

S A V A G E R Y



J . C . M E H T A

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*For all the murdered & missing indigenous women—for all of us
who were, who are, and who might be.*

“... but still we have had the Indians; and then in these half-breeds,
enticed by white men, the savage instinct was awakened ...”

John A. MacDonald

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S A V A G E R Y

P A S S I N G

I was twelve before I realized
my father wasn't white. Until then
I thought nothing of his clay
colored skin, eyes dripping
like honey or ropes of black licorice
hair snaking furiously down his back.

My breasts had sprung early, hips
splayed wide as an overeager invitation
with bones pushing unforgiving
against my own skin, pale and quiet
as the illness.

He took me to Radio Shack,
his syrupy southern drawl
wrapping around the simple words
like a shy gift, *My wife put something on hold.*

And the clerk, not a decade older than me,
looked at both of us with loathing, blatant
disgust, and an envy even I could sniff out,
like a dog or a wild thing.

Is this your wife? he asked, an instant
freakishly large, my chest in a painful awakening
of itself, hips unable to slam shut and
you whispered, too stunned to be ashamed or angry
That's my daughter before walking out, but
for the years I'm too sorry to take back,
the years until the cancer sucked you dry,
in every year after labor-heavy year
I refused to be seen with you,
I felt it for both of us, my lips
too ripe for a child, my thighs
built like a horse, I'm so sorry
I saw you gut-punched and ugly as a man.

MY MOTHER(S) REMAINS

Do you want to go to the Bahamas?

I opened my mother's ashes and was taken
by the color. Somehow, I thought she'd be slate
but she was like Florida, coarse and tawny,

full of bones and grit. What remains
is heavier than you think. The weight
tugs you down. As I spooned her
into the little glass jar, I remembered

being six, my aunt packed tight
in a cardboard urn while the lot of us
boarded a shaky propeller plane.
The pilot never said hold it low,
let the wind lap what's left. She
swarmed us like wild things,
coated thick as we licked her chars
from our lips. Brackish and dry, she shot
to our innards, burrowing, became
a permanent part of us all. I thought,

I don't want my mother to
stay. Haunt my organs, blow
smoke-like through dreams.
How long can someone stick
to the familiar? Cling scared
to all we hate? I brushed her
from my skirt and held my breath
against the dust.

Maybe, if I sprinkle her
in the turquoise of the tropics, salt the rim
a little more, she'll finally—after
so, so many years—release
those bitten nails and let me go.

W H A T ' S L E F T B E H I N D

You outgrow places like people, clothes, perfume.
I was done here, we were done here. This battleground
we'd leveled, truces had been made, a few mines lost in the field,
but hey,
peace had been held long enough
to call it a victory of sorts. Let's move on,
leave the bad memories behind. The tear-blood nights,
the shattered glass frames, the years
of back and forth. I've never been scared
of a clean slate—breathtaking
in its emptiness. I don't care about the treasures
forgotten with the forlorn, mixed and mangled
like a kid's idea of a cocktail. The best of things
we'll carry with us, folded into memories
and puffing up our hearts when days
get too heavy to hold. And the worst?
We'll let them go, stride
right over those sticky bar floors
in the morning light, promising ourselves
through razor migraines and furry tongues
we won't be stupid enough to do it again.

F O R M Y F A T H E R

I remember driving for miles
on heat crazed Saturday mornings, following
cardboard signs for garage sales, reading directions to you
from the Nickel ads, fingers black and grimy. Tough
pancakes from McDonald's suffocating in syrup.
Do you want this dipped slow in a thick Oklahoma drawl
as you raised a ceramic horse stickered for
one dollar with your brown, callused hands.

Not your face at my piano recitals
or your words on my birthday. But
I'll always know how thin your legs looked
next to mine in the truck, the country songs
you sang to make me roll my eyes, the taste of peanuts
and endless Coke Mom would never let me have—
a secret gathering dust, salt blanketing my thighs.

WHAT THEY CALL US INDIANS

You had a Red Delicious sticker
plastered to your foreman badge.

At seven, I didn't know *Apple* was
a bad word, the same as *Oreo* or *Twinkie*.

When I asked what it meant, you just flashed
those dazzling white teeth and reclaimed it, owned it.

What was so wrong about being natural, delectable, healthy,
something that could produce such strong, thick ivories?

But not you, my father said.
You look just like your mother. God,

she was beautiful in her youth. All long, thick hair
flying behind the motorcycle like a wedding dress train,

starved down, waist ant-like
from meals of mustard and lettuce leaves.

But as a child, how I wanted that delicious
coloring, craved that toasted skin, soaked

chestnut into my pallidness, roasting day after day
in my mother's tanning bed, letting the cancer

sink in slowly, a dirty marinade
that made me look like you. The ugliness

didn't show until decades later. And by then
you were gone—smoke, fragments of

bone burned to ashes, a lifeless gray shade,
boring, nothing like you, and

without scarlet. Not a trace.

B E E B E F A R M S : C L O S E D A U G U S T , 2 0 1 7

The orchard went last summer.
At the time I didn't know
the end was nipping feral
at my ankles. Death makes us
want to fill our bellies, drown
the flashbacks. That's why
we reach for fucks we won't
remember and pray for pregnancies
swollen with regrets.

When she died, nostalgia skipped
clean over me and straight into the trash.
I wanted nothing—no blouses to sniff,
no old trophies to dust or scraps of handwriting
already burned brand-hot into cortex.

All I wanted was to
leave the dying trees behind and forget
childhood desire's overgrown paths.
The brittle limbs shot upward in prayer.
Brambles spread on familiar acres
like disease—but not once did I drive by the pastures
or look skyward for anything
close to a signal with cold faith.

O U R O B O R O S

My childhood street began to devour itself
long before that restaurant in the field exploded
and the flames lapped up everything
except the blackberries. By the time
my mother's breath was steaming vodka,
arrested for driving into a ditch, the claws of
the dying road had given up on me, satisfied
with scars stitched up and down my arms.

T R A I N I N G D A Y S

Dogs adjust to the pinch of prong collars,
grow skin tough against the spikes,
immune to the trickles of warm blood
when he would pet my car's hood
to see if I'd strayed. So I got used

to The Next telling me I was *almost thin*
and should only speak when commanded to—
like a bitch scurrying around on all fours, tonguing up
compliments from filthy water bowls. And then

there was you. You make me feel like an animal
in the right ways. When I need to re-learn tricks
I lost over the years—chewed up toys, buried,

cherished things. I used to choke.
How easily and quickly you slipped
the nails off, like my threadbare shirts
when you undress me in the mornings.

T H E L E C T U R E

You think I want to be here ? Listen, I was young once, too. I thought of traveling the world and I did a little and let me tell you, there's nothing romantic about a drunk Korean man vomiting on your shoes in the subway or Ticos on the beach holding your hand while they give thirteen-year-old girls the up-and-down and suck iced sodas from plastic bags.

Just listen to me: I wanted to go to Iowa. I stood on the murderous barstools at the Yamhill Pub on open mic night and told roomfuls of belligerent strangers about my one-night stands. I read *The Bell Jar* and fancied myself Esther. Or thought, you know, if I'd just been born in the right decade, they'd have called me more handsome than Marlon Brando. I could've crafted the perfect suicide letter or been high every night.

Listen, I've done all that. Let me tell you something you already know, the thing that keeps tapping at your brain when you wake up at four in the morning and it's already started to slip away, you better pray you at least had the foresight when you were wrapping your legs around someone whose face you don't remember or is too ridiculously familiar now

that you at least did something during one of those too-late nights, something to make damn sure there's *something* waiting for you on the other side because if there's not, if you didn't think you'd get old, too, like all the rest of us, that's not going to stop the freight train barreling straight for you and it's going to smash the living hell out of everything because that's its nature, it doesn't care, because it can, it's the scorpion riding horseback here and just like you it will roll right over something, someone at some time considered precious and barely even wonder what that bump was as it keeps screaming in the night.

F O R T H E T I T L E

I dried up all my fights fighting
for you, and I'm too tired, too busted, too
beaten black and blue to do it anymore. Tell me,
did we make it through all the rounds? Clinch tight
enough, survive the rabbit punches and clean up
real nice from the dirty hooks and jabs? I came back
for that last round all split lip and broken nose, bloodied
knuckles and dragging feet. (Fighters always do.) Listen
as the crowds shuffle towards the exits. The bells ring
something sweet. The gloves' weight slips off our hands.