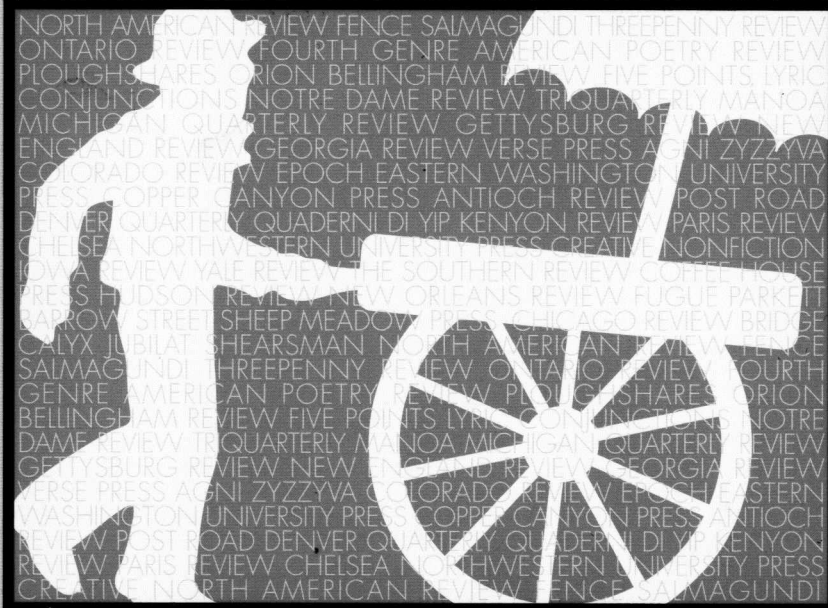


2005

# PUSHCART PRIZE XXIX BEST OF THE SMALL PRESSES



**EDITED BY BILL HENDERSON  
WITH THE PUSHCART PRIZE EDITORS**

"The most creative, generous and democratic of any of the annual volumes."

**RICK MOODY**

# THE POISON THAT PURIFIES YOU

fiction by ELIZABETH KADETSKY

from THE GETTYSBURG REVIEW

*I dreamed that the beloved entered my body  
pulled out a dagger  
and went looking for my heart*

—Rumi

JACK IS WALKING THROUGH CONNOUGHT PLACE. The area is laid out in several concentric circles with a park in the middle. He has noticed that the closer to the park you get, the more you are hassled. Near the perimeter a man selling colorful stuffed puppets from Rajasthan attaches himself to Jack. "Pretty doll you buy sir for pretty daughter?"

"*Meri beti nahin*," Jack responds bluntly, keeping his hands in his pockets. This is decent enough Hindi for "I have no daughter." A few words of Hindi are usually enough to discourage a hustler, but this one persists, in his bad English.

"For cousin sir. Little girl like little doll sir." The man tails Jack for several yards, until the duo is intercepted by a young couple from, probably, France. The woman has a maternal way about her that the vendor seems to sense as well. "Madam pretty doll for pretty daughter." She pauses long enough to gaze at the puppet. *Her first misstep*, Jack chuckles to himself as he separates from the vendor. It will take her hours to shake him.

Closer to the center Jack pauses to sip from his water bottle. He's thirsty enough, but he also thinks of the water as an antidote to the air around him, which is black with ash and exhaust. He lowers it from his mouth and keeps walking, holding the cap in one hand, the bottle in the other. In a few paces he will stop to take another sip, only he doesn't get there. A slight man with a close beard and prominent cheekbones, wearing black trousers and loafers, cuts him off. "Excuse me sir," he says. This man's diction is closer to standard English. Still accented, it suggests a better comprehension of words than the doll hawker's. "You know there are ten million microbes per cubic centimeter of air in Delhi," the man begins.

Jack looks at him dumbly.

The man is gesturing to Jack's water bottle.

"Really it is a health hazard, this."

Jack wants to know what *this* is, but he's wary of giving the man the impression he actually wants to have a conversation. Up to now the interaction has been solely a matter of one man assailing another. Until he gives a sign of consent, he is not actively taking part. Jack has not been a willing interlocutor with anyone in Connought Place, ever. He has only been hustled. He's glad that he's never given in, but as of this morning, he's also decided maybe he should give in sometimes, too.

He made the decision at the Ankur Guest House, where he is staying for five dollars a night near Delhi Station. There are no sheets or towels. He sleeps on a mattress in a room with no natural light, right on the mattress cover. This has given him pause. After five months in India, Jack now believes that comfort is a misnomer. Sleeping on a mattress cover is not uncomfortable. It only requires you to imagine your relationship to the people around you differently. It requires you to allow them closer to you, in every way. Raw and unwashed, the uncovered mattress connects you to the person who was here before you. And by association, it allows you closer to all of Delhi.

Sleeping at the Ankur last night, Jack imagined that his body and the mattress were like two continents buffing against each other. Exposing the continent of his body to the continent of the mattress caused them to join slightly, the contours of one shore interlocking with the contours of the other. He wanted the sand of the far shore to make its way into his own skin, to make it darker and tougher, better prepared for danger.

Jack woke up with the realization that only in this skin with its big-

ger pores could he engage in an honest relationship with India. He wants to become a part of this continent, to experience a true interchange before he gets on a plane back home—whenever that is. This has become the single precondition for his return, in fact; forging an enduring alliance with this place, and its people, will inure him to the sterile California roadways that await him—their clean yellow lines, their sidewalks freshly scrubbed, the bushes at their shoulders so green, so free of grime and soot they seem to have been painted onto the landscape. He will stay in India longer, as long as it takes to erase this painted landscape from his memory. He will let India deep inside him. The squalor of India will become a part of him, so much so that it will have lost the power to make him feel dirty.

The hustler's open face peering at him, his hand gesturing neatly toward his water bottle, reminds Jack that this very man could be one of the Delhi-ites who has slept on his mattress. The impression of this man's very body could be sunk inside of it. If Jack is willing to sleep on canvas cast in the shape of this man's body, or a body like his body, he might at least talk to him.

Jack clears his throat. "What's *this*?" He is aware that his tone might seem mildly threatening.

"You should never leave the top off of the water container, you see." The man pauses, as if Jack should follow his logic effortlessly, which he doesn't. "Delhi is the second most polluted city in the world, see, according to the *India Today*. So you see."

"Actually I don't."

"The microbes. They will fall from the air into your container. And when you sip, you will drink the microbes. Foreign bellies are not constructed to drink microbes. A missing enzyme or something like this. Really you must put on the top. Now. Really sir. Now exactly. It is actually quite imperative." The man is making fluttering gestures with his fingers, so they impersonate butterfly-like creatures dropping from the sky. He looks at the bottle with an alarmed expression. It seems to Jack that even if the man is a hustler, his anxiety about the continuing exposure of his water to the air is genuine.

Jack gazes at the mouth of the bottle and lifts it to his lips. "But I'm drinking."

"Please sir, you must only drink inside. If you don't mind. Could I invite you?"

The heat outside is enormous. Peering back at his bottle, Jack realizes he's drunk a third of it in just the time it took to walk here from

the Ankur. This means that right now there's about a half-liter of water moving by gesture of peristalsis into his bladder, and he has to pee. A café, with a toilet, is certainly in order.

With the same neat movement of his hand, the man points to a café on the rim of the park. "I buy you coffee. Western man likes Indian coffee nah? Very sweet. Too sweet."

Jack nods, following.

The café is one of those brightly lit chrome and Formica spaces that in the States would look glaring and uninviting. Here, the layers of grit subdue the harsh tones. The toilet is suitably foul. In India Jack has gotten in the habit of washing his hands before rather than after he pees, for salutary reasons. As expected there's no soap. He pulls a miniature bar from his fanny pack and unwraps it; he bought it for five rupees this morning with the water, at the *paniwalla's*. There is no urinal or squat toilet, only a Western toilet, de rigueur at Connaught Place, gathering place for foreigners. The toilet seat is speckled with the requisite drops of urine. Jack considers whether he should risk touching the urine to lift the seat with his hand and thus pee straight into the bowl; leave the seat up and probably wind up adding his own pee to the drops; or clean the toilet seat so as to avoid touching the urine when lifting it. He chooses the latter, allowing that it works against his new resolution about the mattress. He pulls a tissue from his fanny pack as he meditates on the many shades of meaning between *sanitary* and *salutary*.

The man's name is Rohit. He tells Jack about his upbringing shuttling between London and Delhi, and what brought him back to this nation of "wretchedness and dross," as he puts it. Jack considers whether Rohit's diction is that of someone who's lived half his life in London; until now he assumed Rohit was overstating the Western side of his story.

He also realizes that Rohit is a very beautiful man. He has slender wrists with a light covering of long and shiny black hairs. The skin on his face is a deep olive and so smooth that it, like the hairs on his arms, seems to shine. This glow makes it hard to guess Rohit's age. He looks like he's in his twenties, but Indian skin lies. His sharp cheekbones, outlined by the few strands of cheek hair growing down to meet his short beard, create dark shadows on his face, suggesting greater seriousness and age. He guesses Rohit is approximately ten to fifteen years younger than he himself. There is a delicate quality to everything about Rohit, not just his skin and the hairs on his cheeks