

# Shamba

My father calls four times a week, cheering me on from across the Atlantic as I write my way through a blindingly white MFA program. He's on the other end of a video call, pleading. Write. He's looking at me with his head tilted out of focus, my screen blurring the deep creases on his hollow cheeks, dimming the brightness in his brown eyes, and fuzzing the bushy brows that lead up to a forehead drooped against his folded right hand. I see silent stories etched in deep wrinkles on my father's face.

He says he can show me what to write about as he moves his hand from his head and presses it against the grey mudwall behind him, rising up from a three-legged wooden stool. He keeps his hand clenched around his phone as he glides from the kitchen, to the living room, and out onto the verandah. He pauses by the door and glances down at his phone – I'm still here – then he makes his way down to the shamba. I shift my position inside my bed, tossing in sweaty discomfort and mewling my frustration at the enervating South Florida heat, waiting. My father, in seeking to keep me up to date with the progress of our land, switches from the front camera to the back, and then clears his throat and asks, his voice rising with every word, "Chemu, can you see?"

I can't see – what I'm looking at is a nebulous mix of black and brown. I squint harder, blinking at my cracked screen until I make out black blurry stick figures planted above a shadowy brown mass; the network in Ndalat is poor, and I refuse to tell him that, so I imagine.

The early sun shines under vast velvet clouds, rays coming down on the shamba in hues of golden red and orange. In that soft light, my mother, bent over like a hook, plows her hoe at a narrow trench. As she turns the soil and breaks its surface, an acacia tree sways and watches at a distance. Beyond the thorn tree, my sister waves hello, or was that goodbye? Beside her, my brother introduces his new-born daughter to the family: Limitrophy. But that can't be her name. I heard it at school, from the group of white people that surround me there. Literature students, guys who spend days on end analysing, debating, and theorising other white people.

My father switches to his front camera, his brows puckered, waiting for a response. I take a deep breath and clear my throat, my voice raised far beyond its natural pitch, "I see it, Baba."

Inside the hut he sinks back into his stool, a grunt, contentment. He holds out his phone, stretches out his hand at an angle he thinks works best. I rest my elbow on my pillow, propping my head up with my hand, we can't get comfortable.

I long to fold myself, slip into the screen and join my family. I see them on the shamba, watching me from that shadowy brown mass, urging me on. My mother nods to my father and me, half-smiling. She stands to take a break, to straighten her spine, and to feel the gentle wind. She wipes her brows with the back of her hands before bending back down to the shamba that wears her out. Behind the acacia tree, my sister beckons, come, she calls, come and meet her, the newest member of the family: Limitrophy, my niece. Soon my world will resume, but for now I hold onto my father. I'm with him in our shamba, in that place that propels me forward. I

imagine the limit as a space for expression, a place that inspires and acknowledges and honors differences.

From across the ocean, I can feel my father, so I write.