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Branded Cowboy

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Branded Cowboy

by Meredith Doench

“Here is a moving story of a transgender man whose roots reach deeply into the dust of West Texas. He must choose between the woman he loves and the life he has made on his family’s ranch as a cowboy. I was impressed with how the writer chose to tell this story, with grace and nuance and heart. “–Roxane Gay

It is fatal to be a man or a woman pure and simple: one must be a woman manly or a man womanly.
–Virginia Woolf

Dust from the cattle pasture plumes red around my boots as the runts totter on spindly legs. They always come for a shake of the sweet feed and a few quick whistles. I guide their heads into the large buckets until I’m sure each one has their fill. My father warned that we cannot afford to lose any of our 100-head this season. We’ve had a rough year and our finances are now so strapped, this old ranch is nothing more than a dying illusion on the American West’s landscape.

I settle onto a wooden crate out behind the water barrels where Darcy, my gal, nuzzles against old Vivaldi’s neck and kisses her puckered horse lips. The steady summer wind mixes with the sounds of Vivaldi’s snickers as she delights in Darcy’s kisses. Vivaldi’s a flirt, a lady’s mare, and she’s dialed up her game since Darcy came into my life. It’s possible, I’ve found, to be jealous of my horse.

Shading my eyes from the dying sun, I trace my father’s ride out near the oil horses. He follows along the perimeter of the steel-edged fencing as he checks the security of the gates and re-counts each head. Cattle rustlers have stolen twelve of our bulls over the last six months, a significant portion of our livelihood. There is no way for us to be too cautious during these times.

“Y’all need to brand,” Darcy says.



Wax and Wane by Sarah Elise Abramson

I take my hat off and finger-scrub my sun-bleached hair. "Can't afford it."

We fought to get the bulls back from the auction house, but without branding, there was no way to prove they were ours. The Fort Stockton police took a report simply as a formality. There wasn't much they could do and that rustling has become a serious problem in the West. Most ranchers and farmers are down on their luck, and a slim few resort to thievery in order to keep their finances above water.

From my very beginning, there has always been the land and my father. He taught me to respect the West Texas, dusty-red tundra, a land so proud and strong and irritable it could make or break you in only a season.

"This dirt is so much bigger than us, B," he told me, "and there's no telling when it will choose to bless us and when it will not."

Hard, blistering work was my dad's answer to the randomness of life's troubles. After long days, I joined him on the porch where we looked out over a ranch that was so alive, it breathed and shifted around us. We recognized the land's quiet but steady beating heart, and never doubted that we belonged to this patch of earth in much the same way a sailor belongs to the sea.

My mother left when I was only three. Sometimes it felt like her presence stood between me and my father, the ghost of her nearly impenetrable. Eventually I learned that the distance I sensed had nothing to do with my mother and everything to do with me. And my body.

Finally, my father rides out of our sight. Darcy kneels down in front of me and kisses my palm. She loves the leathery feel of my rope-calloused hands.

"You are my cowboy, B." She slides my wide-brimmed hat on her own head until the sides hang low against the tops of her sun-burned ears. She straddles me with her knees, settling onto my lap. Her breasts press against my own while she kisses the tip of my ear. She whispers, "Let's leave this town together."

Darcy sighs when I pull my gaze from hers. She's young, only twenty, and doesn't understand that the land has taken hold of me the way mesquite takes to the veiny, dried up earth. She doesn't understand that I need the scattered western wind to help quiet the storms deep inside me. And she doesn't yet understand that it takes stamina and a steel-like strength to love a man like me.

Darcy unwinds her body from mine and reaches for Vivaldi who whinnies and kicks at the earth. She calls to me, "I won't wait forever, cowboy."

My father raised me like an only son. He used to brag to the other ranchers that I was a little him and touted me as the best rider he could ever have at his side. Then I turned thirteen and my body betrayed me. Curves appeared from nowhere. My dad noticed my suddenly swollen chest and decided I was past the tomboy stage. Inside nothing had changed, yet I didn't recognize this outer, shifting landscape. I wanted my old body back.

My dad gave this new version of me his best; he bought dresses with matching hair ribbons and invited women from town in to help me do up my knotted hair shiny and pretty. He even hired an extra hand so that I could work in the house instead of ranching beside him. This grand experiment failed miserably, and my dad never stopped blaming himself that my mother left so early in my life. He swore to everyone who would listen that if she hadn't left, I never would have turned out this way.

Before my body changed, my dad and I used to ride a much younger Vivaldi bareback out beyond the oil horses darkened against the evening sky. We watched their lazy sway up and down on those late summer evenings after the blazing sun had sunk below the brown horizon. I'd rest my knobby knees against my father's hips and try to match the rhythm of my breaths with his. We'd settle just over the lip of the land, the place where we could see most of Fort Stockton's lights winking on. With my arms around his waist and his warm, broad back at my cheek, I'd think about telling him what I decided: God made a terrible mistake with me.

Before I could speak, though, my dad would arc his arm wide out in front of him. "B," he always used my initial rather than my girly name, "one day you will bring your husband here and work this land together." His fairy tale version of my happily ever after.

It's hard to tell anyone you love as much as I love my dad that you cannot be exactly what he wants you to be. So we don't say words out loud like he/she or transgender. Sometimes, though, it is the words you don't give voice to that scream the loudest.

A small, struggling ranch outside of Fort Stockton, Texas was never Darcy's dream. "Don't get too used to me," she told me, explaining this was only a temporary gig. Darcy was on her way out west to find her own pot of gold. She said her current lack of funds was no indication of her future; she was on her way up in the world.

"What's your plan?" I asked.

Darcy shrugged. "I don't plan." She tucked a thick section of sleek, brown hair behind her ear and gave me a reckless smile. "That's why I'm here."

"You just might like Fort Stockton," I said, in an attempt to convince this young woman to stay. Plans, after all, are made to be broken.

Ranch-handing can be back-breaking work, and most don't take too kindly to anyone who's different. The men find out about me when another ranch-hand tells them, generally in a quiet, conspiracy-like whisper behind fat, sweaty fists that B does not stand for Bob or Bryan or Bubba. It only took a hot second for everyone on the ranch to know Darcy and I were something.

A few weeks after she arrived on the ranch, we drove barrels of water out to cattle points.

The open windows whipped Darcy's long hair about her in sheets and filled the truck with the smell of her apple-cinnamon shampoo. She considered me from her side of the truck. "You're beautiful, you know that?"

I chewed the inside of my lip as the old pick-up truck jumped along the rutted earth. No one had ever said that to me before.

"I don't know why you stay," she said barely above a whisper. "It must be horrible for you." Her left hand patted my knee as if to comfort me, but she didn't take her hand away.

I pulled up to the next aluminum barrel and climbed out to hitch the hose of the water tank to the tub. "It's not so bad," I tried to tell her.

Darcy watched me from the truck, her eyes hooded in a way that said she didn't believe me. Her tanned arm hung from the open window. Suddenly, I wanted to touch her. I wanted to wind Darcy's hair between my fingertips, feel the softness of her cheek inside my palm.

While the water poured into the tank, I stared off into the horizon. "I've been looking into top surgery over in Austin. I just don't have the money. That's the problem with being a cowboy these days."

Darcy laughed in that way of hers and I felt our connection, a closeness that only honesty between two people can bring.

I went about my work the next few weeks, and ignored the pull I felt for Darcy. I tried not to remember the way her warm hand felt on my knee or the heat of her body as we worked together side by side. I fumed inside when she flirted with a male ranch-hand, slapping and giggling at his advances. The summer season was coming to an end and I guessed she'd be leaving the ranch soon. Then she came to me one night, freshly showered, beers in hand, and a smile that teased and pulled at the edges of my heart.

After that night, I made plans for Darcy and me; hopeful fantasies of taking on the ranch where we would spend our nights wrapped tight inside each other's arms, tucked away inside the basement of the main house. I craved her milky skin pressed against mine, her hair spilling across my chest. Yet even when Darcy slept soundly beside me, I worried that I was beginning to care too much. I spent most of every night batting down the constant heckling whispers inside my head: Darcy will leave soon. She will leave you and all your brown land behind.

I insist on the whole thing, my packing. I know not every trans man does, but without it I feel as naked as I do without my wore-out work boots. It's the part of me that should have been there since birth, that complicated measure of skin that so many men take for granted.

One of Darcy's favorite parts of our relationship is packing me. This evening, she sits on the closed toilet lid and stares up at me while I primp for a night out dancing with her.

I wipe the steam-covered mirror with the side of my hand, towel off my muscular body enough to pull on a favorite pair of BVD's. With a comb, I rake my gelled hair away from my face, mobster style. I trail that comb over and over until I can see its grooves marking thick paths over my scalp. With a straight razor, some updated version of what my dad uses and his dad before that, I shave my neck, my face, washing all that peach fuzz down the sink drain.

"You missed a spot." Darcy takes the razor from my hand. She tilts my head to the left, holds my chin, and slides the blade along the bony jawline.

Fall season is in high swing and I haven't spent more than a few hours out of Darcy's presence in weeks. Just when I thought I'd convinced her to stay with me on the ranch, her attention drifted. I've noticed it in the smallest ways, really; silence when I expect a comment, the sudden pull of her gaze away from mine at discussions of a future, or the way she lingers a little too long while she works with James out in the cattle fields.

It was only a week ago that I joined my father at the end of a long day out on the porch. I sank in the rocker beside him, both of us quietly taking in the other, the way it always had been before Darcy arrived.

He lit a cigarette, the quick flame lighting his aging face. "She's a pretty girl, B." Smoke streamed from his nostrils.

We rocked side by side until he smoked his cigarette down to the butt.

"How much are you willing to give up for her?"

We'd never discussed women together before. "What do you mean?"

He stubbed the cigarette out and rested his leathered hands in his lap. "She's not the kind of girl who will be happy for long in a place like this." He cleared his throat. "And you aren't the type to be happy for long away from here. You have to set limits of what you're willing to give up, B. And what you're willing to overlook."

My face suddenly flushed at his reference to the way Darcy flirted with James. I refused to talk, and instead looked out over the ranch. Autumn had turned patches of the scrub along the fence lines golden, and the lights in the ranch dormitory were now flicking on earlier and earlier each evening.

“Winter will be here before long,” my dad said. “Seasons come on so fast these days.” He looked over at me in the dusky evening. “A guy can’t let himself get too used to anything out here. Before you know it, everything has slipped away.”

“Is that what happened with mom? She slipped away?” I’m not sure what made me bring her up after so many years; maybe it was payback for his observations of my relationship.

“She was never meant for the likes of ranching, B. The same way Darcy isn’t.”

“How do you know I am?”

He smiled then, and shook his head. “Could you really give it up for her? Leave the land for a city? A desk job?”

When I didn’t answer, he said, “What is it, really? Money for that surgery? Is that what you’re after?”

I looked over at him and saw that his eyes were wetter than usual. He looked so much older in the dying light of day. I wished that I could explain everything to my father, but there were no words to explain, no phrases to close that chasm between us.

Now, I try to shrug off the talk with my father and watch as Darcy nibbles the side of her lip, turning the flush of her red lip white with pressure. She spins me around and helps me into my binder, that tight tubing that holds in any possible curve of my chest. Darcy hands me an undershirt, and then helps me into a flannel that she says make my eyes look as blue as the enormous sky that surrounds us.

Darcy grips my waist and tugs me close while she sits down on the toilet lid. Her fingers find their way beneath the elastic band of the BVDs. I try not to think about what my father said, about giving up too much. Darcy’s fumbling hands wind through my legs as she tries to pack me. It used to be that it was never long after Darcy snapped those straps in place that she would push me flat-backed onto the bathroom floor and settle into me as if I were her oldest saddle. It used to be Darcy couldn’t get enough of me. It used to be that I believed I couldn’t live without her.

Our winter hay supply is always delivered in late October. I spend Halloween stacking the barn with Darcy. Each string-tied bale weighs close to 100 pounds, and together we bring them inside to store them in neat, rectangular blocks along the far wall of the barn.

“How will we stop the rustlers from taking the bales from the fields?” Darcy asks.

I tip a bale on its side to check for any signs of mold before I stack it on top of the others. The Western Cattle Association has warned that this winter will be the worst yet for cattle and supply thievery.

“You hear me?”

“I heard you.” I stab the pitch fork into another collection of hay. “There’s not much we can do about it.”

My dad and I talked about everyone on the ranch taking turns throughout the night to run security by driving the perimeter of the ranch. In the end, we decided it would cost too much to pay the ranch hands over-time and the two of us couldn’t keep up a grueling schedule like that for long.

“James said there are ways to do home-made brands.”

I turn away from Darcy and my fork stabs into another bale too hard. I haven’t seen her in a few days. “Those can be dangerous.”

Darcy tosses another bale. “It’s the only way to prove what animals belong to the ranch and your family.”

When I shrug, she refuses to let it go. “I forgot. This ranch respects the grass-fed animals before they are sold for slaughter, right?”

I slam the ends of my fork into the hard-packed earth. “What’s going on, Darcy?”

She sits down hard on the edge of a bale and wipes the sweat from her face with the edge of her flannel. I wait for her to say something with my fists on my hips. Outside of the barn, my dad drives the truck away to get another load of hay.

Darcy looks up at me, her dark hair pulled back from her face in a red bandana. Suddenly, I want to touch her cheek and feel the softness of her skin against my palm. I want to rub the pad of my thumb over her plump lips. I want to feel her close to me again.

“It makes no sense, B,” she says. “Why not leave this place? There’s a whole country out there where you can live any way you want.” Darcy leans toward me, her elbows on her knees. “Do you know that in L.A. there are fucking parades for people like you?”

People like me. I don’t like the taste of that phrase from Darcy’s tongue. “I don’t need a parade.”

“B, there is so much more out there.”

Suddenly, I can see everything. This isn’t about moving to other cities or top surgery. This isn’t even really about branding cows or fighting cattle rustlers. It’s in the way Darcy’s brow furrows in frustration, the way she turns away from me. She doesn’t see that I already live the way I want

here on this ranch. She'll never understand that my blood belongs to this hard, Western earth or that I can only breathe in these wide open prairies. Somewhere else—anywhere else—will never be enough for me. And I will never be enough for Darcy.

For me, this is about the land. It has always been about the land. If there was ever a way for the earth to claim ownership of its human, this ranch branded me its cowboy long ago.

Vivaldi's hooves sink through the layers of snow as she follows my father on his horse through the fields. Dead middle of February and everything on the ranch and in Fort Stockton looks frozen, a still frame of the town I've looked at every day of my life.

We ride out over the lip of the land and stop to take in the last sprays of daylight. The runts have lasted, no longer on spindly legs and now huddle together in clumps throughout the pasture. We check their barrels every morning to make sure the water hasn't turned to ice. Vivaldi stands still beneath me and leans into my hand that rubs her neck.

"Winter has never been my favorite," my dad says, pulling his wide-brimmed hat down farther. "Thank God it doesn't last."

The oil horses sway up and down against the horizon.

"Darcy is leaving," I say. "First thing in the morning. I thought you should know."

My father rubs his thick mustache in thought. "James, too?" To my nod he says, "I'm sorry."

"Like you said, she wasn't meant for this life."

The tumbleweeds along the fence lines are covered with snow, airy mounds of white.

"I need to get the top surgery, Dad." I wind my gloved hand through Vivaldi's mane and hold on. "I've found a surgeon in Dallas willing to do it."

"B," he groans, "the money."

"It's not about the money. The surgeon does a few pro-bono cases a year. He says it's about me feeling comfortable in my own skin."

"A flat chest doesn't make a man."

I grunt in frustration, pull at Vivaldi's mane a little too hard. She jerks beneath my hand to let me know.

"What makes a man in my book is someone with an unwavering strength and stamina. Someone who refuses to give up what he loves." My father sniffs and looks over Fort Stockton. "You are already a man, B, no matter what you choose to do or not do to your body."

Sudden tears sting my eyes. Vivaldi lifts her head back against my hand to let me know she's still there, that she is always there. In the distance, the cattle calls out to each other, wail-filled moans that draw them into closer huddles that will keep them alive despite this bitter cold.

Beside me, my father looks out over all that is his with a deep pride. We've managed to stay off the cattle rustlers and the ranch is finally on its way toward some semblance of financial recovery. After all these years, my dad still may not understand the shifts of the seasons or be able to make out any rhyme or reason as to when the land will bless us and when it will not, but he never stops trying. And he's the strongest man I have ever met because of it. I breathe in the cold, winter air and rub Vivaldi's neck. I watch the rise and fall of my father's chest and work hard to match the rhythm of my breath with his.

Meredith Doench teaches writing at the University of Dayton in Ohio. Her fiction and nonfiction has appeared in literary journals such as *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Women's Studies Quarterly*, and *Gertrude*. She served as a fiction editor at *Camera Obscura: Journal of Literature and Photography* and her first crime thriller, *Crossed*, was published by Bold Strokes Books in August 2015. Her second, *Forsaken Trust* will be released in early 2017.

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