

## Portrait of a life

Amaal Said

If I really think about where my need to cherish photographs started, it was receiving packages that contained photos of family members I had never met. There was my parents' joy at seeing the loved ones they had left behind enter our home. The photo album was opened, and they would be given a space, even if my siblings and I knew we might never meet them any other way. For my parents, this is how they stayed connected with family that stayed in Mombasa, Mandera and Nairobi, while they made it to Odense, Copenhagen and then London.

There was an uncle I called A. I knew he was real because I was sent to the store to get the £5 Talk Home calling card they'd use to speak to him. I knew him better through photographs which gave me more than just a voice on the phone. I'd studied his posture. Him and another man I didn't have a name for, squatting and shaking hands. He knew me as the niece that wasn't taught proper Somali and didn't jump at the phone to say hello. There were many uncles and aunts. They would have been just names if it hadn't been for the photographs. Even though so much remains missing.

There is always the danger of loss. One of our two albums was thrown into a larger bag and nearly discarded. My mother told me she had a strange feeling and decided to check if the bag was actually rubbish or something else; she ended up saving it. In the same conversation, she told me it was

too late to save a VHS cassette recording of her best friend. Her friend then passed away in Kenya and nobody knew she was ill. It was easy to move on from the tape before the death but afterwards all she could think about was never being able to hear her voice again. My mother got the news from her sister in Denmark. I remember the sadness. I got the impression she was thinking deeply about what she had left of her friend – an image in her mind.

Working recently on a project about family albums during an artist's residency, my external hard drive got corrupted. Nothing was recoverable. I cried for a full day, on and off. I thought, *How can I not have saved anything? How did I not know better?* But now I'm thinking, *What can be salvaged from elsewhere?* I go to what I'm left with and remember opening a direct message on Instagram from my little cousin in Nairobi. A picture of me as a child. I don't need to ask how she got it. My parents sat down and carefully chose which pictures of us to send over, the ones that would best say, 'We are alive', and also, 'We have children now'.

Sometime back then I made a promise to everyone that I'd be the documenter of the family, that anyone could come and tell me their stories and I'd make sure they were written down. My father found me hunched over my anonymous blog as a teenager. I was putting lines on top of each other, making up stories; I had no idea I would eventually call it poetry. Noticing me at the computer, he came over to say, 'I want you to write my story.' Just like that. No preamble, no apology. Just the fact that he had a story to tell and I was the only one that could write it down. There wasn't a secret language between us and very little tenderness, mostly formalities. At that age, I thought, *Yeah right, how on earth can I do that?* But he sat on the sofa next to me and began. He called my little sister over, too. We sat and listened. I tried my hardest to capture where he started and what he

survived to get here, but I could never find the right words. I've attempted so many poems about him since then, but haven't shown him any of them. When words became difficult, I hoped I could use a camera and tell the story that way.

From his last visit to Kenya, my father came back deflated. My grandad's situation was deteriorating quickly but my father made it back to him before he passed away. I stopped myself asking why he didn't take any pictures. I was sat eating my breakfast while he talked to my mum without looking at me once. I thought, *He doesn't want this part of the story documented. This stays off the record.* In the conversation with my mother, he's a small child at his father's bedside, waiting for a little gratitude and acknowledgement that he came back for him. All I could think about were photographs. I started to fill in the gaps. I went back to 2015 and my first trip to Kenya. I went back up that dark muddy road, past the neighbours sat on the stoop, past the neighbourhood cats minding their own business, and into my grandad's room. I would do it right if I got the opportunity again. I would ask to photograph him. Then we would pass the camera around and take pictures of each other. It couldn't and didn't happen because of shame. No one should see grandad living like this. I took a picture of the only thing I could: his radio. I felt close to him because it was the radio he listened to poems on.

There's so much that isn't documented. My years of being homeless. There's no record of any of this. The photo album was for the significant moments. There's our first day in London, landing at Heathrow airport. My first day of school in Copenhagen wearing a denim dress. If you keep flipping, there are the images of aunts and uncles, the ones we've never met. Filling the photo album with pictures of family back home served a distinct purpose. When we go back and look at ourselves, we see them

too. My mother telling me, 'If I die, you have to send money to Uncle A because he doesn't have anyone else to send him money', wasn't so strange because I knew uncle A from the photographs, and he knew me on the phone.

I appreciate being able to go back and see those key moments photographed to prove we're surviving in the country we've ended up in. There's evidence of joy, even if my memory and the photo album memory aren't always the same because the album shows none of the hardship endured. Being able to go back and point to evidence of happiness is important because I realise not everyone had this. A family. An existence without fear. I knew about all those being deported, sent back in the darkness of the night. My own cousins attempted the journey and got sent back. All these years living near a detention centre, and I only realised last year how close we were. All the people inside that I wanted to give homes and safety to. But then I remembered being that teenager my father trusted to tell his story, and who failed at the task. Small details come back to me gradually, like the Danish detention centre that my father and uncles were in. The story's murky now. I don't remember if I've made up details or not. I see him alone on a plane to London with us waiting for him in Copenhagen, but I can't recall the dates. I can't see the picture.

What happens when the photograph is the only thing that pins you down, gives you a name, an existence, and puts you in relation with others? Watching *Sitting in Limbo* on the BBC with my family and hearing the immigration official tell Anthony Bryan – who grew up as a child in Britain only to be threatened with deportation in the Windrush scandal – that he needed to bring family portraits because they were persuasive was heart-breaking. The difference between finding a photograph and not finding it is the difference between losing your life as you know it and staying alive.

Photographs are taken as proof of an entire life, lived in Britain, but even that's not enough. Bryan still needs to provide his passport and birth certificate. He's an alien without this evidence.

I think about the films of Portuguese director, Pedro Costa. In an interview with Michael Guarneri, Costa states his films are 'about the fear of losing that house, the roof, our home, the fear of losing this centre.' He speaks to the fear that many people live with every day. I think about the document folder of my mum under her bed. It contains in one place everything officials could ask for.

I always thought I took pictures of my friends and family because I wanted them to have photos they felt good looking at. But there's more to it than that. I'm also proving that I'm part of a wider community and that we've built a life here. When my dad said, 'Take pictures of someone else', I realised I wasn't immune from being a suspect, external gaze. Perhaps he was sick of being looked at, processed, read, and it didn't matter that I was his daughter intending only good. I know about relying on photos and losing them, needing to rely on memory alone, and getting upset when you inevitably forget the details. I can't ever compare losing my external hard drive to losing the photographs that will prove to officials that we belong here.

The hope is that I'll leave something solid behind. That there'll exist evidence of a life lived, that'll make sense and be passed down. It's about needing to go on. The same thing that urges people to grow trees in other people's names. Something still growing when they're gone. Something about being between different places and feeling at home absolutely nowhere, while still having some kind of evidence of a life. For my parents, filling up photo albums is so that we will have images of them to show

when they're no longer here. It's because my mum can't remember her mum's face, who passed away when she was still a child. I find it normal now, my need to hold on to images I've taken and the sadness when those images get lost. Preparing to pass down images for when I'm not here anymore is proof that I'm thinking ahead, beyond myself. There are so many ways to document this existence; I get the urge at times to take pictures of my everyday life, to post them to a stranger and to ask if they could kindly send something back. I'm proving to others, elsewhere, that I'm still alive, and that this country, and its coldness, hasn't killed me yet.

### **Amaal Said**

Amaal Said is a Danish-born Somali photographer and poet, based in London. Her photographs have been featured in *Vogue*, the *Guardian* and *The New York Times*. She is concerned with storytelling and how best she can connect with people to document their stories. She won *Wasafiri* magazine's New Writing Prize for poetry in 2015. In 2017, she exhibited in Los Angeles, California. In 2018, her photography was featured in the fourth volume of *African Lens* and was exhibited in Accra, Ghana. She is a member of Octavia poetry collective for womxn of colour, and is a former Barbican Young Poet.

A recording of this piece can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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