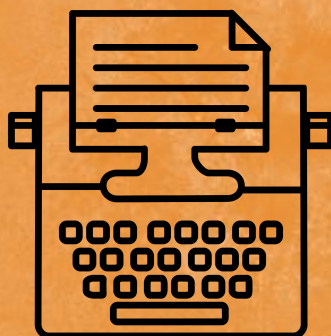


# Title: Journaling through Calcutta - Silence and Shahid

*Author : Taha Mama*

## Occupy Climate Change (OCC!)

*Creative story entry*



FORMAS





The Green (CCU – 2200)

## Journaling through Calcutta

### Silence and Shahid

by *Taha Mohammed Mama*

#### *Start with Silence.*

The phrase bounced around Shahid's head. He had contemplated maintaining a journal for over a year now. Shahid kept finding reasons to push the initiation. A month later – he'd tell himself – after he's thoroughly honed his handwriting skills. Just a few days later: after he finishes the last chapter of the critically acclaimed novel around the Covid'19 pandemic. (A seminal text really, if one wants to seriously take up journaling) A week into working on his typing speed. Or after he gets his hands on the latest typing tech. Little did he know, his great-great grandfather in the summer of 2021 was faced with a similar journaling debacle.

#### *Panic, Panic, Hope!*

He'd fixed upon his 'writing mantra,' going back and forth between stages of panic without making the leap of fate into realm of Hope. Writer's Hope. He flirted with fragmented ideas but saw no ink flowing on his screen. A cursor kept blinking at him from the first page of his blank book. Why should one journal? Cash? He'd turned twenty at his parent's house a week ago. It seemed only yesterday when could he stop worrying about math homework and finishing the greens on his plate. It was too soon to be worrying about green numbers. Craft? He was told by teachers he had a distinct style of writing, "Write more!" said some "Write every day!" said the others. But he'd said enough, Silence was his spectacle now. Career? The world where he finds himself has moved beyond (or back to) the need for creating careers out of their lives, living was enough. The prestigious Calcutta Colleges had hung their English hats, dawned during the British Raj. Calcutta then was a bustling capital city where social customs were challenged to allow fresh ideas to flow. Now, one followed the path their parents had set out on or they would be left behind. Forward meant following. Choice became the unspoken C-word of the times. Coffee? Coffee!

#### *Caffeine, Kaf · feen? Ka · faa · een?*

Shahid struggled. Coffee could momentarily lift his spirits, till this C-word somehow got the better of him. Once again, on a gloomy Sunday morning his duel ended with defeat. Humbled, he waddled up to the Machine with three blinking lights. Red meant it Lives. Green said it was ready to Give. The third light, he was not quite sure. In fact, this was the first time he had even noticed it. Blue-black, blue-black, blue-black, it flickered. Red stayed stable; Green caved in as he pressed the button that spawns the warm beverage he craves. He pays the Machine a closer look. Its pockets were filled with coffee beans, it was adequately fed with milk. It seems like the poor old Machine had a classic case of being 'simply thirsty.' Shahid had nothing to offer, the Taps stayed stiff as the Machine mourned. He looks out of the window, in search of Life, that would sympathise, in search of Red. A decaying Green blinks back at him. He sees no humans, just malfunctioning Machines. It was 2200, and his kind had run out of water.

There was a War of sorts. A Water War. There were no guns or bullets, or sturdy looking tanks involved. A few men in suits called each other unpleasant names in a fancy room and suddenly all the pipes went dry. All that was now spoken about was: how to turn Sea water into Fresh water. To Shahid it seemed like a Salt crisis but his nephew on the other side of the world was taught Water Crisis instead. He did not protest, he remained silent.

*Violence is a culture found in playgrounds,  
Cities fall to let their children breathe*

The lines ringed in his head when the Lake (Calcutta had many lakes, but only one Lake), after being saturated with that same Green for days caught fire on a Tuesday afternoon. It echoed in his sleep for weeks after he witnessed a building (not Building) ignite in flames without provocation. A group of people blamed another group of people, while some suspected the Green was the culprit. And the same lines filled his ears today. But no matter. For the Fire Crisis was over. The lines were now useless to him. He'd picked it out from a Collection of Poems along with other little bits and pieces he'd found from his Great Great Grandfather's box.

*The Box!*

He summons the ladder and makes his way up the bathroom door to the attic. To where the Box sits. He empties it out, sprawling the same items again hoping one would pique his interest today a little more than the others. He picks out a Portable Air Quality monitor first. It didn't really work, but its scale was visible. It assigned a word each for a range of values. It started with 'Good' and went till 'Severe.' Green to Red. He knew very little about Air Quality or Good and Bad, but he had spent many an evening with his math homework. He knew a set of numbers when he saw them. He was certain the Monitors today started where this one ended.

Shahid finds a couple of old photographs too. There wasn't much to talk about them. Photography was a summer fad for the old man. He recognised some of the places. Only the *chai* shops with colourful tarpaulin roofs were replaced by Buildings. Yellow Hindustan Motor's Ambassadors which operated as taxi's were replaced by grey Council Cars. And you don't see cycles, birds, dogs or any people on the street anymore. Surely Green cannot be behind this, perhaps the Salt has made its way to the air too, seeping into Water, making all Monitors flicker in Red.

Shahid then got his hands on a book, was it a journal? He couldn't tell. It didn't speak; the pencil marks have faded. Could he make it his journal? It already started with Silence. But the pages were on the brink of turning to powder. The photograph's plight was similar. Is this how pages die or had the Box been unkind?

*He was terribly partial to handmade paper.*

Was all that was spoken about his Great Great Grandfather to Shahid. As he packed up the box it occurred to him: He was terribly partial to paper too!

### *Shops*

Now, luxury items such as notepads and pens and protractors are only issued by the Calcutta Council, available only at Calcutta Council authorised stores, run by Calcutta Council employees. But you can also get them at Stationary Shops. There aren't very many of them these days. Fortunately, Shahid's house is directly across one. They had somehow unlocked the secrets of time travel years ago, for they were always outdated. Before the Council's Takeover, before the Crisis, when everyone around them used calculators and Computer-generated receipts, they stuck to a pen and a notepad. Slowly writing the price of each item in a column. Before adding a neat plus sign beside it. A line struck below it would signify the Addition would now begin. Only a shaky hand of the aged shopkeeper could handle the phenomenon. Young blood would be overwhelmed by the pace of this craft. This was the game of the old folk. Even the Council couldn't faze them, and it had some seriously old folks. The Shops stuck to their ways

### *Silent Streets*

Shahid stepped out on the Street to see everyone around him with (along with half a dozen masks) a device. A Noiseless Mic. It looked like a lapel and cancelled out all the surrounding sound for the wearer. It could catch the softest of whispers, you'd just about had to think out loud and it would pick it up. The messages were transmitted to a fellow Noiseless Mic flaunter with the actual sound being lost. The receiver would hear a monotonous hum as the messages. One could obviously select from a wide array of emotions to flavour to your messages. Let alone noise, the Demonic Device had cancelled out all sounds. Everything but Silence. But Shahid's Silence was different.

### *Father's Son*

He noticed he was being watched. Watched as his 'Father's son.' It was his Mother's colleague, across the street. He'd seen that scowl before. They must have picked it up from his Mother, who reserved it for the times she spoke of her Father. So, this Father of his, somehow makes tonnes of Money by selling Salt. He owns big Machines that do all the work for him. Sea Water becomes Fresh Water, leaving Salt and Money. To his Father this was Service, to his Mother it was Inhuman in times of a Crisis. To Shahid this was Routine. As a child his Father, would hold him down to unleash the Tickle Monster, only to let go if he admitted he was his Father's son. An innocent activity?

### *Mother's Son*

He left their gaze only to run into a suited man at the Shop. He could smell the smirk on them through the layers of masks. A smirk he'd seen slapped on his Father's face while his Mother would spend her days speaking at length about Ecology to whoever gave her a hear. All his Father would say, whenever he stopped smirking that was, "We live in a Silent World."

*My Silence*

But Shahid believes his Silence is different. He just couldn't quite point out what exactly was so novel about it. He buys a book. He buys a Pen. The shopkeeper begins the Addition. On his way out he is stopped, not by silence, but by sound.

"My name is Zariya and yours?" The raspy, sing-song speech, Human speech, is a carnival to his ears.

"Sh, Shahid" he squeaks. His throat numb, his mouth dry.

"Why were you named Shahid?" speech flows easily through little Zariya. Just as easy as the little fountain of hair gushing above her head, clipped in place by a deep Blue scrunchy.

He dusts off his vocal cords, the clouds around his conscious part. He feels lighter. His eyes are fixed on that Blue, glistening under the lonely bulb of the Shop. He is reminded he was named after his Great Great Grandfather.

"Listen," his voice lingers, filling up the room. It catches the shopkeeper's attention. Little Zariya's mother lifts her eyes from a vintage book to that vintage young man, "It means beloved in Persian, Witness in Arabic"

Shahid rushes back to his room, the Machine still blinking. Shahid's new book isn't blank anymore.

*Tu Zariya, hoon main Zariya,*

*Aur uski Kripa, Dariya Dariya.*

*(You are the medium, I am the medium*

*And their blessings are like the Sea, like the Sea)*

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## References

### **[Text]**

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The introduction of The Last Jet Engine Laugh by Ruchir Joshi. ISBN: 9780002570893

Agha Shahid Ali's Call Me Ishamael Tonight. ISBN: 9780393051957

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Adil Jussawala's Land's End. ISBN: 9788192923062

### **[Picture]**

Cover Image by Taha Mama

### **[Video]**

A Phoebe Waller Bridge Interview for the Writing Mantra

([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D3mmqLVi\\_QQ&t=423s&ab\\_channel=Vogue](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D3mmqLVi_QQ&t=423s&ab_channel=Vogue))

Zariya by Coke Studio and AR Rahman

([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wlaZSx6tqRo&ab\\_channel=CokeStudioIndia](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wlaZSx6tqRo&ab_channel=CokeStudioIndia))

### **[Other]**

Shahid's Great Great Grandfather's box, all of it.