

Sreeja V

## A Straight White Line

I sat there laughing sheepishly,  
Secretly sharing your misery.  
Frightened to spit the grain of disgust,  
As the professor roared with mirth,  
Drawing a chalk line on the green board,  
“Is this the line? Does it mean you just step across this line?”  
He stepped across an imaginary lakshman rekha  
on the floor, “So simple.”  
He roared, we all swayed in reverence.  
The amused lines on his creamy face  
Declared his lush Kottayam<sup>1</sup> lineage.  
And you stood there by the podium  
Looking down at the essay, smiling  
at the relative ignominy of the scene.  
With eyes accustomed to restraint  
The white line on the green board—  
Swollen corpse sinking slowly into the river.  
You stood there facing us—  
A formidable wall  
Of polished accents and expensive ideas,  
Shrouded in studied metropolitan carelessness.  
Clearly you were different.  
Oily hair, burnt skin on a working class body  
In a check shirt you wore specially for the seminar day.  
Ill belonging  
In the city of large round rocks  
And grand centres of learning.  
We had read the essay—  
Rushdie/Rooshdie.  
(And R K Narayan, A K Ramanujan, and Meenakshi Mukerjee)  
We kicked strong for you to surface  
Above the first few lines.  
Your confession in odiya<sup>2</sup>-stained English—  
Sir, I don’t understand this—  
Feeble but steady,  
choked our cowardice.  
We shifted ever so lightly and tried to laugh,  
Our shame at your smallness.  
I do not remember the day you quit

Within a few weeks of the course,  
I had forgotten your face by the end of the next semester.  
May be not.  
As the Howrah Express<sup>3</sup> meandered  
The flooded fields of Orissa,  
When news of institutional murders  
had lost its sheen,  
I go back to that classroom  
Sit on that chair and look at  
that white line on the green board  
That rises into a fort of giant guilt.

#### Notes

1. India's first city to achieve 100% literacy
2. Language spoken in the eastern Indian state of Orissa
3. Indian Railway Express that plies between the states of Kerala and West Bengal