

KAZIM ALI

Saraswati Puja

1.

On the train we knew neither when we would arrive nor the name of any station along the fog-laden way.

The taxi driver lied about our hotel being full, stopping in a dark alley.

I insisted we drive on, but the way was blocked by the Saraswati Puja.

A street full of men, stripped to the waist, dancing like houses on fire, heading down the river.

One took my hand and pulled me to him, but we pressed on through the rickshaw-mounted speakers, bass line of the strobe-sworn mantra thumping.

Our hotel clerk claimed it really was full so the taxi driver found us another.

You leaned out the window of the room, snapping photographs of the puja-rave.

I huddled on the bed, the racket of the train on the tracks still hiving in my ear.

2.

On the water in the morning dark shapes emerge
Sewn on the surface of god and ardor:
History a hysterical marigold bloom,
Oarsman pulling with beautiful rhythm,
His eyes covered by dark glasses
Dismembered reed arms float past, Saraswati comes apart
His oar dips in, crushing the floating marigolds
At the Jain ghat a huge painted swastika,
Symbol unmoored from meaning
I want him to take off his glasses, to look at me
Open his orange lips, flower-stained and speak to me
What do we have to do to own our life
Water has no architecture in warm places
It will not stay where it is spilled