

**Mohammed Hanif**

Things We Can't Say

**Mohammed Hanif** was commissioned by Manchester Literature Festival and Karachi Literature Festival to write a personal essay about creativity. The new commission was premiered at Karachi Literature Festival in February 2017.

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I recently visited the grave of a friend who died here in Karachi but was buried in Multan. While escorting him to Jinnah airport for his last departure I remembered an old argument about living and dying in Karachi: a friend had once told you that you are not really going to become a native, you are not going to belong, if you don't stop going to your village for every Eid and, more importantly, if you don't stop burying your dead in their ancestral villages. Karachi's graveyards may be overpopulated but so is the city and that's why you are here. Sitting in that ambulance racing towards the airport I thought it didn't matter now, nothing mattered any more. And Multan anyway has more atmospheric graveyards.

I was in Multan and I thought I would pay *dear departed* a visit. It was a modest grave with mud plastered over it and the gravestone carried a couplet by my friend. I paraphrase: Life was like a dark sky, but my pen illuminated the darkness of the night. I cursed him under my breath, for leaving me in this world where *You* are supposed to fight against the dark sky and all you have is a pen.

I thought we were done with all that pen and sword stuff. We can fight all our battles on twitter. But now even a rant in cyber space can bring the dark sky crashing over your existence and you can just disappear.

Most days I use a cheap ball pen and I struggle mostly against an A4 blank sheet. Printed words delight me. I have no shame in admitting that most journalists love nothing more than their own byline in print. They don't really think about the oppressive dark sky of existence suppressing them. I probably shouldn't say it in front of

young people as they are always looking for optimistic mentors but sometimes I feel that the words we write can't change anything. They can distract you from what you really, really want to change.

Yes I do know that some words can illuminate the dark sky for a moment in which we can see our world in bright relief, we can see it in its entirety, but then it goes dark again. Like you can see an illuminated Karachi when you are coming in to land at night. And we spend the time til the next illumination by trying to remember the bright outline of a world that we glimpsed in that moment.

Why is the sky so dark? Why does our pen need to illuminate it? Sometimes as a writer you are transported from the solitude of your desk to a room full of people. Lovely people who have read your book, or at least intend to, or people who have an afternoon free and think that talking to a writer, or 'a published author' as they like to call them in India, is a better idea than looking at other people's holiday pictures on the internet. And then one of them raises a hand and asks in a very concerned, somber voice, 'Don't they say anything to you?'

We both know what they mean by they. We both know what they mean by say. What they basically ask you is do you receive threatening phone calls? Do you worry about someone following you when you go on a school run? Have they ever picked you up? And if they haven't done it to you, surely whatever you are writing is not worth it. If the sun is shining and the sky is blue your pen can't really illuminate much?

When we ask each other these things we are not scared of each other, we talk in riddles because we are just being polite to each other. My answer is well rehearsed by now. No they haven't made any threatening calls, no I am not important enough, they don't read books; I simply reassure myself or those concerned about me that I haven't done anything.

It's important to keep our answers short but I usually want to tell them that what we perceive as our enemy, the guardians of this dark sky above us, are also citizens like us. They might have the ability to tap our phones or hack into our emails, but surely they also watch kitten videos on You Tube. They may have to break our bones one day or take an electric wire to our private parts but I assure you that they have the same worries about where to find a good maths tutor for their children. They are as patriotic as we are. Just like us they also believe they know better about what's good for this society. If they are trying to scare us through abductions, might it be that they are also scared of us?

That question brings us together, that question about how much should we be scared? That question brings reader and writer together, and writer and other writer together, and writer and the person in the second hand book shop who knows if he can recommend this book to a new enthusiastic reader.

And then you usually have a wise friend who tells you that it doesn't really matter what you are saying, if you know how to say it then you are going to be fine. I convince my wise friend that I am respectful. In my disagreements, in my jokes, in my criticism I am respectful, even when I am showing my contempt I don't forget to add a

dash of respect. A punch line might be a matter of life and death when you are trying to finish a paragraph, but you don't want your life to be a punch line to a long running joke. Which starts with you should have known better. Grammar and punctuation and vocabulary are not enough. We must learn some manners. We must learn to respect institutions, faiths, traditions and sometimes goons on the street.

So as a reader we should know better. So there are certain things that we should not say about writers, journalists, poets, song makers, these are things we should not ask them.

\*Let's not call them brave. Let's not call them brave even if we really believe they are brave.

Soldiers are brave and boxers in the ring, a woman ready to give birth without epidural, and Karachi's mini bus drivers are brave because they'll get you to your destination dead or alive. Their job involves demands, if they are brave they will do their job better. If a writer is brave there's no guarantee that he is actually good at his job or even that he is competent or that he'll finish that book he keeps saying for years that he is working on.

When you call someone brave you are basically saying, are you slightly soft in the head? Do you not know what could happen to you? Do you not read the papers? Or forget that, don't you ever go on Facebook? Or do you want that thing to happen to you so that you could claim innocence, you could become a victim? You could hope that a

few more will read your books, some more people will recite your poems. There should be easier ways to find a readership.

\*If they go missing for a couple of weeks, or suddenly disappear from your social media feeds, stop shouting from the roof tops, just assume they have fallen on bad times, don't ask them what happened during the time they disappeared.

And then you can ask that question what really happens. Some People have tried. And no, the state is not so bad. There's not always torture . Or there are different kind of techniques where there is nothing happening to you. Sometimes you could hear your mother screaming in the next cell. In real life your mother is at home suffering the ultimate torture: why aren't you home yet?

We must not ask them to take responsibility for all the evil in the world.

When I became a writer of novels I used to say I have responsibility as a journalist but I have no responsibility as a writer. My only responsibility is that I shall not bore you. I must occasionally bore you, I must tell you things that you'd rather not hear.

Don't Ask Them What Their Book is about. They will find out when they read a review. You might have written something funny, a love story maybe, and you might find out that it is really a terrifying insight into a country at the end of the world.

Don't Ask them How much Money do they make? It will always be less than what an average lawyer makes. Sometimes writers are not really illuminating the dark night they are just doing their job.

When Mohammed Khalid Akhtar in his very funny novel Chakiwara mein Wasal invites his friend for a cup of tea, his friend's friends, including a bear, a monkey, and a goat, also have to sit at the table and drink their tea. Because it's good manners, You can't park your companions outside a café while having tea.

Abdullah Hussain used to be a regular here and I miss him a lot. When a character in his novel, Nadar Log goes into the ripe wheat field to meet his lover in secret he sets the field on fire. His uncle thrashes him and asks him what happened. He says that he lit a match because he wanted to see his lover's face. This is the job of a writer to burn down the fields for a moment of illumination.

Where is the dark sky? Where is my pen? And it's very convenient to tell me that I am my very own dark sky and it's my pen trying to illuminate it. I can't ask my friend these things, because he is six feet under in a graveyard named after a woman. It's called Mai Pak graveyard. Which means a pure woman. I have never heard of a graveyard called Pak Mard, a pure old man. Because maybe we already know that pure men don't exist. Or we don't need to be pure. Because we are our own dark dark sky and we wield the pen that illuminates it.