

Souvenirs

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Memory is like a film you watch when you're a child. You remember shapes, colours, images, voices, words. But they don't always fit together in one cohesive slideshow. Sometimes the end jams itself into the middle, the beginning is half forgotten, and other films enter the imagination, pulling their screens over your screen. My childhood experiences of Kenya are a series of fuzzy dreams, like veils overlapping. I often wonder if the memories I have come from recalling actual experiences or simply because I've memorized photographs. The bruised blue of dawn in a photo - a three year old me in a tomato red sweater, being held by Peter, with his filigree Muslim cap. Am I remembering the crispness of the air, the tips of my fingers freezing? The smell of sweat from my caregiver? Or is this imagination? Where do memory and perceived memory overlap?

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Visiting the houses of older Ismailis in Toronto is a constant *deja-vu*. If you're invited for chai and snacks at an Aunt's house, prepare yourself for the usual memorabilia - an elephant tusk stand (before they were illegal, of course), carved elephants or giraffes or lions, either made from Kisii stone or mahogany, a brass plate with an African scene etched on it. An ailing mind is not a place to accurately store memories. Memories have to be displayed on walls and coffee tables. They have to collect dust, to be polished and remembered once again. Each time we go to Kenya, we collect Kisii stone, clothes, newspaper cutouts, little tokens from Mama. Our memories of home are in our minds, but reminders of home can be on our desks, shelves, and coffee tables.

My family house in Toronto, for instance: Kenya photography books, a table shaped like an acacia tree, Masai busts, paintings of various Kenyan tribes, Kisii stone elephants. My father's house has two framed paintings of a wildebeest-elephant stand-off above his couch. He has a lampshade with painted baobab

trees, a photo of Jomo Kenyatta in steel next to the front door entrance and huge hollow drums that are used as magazine stands or makeshift TV dinner tables. I'm not innocent either - my room has a Kisii stone egg, and two mahogany book ends from Mombasa. Other houses have more extreme reminders.

I remember walking into the cold apartment of a great aunt who was exiled from Uganda. Splayed on the wall was a Colobus monkey skin. My aunt kept talking, serving tea, smiling at me, but I was staring past her. The black and white coat was less silky than I would've imagined - matted, straggly, stained with dust. At first, I wondered what possesses people to skin monkeys. But that question was too easy to answer. Money. The more important question is what possesses someone to buy that skin? As if our own skin wasn't enough to shed - skin that couldn't be easily peeled off, that forced many of us to be exiled to countries where white skin meant higher salaries and more respect.

But what I failed to remember is that most of the people with monkey skins, or ivory tusks, or lion hair left East Africa before it became illegal to own such things. They haven't been back since they've been exiled, or they don't have enough money to make the journey home. And even if they did, what's left? Family is no longer there. Their houses are now owned by ministers, or new residents. Or maybe they've been converted into shops, or offices. Rooms demolished, repainted, refurnished. If they went back, would they even recognize their home town? Would they be able to locate their childhood home?

When you're forced to leave your life behind and carry everything you know in a suitcase, what do you take with you? Money, clothes, books. Or a piece of wood, stone, shell or skin that will never lose its smell or texture. If these houses lacked these 'tacky' reminders of home, what would be left? Memory is selective, photos are few, parents are dead. But to touch something that was once from home, chiseled by local hands, is a small token of departure. It reminds some exiles of how they didn't want to leave in the first place.

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