Uganda: Winter

Ouda Baxter

An exploration of place, memory, and rootlessness.

This exhibit comes from a deep wound, a hidden place. Half of my family and half of my life are unknown to the other half. My relationship with my mother is fraught with misunderstanding and longing. I look at photos of myself when I was young and I see and feel the love that we all had for each other, the way I looked at my mom, the way she held me. My sisters carried me on their backs. I was their white baby, their youngest. I was born with black hair that turned blonde when I was young, and eventually brown. I was curious, silly, strong-headed. Sweet. I picked flowers all day long and played with all of the children. I climbed trees. My dad, when he visited, called me Makako, monkey. I sang in church, loud and clear. I went with my religious mother, which made her happy. I was happy whenever I was with her, and I was always with her.

These photos were taken in January of 2009, where I traveled alone to see my family because my oldest sister was visiting for the first time since she left. She is now Canadian, although she was born and raised in Africa, schooled in Kenya. She was engaged to another Sudanese immigrant, Joe, who somehow turned out to be the kindest person despite experiencing the trauma of having been forced to be a child soldier. My sister, Hayat, was carrying her child, Elkanah, on this visit. It was her victory visit and I was there to celebrate with her.

Many of these photos show the ample time I spent with my nieces and nephews, Boy, Titi, Queen, and Ariel. They were silly, and goofy, and so much fun. I experienced the least amount of misunderstanding with them. My saving graces. Since I have left, three more children have been born aside from Elkanah. Everyone asks when I will have children and my answer is, not for a long time. I feel too young but by African standards, I am already getting too old.

My hope is that these photos, and the accompanying treasure hunt throughout Portland, will allow the viewer to explore the city in a way he or she previously had not. In addition, exploring my own family and personal history will perhaps encourage the viewer to look to his or her own memory/history. I have grown up scattered across the world, so is only fitting that my memories are snippets, strewn across the city that I have come to call home, that now represents the world.

It is a form of healing, far from complete. Revisiting these photographs and writing about my family has reminded me of a few key things: One, I love them, with all my heart. That is never in doubt. Two, distance creates a frustrating barrier, as well as cultural differences, that I feel the need to strive against, work through. Three, these are vulnerable places for me to visit, and yet, here they are. Softening into the places of sadness, of pain, of trauma, are the scariest things to do, but ultimately, the most transformative. My position is not a common one, and I have few role models of how to navigate being neither here nor there. Someone who exists in both worlds, as my good friend Oscar says. It is not an easy journey, but one that I welcome you to witness.

All we can ask for is grace. And so:

May we all walk with much-needed grace, humility, and openness on our path, our journey. Asante.