

The Disappearing Island

Marjorie Rugunda

marjorie.rugunda@ucalgary.ca

Marjorie Rugunda is a freelance writer and editor. She was born and raised in Uganda. She is currently pursuing a Masters' degree in English literature at the University of Calgary, Canada. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism, Media studies and English literature (Hons) from Rhodes University, South Africa (2017 & 2018). She is the receipt of the MacKenzie-Hicks Graduate Scholarship (2019) and the Andrew W. Mellon Scholarship for Urban Connections in African Popular imaginaries (2018). Her research interests are Post-Colonial literature, African popular imaginaries and female subjectivities in African literature. She enjoys reading in her free time, cycling and photography.

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My name is Girl. I am fifteen years old. I live with my mother. I have one brother. Boy. We are twins. He died eight hours after his birth. I have no aunty or uncles. Mother is an only child. I have one grandmother and one grandfather. I have never met them.

We live in a fishing village one kilometre outside of the city. The Island is on Lake Victoria. Most of the houses here are built with mud and bamboo sticks. When the rains come, the cow dung we smear on the walls outside the house prevents the water from penetrating the walls.

No men live here. We push our own canoes along the monstrous lake. We catch and collect our own fish. We milk our own cows. We plant our own food. We harvest our own food. Our mothers head our households. Outside invaders are afraid of the lake so we rarely get intruders. When we do, every matriarch from each household has a bamboo stick. The weight alone is enough to knock someone out with an aggressive nudge on the back.

The first born girls usually head out for the first catch at dawn. We spend six hours quietly manoeuvring through the lake. Dawn is the best time to fish. It is when the lake is most calm. We glide through it like a child gliding over freshly mopped floors. We take turns singing songs. We make sure everyone is in sight.

The mothers head out for the evening catch. The first and last born girls wash the morning's fish. We scrape off their skin, pluck out their eyes, chop their heads off, chop their tails off and toss what is left in buckets. We distribute each bucket to each household on the Island. We then meet at the shore to prepare for the daily game of dodgeball.

Today I made the ball. I stuffed it with one sock, a handful of tiny stones, one underpant and sealed it with a black polythene bag. The smaller the ball is, the easier it is to shoot through the air like a bomber plane on a mission. I have one friend amongst the girls. Mora. She and I will be the ballers today. I only see Mora once a day. I see her after dawn and she disappears before sunset.

One day Mora's mother went with the evening group to fish and did not return. They claim she sailed so far they could not see her. Others whisper that she was eaten. Others suspect she did not exist at all. They only saw her after dawn and she disappeared before sunset. Others whisper that maybe she and Mora are the same person.

Mora and I toss the ball between the overly excited group of daughters. They run back and forth flapping their arms. Shoving each other with their ashy elbows. Using each other as shields from the handmade bullet. They start to drop out, flinging their arms up in protest. We started with eight. Then six. Then four. Now there's two.

Mora and I throw the ball faster. The two girls twist, then dip, then twist, then spread their legs wide to avoid the shot, then squat, then run to the side, then dip, then twist, then spread their legs wide, then squat, then run to the side. These ones are tough.

I pitch the ball with all my might. It hits number two straight in the back.

"Out!" I yell.

"You've always had such strong arms," Mora says.

At sunset. Mora takes her leave.

The rest of us are sitting cross legged sharing a cup of boiled water amongst ourselves when an old canoe with tape loosely hanging from the sides approaches. A woman with a bald head and a hunchback paddles the canoe. She wears a smile as she approaches. I have never seen her before. We all stare with disapproval as her canoe rests on the shore.

"Are you lost?" one of the daughters asks.

"Mwanawange?" The woman smiles revealing grey gums with hardly any teeth. "I'm thirsty. Please can I share some of that water?"

As I am the last one with the cup of water gripped tightly with my two fore fingers, I rise to share our cup. Jagged fingernails clench my hand before I find my balance.

"We do not give anything to strangers here" the daughter with claws digging into my skin says.

A few years ago. Before Boy and I were born. Mother told me a group of local fishers including herself left the city after being cheated out of their money by city dwellers. They knew each Island on the lake so they picked the one hidden out of sight by the thick forest. Men, women and children. They worked together and made a community on the Island. One day, the men and boys went to fish. They never returned. The women took over and vowed never to let any other stranger on the Island. My brother was the first and last male on the Island.

"Ah! Get off" I shout. "She says she's thirsty."

"No! I will not let you. We do not feed strangers," the daughter says.

"She is an old woman asking for water!" I say.

"Bring the water, kind one. You will not regret it." The woman motions me with her fingers to come forward.

As I walk closer to the woman I notice she has a face of a girl no younger than fifteen. She has grey stripes through her hair. The skin on her face is smooth. Not a wrinkle in sight. As she stretches her arm to reach for the cup, I notice the sagging skin under her arms and two moles each the size of a grain of wheat on her forearm. It is as if her face and body belong to two different people. She gives me a cheeky smile, like she knows who I am, as she takes the cup from my hand. Her hand tremors.

"You are a kind one" the woman says and drinks the water so fast. It seems like she is drinking water for the first time.

“Are you from the city?” I ask.

Before she can respond one of the daughters says, “How can you give our water to this stranger? An ugly stranger. Go away before the mothers return.”

The woman smiles. I now notice that she has become much taller and her hunched back has slightly straightened up making her body appear much younger than it was.

“Come with me, kind one” she says. “Help me push this canoe off this shore and I will be on my way.”

I hesitate. The mothers will be home soon. If they find her here she will not make it back to the city. City women never make it this far. She is not from the city. Maybe she is from the Islands across from us. I place the emptied cup on the ground. I grab the pointed end of the canoe and begin to push. I jump into it as it glides off the shore and floats on the water.

“Grab that oar,” she commands. “The current is too strong. Give me one good push and you can swim back.”

The tide is getting higher. I feel my arm muscles begin to ache as I fight with each wave. I succeed in rowing the canoe far enough off the Island. As I place the oar down, I look up and notice the woman’s back is turned towards me. She watches the Island. I now notice the grey stripes in her hair have disappeared. Her hunched back has disappeared. The sagging skin on her arms has tightened. The two moles the size of a grain of wheat have disappeared.

“You have always had such strong arms” the woman remarks.

At once, I jump out of the canoe and begin to swim. My legs feel like bags of sand. I push my arms forward and backward, battling with the water’s resistance. My arms move but my body remains still. I reach my head out of the water and look toward the Island. Breathlessly, I open my mouth to shout for the daughters. My words are replaced by shock when I discover that the Island of mothers and daughters has disappeared.