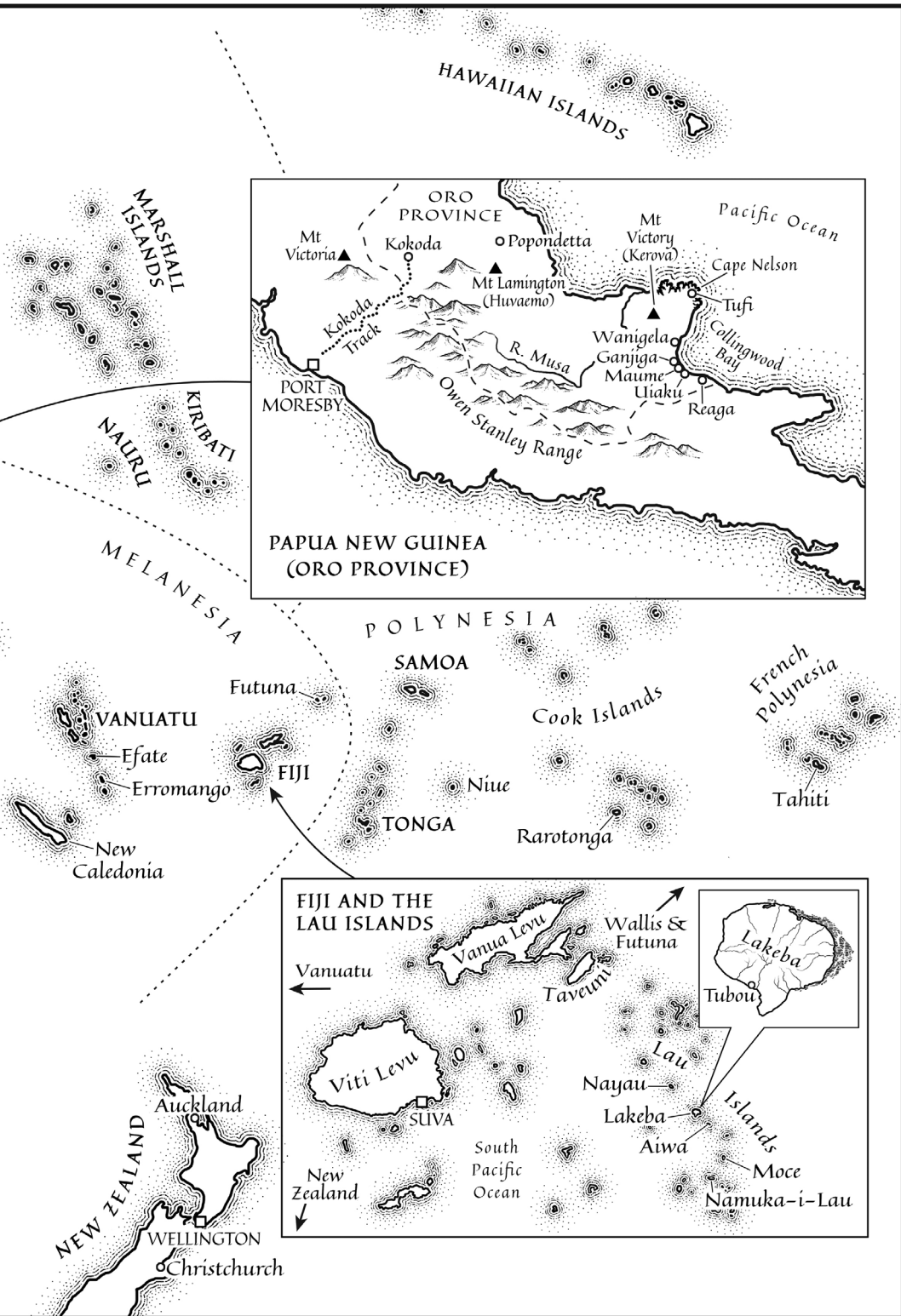
Sometimes the quilts were white for weddings, the design
Made up of stitches, and the shadows cast by stitches.
And the quilts for funerals? How do you sew the night?

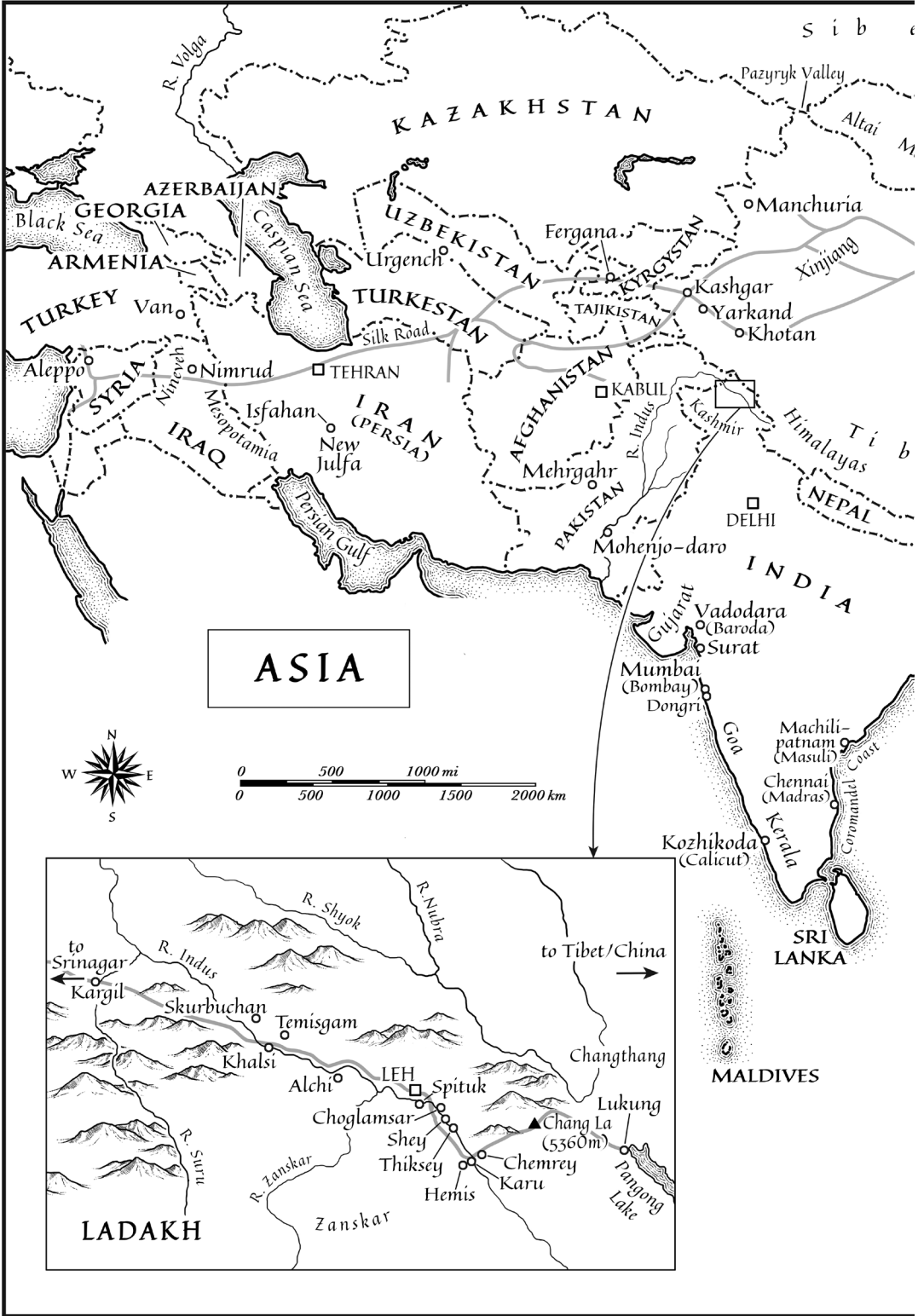
'The Design', by Michael Longley

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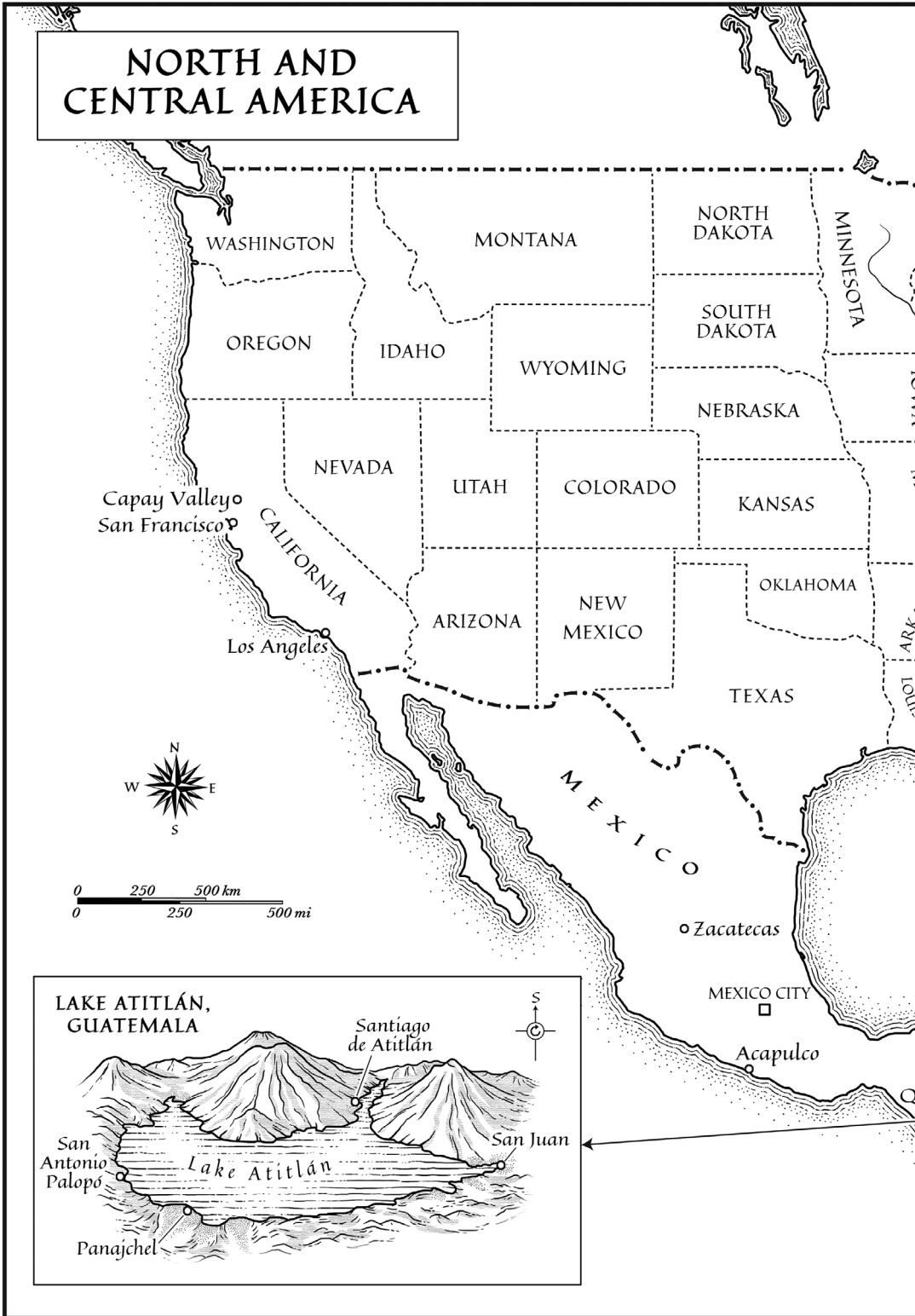


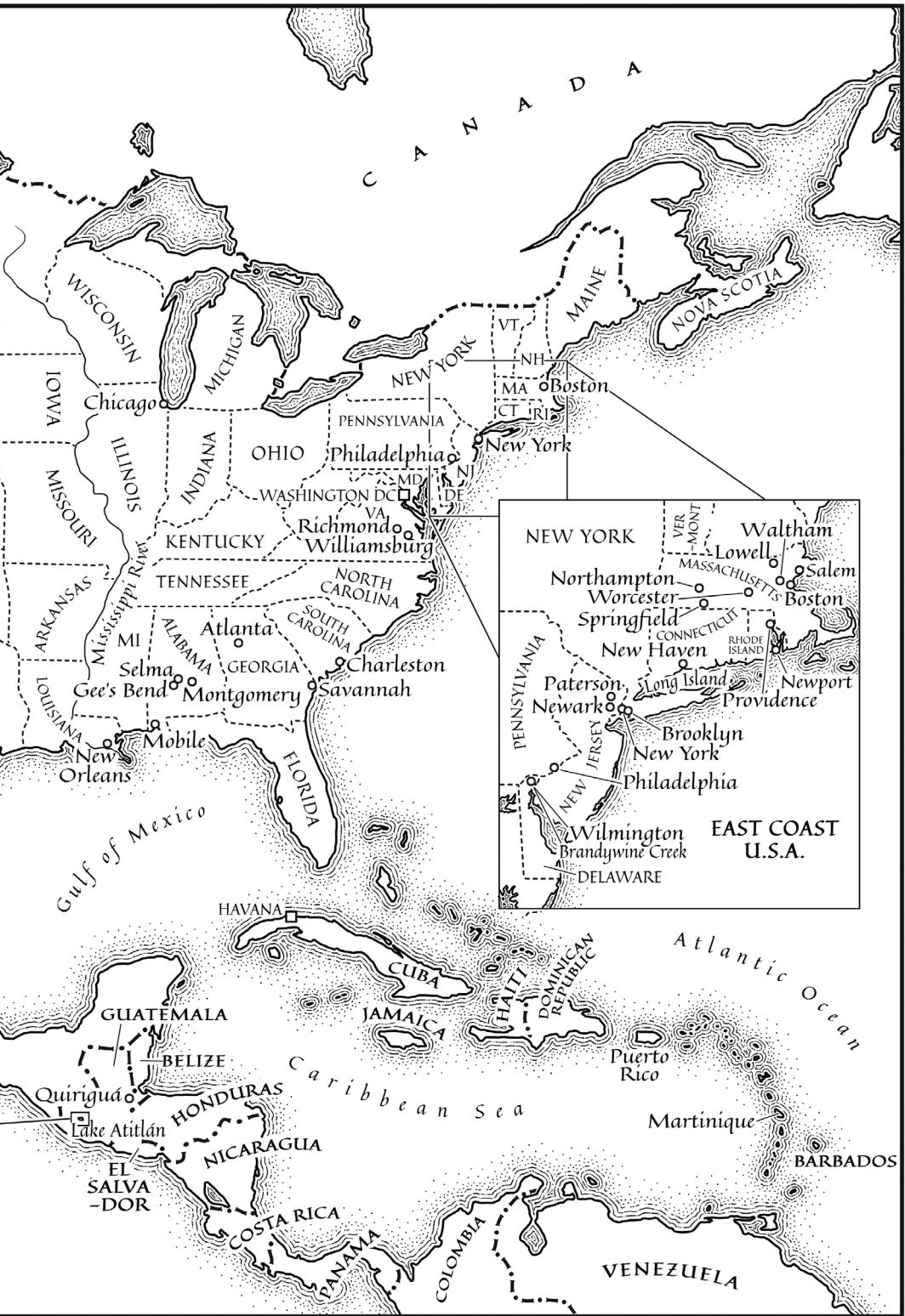


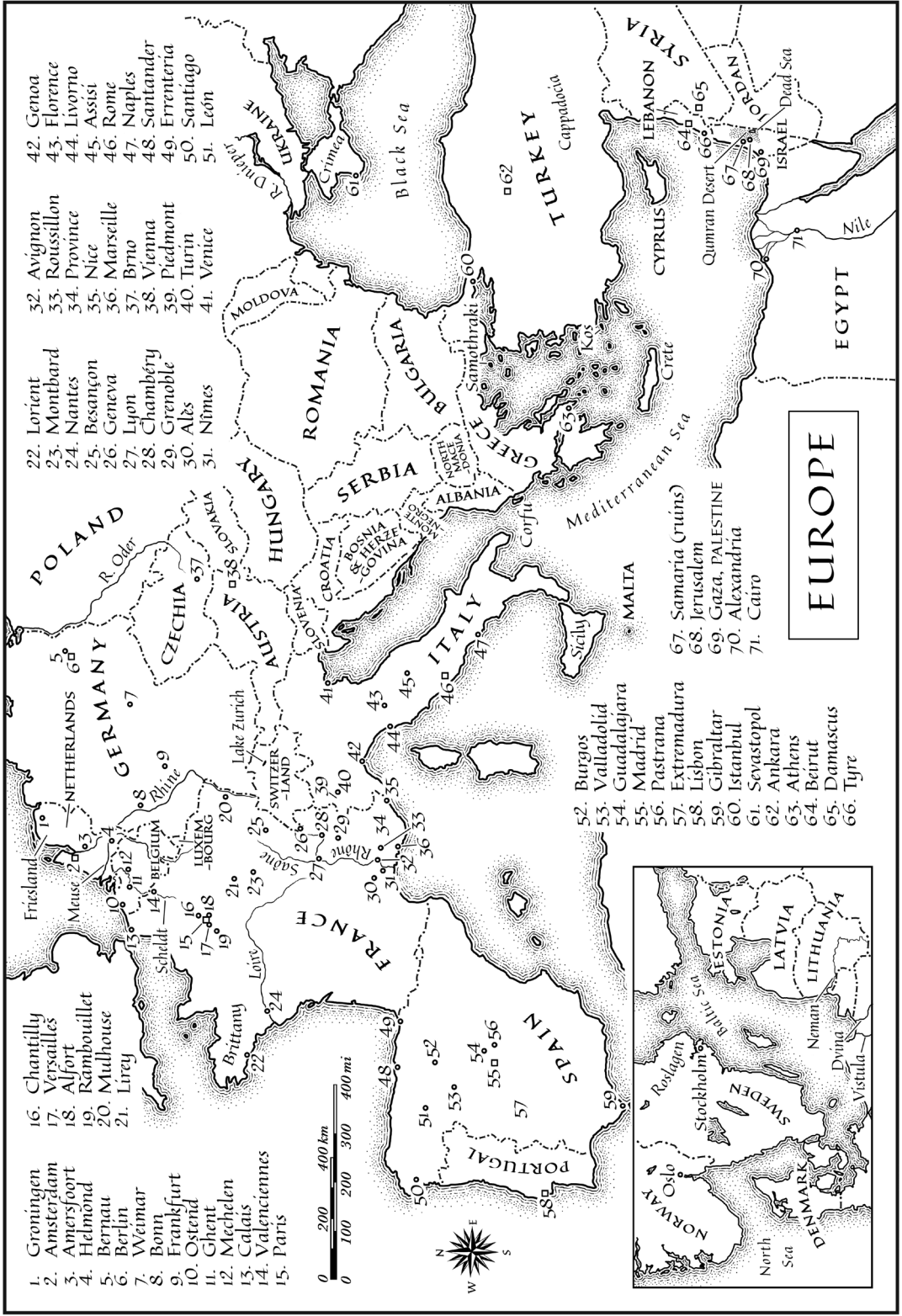




NORTH AND CENTRAL AMERICA







- 1. Groningen
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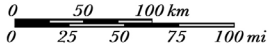
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LEWIS & HARRIS



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27. Abertridwr
28. CARDIFF
29. Splott

English Channel

FRANCE
 Douaio
 Cambraio
 Valenciennes

INTRODUCTION

It was 7 November 1992, the seventy-fifth anniversary of the 1917 October Revolution, and less than a year since the Soviet Union had collapsed. For the first time there would be no official celebration of communism. Red Square in Moscow was closed by the new authorities 'for repairs'. But nearby, Manezhnaya Square was crowded, waiting for something to happen; journalists and undercover police mingled with local people whose world had collapsed and who now had no money for bread. Armed soldiers lined the square. Snow was falling.

The Russians standing beside me in the crowd began to look worried. Then, from a direction I was not expecting, hundreds of people appeared in a silent procession. They were twenty wide, and dozens deep, most of them old men and some old women, all with grey hair, all in military uniforms, some hobbling, others with backs straight for the march. I ducked under the closing cordon of soldiers pushing the crowd back. I was the only one to get through. I ran towards the marchers, pulling out my camera from where I'd been keeping it warm in my jacket. Through the long lens I could see them close up. Their expressions were set, and hard to read. I found myself focusing tight on their clothes. The khaki woollen cloth of those who had been in the army, and the white cloth worn by the navy, puckered at the seams as if hand-sewn. Some of it was torn.

It was this – the frayed, patched, repaired fabric that represented how the people walking towards me had lost everything they believed in, how they were not going to be looked after as promised, how they were proud – that left me, still almost alone in the gap between the marchers and the surging crowd, taking pictures as tears froze on my cheeks.

After that, I began to notice how fabrics can give a glimpse of something truthful, a clue to what is underneath the surface of things.

I learned that the word 'clue' itself comes from an Old English term for a ball of yarn that can be unwound to show the right path. And, almost in passing, I saw how the stories of fabrics, their histories, are about endeavour and work and secrets and feuds and inventions and abuse and beauty and ugliness, and sometimes they are about tenderness. There were stories, I thought, and I wanted to know them.

It took a long time to get there. I had a journalism career in Hong Kong, returned to England, married, wrote three books, and spent twelve years working with my husband for a small international environment charity. But in early 2015, I was approached about the fabric idea. I both wanted to do it and knew I could not. My father had been ill for ten years after a catastrophic brain haemorrhage, followed by a stroke. He had been a medical miracle and survived, but now his dementia was getting worse and it was harder for my mother to look after him.

'Do the book!' she said. But the book I wanted to do would take several years and many journeys and I might not be there to help her.

'Don't say no just yet,' she said. We both knew she meant that my father would probably die soon. We talked about it with my father too; we talked freely about death in our family. He also said I shouldn't say no just yet.

That April my mother came to visit me in Bath. My husband, Martin, was away and we had the whole weekend to ourselves. The American Museum was running a show titled 'Hatched, Matched, Despatched – and Patched', about the fabrics people use at key life moments.

'We should go,' she said. 'Just in case you decide to write that book.'

In the final room, the funeral room, there were two burial skirts made somewhere in Wales, by sisters, to wear in their coffins. We imagined the making of them, a hundred and twenty years or so before: the warmth of the coal fire, a kettle boiling, adjusting of reading glasses, of woollen shawls shrugged around shoulders, the laughter at remembered stories from long ago, the teasing about whether it would still fit when it was your time to go. Such skirts are rare now, of course, as most of them ended where they were intended to, but these two – long, black, glossy, cotton satin,* one

* Cotton satin is made from cotton fibres that have been combed so they are

diamond-quilted and the other with fine zigzags – were stored in an attic and not used.

Then on a wall nearby we saw a quilted patchwork made in Llanybydder in Wales in 1911 by a widow, Ada Jones, just after her husband died. The caption stated that a friend stayed with Mrs Jones for the first six weeks of her mourning, and helped her to sew it. It was mostly dark crimson, with scattered scarlet diamonds, and a long scarlet strip at the centre with two spider-like black crosses at top and bottom. It was the opposite of restful, though perhaps it gave some repose.

‘We should do that,’ my mother said.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked.

Many friends would come to express condolences after my father died, she said. This way we could all sit companionably. It would give us something to think about when we wanted to stop thinking about anything. ‘And the funny thing,’ she added, ‘is that it would probably be the worst patchwork in the world.’ She had never had a loving adult around to teach her to sew as a child. She hadn’t been able to teach me. We’d always said we really should learn, and a shared project would mark a new kind of beginning, at a time when we’d need a new beginning.

I drove her back home to Devon, and we told my father about the worst patchwork in the world. He laughed. We all felt happy because it seemed we’d sorted something important.

Four months later my healthy, vibrant mother died. It was absolutely unexpected. I had not known grief could be so physical. That visit to our house in April had been her last, it turned out, and I kept on looking at the chair she had sat on at the table when we’d stayed up late making plans. After my father died she would move to live near us in Bath, we would travel to India, we’d have adventures. Her hands had turned the cloth napkin, folding it and unfolding it as we talked about shaping a happy life without him.

I had written in the past about the colours of mourning – black in Britain, white in Hong Kong, yellow in Brittany, mauve for ‘half’

long and silk-like. It’s often woven with the weft passing under one warp thread and over three or four, so the finished cloth feels like satin. It’s sometimes called ‘sateen’.

mourning as you begin to emerge from the first hard frost of grief.* But now I understood mourning clothes for the first time. I needed an armband, a ribbon, any kind of sign that would be understood by strangers and friends to say I couldn't be relied on, that I was to be treated carefully, that I was not, for a while, in this world.

My father died three months and a day later, at home, in the moment between me wetting his lips with cotton wool and turning away for a drop more of water. I was bereft but I was glad for him. And in the months between the two deaths, as my brother and I struggled with all we needed to do to keep our father out of hospital, when we felt lost and fractured into small pieces, I found myself trying to call my mother back. 'Where are you?' I kept crying in my head. 'You can't have gone. We have to make the patchwork!'

But as I did this, I came to realise I could make it after all. I'd go out into the world and uncover stories of barkcloth and cotton and wool and linen and silk and some of the other fabrics people have invented and used and worked into being. I'd meet some of the people who made them and learn about some of the people who'd changed the way they were made. I'd explore that quality of truth in fabric I had seen through my lens in Moscow and never forgotten. I'd learn the histories, and I'd find out more about the connection the material we can see has with the non-material world we cannot see.

And that book – this book – would be my patchwork.

I wasn't, in the beginning, going to talk about my parents. But they kept appearing in surprising ways. So this is, on occasion, a ghost story. Or a book written while grieving, and emerging from grieving, which is also a ghost story in its own way.

* In the early twelfth century, Balderich, abbot of Bourgueil in the Loire Valley, observed with curiosity that the Spanish dressed in black when their relatives died. Until the fifteenth century it was normal in France and England to dress in the brightest colours and the finest clothes to honour the dead.

SOME WORDS BEFORE WE START

The **warp** is the first set of threads on a **loom**; it's the skeleton of the cloth, the along.

The **weft** is the second set of threads, the skin of the cloth, the across.

I remember the difference because the last two letters of warp, reversed, are the beginning of 'primary'. And 'weft' is just another word for 'weave' – although curiously one of the old words for weaving was warping (*worpan* in Anglo Saxon, *verpa* in Old Norse) with its sense of projecting an object through space, or of wrapping, enveloping, binding and tying.

The warp threads need to be the strongest: if they break, the whole cloth is lost. They also need to be twisted harder than the threads that will run across them. This led to the word 'warped' meaning twisted or perverted: turned away.

A **shuttle** is the container holding the weft. It moves in predictable ways, back and forth – space shuttles and airport shuttles are named for it. 'Shuttle' is from the same origin as 'shoot', as in 'fire a projectile', and 'shut' as in 'bolt something closed'.

To **weave** a cloth or a **web** you need to pass the weft threads through the warp, over and under and over and under. You can do this more quickly by passing the shuttle through a tunnel in the warp called a **shed**. 'Shed' – from the same root as the German *scheiden* meaning 'to separate'. Which is, in turn, from the same root as the Greek *schizo*, to split.

The shed is created by a **heddle**, which uses cords or wires to lift different warp threads, ready for each pass or '**pick**' of the shuttle going through. Heddle is from the Old English *hefeld*, from the same root as 'heave', or the German *heben*, to raise.

If the heddle lifts every other warp thread each time, that is **plain weave** or **tabby**. If it lifts two or more neighbouring warp threads at

a time that is **twill**, from the same root as 'two'. It makes a diagonal pattern; denim is a twill.

The end of the pick, where the weft thread turns round on itself, is called the **selvedge**, the 'self-edge': the edge of cloth that is created through the action of the shuttle.

Yarn was traditionally made by twisting raw fibre on a **spindle**, a stick with a **whorl** near its base to give it weight as it turns. And the raw fibre would often be stored on another stick, sometimes cleft, called a **distaff**, to make it easier to handle before it met the spindle. In the past – from Spain, to Britain, to Germany, to Iceland – people called their mother's kin the distaff side, their father's side the sword.

BARKCLOTH

In which the author learns how fabric can be a magical pathway for gods travelling between worlds and discovers that barkcloth close up looks like noodles. And while she finds some curious books of cloth samples from Captain Cook's journeys two hundred and fifty years ago, she also tries to see it being made in Papua New Guinea. Or Fiji. Or Vanuatu. Or the Congo. Or anywhere at all.

It was 19 November, my birthday. My mother had died twelve weeks before, and my father wasn't doing well. My brother was with him. I'd be going to see them the next day but for today I was in London with my husband, and we'd taken the day off. I'd wanted to see an exhibition at the British Museum, hoping an encounter with the past would somehow help me in the present. We walked from the Tower of London, past St Paul's, along Fleet Street. Outside Dr Johnson's house, my mobile phone rang. It was my brother. It wasn't about my birthday. He wanted me to know the doctor was coming later. She was probably 'going to recommend a syringe driver' for our father's morphine and the other drugs he was taking, and this was the signal he was going to die. The pavements were grey after that, and the sky was grey, and the exhibition on the Celts was grey too. Later, at lunch, I couldn't eat the food.

What were we going to do with the rest of the day? We looked at each other helplessly. Then we saw a small notice by the northern stairs of the museum. Pacific Barkcloth Exhibition. Room 91. We could try that.

It was dark and there were luminous objects on every wall. Most of it was cloth, that was obvious, but it wasn't just cloth; that was obvious too. It had zigzags and patterns and whiteness and blackness and a quality of curiously textured brownness or bright reds or yellows. And dazzle. There was plenty of dazzle. The texture and

pattern of some of the pieces of fabric provided a strange, almost psychedelic, visual experience. It was neither flat two dimensions nor solid three. It was like it was two-and-a-half dimensions, with the extra half allowing a kind of mystery to enter in.

The Pacific was settled from about sixty thousand years ago by successive waves of people arriving from Southeast Asia. On Western maps it has, since the eighteenth century, been divided into Polynesia (including Hawaii, Samoa, Tonga and Tahiti), Melanesia (including Fiji, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and New Guinea) and Micronesia (including Guam, Kiribati and the Marshall Islands). When you look at the map, with islands like scatterings of salt on the blue tablecloth of the vast ocean, it seems astonishing that they had the courage to set out at all, and equally amazing that they survived.

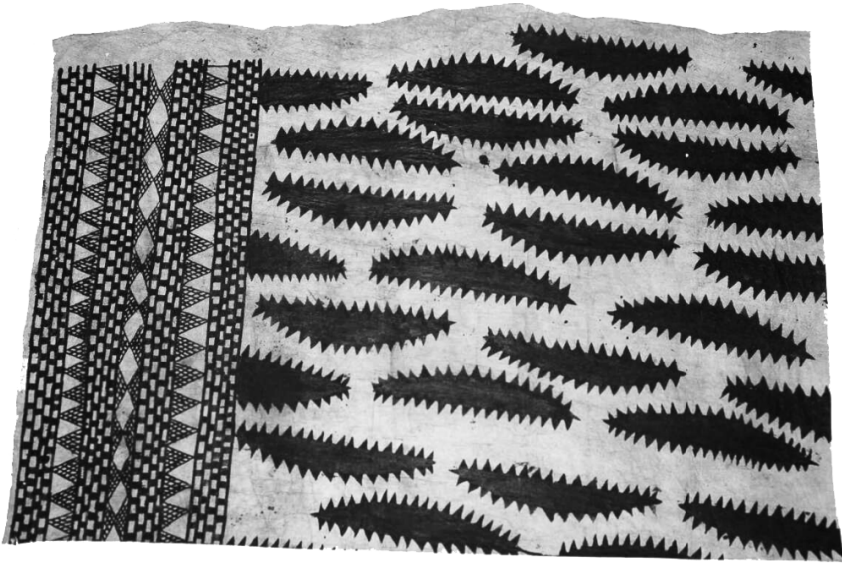
Micronesia has only ever had a woven fabric tradition, so it's not part of this chapter, but many future Melanesians and Polynesians carried with them from the Asian mainland various saplings: paper mulberry, wild fig and breadfruit. And they beat the bark of those trees into cloth.

The word 'barkcloth' has always sounded itchy and unappealing. It turns out that it's seriously badly named. It's not made from the outer, dead bit of a tree, which botanists call the rhytidome and we generally think of as 'the bark'. It's from the next layer in, hardly bark at all, the soft inner periderm layer through which what you could call the 'blood' of the tree flows. It's the layer that brings sap up to the leaves and back down to the roots. Far from being dead, the 'inner bark' is the part of the tree that is most alive.

Most communities have their own name for barkcloth: *siapo* in Samoa and nearby Futuna, *ngatu* in Tonga (pronounced -*gatu* with a silent 'n'), *masi* in Fiji, *nemas* in Vanuatu, *hiapo* in Niue and probably hundreds of different names in Papua New Guinea where there are eight hundred and fifty separate languages. But they also all use a borrowed word, *tapa*. It comes from the Hawaiian word *kapa*, which originally didn't even mean the whole of the fabric, just the edges, the unpainted parts, the liminal areas of cloth.

And ever since people set sail into the unknown Pacific with saplings on their outrigger canoes, they've invented all sorts of imaginative and sacred ways to decorate the cloth they could make from them.

In Hawaii, people created a kind of corduroy effect on some of their barkcloth, using incised bamboo rollers covered in red pigment.



Two-hundred-year-old barkcloth from Rarotonga.

On top of the red, they painted black triangles like backgammon motifs. These zigzags were sacred. They represented both genealogy and human spines, as if to say that records of our parents and their parents and their parents' parents are held in the bones of our backs, holding us up, and making us who we are.

On Niue, they cut out sections to make fringes like cowboy jackets; the Samoans glazed theirs with oil to make it shiny. In Tonga, people used sharks' teeth and shells to stamp the cloth: from a distance the patterns looked big and bold, but close up there was a perfect intricacy of tiny stamped shapes.

Standing there, in the British Museum, I realised that looking at cloth properly is all about moving in, then away, so the impressions shift and change.

I stopped for a long time in front of a black-and-white barkcloth from Rarotonga, the largest of the Cook Islands. It showed thin, leggy creatures like stick insects, surrounded by black diamonds. From a distance the black was rich like velvet, and when I got close I could see every line was made blurry by tiny zigzags. The border is similar to one on a cloth also from Rarotonga, used to wrap a 'wooden staff god' from Rarotonga, suggesting, as the museum label said, that

‘cloths like these might have had considerable sacred meaning’. But you could tell anyway. The pattern pulled you in and danced.

My brother sent me a text. Our father wasn’t going to die today. I breathed out. I knew that I could be present here now, rather than floating like a zigzag on top of the patterns I was seeing.

There were several pieces from Papua New Guinea. The Kovave dance masks, like enormous bird heads in a dream, had been made from stretching barkcloth across bamboo frames: they were teaching tools, created to pass knowledge to young initiated men about how magic worked. There were also six New Guinea loincloths made in the 1890s with busy, curling, abstract patterns that played games with my eyes. One looked like it showed a spine with little faces pulling open the vertebrae and peeping through. Another had interlocking blocks like capital Es and Fs dropping down the long cloth like a *sepia Tetris* video game.

Most of the New Guinean cloths were a century old or more, but then I found some from 2014. It seemed the Ömie people in Oro province in the southeast were still making barkcloth, and it had astonishing patterns.

Sarah Ugibari, the oldest of the Ömie painters, born around 1919, had painted a cloth covered in diamond shapes like the ‘gods’ eyes’ you make when you wind successive colours of yarn around crossed sticks. They were surrounded by black, red and yellow zigzags like the lines around the BLAM!!! in a comic strip. They depicted the fruit of a local tree. However, Ugibari wasn’t painting the fruit, but the design of the fruit as it was tattooed around her late husband’s navel. I briefly wondered why you would have tattoos around your navel, but then I understood that it is of course one of the most symbolic parts of the body. It is our closest link to another person, to the beginning of life.

As I walked, I felt the colours and the seams of my world coming right again. I felt wrapped in something that might actually comfort me. Towards the end of the exhibition there was a quote from Mary Pritchard who was one of the women making barkcloth – which she called *siapo* – on Samoa in the 1980s. ‘No one who makes *siapo* and who has experienced that silent communion ever feels they are making mere handicraft,’ she said. ‘Something deeply felt, like a prayer, gets into your being, your limbs, and through them into the *siapo* itself.’

I was in that one room for two hours as if I was in a dream. When

I woke and came to the end, Martin was there, quietly reading a book. I asked him just now, three years later, what he had thought. 'I felt you'd at last found somewhere that gave you some peace,' he said. 'It was a room full of ritual, and it was simple, and somehow that took you out of the pain. It was you again.'

And because it *was* me again I knew then that soon, in time, once my brother and I had helped our father through his last journey, I would take a journey myself, to find out more about this cloth which, with its issues of sustainability and adaptation and key life moments and hard work and design and invention and the fine art of wrapping, sums up so much that is important about all fabric. And which also, when I had really needed it, had seemed to comfort me.

But I would start with reading about a British expedition to the Pacific two hundred and fifty years before in 1768, when the crew were fascinated by cultures that were so different from anything they knew. One of the things that astonished them most was the sophistication and beauty of the cloth. And the person who was most interested in it was the chief naturalist, who a decade earlier had learned to look at the layers of the world.

And some of it is fine, like muslin

It was the summer of 1757. Joseph Banks was thirteen years old, and already the despair of his teachers for 'his extreme aversion' to studying. One day, wandering slowly back to school along a green lane, enjoying the summer evening and the flowers covering both sides of the path, something extraordinary happened. He realised in a kind of vision that his time would be better spent learning about those miraculous plants than the boring Greek and Latin he was forced to study. He also found in that realisation a kind of pathway to what his life could be. It was a tiny epiphany, one that anyone could have had, but it would change his life and it would give Britain a collection of plants, textiles, stories and seeds it still treasures. It would also mean he would be the first British person to write about barkcloth.

But that was the future. First Banks needed to find out about those plants. He found local women who gathered medicinal herbs for druggists and he paid them sixpence for each new piece of botanical information. Later he was 'inexpressibly delighted' to find a torn copy of Gerard's 1597 *Herbal* in his mother's dressing-room, and he