



*Figure 1 Eric Muthendu at his home in Richmond, Tex. He will attend Harvard in the fall.*

Richmond, Tex.

**“These are the two worlds I have inherited, and my existence in one is not possible without the other.”**

**Eric Ngugi Muthendu**

My grandmother hovers over the stove flame, fanning it as she melodically hums Kikuyu spirituals. She kneads the dough and places it on the stove, her veins throbbing with every movement: a living masterpiece painted by a life of poverty and motherhood. The air becomes thick with smoke and I am soon forced out of the walls of the mud-brick house while she laughs.

As for me, I wander down to the small stream at the ridge on the farm’s edge, remembering my father’s stories of rising up early to feed the cows and my mother’s memories of the sweat on her brow from hours of picking coffee at a local plantation.

Life here juxtaposes itself profoundly against the life I live in America; the scourge of poverty and flickering prosperity that never seem to coalesce. But these are the two worlds I have inherited, and my existence in one is not possible without the other. At the stream, I recollect my other life beyond this place. In America, I watch my father come home every night, beaten yet resilient from another day of hard work on the road. He sits me and my sister down, and though weary-eyed, he manages the soft smile I know him for and asks about our day.

My sister is quick to oblige, speaking wildly of learning and mischief. In that moment, I realize that she is too young to remember our original home: the old dust of barren apartment walls and the constant roar outside of life in the nighttime.

Soon after, I find myself lying in bed, my thoughts and the soft throb of my head the only audible things in the room. I ponder whether my parents — dregs floating across a diasporic sea before my time — would have imagined their sacrifices for us would come with sharp pains in their backs and newfound worries, tear-soaked nights and early mornings. But, it is too much to process. Instead, I dream of them and the future I will build with the tools they have given me.

Realizing I have mused far too long by the water’s edge, I begin to make my way back to the house. The climb up the ridge is taxing, so I carefully grip the soil beneath me, feeling its warmth surge between my fingers. Finally, I see my younger cousins running around barefoot endlessly and I decide to join their game of soccer, but they all laugh at the awkwardness of the ball between my feet. They play, scream and chant, fully unaware of the world beyond this village or even Nairobi, but I cannot blame them. My iPhone fascinates them and they ask to see my braces, intently questioning how many “shillings” they cost. I open my mouth to satisfy their curiosity, but my grandmother calls out, and we all rush to see what she has made.

When I return, the chapatis are neatly stacked on one another, golden-brown disks of sweet bread that are the completion of every Kenyan meal. Before my grandmother can ridicule me in a torrent of Kikuyu, I grab a chapati and escape to find a patch of silky grass, where I take my first bite. Each mouthful is a reminder that my time here will not last forever, and that my success or failure will become a defining example for my sister and relatives.

The rift between high school and college is wide, but it is one I must cross for those who have carried me to this point. The same hope that carried my parents over an ocean of uncertainty is now my fuel for the journey toward my future, and I go forward with the radical idea that I, too, can make it. Savoring each bite, I listen to the sound of neighbors calling out and children chasing a dog ridden with fleas, letting the cool heat cling to my skin.