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### Their Asbury Angus

Ocean mountains. That ole Blue Ridge Mountain Range filed down to soft waves of azure, systematically crashing through the Shenandoah Valley. Blurry with my tears but sharp in outline with my raging, squinting concentration. I stomp up the steep green hill with the purpose of a preacher stepping up into a pulpit.

“Talking doesn’t seem to work, so this time I will be shouting,” I give a dignified update.

Silence.

The pungent smell of a dried up cow patty wafts up to my nose as I am eyeballing the halfway point. I am sliding past. Pause. Blackjack, my family’s pet baby cow, peers at me with heavy eyelids and the concern of an interrupted musician. His whole left hind side is plastered with lighter shades of brown. He is pure Angus beef, and he stands as temporary mascot for the farm we call Asbury Angus, for the home we call Asbury Angus. I stare back at him.

“I suppose you would like to join me in bellowing to God?”

His disinterest drives him back to licking the salt block with his disproportionately-colored pink and gray tongue. He makes me feel melancholy; a step down from indignation.

I cock my head to the side to breathe the freshly bush hogged field and evening dew. My stomping slows to a constant march. God has never shouted back, but this time I feel as if he really hasn’t properly considered listening and responding. I figure absurd shouting in the middle of a symbolically green pasture should at least draw out His irony.

“God has a sense of humor,” my mom sighs the southern adage in my memory.

“Okay, then, funny world. Reveal yourself! Let me revel in your wit and charm.”

Blackjack turns back to me. I decide I want to touch the white star precariously balancing between the long, thick lashes heaped above his dark eyes. Cow fur is so thin; I feel his thick skin. Concentrate. Okay.

A brilliant sun stands in permanent state of volcanic eruption right behind the cool mountain wave. One step further and the hill would drop like an anchor pulling towline; I rest at the tippy top. The prickle of summer grass beneath my calves and behind my knees triggers a memory: Sky, black, sky, black, I am barrel rolling down the cow patty-speckled slope. My brother tumbles close behind in a fit of girlish giggles. We love to roll down the steep farm hills when the evening brings cool air. We call it summer sledding. The solar eruption takes cover beneath the mountain, leaving the valley void of its golden brushstrokes, but leaves remnants of pink wisps stuttering across the sky. My parents' divorce is prying me from this farm and pairing it with a vacant, irrelevant face. I whisper.

“Why then, would I be raised here?”

Homeless suddenly differentiates itself from shelterless. The thought hunches my spine, and I let my tears roll into the soil. I'm shaking. I'm sobbing. I'm shouting.

“BUT THIS IS BASE. YOU CAN'T TAG ME HERE! EVEN IF YOU ARE GOD.

Even though you are God.”

The wind dries my face until it just looks like I've sneezed twelve times in a row. I can feel my eyes shining and my mascara connecting dots between my freckles. I'm beginning to wander down the hill to a pond that resembles an oversized mud puddle. The breeze blows and goose bumps rise on my arms, so I turn around and wearily pull my legs into a brisk walk. I figure the 35 acres of farmland and 10 acres of woodland is expansive enough for me to revisit in secret

when the farm is sold. People typically only shoot at male trespassers around here. I console myself with moral justifications of lifetime trespassing rights.

A hop, skip and high school career later, Asbury Angus still stands in Price possession. Divorces have a way of splintering all people and possessions involved, with the exception of at least one family-life remnant that neither party can bear to chalk up to collateral damage. It is usually a vestige that, when preserved, can attest to at least one small, albeit materially insignificant, success. Asbury Angus, with its churning hills, form-fitting fences, and combed fields, is a direct result of seventeen years with two lives cohabitating, coexisting, cogenerating. Sometimes the vestiges of divorce are the children; my parents' vestige is the farm. Even as I traverse the same grains of earth, cold and packed years later into winter's navel, I am not resentful to still be splintering. I would rather have the farm. The grass grays from a cold season's touch, but it reminds me of an aging foundation. The mud puddle pond, hazy with chunks of ice, taunts the tongues of newborn calves. Rows of barren brown limbs stand to attention, saluting the same eruptive sun, patiently waiting for it to bring forth spring life. I still trace that foundation with my feet, and it brings me forward. I march up the hill and know home.

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La Hispaniola is just a handful of landmass among the Caribbean's archipelago. It houses Haitian and Dominican people. I travel there to hear them eat, taste their words, and observe their language. I yearn to be familiar with their Asbury Angus. I settle into a white van that seats nine with fourteen other Americans who are also part of . Our driver spins us through city colors while occasionally plucking a building's faded pink or burnt orange into attention with the jolt of brakes. We approach a compound enclosed in white walls topped with curls of barbed wire. Their security guard, a tooth-speckled smiler, waves us through the iron-dressed

gates with his shotgun. I am peeling my sticky skin off the van seat as I squint into the approaching darkness.

We sit in the kind of shelter you typically hold your family reunion in. A chalkboard stands with importance at center. Its condition is laughable. My eyes frown as they peruse the webbed cracks and blue hue. Scan. Pause. Frown. Scan. Pause. Four white eyes stare to me. Two Haitian immigrants see me see them. I shove my glance downward and settle in my narrow wooden chair. Seven Haitian migrant workers occupy the front of the shelter like ambassadors. They begin to chatter with our professor, Felix.

Haitian skin is royal black. It holds the same authority as the black of night. Their slow Spanish and second language word choices make it easy for me to understand. Since Felix stands in as translator, he introduces us as the youth of future and importance. Their nonchalant attitude exudes judicious intellect; they remain unaffected until gathering truth from experience. They do not pay mind to our stated importance. One man has youthful wrinkles that flit across his face with sage and philosophical skepticism. A woman, braless and clothed only in black sweatpants and a washed-through blue t-shirt, demands attention with the strength in her voice. She speaks and marinated thought comes out. The letters of each word push forth from her tongue into the thickness of Dominican air, taking the shape of small font capital letters.

“What will they do with our lives after we hand them forth? What purpose do our words and dredged up suffering serve if only to be briefly entertained?”

She questions our intent. My cheeks flood with a heated red. Truthfully, we gave our parents’ dollars to this university program to get us first row seats to this lecture, a front row view of their suffering. After all, this is the education and awareness that JMU promises to deliver its students. This is how the university churns out globally enlightened citizens. The onset of foolishness

begins in the soles of my feet, working its way to tug the viscera in my abdomen down, down, down. The very concept of awareness blushes, and it is tumbling down through my mind.

“We are legal workers of the Dominican Republic. The police bash the heads of our kin with the butts of their discriminatory guns.”

But guns are meant for complete jobs, a trigger pull and done. They are used like an unsharpened knife here, to leave scars for remembering. Discrimination abounds.

“We educate our youth here because the government has revoked their citizenship.”

The government twists the blunt knife. Deprive a population of education and your racial slurs about stupidity will become true. Oppression abounds.

The Dominican Republic’s corrupt government passed “Resolution 12,” which revoked the citizenship of many Haitians. It lends credence to the Dominican intolerance of Haitians. Haiti will not accept people of Haitian descent who were born in the neighboring country just because they share the same royal skin and cultural history. Ten by ten, “Resolution 12” renders Dominican Haitians homeless, Asbury Angus-less.

I look up to the 25-watt light bulb hanging in a crevice of the shelter ceiling. Its steady buzz is an audible effort to shoo away the enveloping nighttime. This is the light that allows them to teach after sun down. I can’t see the chalkboard.

“People do not care how much you know, unless they know how much you care.”

Momma’s words grip me into a sympathetic expression. To care is a verb, an action. These Haitian migrant workers are birthwronged. My birthright is Asbury Angus. My mind works to recall the difference between homeless and shelterless. My identity leans on my home. People are migrating from poverty, from desolation, from Haiti. They are bearing Dominican citizens who serve the economy through organizations

that legally help them find jobs in the Dominican Republic. But they are “undocumented” because poverty stole their chance at a birth certificate. Their children are born here and denied citizenship. No community ownership, no healthcare, no education, no job opportunities. Nowhere to prove worth and earn dignity through the application of knowledge. No vote, no power. Oppression.

Without documentation, the police refuse to look at the proof of life, each breath, rising and falling throughout their chests and shoulders. No ID, no breath. Human rights are for humans. Is the condition of humanity dependent on the existence of a birth certificate? If so, then why do the officers *with* birth certificates bruise bodies like violent primates? The injustice hooks to the inside of my back and pulls angry breaths up through my clavicle. Particles of Dominican air stick together and I pull them in my mouth like cigar smoke. In my mind, I stomp up the hill of Asbury Angus. This time, when I shout at the top, it will be to my world.

We stand on wobbly legs, rid ourselves of paper pesos into their needing hands, and circle up to end in prayer, Haitian-style. It is there that I began to whisper to God.

“Thank you for my Asbury Angus. Help me restore theirs.”