

## Editor's Note

Why read literature? Why write? Living would be easier without this bloodthirsty insanity of words. We would sing like birds, and not know we were singing. Happiness and grief wouldn't be—they wouldn't be *happiness* and *grief*. We would be, without knowing we were.

There wouldn't be this tearing urge to breach the limits, to slip beyond the horizon. We would be limited. Without knowing we were...limited.

Literary communities can morph into ego gyms and private limited companies. Writing can become oblivious of limits—its own as much as those imposed—and, so, of itself as a calling. It can betray its fidelity to itself by dying to the beyond. It can wish not to want to know that it might have lost touch with itself. With literature. That it might have become a carrier and a parasite and stopped dreaming of becoming literature.

Art, when it hits its head against walls, discovers the walls. And opens itself to the night. And to stars.

With its absolute demand, art then knows the sheer contingency as the absolute necessity. It moves in the terrain between freedom and necessity, and overcomes the temptation to be enslaved.

It then peels the sk(e)in off reality, exposing its fictional substance, its substantive fictions. It creates. And frees.

Less than this, art is inadequate. Insincere. Insinadequate. Short of this, literature is a fetus aborted. Dropped and abandoned—

to remain mere writing: not, of course, of the order of the writerly. It might sell—at whatever high price. But it remains saleable. An alien horizon shuts it in, names and tags and tames it. No blind insanity, that sees strangely, impels it beyond the given—forget its own—horizons.

In the adventure against horizons the writer, as artist, not only is the point of departure but also *remains* as the point of departure. He becomes the ground of departure, the ground that animates the departure. And he becomes the departure. This conscious departure, of art and the artist in their irrevocable bond, from the self is a terrifying responsibility and entails a terrible risk. In another time and place, this would be called sacrifice.

Balzac in *The Unknown (or Unrecognized) Masterpiece*, Zola in *The Masterpiece*, Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Thomas Mann in *Doctor Faustus* and Roberto Bolaño in *Nazi Literature in the America* grappled with this challenge—of art’s extreme demand—in the form of a crisis of reflexivity exploding into the irrevocable bond between art and the artist and leaving them both transformed. Nietzsche lived it on the edge and, probably, also beyond the edge.

In South Asian writing today, a rumor of such grappling is awaited.

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**Upendranath Ashk**

## The Chaff-Cutting Machine

*Translated by Nida Sajid*

Beyond the railway lines, when the Muslim residents of Islamabad in Amritsar began to abandon their cherished possessions and flee, our neighbor Lahan Singh’s wife sprang into action.

“You will keep sitting here like a eunuch,” she mocked him, “and others will take over the best houses in the city.”

Sardar Lahan Singh could stomach anything, but not the word “eunuch” from the mouth of a woman. He quickly unfastened the wobbly turban from his head and tightened it, grabbed the loose end of his *lungi* from the floor and tucked it in the waistband, and took the *kirpan* out from its scabbard and inspected it carefully. Satisfied with the sharpness of its edge, he set out in search of a new house in Islamabad.

Before he could cross the compound, Sardarniji came running and dropped a bulky lock in his hand. “How will you take possession of a house without this?”

Lahan Singh took the lock in one hand, kept the other on the *kirpan* tied to his waist, and started his trek over the railway lines towards Islamabad.

On Khalsa College road near Putlighar, Amritsar, we had a bungalow. Adjacent to us was an open compound where Lahan Singh used to sell chaff-cutting machines. In one corner of the compound, there were a handful of dark, damp rooms.

Sardar Sahib used to live in these dilapidated quarters. Even though he had started with just one or two thousand rupees, the business picked up during the riots because of the growing number of farmers with new land and wealth. With money came more machines and also the desire for a better life. In the beginning, both husband and wife were content with these quarters and the adjoining compound, but, now, his wife – who was addressed as ‘Sardarniji’