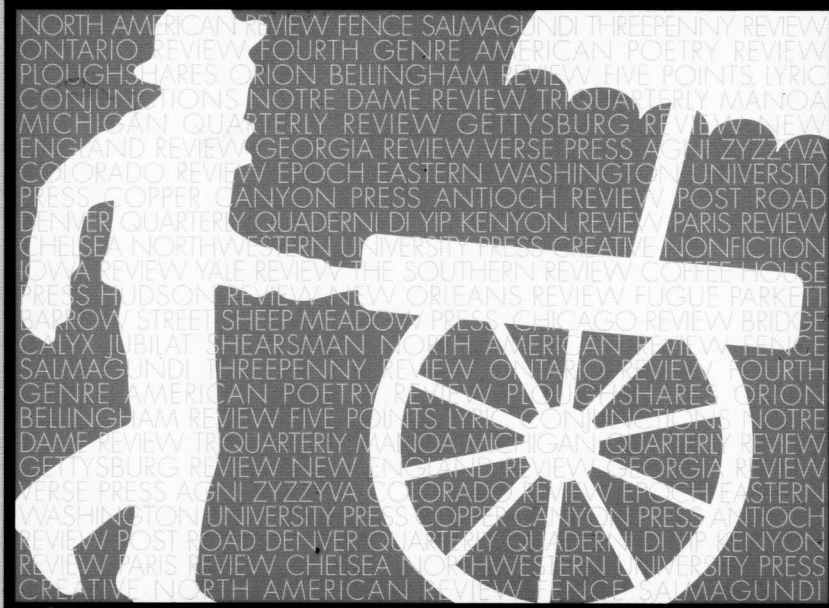


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**EDITED BY BILL HENDERSON
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RICK MOODY

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

and forearms, but his body, which looks neurasthenic inside his loose-fitting trousers. Jack imagines that Rohit is someone who was well cared for by his mother at one time, which is what Rohit is telling him now, in so many words.

"My mother's parents loved me very much, but mostly just from the photographs. I met them one time here in India when I was eight and went to visit the ancestral village. This was a dusty old place with quite an illustrious past. My family were Brahmins, see, and they once owned the entire village. The government took the village from them in the 1970s to give it to the poor—they fancied themselves the Robin Hoods of India, of course. This was bad. Very bad. All over India this transpired. The villages became very poor as a result, because the Brahmins had been managing the land. Now the Brahmins had no jobs—they went to work as clerks in the government, working for the very factotums who'd taken their land away."

Factotums? Jack is impressed with Rohit's diction. "Factotum?"

"Yes. You know. Apparatchik."

"Apparatchik?"

"So sorry. You see here in India we have so great a bureaucracy we have several words to describe it. The Eskimos in your country have ten words for snow. We've borrowed a word from every language for *bureaucrat*."

"Yes. So the factotums? Or would that be *factoti*?"

Rohit's eyes smile at Jack, and Jack lets his make the same.

"The Brahmins were unhappy everywhere working in these offices, but in my mother's ancestral village, the poor people were unhappy too, and they asked my mother's family to come back to take the land. It was really a very benevolent situation. You have to forget, please, this paradigm that India is divided between possessed and dispossessed, ruler and ruled, oppressor and oppressed. Disregard this entirely, if you please."

Jack continues to be impressed with Rohit's speech, even if he pronounced the *g* in *paradigm* hard, so the word sounded like "para-dig-em." This is actually the first Jack has heard about the politics of land distribution in India. It's all a little fuzzy to him. He read Marx in college, but poetry was his major. He was thinking more about Rohit's particular way of telling the story than class conflict. He just wants the details to fall in place. "So your family took the village back?"

"Spot on. Then it is sad but everyone in my family has died. Mother father grandmother grandfather. My grandfather just now."

"I'm sorry."

"Yes thanks. So they have left the village to me. I own the village."

"What's it called?" Jack isn't sure he believes Rohit. If Rohit stumbles in coming up with the name, he's probably lying.

Rohit has an easy answer. "Saharanpur."

"Never heard of it."

"No, you wouldn't have. You'd like to come maybe? For luncheon. There is a very kind family there that treats me like their son. I show you a typical Indian family. Not Brahmins. Kshatriya caste actually."

Kshatriyas are the traditional warrior caste. They are the caste that has always intrigued Jack most in India. He doesn't know much about them, but in his imagination they ride bareback on elephants or tigers as they vanquish invaders—Aryans, Muslims. He's read about a seventeenth-century Kshatriya warrior in his *Lonely Planet* travel guide, Shivaji, who fought off the brutal Mughal conquerer Aurangzeb. "Kshatriya is fine," Jack says. He is aware that his tone might have sounded more condescending, more colonialist, than he would have liked. He meant to be ironic, so to show this in retrospect, he adopts his smile face. He's relieved when Rohit returns it. "Like Shivaji," Jack adds to soften the irony.

Rohit pauses before responding, the way someone does when they don't understand but haven't decided yet whether to admit it. At first this confuses Jack, because there's no way an Indian Hindu could not know about Shivaji. From what Jack gathered from the *Lonely Planet*, Shivaji is as revered among Hindus as Gandhi, maybe even more. Gandhi cooperated with Muslims, after all, while Shivaji fought them. And Jack has never, not once, seen a store selling, say, sheets named after Gandhi. But there are plenty of Shivaji Sheets, Shivaji Sinks, Shivaji Sweets. Given these facts, Jack decides he's misread Rohit's reaction. He peers into the Indian's face and feels a small physical thrill at the idea that between Rohit and himself lies a whole potential universe of missed cues, crossed signals, misinterpreted cultural nuances. Rohit is a mystery indeed.

"Like Shivaji," Rohit says, smiling.

In the dream, Rohit is so delicate, Jack is afraid he'll crush him. He embraces him with all his might nonetheless. He wants to consume Rohit. He is smooth and warm, like sweet Indian tea. Jack kisses him hard on the lips, but the lips respond by staying soft and slippery. They taste of almonds and have the same oily quality. He kisses Ro-

hit's torso, first his nipples, which have only a thin down growing at their circumference and in a thin shiny line at the midline of his chest. His abdomen is flat. His member is large, like the god Shiva's. Jack has seen statues at Mahabalipuram depicting Shiva sitting cross-legged with a lingam the size of a small building growing out of his lap. Jack arranges Rohit in this seated position and puts his mouth on his great lingam. It is warm and smooth, and he worries that he will give it abrasions when he rubs his cheek, coarse with stubble, against it.

When Jack wakes up he's sweating profusely, and he's hard. He rocks from side to side on the mattress, pulling at himself until he comes. He tries to keep his come on his abdomen, but a glob drops onto the mattress. Because of the sweat, it proves hard to clean with a towel; he rubs the stain hard with water, but this only creates a solution of come and sweat, its precise chemical composition suiting it perfectly to the act of seeping deep into the stuffing of the mattress:

Rohit is waiting as arranged outside the café on Connought Circle, wearing the nondescript Delhi garb of trousers, a button-down polyester shirt, and sandals. Jack is wearing shorts, Birkenstocks, and a long Indian *kurta* top cinched at the waist by his fanny pack. Rohit embraces Jack's forearms warmly with both hands. The physical closeness embarrasses Jack. His penis stiffens slightly as he returns the gesture. "Come come. My friend has got the vehicle," Rohit is saying as he leads Jack through the late-morning chaos of Connought Place. "This drive it is ninety kilometers, something like this. We shall arrive promptly in time for luncheon. Promise promise."

Jack has never walked this quickly in this kind of heat. It occurs to him that the brisk movement might have a homeopathic effect against the heat, like drinking hot tea to stay cool the way they do in south India. Walking at this speed, on the heels of an Indian, also has a repellent effect on the usual retinue of Indian hustlers. Jack and his companion move swiftly through the obstacle course.

Another young man, whom Rohit introduces as Vikram, is waiting in a Land Rover. Vikram and Rohit talk in fast Hindi as they gesture for him to step into the backseat. The Indians take the two front seats. It all seems to go by too fast for Jack to consider. Inside, he can only pick up a word of Hindi here or there—numbers, the words for *right* and *left*, *road*, *distance*, *kilometers*, *the American*. Vikram doesn't address Jack directly, probably, figures Jack, because he

doesn't speak English. The Land Rover pulls out into the street at a point where traffic funnels straight into a daisy wheel. He finds the way the vehicles move through the circular space mesmerizing; they intercept each other so that if each were trailing a piece of string, the threads would interlock to create a complicated braid of rope.

The car winds through miles of city, one scrappy block after another. Socialist realist apartment structures with tilted, laundry-clad balconies give way to store-lined blocks that then shift back to apartments. Signs in Devanagari and Roman script dominate a street front broken only intermittently with signs in Urdu, in the Persian script. Jack tries to parse snatches of Hindi writing, but the car moves too quickly for him to read anything but small chunks, syllables or two-syllable combinations that he sounds out in his head. The act reminds him of learning to read as a six-year-old; he has an image of his first grade teacher pronouncing vowel-consonant combinations written on a blackboard. "Ab, ah, la," he mouths in a low voice.

The Roman script is mostly Hindi and Sanskrit words. Gurukula Apartments; Chapatis Vishnu; Laxshmi Banking; Shivaji Housewares. It amuses Jack to imagine that the Urdu signs, so exotic and lovely in their arabesque shapes, advertise items equally charming and camp: Sheikh Iqbal's Internet, perhaps, or Masjid Mosquito Netting.

They pass a sign reading Santosh. Kuti. *House of happiness*, Jack translates to himself. He realizes he doesn't even have a picture in his head of this house in the village that he is visiting, and as he scans his memory for an image of a hut—a *kuti*—in an Indian village, he sees himself lying on a mattress on the floor of a dirt lean-to, a paisleyed Indian tapestry covering the entryway. The tapestry parts, and Rohit walks in—wearing only a *lungi* bound around the waist. The *lungi* hangs low, giving Jack a generous view of the line of hair stretching from Rohit's navel to his groin. He wonders if he will sleep with Rohit, if Rohit knows how to read the hidden give-and-takes of Jack's lovers' calls. If Jack were to look deeply into Rohit's eyes, would his meaning be any clearer to Rohit than Rohit's was to Jack when he stumbled over the name Shivaji?

During the five months he's spent in India, Jack has had several encounters with Indian men, but none that was ever consummated. Once, a dark-skinned south Indian Christian named Michael chatted with Jack in a pizza parlor until late. Jack invited him to sleep over.

They walked to Jack's hotel together like schoolboys, holding hands, joking, teasing, jabbing each other in the ribs. This continued when they got to Jack's room, until, innocently enough, Michael announced he was tired and proceeded to make a bed for himself on Jack's balcony. Jack was dumbfounded.

Another time, Jack developed a great friendship with an Indian banker. They shared details about their parents, their pasts, their dreams, catching lunch or dinner together every day without fail for two weeks. One night the banker asked Jack to meet him at a disco. The disco was the closest thing to a gay bar Jack had seen in India. In dim light, men danced together, holding hands, whispering into each other's ears while standing close. There were women too, but they mostly sat alone or in dour groups. The man arrived late, showing up with a woman he introduced as his wife. She was large and unhappy looking, rounding out her capacious Punjabi *kameez* and bloomer pants. Like the other women, she kept to the sidelines. Despite the presence of his wife, the man was unrestrained on the dance floor with Jack. They touched hands, hips, whispered. They were touching shoulders, front to front, when the man's wife broke it up. Broke in, like in any proper waltz. Then Jack saw the man and his wife arguing bitterly, and Jack left without ever again seeking contact. That night he paid for an expensive hotel with fine linens, seeking desperately to close the cavern inside of him, to build a bridge connecting home to here, the past to now.

When Jack looks up again, he realizes they've made it out of the city. The landscape is now rough and desertlike, arid except for occasional outposts of shanties with animals and children running in front. On a particularly barren stretch of road, Vikram slows the vehicle. Jack makes out two men standing by the side of the road. Rohit stretches across the back of his seat to break the silence with Jack. "Just some guys," he says. "Just some guys we're giving a lift." Rohit's voice is languid, his body limber as it curls over the seat back.

Jack watches the guys approach, walking to either side of the rear. It seems strange. One gets in either back door, so they are sitting on either side of Jack. Rohit begins speaking with them in Hindi, but even though Jack can understand only a word here or there in the conversation, he has the sense that the conversation is wrong. It's as if they already know each other. Jack feels prickles on the back of his

neck and remembers the way the dark boys in his high school used to slap the white boys on the backs of their necks to give them red necks. The man on his right interjects the word "*Amriki*." It seems like Rohit and this man are arguing. From behind, Jack can see the back of even Rohit's neck flushing.

"What the fuck's going on?" Jack's voice says. It seems to be speaking on its own. He notices that it sounds more American than it did before, when he made an effort to pronounce each syllable so Rohit could follow. "Who the fuck are these people? Rohit, tell me the fuck what's going on."

Rohit arches back over the seat and then slides down so he's peering between the two front seats straight above Jack's lap, which is now positioned in the center of the backseat. Rohit gently takes Jack's forearms with the same gesture he used to greet him at the park this morning. "I'm sorry friend." Rohit is looking deep into Jack's eyes. At the precise moment that Jack feels cold against the skin of his neck, he senses Rohit's eyes latching onto something inside his own. It's this, only this, that keeps Jack from swinging at the gun like a spastic. He feels strangely calm.

"I'm sorry friend. American friend," Rohit says. "Keep your hair on please. You are kidnapped, for the cause of Kashmiri freedom."

The man on Jack's left takes out a large swath of brown embroidered cloth and slides it over Jack's head. It is the kind of thing Muslim women wear to cover their heads and bodies, only this one covers Jack's eyes as well.

He hears Rohit's voice again from the other side of the cloth. "I'm sorry friend."

Sitting in the safe house, surrounded by the four Indian men and a small artillery of heavy weapons, Jack tries to make lists of things to keep himself calm. There were at least three false notes in Rohit's self-presentation. First, if he is a Kashmiri militant, he is not a Hindu at all. He is a Muslim, and this explains his ignorance about Shivaji. Second, if he's Muslim, he hasn't been speaking Hindi at all, but Urdu, its Muslim stepbrother. And third, his name, Rohit, which is a Hindu name, is not his name at all. The guys are calling him Johnny now, but it's probably really something like Omar or Mustafa.

The hood is off now, and Jack is sitting on a cheap, uncovered floor mattress, chained by his wrists to a pole. The four men from the

Land Rover have fed him dal' and vegetables. It was certainly not the luncheon feast Jack was expecting but no more simple than the five-rupee *thalis* he's been subsisting on through his travels.

Jack watches his captors as if from the other side of a camera lens. Two new men have arrived; the men from the car are less languid in their presence. With their wiry bodies they seem jacked up, like schoolboys whose hours of play have been interrupted by a stern mother. The new men are of a completely unrelated type from the kidnappers. Rohit and his posse are frail in loose-fitting trousers, with watery eyes and new beard hairs on their cheeks. The two new men are portly, with thick, full beards and loafers rather than sandals. Rohit seems to be the go-between, but Jack can't make out Rohit's speech—he swallows his words and says little, looking away when he addresses the new men. The words of the new men, too, blend into each other, like so much street Hindi at Connought Place. There seem to be many accents and languages, with many words that cross over like bridges between the languages. *Amriki, American. Sheikh. Thug. Badmash.* The familiar yet distant quality of the words makes Jack feel like a child learning to attach loose meanings to approximate sounds. His comprehension, likewise, feels no more sophisticated than a child's.

A sudden movement jolts Jack out of his stupor. One of the portly men has backhanded Rohit. Rohit, who has only about 66 percent body mass to the big man's, stumbles backwards. He looks back at the man, blinking, and then says something odd and confusing to Jack. "Bugger! What kind of a berk are you? Have you gone barking mad?"

Barking mad?

It strikes Jack like the answer to an obvious math problem that what made Rohit so hard to understand was the incongruity of the fact that he has been addressing the men in English all along—and not just impeccable English but a slang obscure to even Jack. "It's not quite cricket then, is it?" Rohit is saying now. "We've nabbed your Nancy boy and it wasn't for jam at all you know," Rohit goes on. He's speaking queen's English. Or is it cockney? "This is all hideous."

Hideous?

Rohit has preserved none of his earlier awkward Indianisms, the dropped articles, the dangling modifiers. Jack thinks of the old Harvard joke. He used to toss it around with his ex, a Harvard grad: *You know where the library's at, asshole?*

Jack realizes his knowledge of language now—Hindi, English, anything—is too rudimentary to parse any single one of these men's identities. He wishes he knew more about London, that he could place "Johnny's" accent in a particular neighborhood or social class, but unfortunately his knowledge of the colonial seat is far less extensive than his understanding of India, England's "jewel in the crown."

Rohit/Johnny is a jewel. This Jack still believes. There is a gemlike quality about him. He's shiny—that impression hasn't faded. Is to be a gem to be a subject? Jack can only take the train of thought so far. Then his mind starts to mist up, and he feels confused and emotional and angry.

He falls into a deep sleep. He dreams that he is back at the Ankur, Rohit lying under a thin sheet on the far side of his mattress. While Jack sleeps, Rohit masturbates. In the morning there is a large brown stain on Rohit's part of the sheet. His come is brown, like a dark ruby.

Jack shakes awake. As in the dream Rohit is next to him on a mattress—now the mattress at the safe house. Everyone else is gone. Rohit is stretched out so only his head and shoulders rest against the wall and his spine is in the shape of the top of a ski. Rohit was half asleep himself. He looks at Jack quizzically but not with the incomprehension of the day of their first meeting—the incomprehension of a man less in control of the common language than his interlocutor—but of a man lumbering back to consciousness through gelatinous layers of sleep.

"It's hideous," Rohit says, slicking back his hair.

"Hideous?"

"What we've done to you. It's all gone squiffy. I'm sorry, brother. Truly sorry. These activities have got to seem absolutely extremist to you."

Squiffy?

"You'll be thinking *I've kissed the Blarney stone*, but we had no intention of harming you. We needed one American, a Sherman Tanks the likes of you, to bring the atrocities in Kashmir to the limelight."

Sherman Tanks?

"The sum of my activities in the past was fund-raising," he goes on. "But we must open eyes. Bosnia. Chechnya. The treatment of Muslims everywhere is atrocious. We have resorted to drastic measures. Sorry for the pig's breakfast." Rohit chews on a fingernail, pushes

back another stray lock of hair. "I have sacrificed my career. This will not go to waste if the government will address Kashmir." Rohit fixes Jack with a stare. Jack believes this is an honest stare, that this is the real Rohit—or Abdullah or whatever his name is. He feels that somewhere within the treacherous Rohit there is a kernel of integrity, and he himself has found the pathway to get there.

"Your career?" It had never occurred to Jack what Rohit might do for a living. He supposes he imagined him as a truck driver or a hustler. Or better, probably unemployed.

"I went to a private school, a very beautiful place, in East London. Forest School. You know it?"

Jack looks at him dumbly. He's not used to hearing British English, and it's taking him longer than it should to assimilate his captor's phrases. It's no easier than Hindi. The signposts in Rohit's monologue have likewise left Jack feeling lost and unmoored. He's never heard of the school, could find neither Bosnia nor Chechnya on a map, and knows nothing about Kashmir except that it is, indeed, Muslim, and that because of a contested border, it is at the center of a power struggle between India and Pakistan. This he read in *Lonely Planet*. He has also heard it spoken of in the context of a breakaway struggle for independence. There his knowledge ends.

"I remember one hydrangea bush."

Hydrangea?

"So lovely. We are quite educated, my family. My sister is at Oxford. I myself am enrolled at the London School of Economics. Statistics. And what college is it you attended?"

"UCLA. Poetry."

The longest relationship Jack has ever maintained was with his Harvard ex. Talking with Rohit, Jack remembers several instances where his boyfriend's Ivy snobbery offended him. He often had the same feeling he has now, that there was a code he'd never been given that was essential to understanding the dialogue. Inside references acted as rungs by which to hang onto a conversation. There were cocktail parties where a profusion of disconnected details fused with a self-conscious Boston argot to the point where Jack felt his brain turn to so much twisted rope. He could no longer make out words or meaning at all. He feels that way now.

"You've heard of Convoy of Mercy?"

Jack stays quiet.

"Sending supplies to Bosnia. Bosnia. Now that, friend, is where Muslims must unite. We must fight for our brothers."

Rohit's expression suddenly turns feral. No one has hit him this time, but the abrupt shift in his eyes is as dramatic. "In London we will rise. Rise. Men like you," he adds, now fixing Jack with a look not unlike that of a trapped possum, "you're no better than brown bread. Dead. You're in a Barney, friend."

Jack's relationship with the man from Harvard ended unexpectedly. One day the man didn't show up at their usual meeting time and place. He's had no contact with him since. The loss of Rohit's solidarity is the closest thing he can remember to his feeling of heartache during the days after his boyfriend's disappearance. It's as if a mentally imbalanced, cold-blooded, and militant killer has kidnapped Rohit himself.

Rohit has uncurled himself so that instead of a ski, his body is angled into a taut upright sitting position from which he lunges forward to look straight into Jack's face. Now he stands as if to start pacing, but after just one step, he flings his body in a full circle so he is facing Jack again. Then, as if personifying a strange, genderless demon, he strikes a pose—arms up, fingers pointed and gazelle-like so that Jack can imagine them extended by long painted fingernails. *Voguing*, is what Jack thinks—like the drag queens of Santa Monica Boulevard. Then Rohit begins swiveling his hips in a grotesque gesture accentuated by a circular movement of his wrists. Rohit is doing a dance, a lurid and suggestive belly dance. He puts his hands, fingernails pointing downwards, over his abdomen and slowly begins pulling them up so the very tips of his fingers lift his shirt slightly, exposing his belly. The trail of hairs. The low hang of his trousers.

Rohit stops just as instantly, bringing his face close to Jack's again. He has reverted to the fierce militant. How Jack longs for the person two cycles back—the cultured Muslim university student—or three, even—the obsequious Hindu secular.

"We have asked for a prisoner exchange. One hundred and fifty Kashmiri men have been jailed in Indian prisons under the most untoward, the most brutal conditions. We will accept their release in exchange for you and three others. In your poetry education you undoubtedly learned arithmetic. The algebra of the human soul, it is then. You see your value in this equation. One to forty, is it? You have forty times the value of a Kashmiri then, is it? Our Sherman Tanks.

Hamari Amriki." Rohit marches more furiously, spinning on his heel now like a parodic soldier from a World War II sitcom.

"Your family will scour the streets of Delhi looking in every ditch, behind every railway track. They will find pieces of you scattered about the slums of this city where Muslims toil in their abject lives. Like the droppings of nightingales, your body will decompose in the streets, in the sewers. Your family will mourn your death like the thousands of Kashmiri mothers and sons crying over our lost martyrs. No one can find you here. Friend."

As Jack watches Rohit fly across the room, he feels himself falling back into the dissociated state of watching his surroundings through a lens. Jack is dropping off to sleep against his will, and for all his efforts to dive back through the lens, he is caught in a thick layer of gelatin through which he cannot plunge back. As his eyes mist over, the last image he catches is of Rohit smacking the walls with his fists and then kicking.

When Jack's eyes close there is still an image of Rohit warring with the wall, only now he is climbing it, then standing with his feet on the ceiling, then pummeling the contours of the room with every limb of his body.

Jack dreams he is in a zoo. Rohit is inside a cage, hanging by claws from its chain-link ceiling and making a terrible shattering sound as he shakes its wall with his bare feet. Jack walks up to the metal wiring and grips it with both hands, pushing his face up to the metal to get as close to Rohit as he can. He wants to offer him a way out. Then Jack looks up and sees that there is cage metal above him as well, and when he looks back to Rohit again, his captor is dressed in a sharp, loose-hanging blue suit and tasseled loafers. He is watching Jack from a spectator's bench with a cool, detached stare. Jack rattles the walls of the cage and silently makes a pleading gesture with his eyes. *Let me out.* He no longer has language. Rohit returns the stare coldly.

When Jack shakes awake the first thing he sees is the back of Rohit's neck. Rohit has come back to the mattress and has been sleeping alongside Jack. It is an oddly intimate posture for a man who a short time ago was subjugating a wall in a fit of rage.

To the constant disgruntlement of his mother, Jack was exceptionally wild as a child. He has several fond memories, though, of lying in

bed deep in the night with his mother seated next to him stroking his hair. "Even the rottenest boy is an angel when he sleeps," she used to say. Looking at the sleek hairs growing on the back of Rohit's neck, Jack has that same wistful feeling now. Jack always wondered how his mother was able to marshal such deep reserves of forgiveness for her raucous son. But Rohit, vulnerable in sleep, inspires that tenderness in Jack; it's a feeling he doesn't recognize.

Rohit stirs awake and turns, so that now the two men are face to face. The gun is lying next to Rohit, in easy reach for Rohit but not for Jack, who is still shackled to the wall. Rohit sits up, lies against the wall in the ski position again, and fingers the 'silencer on the gun. "Tell me friend, how are the birds in America? Girls?"

Girls? Jack wonders if, finally, he is beginning to understand. When Jack was young, when he had his first fumbling adolescent sex, it always began with talk of girls: two boys, snuggling together, talking about girls. It was so commonplace an initiation into adolescent homosexuality that, later, Jack came to assume that male talk of women axiomatically stood for gay sex. Fill in the blank: How do you like girls? How do you like *men*? How do you like *sex*? How do you like *me*?

Jack pauses. "They're, I don't know, girlish."

"In London, brother, they're nutters, you know, tough."

"Do you like poetry?" Jack recovers. Fill in the blank: *Do you like poetry do you like sex do you like me?*

Rohit cites some words of verse in a language that is not Hindi—or even Urdu, Jack thinks he's sure. Then he translates. " 'She hides behind screens calling for you, while you search and lose yourself in the wilderness and the desert.' "

Rumi. Rohit has uttered the unmistakable verse of Rumi. Jack wrote his thesis at UCLA about Rumi, worshipper of a delectable and godly object of passion whose name was Shams. A man. Jack's kidnapper is quoting Rumi. He is quoting Rumi in Persian. No one has ever quoted Rumi to Jack in Persian. It comes like a wash of cold, immersing him in the bright, fresh quality of his earliest sensual memories, when words articulated the sparkling internal sensations of his body. " 'The flames of my passion devour the wind and the sky,' " Jack recites in response.

Rohit picks up: " 'My body is a candle, touched with fire.' "

Jack feels calm. " 'Let me feel you enter each limb, bone by bone.' "

"There are no edges to my loving now."

"Rumi," Jack says.

Rohit's eyes dance.

"I knew a bird once—" Rohit says.

"For Rumi the love of a woman was an incomplete love, a less than perfect completion of the circle of desire," Jack responds, or deflects.

Rohit nods. "For Rumi the love of a woman was certainly platonic. A metaphor, really, for the true heights of passion a man could achieve."

"A woman's body could never contain the full weight of a man's actual desire," Jack volleys back.

Rohit looks at Jack long with his watery eyes. "We truly understand each other, friend. 'The beloved is all, the lover just a veil.'" He lies back onto the mattress with his hands behind his head, and staring at the ceiling, he begins to hum. Rohit's hum escalates slowly to a chant. It is a gorgeous melody sung in a thin and sinewy high-pitched voice, flowing through the room like the trickle of a drought-choked stream. The chant grows louder, seeming to rebound now around the corners of the room, to flood it with its echo. Jack recognizes it as a thread of Qur'anic chanting—not unlike the melodies mosques broadcast from their towers at daybreak. Rohit is suddenly lost to Jack, lost in a prayer, devotional and otherworldly.

Jack leans back, and listening to the sinewy phrases, feels himself dropping back again behind the lens. With his eyes closed he imagines the water of Rohit's choked stream gurgling over his face. "The water that pollutes you is poison, the poison that purifies you is water," he recites to himself. The stream turns into a rush of water, and then Jack feels he is suffocating as it enters into him, through his lungs, coursing through his own body, as if he is part of the room, a receptacle for Rohit's devotion. Grasping for breath, he swings his arm in front of him to find Rohit on top of him. The Indian is lying above him, the full weight of his body crushing Jack's chest, the kidnapper's hands covering his face.

Rohit is whispering something in Jack's ear. "You sit on top of a treasure," his breath says. "Yet in utter poverty you will die. Friend. In utter poverty. You will die."

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ELEGY FOR THE SAINT OF LETTING SMALL FISH GO

by ELIOT KHALIL WILSON

from THE SAINT OF LETTING SMALL FISH GO (Cleveland State University Poetry Center)

I.

You too might step into a puddle of fire,
or splash through a stream of glowing lava
where only moments before you were barefoot
in your kitchen after a late night of too much wine
and, nearly naked, frying bacon at the stove.

A burn like this is a different thing the doctor said
and I can believe it. I was a different thing.

I was a man with an unquenchable oil well fire on his feet
that would blaze up as the medicine ebbed.
And the skin curled over, brown-red,
too much like the meat I was cooking in the pan that I dropped
—an irony not lost on even the youngest of nurses
drinking and bacon don't mix
she kidded as I healed.

Yet had my wounds burned like Vulcan's forge
they'd be a distant fire in light of the child
behind the glass in the opposite bed.