

*Certain kinds of trauma visited on peoples are so deep, so cruel,
that . . . only writers can translate such trauma and turn sorrow
into meaning, sharpening the moral imagination.*

—Toni Morrison, “Peril,” in *Burn This Book* (2009)

FREE/UNFREE. In the excerpt from *Notes from the Middle World* featured in this issue, Breyten Breytenbach insists that although the terms of the *free/unfree* dyad might seem like inconjoinable extremes, for the imprisoned writer, each pole only exists in relation to its opposite. Paradoxically, Breytenbach writes, his years of imprisonment “constituted a laboratory of the mechanics of freedom,” yet upon his release he experienced a new form of captivity: “The mind was now sly like a hunted, lascivious beast . . . henceforth a convict of respectability and accountability.” Freedom and unfreedom, he reminds us, are inextricably entwined.

In “Voices Against the Darkness,” this issue’s special section on creative writers from around the world who have been imprisoned for their writings or political beliefs (see page 39), the regimes involved are all notorious for decades of human-rights abuses: Burma (Myanmar), Iran, Iraq, Libya, South Africa, Turkey. Still, many more could have been included. Among the countries with multiple poets, novelists, and playwrights on International PEN’s latest Writers in Prison Committee case list, Colombia, Egypt, Eritrea, Syria, and Vietnam all receive dishonorable mention. The complete case list, over 100 densely packed pages representing 98 countries, records 644 cases of writers, journalists, and publishers who were imprisoned, attacked, or killed in the first six months of 2009 alone. The statistics are at once sobering, overwhelming, and numbing. Nevertheless, the writers included in our special section have all survived the prison experience, despite extremes of abjection, torture, and threats of death.

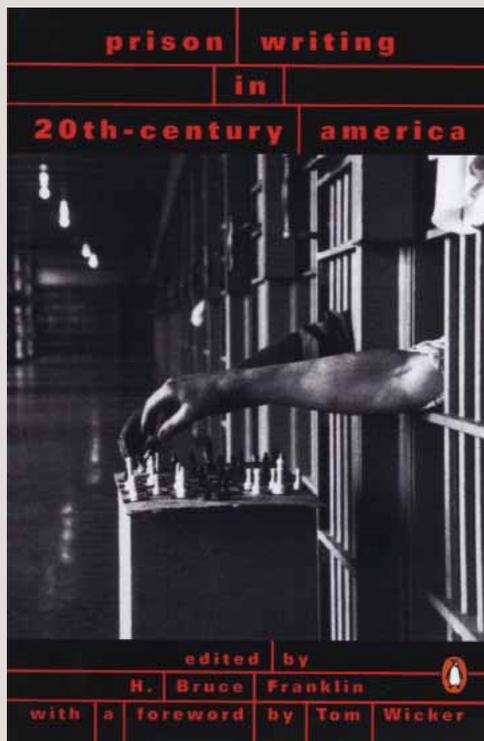
In the United States, where authors are relatively free from persecution, in the years since 9/11 the discourse surrounding detention has been polarized by the war on terror: enemy combatants, homeland security, extrajudicial detention, extraordinary rendition, ideological exclusion, the Patriot Act, the scandal of Abu Ghraib, and the ongoing controversy over the military prison at Guantánamo.* Although the Bush administration’s post-9/11 policies were initially viewed (and applauded) as temporary measures during a state of emergency—necessary evils in a time of war—several critics have pointed out that such measures were actually the outgrowth of a domestic “prison-industrial complex” carried to its appalling extreme. In his book *The Prison and the American Imagination*, just published by Yale University Press, Caleb Smith notes that even when prisoners are consigned to a state of “monstrous exile . . . outside the circle of juridical and philosophical humanity,” they ought to remind us that anytime human rights are abrogated, “the very foundations of citizenship and sovereignty” are at stake. “Law, the rhetoric of prison reform, and literature are not separate spheres,” writes Smith. “They are intersecting, interdependent discourses, all involved in the project of imagining the human figure at the threshold between bondage and freedom.”

By casting writers into the abyss between freedom and unfreedom, notes Breytenbach, authoritarian regimes attempt to “whiten words into the unsaid.” With their lives at stake, caught in a liminal state, writers counter the oubliette of the blank page with the black ink of witness and imagination—the power of the liberated pen.

David Simon



* Two recent documentary films, *Taxi to the Dark Side* (2007) and *Torturing Democracy* (2008), shed light on the abuses that have been committed in the war on terror. Jane Mayer’s *The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned into a War on American Ideals* (2008) and Dexter Filkins’s *The Forever War* (2008) are also essential reading. To read more—and to get involved—see our list of resources on page 7.



Voices Against the Darkness

A Guide to Essential Reading

Against Forgetting: Twentieth-century Poetry of Witness, ed. Carolyn Forché (W.W. Norton, 1993).

Kofi Anyidoho, *The Word Behind Bars and the Paradox of Exile* (Northwestern University Press, 1997).

Burn This Book: PEN Writers Speak Out on the Power of the Word, ed. Toni Morrison (HarperStudio, 2009).

Conscience Be My Guide: An Anthology of Prison Writings, ed. Geoffrey Bould, 2nd ed. (Weaver, 2005).

Melissa Dearey, *Radicalization: The Life Writings of Political Prisoners* (Routledge, 2010).

Exiled Voices, Portals of Discovery: Stories, Poems, and Drama by Imprisoned Writers, ed. Susan Nagelsen (New England College Press, 2007).

Prison Writing in Twentieth-century America, ed. H. Bruce Franklin (Penguin, 1998).

Caleb Smith, *The Prison and the American Imagination* (Yale University Press, 2009).

This Prison Where I Live: The PEN Anthology of Imprisoned Writers, ed. Siobhan Dowd (Cassell, 1996).

Tibet Since 1950: Silence, Prison, or Exile, ed. Melissa Harris & Sidney Jones (Aperture Foundation / Human Rights Watch, 2000).

How to Get Involved

Amnesty International
www.amnesty.org

Committee to Protect Journalists
www.cpi.org

Human Rights Watch
www.hrw.org

IFEX (International Freedom of Expression eXchange)
www.ifex.org

Index on Censorship
www.indexoncensorship.org

Poets Against War
www.poetsagainsthewar.org

Reporters Without Borders
www.rwf.org

Writers in Prison Committee / International PEN
www.internationalpen.org.uk

*You took away all the oceans and all the room.
You gave me my shoe-size with bars around it.
Where did it get you? Nowhere.
You left me my lips, and they shape words, even in silence.*
—Osip Mandelstam, former Soviet Union, 1935

SPECIAL SECTION

Voices Against the Darkness

Imprisoned Writers Who Could Not Be Silenced

Featuring

U Win Tin
Breyten Breytenbach
Orhan Kemal
Nâzım Hikmet
Omar Al-Kikli
Tha Zin
Nahid Persson Sarvestani
Saadi Youssef
AND Amer Hanna Fatuhi

Introduction: Yellow Geranium in a Tin Can

Joanne Leedom-Ackerman

*The prisoner Halil
closed his book.
He breathed on his glasses, wiped them clean,
gazed out at the orchards,
and said:
“I don’t know if you are like me,
Suleyman,
But coming down the Bosphorus on the ferry, say
making the turn at Kandilli,
and suddenly seeing Istanbul there,
or one of those sparkling nights
of Kalamish Bay
filled with stars and the rustle of water,
or the boundless daylight
in the fields outside Topkapi
or a woman’s sweet face glimpsed on a streetcar,
or even the yellow geranium I grew in a tin can
in the Sivas prison—
I mean, whenever I meet
with natural beauty,
I know once again
human life today
must be changed . . .”*

—Nâzım Hikmet, *Human Landscapes* (1966)

In 1938 the renowned Turkish poet Nâzım Hikmet (1902–63) was sent to prison, charged with “inciting the army to revolt,” convicted on the sole evidence that military cadets were reading his poems. He was sentenced to twenty-eight years but was released twelve years later in 1950. His “novel” in verse, *Human Landscapes from My Country*, was written in prison, featuring Halil, a political prisoner, scholar, and poet who was going blind (see *WLT*, October 2003, 78).

One of the cadets reading Hikmet’s poems was the young writer Raşit, who met the senior poet in prison. Raşit helped care for Hikmet, and Hikmet mentored Raşit, who went on to become famous in his own right as the novelist Orhan Kemal. The friendship of the two men endured past prison, as Maureen Freely’s article “The Prison Imaginary in Turkish Literature” (page 46) chronicles.

In this issue of *WLT*, stories, essays, and poetry from Turkey, Burma/Myanmar, Iran, South

Africa, Libya, and Iraq show prison as a cage, a crucible, a classroom, a stage, a fraternity from hell. The challenge for the writer in prison is to survive and to keep writing.

Governments have long tried to stifle dissent by imprisoning the writer. The charges vary: “inciting subversion of state power,” “insulting religion,” “insulting the president,” “insulting the army,” “spreading false news.” Today the largest number of writers in prison for the longest periods are in China, Burma/Myanmar, Cuba, Vietnam, and Iran. In some countries such as Mexico and Russia, the threat to writers is assassination, often by criminal elements who operate with impunity. In Latin American countries such as Colombia, Peru, and Honduras, death threats are serious inhibitors to free expression. In many African countries such as Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, and the Gambia, violation of criminal defamation laws—particularly those relating to “insulting the president”—can land a writer in prison. Worldwide, the increasing use of anti-terror legislation has resulted in imprisonment of writers when the line blurs between legitimate dissent and criminal advocacy of terror and violence as in Spain and Sri Lanka. In the United States, writers are rarely imprisoned for their writing, but over the years the U.S. government has denied visas to writers from other countries whose political views the authorities object to.

The texts in this issue are from writers who were locked up for political reasons in some of the harshest prisons by authoritarian governments on both the left and the right. Common among the jailers was not their politics, but their fear of opposing opinion. Implicit was the belief that the writer and his words could undermine the authority of the state.

For a generation of Turkish writers, prison was almost a rite of passage as the government incarcerated anyone suspected of communist or leftwing sentiments. Conditions in prison were harsh, but Nâzım Hikmet insisted that the writer must master his despair in order to pursue his literature. Hikmet committed himself to his fellow prisoners, tutoring them and learning from them. He warned the younger Raşit about the corrosive

effects of despair: “Beware, my son, protect yourself from this, be even more bitter and sad, but let your joy and hope shine through.”

As seen in these texts, the writer’s imagination and the support of fellow prisoners and of those outside the prison penetrate the despair and allow hope to struggle through so that the spirit endures and literature survives. The story “Life on Death Row” (page 52) chronicles how the prisoner’s life in Myanmar shuts down to a small, dank space, but also how the prisoners “boosted spirits by singing” and relating books to one another.

In “Seven Years with Hard Labour: Stories of Burmese Political Prisoners” (page 55), Sara Masters recounts the experiences of writers who have served and are serving in the infamous Insein prison in Myanmar. She also tells of people outside the prison and the country who give voice to those locked up or shunted to the margins. Through theater and film, Actors for Human Rights and the iceandfire theater company render the humanity, humor, and tragedy of the Burmese, which the government would hide away.

In U Win Tin’s poem “Fearless Tiger” (page 43), the narrator’s courage and endurance spring from his certainty that truth, the people, time, and God are on his side: “Like a tiger in the zoo, / Rolling in a cage. / Do they think it has become harmless? / [. . .] / It’ll always be a fearless tiger. / Just like me.” U Win Tin spent nineteen years in Burma’s Insein prison.

Iraqi poets Saadi Youssef and Amer Fatuhi (pages 60–61), imprisoned at the beginning and end of the Baathist regime, both use the tools of the imagination to assault the darkness.

Tunisian writer Omar Al-Kikli’s stories “Awareness” and “The Technocrat” (page 51) show a writer in harsh conditions—in his case, ten years in a Libyan jail—still finding in the life around him the beauty that helps him endure. “For the first time, he could see the clear sky with a mixture of delight and suffering. He wondered why he hadn’t recognized such splendor before now. . . . He wished that he could take, from the sky, a blue fragment abundant with clarity and brightness and keep it with him.”

The challenge of captivity and freedom is not simply political. In “The Inextricable Labyrinth” (page 45), Breyten Breytenbach shares the existential dilemma he faced when the society that imprisoned him changed. Proud to be “a statutory, convicted terrorist” in apartheid South Africa, Breytenbach finds himself trapped as a

free man by respectability and responsibility. “I have seen. I am responsible. I must report. . . . And here I am now, writing myself, burrowing into an inextricable labyrinth.”

Iranian filmmaker Nahid Persson Sarvestani (page 57) highlights the importance of the witness to tell the story. In an interview, Sarvestani explains her compulsion to film the struggle of the people in Iran, particularly women, who are bound by repressive laws. Imprisoned under house arrest herself, Sarvestani notes that after the recent presidential election, Iranians “could not be quiet anymore. Despite the fact that the regime imprisons, tortures, and executes young people in order to keep others quiet and under control, people will not be silenced or stopped.”

Sixty years ago Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserted: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” A number of signatories who subsequently imprisoned writers signed this declaration, including Turkey, Burma, Cuba, Iraq, and Iran, represented here.

Article 19 set the standard for freedom of expression in the last half-century. Though its full realization has not yet been achieved, its ideal reflects the dream of Hikmet’s narrator in the opening poem that “human life today must be changed.”

A number of the writers represented in this issue were released from prison early, in part because of pressure from those outside who advocated on their behalf. With the combination of a megaphone for the writer and a klieg light on the abuser, organizations such as PEN, the Committee to Protect Journalists, Reporters Without Borders, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and others lobbied governments and mobilized international institutions and citizens to uphold the right for individuals to speak and write freely.

Readers of this “Voices Against the Darkness” section can celebrate the writers and the writings that have survived, rather like a yellow geranium growing in a tin can.

Washington, D.C.

Joanne Leedom-Ackerman, a novelist and vice president of International PEN, has served as chair of International PEN’s Writers in Prison Committee and as international secretary of International PEN. She also serves on the board of directors of Human Rights Watch.

Fearless Tiger

Hanthawaddy U Win Tin

A poet, editor, and close aide to Aung San Suu Kyi, **U Win Tin** (b. 1930) was arrested in July 1989 because of his senior position in the National League for Democracy (NLD) and spent nineteen years in the notorious Insein prison. Once in jail, he received additional sentences for agitating against the military junta, distributing propaganda, and for attempting to inform the United Nations of ongoing human-rights violations in Myanmar's prisons. When he was finally released in September 2008, he was in a poor state of health, exacerbated by his treatment in prison, which included torture, inadequate access to medical treatment, being held in a cell designed for military dogs, without bedding, and being deprived of food and water for long periods of time. In 2001 he received the UNESCO / Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize.

Editorial note: A poem composed in Burmese by U Win Tin in prison, translation courtesy of the Burma Project (www.BurmaProject.org). Many writers are known by their publications; in this case, U Win Tin was the editor of the *Hanthawaddy Daily*, distinguishing him from other Win Tins.

The sun might be strong,
Or it might be foggy.
It might be piping hot,
Or it might be shivering cold.
In the narrow room,
Light cannot enter, air cannot enter.
You can't see the sun, you can't see the moon.
You can't see anyone.
You can sit, or just stare.
You can sleep, or just think.
Let alone ask about the news, you can't even sing a little tune.
Let alone read, you can't even compose a poem.
Let alone preach, you can't even talk.
Wasted in the life cycle,
My world is a small, narrow room.
Walk one round and face the iron door.
Stand up all day long.

Yesterday was a waste,
So is today.
Tomorrow will be wasted too.
Waste.
Waste.
Waste as much as possible
One day or one lifetime,
One month or one week,
One year or one era.
I won't give in. I'm not weak.
While an anvil, I will suffer. As a hammer, I will hit.
Truth is on our side.
People are on our side.
Time is on our side.
God is on our side.
Do they even know that?

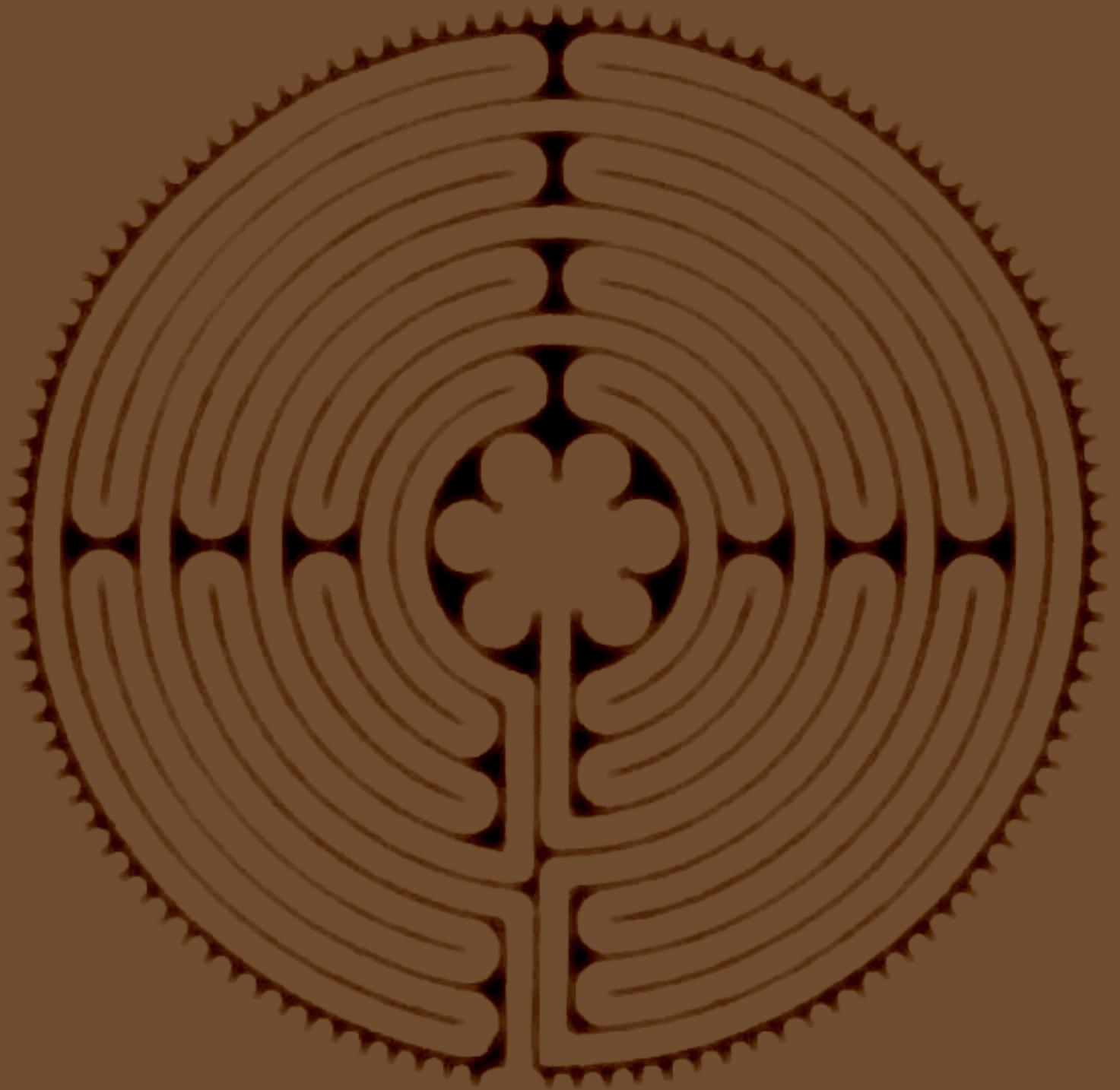
Like a tiger in the zoo,
Rolling in a cage.

Do they think it has become harmless?

How wrong, how hilarious!

Remember this.
As long as there are black stripes on yellow,
Unfading and vivid,
Unmistakably clear,
And distinct,
It'll always be a fearless tiger.
Just like me.





The Inextricable Labyrinth

Breyten Breytenbach

A political prisoner in South African prisons from 1975 to 1982, Breyten Breytenbach considers the mental confinement that continues after release in the following excerpt from the chapter “Self-portrait/Deathwatch: A Note on Autobiography” in Notes from the Middle World (2009), published in October by Haymarket Books.

Free/Unfree. I am a statutory, convicted terrorist. This I am inordinately proud of although I realize how easy it is to become one in the perverted context of South Africa—where, after all, we encounter a population of 5 million albinos and 25 million actual or would-be terrorists. Our exclusiveness has been vulgarized, our mythological nature ridiculed! We are becoming as common as garden tourists!

I have covered many pages with reflections and speculations pertaining to freedom, as if obliterating my tracks. Perhaps not enough, as time has whitened the words into the unsaid. The snow is like a sleeve of silence. Still, I have come up with quotable thoughts even if these were filched from other minds. Should one not be free to steal?

This concern with freedom evidently became more acute after my conviction in November 1975 for underground activities detrimental to the security of the state of South Africa. In fact, I was digging holes for the white rulers. The subsequent prison years constituted a laboratory experience of the mechanics of freedom.

Then, early in December 1982, came release—and captivity. Not only because I had become conditioned to tail wagging, not simply because the mind was now sly like a hunted, lascivious beast, but because I was henceforth to be made a convict of respectability and accountability.

I have seen. I am responsible. I must report. And so my own books hemmed me in; all these images like spectres took possession of my eyes to deform my vision. And here I am now, writing myself, burrowing into an inextricable labyrinth!

Editorial note: Copyright © 2009 by Breyten Breytenbach. Reprinted by permission of the author and Haymarket Books.

Writing in Afrikaans and English, South African native **Breyten Breytenbach** is the renowned author of more than thirty books of poetry as well as novels, short-story collections, dramatic works, and essays. He has written about his prison experience in *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (1983), *Mouir* (1984), and the poems that form the central section in *Windcatcher: New and Selected Poems, 1964–2006* (2007). Also a painter whose work has been the subject of solo exhibitions in cities worldwide, his paintings portray surreal people and animals, often in captivity. Breytenbach has taught at the University of Natal, Princeton University, New York University, and the University of Cape Town.

The Prison Imaginary in Turkish Literature

Maureen Freely

From the earliest days of the Republic, literary writers who challenged Turkey's official ideology could expect to spend time in prison. Despite the privations that they suffered behind bars, they were able to form societies of support that helped them grow as writers while also helping them to survive materially. Though today's literary writers are unlikely to spend time behind bars, they do not always feel better off.

In 1938, while doing his military service, a young Turkish poet named Raşit was charged with inciting mutiny and spreading propaganda on behalf of a foreign state. The evidence against him was slim but, in a court that regarded Communism as the single most important threat to national security, not unusually so. Among his belongings, the authorities had discovered an assortment of newspaper cuttings about Marxism, a book by Maxim Gorky, and a handful of poems dedicated to Nâzım Hikmet, who was not just Turkey's first and foremost modern poet but also its most famous Communist.

Raşit was dispatched to a prison in the city of Bursa to serve out a five-year sentence. The winter of 1939–40 found him assigned to the prison register office. One morning, the registrar walked in to say, "You're in luck. Your master's coming." When Raşit protested, saying, "I don't have a master, or anyone else who fits that description," the registrar thrust a document into his hand: "Look at this, then. Nâzım Hikmet. Don't you reckon he's your master?" (*Orhan Kemal in Jail with Nâzım Hikmet*).

Though Bursa Prison was a broad church, mixing its political prisoners with thieves, drug dealers, murderers, and bandits, every inmate knew of the great Nâzım Hikmet. Those who had come to know him personally in other prisons

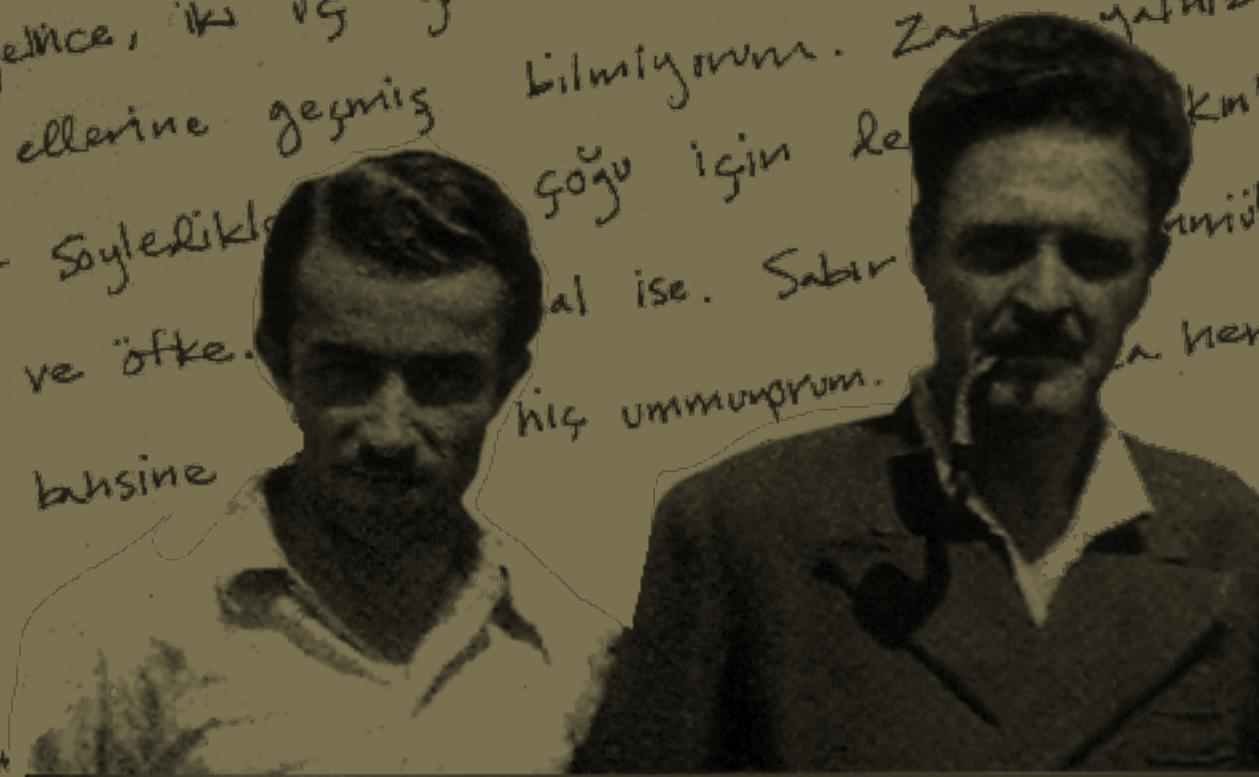
painted a picture of a man so much larger than life that he could stun a crying baby to silence just by picking him up. So Raşit was not prepared for the bright-eyed, open-faced man who walked through the door, clicking his heels together like a soldier as he introduced himself. As he scanned the room, his face lit up at the sight of each familiar face. "And you're here as well, Vasfi? What happened to your appeal? . . . Then what next, Remzi? So you got thirty years then? What on earth for?"

He was assigned to one of the isolation cells usually reserved for men caught gambling, thieving, or knifing a fellow inmate (though in this case it would have been an acknowledgment by the prison authorities that he was a distinguished man of letters who should not be obliged to live communally with common criminals). Raşit was on hand to help Nâzım settle into his new quarters. After Raşit had cooked them both a meal of eggs and Turkish sausage on his charcoal brazier—and refused to let his guest pay for his share—Nâzım asked if he would mind being his roommate. "I can't stand being alone! You can't even imagine. . . . I can't write a single word. I just go mad."

It wasn't long before Nâzım, having already decided to tutor Raşit in French and current affairs, asked to hear a few of his poems. Raşit began with the one of which he was most proud. He had not reached the end of the first stanza

Facing page: Orhan Kemal (left) and Nâzım Hikmet in Bursa Prison / Letter from Hikmet to Kemal dated October 7, 1949

2 evladım,
 etoburu aldım. Bundan önce le gönlenliğim nikâye kitabı
 zileri almıştım. O nikâyeler dergisinin başka bir sayısı
 ime geçmişti. Sanı seviniilecek iki şey söyliyeyim ni
 bazı teknik kusurlarına rağmen o kitaplarıdaki hikâyelerin h
 nemen hepsi özelli, vadedilicikli. Bugünkü hikâyeciliğimiz
 mtında gayet lönv bir yol tutmuş. Bu bir. İkincisine
 işlerinde en özeli, en kusursuz, hele bir tanesi küçük bir
 senin hikâyelerdi. ellerin ve gönün nur olsun Raşid. Beyer
 fotoğrafa gelince, iki iş yıl önce şekilmiş bir resimli.
 ve nasıl ellerine geçmiş bilmiyorum. Zaten yalnız
 değil bana söyledikle al ise. Sabır
 şaşkınlık ve öfke. hiç ummuyorum.
 fıkmık bahsine



when Nâzım said, “That’s enough, brother, that’s enough . . . let’s go on to another one, please” He did as he was told, but he had hardly begun the poem when Nâzım cried, “Awful!” Feeling very small, Raşit embarked on a third poem, only to be told, “Ghastly!”

“All right, brother,” Nâzım said then, “but why all this verbiage and—excuse the expression—mumbo jumbo? Why do you write things you don’t sincerely feel? Look, you’re a sensible person. Don’t you realize you’re maligning yourself when you write about what you feel in a way that you’d never feel, that you’re making a mockery of it like that?” Having launched into a long lecture about “active realism” that Raşit, in his humiliation, could barely understand, Nâzım again stunned his new friend, this time by asking if he would like to hear *him* read.

“I pulled myself together,” Raşit later recalled. “We were facing each other, eye to eye. He added: ‘But you’re not going to be just polite about them. You’ll also criticise me—mercilessly!’”

Thus began one of the most touching friendships in Turkish letters, which Raşit later recounted in a short memoir entitled *Nâzım Hikmet’le üç buçuk yıl* (Three and a half years in prison with Nâzım Hikmet). Though he wrote it in 1947, the book was not published until 1965. By then Raşit had become the famous (though forever struggling) novelist Orhan Kemal (the pen name by which he is known in Turkey), much loved for his stark tales about the poor and downtrodden. Nâzım Hikmet (1902–63) had been dead for two years, having spent more than thirteen years of his life in prison and his final twelve years in exile in the Soviet Union.

Though it would continue to be dangerous (and, at times, illegal) to own a volume of Nâzım Hikmet’s poetry, death would not silence him, and neither would it lessen the stature of Orhan Kemal (1914–70). To this day, they are loved even by those compatriots who do not share their politics—admired not just for their words, but for the sort of men they were, and for the code by which they lived. Nowhere is their generosity of spirit more beautifully described than in Orhan Kemal’s jewel of a memoir, now beautifully translated into English by Bengisu Rona.

The volume includes a long essay that sets the memoir in historical context, outlining the two writers’ careers and explaining (though never condoning) the mind-set that led to the persecution and prosecution of writers at odds with state

ideology. During the early years of the Turkish Republic, as he struggled to pull together the shattered fragments of the Ottoman Empire to create a unified nation-state, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s success depended on his manufacturing (and, if necessary, enforcing) consent among intellectuals, religious conservatives, and the diverse Muslim ethnic groups that now made up most of Anatolia. If ever he met with dissent that threatened to weaken the Republican project, he was quick not just to suppress it but to be seen as suppressing it decisively. Always suspicious of Turkey’s Communists, he was nevertheless willing to enter into alliances with the Soviet Union if he judged them advantageous, and when these alliances were in place, the curbs on left-wing expression would lessen. But by 1938 Atatürk was on his deathbed, and those who succeeded him were less flexible.

For most of the next half-century—until the emergence of the Kurdish separatist movement and the rise of political Islam in the 1980s—it was leftist intellectuals whom the Turkish state viewed as the most dangerous threat to national security, and it was prepared to use the harshest measures to stamp out any party or movement that might be taking its orders from Moscow. Turkey’s first penal code, taken from Mussolini’s Italy, contained several articles prohibiting organizations and propaganda seeking to destroy or weaken nationalist feeling. These were deployed aggressively against the left-wing intelligentsia in general and left-leaning literary writers in particular, though almost always it was literary writers’ political statements that led to their prosecution. Many thousands of leftists and alleged leftists were imprisoned in the aftermath of the 1971 coup; many more were imprisoned after the coup on September 12, 1980. There was even a time, following the 1980 coup, when the penalties for writing an essay urging the Turkish people to take up arms against the state were more severe than those applied to those who actually took up arms against the state. Left-leaning journalists would often find themselves prosecuted for a host of articles simultaneously; for these they were sometimes given consecutive sentences that, added together, would have taken several lifetimes to serve out.

Though there were periodic amnesties, leftist writers often found life outside prison more difficult than life inside. After their release, they were often sent into exile in remote parts of the country, particularly in the early years of the Republic, though the practice was still in place in

the 1970s. When they were at last able to return home, many would find themselves barred from secure employment. Often the only recourse was to work as freelancers in publishing, but even if they were as famous and prolific as Orhan Kemal (who ended up publishing twenty-eight novels, eighteen short-story collections, two plays, and two memoirs, as well as writing many film scripts) they were unable to earn a living wage. As is so often the case in the face of sustained persecution and harassment, Turkey's left-wing writers survived by helping one another.

This may explain why—even today, when, strictly speaking, it is no longer accurate—the joke in Turkish literary circles is that you are not a “true” writer until you have spent some time in prison. What is at stake here is not an aesthetic but an ethos, and in Orhan Kemal's portrayal of Nâzım Hikmet we see its roots. Though his own origins were rather grand, Hikmet saw himself as a people's writer. Though politically an internationalist who believed in the struggle as defined by Marx, he was a fervent patriot and endlessly enthusiastic about the potential of “our people.” One of his most famous poems is a wish (still unfulfilled) that he be buried under a tree in Anatolia. In another much-loved poem, he offers a set of instructions to those who find themselves in prison:

There may not be happiness
but it is your binding duty
 to resist the enemy,
 and live one extra day.

Inside, one part of you may live
completely alone
 like a stone at the bottom
 of a well.

But the other part of you
 must so involve yourself
 in the whirl of the world,
 that inside you shudder
when outside a leaf trembles on the
ground forty days away.
(*Beyond the Walls*)

It is the same struggle to sustain hope against the odds that we witness in Orhan Kemal's memoir, and in the letters that Hikmet writes to him after his release (also translated by Rona and included in the volume). No matter how bad things are, Hikmet refuses to bow to his oppres-

sors. He is the one who goes to the prison authorities to speak on behalf of prisoners too frightened or too shy to ask for dispensations. He tutors not just the poets in the prison but the would-be painters. Lacking the means to support his wife and child or to pay for his upkeep in prison, he sets up a weaving business. He is painstaking about paying all those involved in the business fairly, and in his letters to friends on the outside, he devotes much space to chiding and cajoling them into doing a better job of selling their wares. He is an ardent listener, passionately interested in the stories told to him by his fellow prisoners, many of whom will go on to be immortalized in his poems. But throughout all this, he retains the wayward exuberance of a child. When his wife comes to visit, he flaps his arms in excitement as he speaks, while she, the dignified and long-suffering wife of a great poet, sits silent and composed. When his mother comes to visit, she listens respectfully to his poems, but because she knows herself to be the better painter, she is scathing about his art, and he receives her criticism with a bowed head. When Raşit gives him a rabbit, he is so fiercely affectionate that the rabbit almost dies of fright. And when Raşit becomes Orhan Kemal and sends him his latest book, his mentor begins by offering yet another punctilious writing lesson, outlining the novel's strengths, listing its shortcomings, and expressing horror at the dreadful photograph chosen to appear as the author's picture in the book. There follows yet another lecture about the eroding effects of despair on literature: “Beware, my son, protect yourself from this, be even more bitter and sad, but let your joy and hope shine through. That's it. I repeat once more, I congratulate you and Turkish literature. Young and old, I clutch you to my bosom.”

In this age of irony, it is hard to imagine a writer offering up such undoctored sentiments, even if that writer comes out of the literary tradition that Nâzım Hikmet and Orhan Kemal helped forge. The spirit of resistance remains strong among the many fine journalists whose principles oblige them to challenge state ideology. But among today's literary writers, the center has not held. Most acknowledge their debt to the the great mid-century fiction writers of the leftist tradition—Sabahattin Ali, Aziz Nesin, Kemal Tahir, and Yaşar Kemal, to name just a few—and some (like Latife Tekin) are happy to see themselves as continuing that tradition. But today's novelists are less likely to see themselves as writing for the

Maureen Freely was born in the United States but grew up in Turkey, where her family still lives. She was educated at Radcliffe College and has spent most of her adult life in England. A professor at the University of Warwick, she has translated five books by Turkish novelist and Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk. She writes frequently in the British press on feminism, family and social policy, Turkish culture and politics, and contemporary writing. Her sixth novel, *Enlightenment*, was published by Overlook Press in 2008.

people, let alone the struggle, and more likely to resist the idea that their work only has worth to the extent that it serves the national project (however they define it). They speak instead of the primacy of the imagination, the need for a distinct and authentic voice, and the importance of writing about the world as they themselves see it, unimpeded by ideology.

Sadly, there are many in the state apparatus who are as suspicious of today's most successful literary novelists as their predecessors were of Nâzım Hikmet. They do not like writers breaking with the official ideology or airing their independent opinions abroad. In Turkey's penal code of 2004, ostensibly brought into line with European social democratic norms, there are up to twenty articles that curb free speech, the most famous of which is Article 301, which made it a crime to insult "Turkishness," along with the Turkish Republic, parliament, the government, and judicial organs—and the army and police for good measure. Since its introduction, only a few of the hundreds of prosecutions have led to prison sentences, and in no case has a well-known writer of fiction been jailed. However, the much-publicized prosecutions of Orhan Pamuk and Elif Shafak did succeed in giving prosecutors a platform on the evening news, while portraying the defendants as traitors. After persistent criticism of this clause, some minor amendments were introduced in 2008, replacing the word "Turkishness" by "the Turkish nation" and reducing the maximum penalty from three to two years' imprisonment. None of the critics of Article 301 has been impressed by the changes.

Kemal Kerinçsiz, the ultranationalist lawyer who launched both the Pamuk and Shafak prosecutions, also launched several against the Turkish Armenian journalist Hrant Dink; following a sustained hate campaign in the ultranationalist press, Dink was gunned down in front of his

office in January 2007. His assassin is behind bars, though his fate is still unclear: his trial is expected to go on for years. Also behind bars is Kerinçsiz himself. In early 2008 he (along with many others) was charged with belonging to a state-sponsored ultranationalist terrorist organization charged with aiming to soften up the country for a coup. It is alleged that this organization had a hit list, and that Orhan Pamuk was to have to have been its next target. This trial, too, is expected to go on for a decade.

In the meantime, Pamuk lives under police protection when in Turkey. Though he can come and go as he likes,

and though he is free to speak his mind, he is wise enough to exercise extreme caution, for he knows (as do all other leading writers who have been targeted by ultranationalists in recent years) that a single unconsidered sentence in an interview with a journalist anywhere in the world could lead to a renewed hate campaign.

For a political journalist or a human rights activist, such risks, however undeserved, might still be said to be "part of the job." For literary writers wishing to free themselves of all political ideologies—nationalist and internationalist; left, right, and center—the question is more complex. Where to find the space to work, safe from the glare of publicity? How to explore ideas openly if one's every word is subject to hostile scrutiny? How to reclaim the capricious sense of play without which the imagination cannot function? During the three-and-a-half years Nâzım Hikmet shared a cell with Orhan Kemal, the two men were able, despite the many hardships, to create a space, and a tradition, that allowed them to hold Turkish literature to their hearts. To read of their friendship now is to understand how much harder it is for Turkey's literary writers, for all their fame and all their freedom, to find such spaces today.

University of Warwick

Today's novelists are less likely to see themselves as writing for the people, let alone the struggle, and more likely to resist the idea that their work only has worth to the extent that it serves the national project.

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Editorial note: To read more about Orhan Pamuk and to read his essay "Implied Writer" (translated from the Turkish by Freely), see the November–December 2006 issue of *WLT*. For Elif Shafak's essay "Accelerating the Flow of Time: Soft Power and the Role of Intellectuals in Turkey," see our January–February 2006 issue.

Two Stories

Omar Al-Kikli

After a military coup in 1975, the regime of Muammar al-Gaddafi declared war against Libya's army, the universities, and various writers, striking out at what it called reactionary and communist elements. In April 1976 the secret police and so-called Revolutionary Committees attacked the universities in Tripoli and Benghazi; some students were hanged, and faculty members were purged. The regime attacked the intellectuals next; in December 1978 the Association of Libyan Women in Benghazi invited eleven writers, including Omar Al-Kikli, to participate in a celebration of the work of Libya's modern poet Ali al-Regaii. This cultural event was interrupted by secret police and zealous committee members who beat and arrested the writers, accusing them of plotting to overthrow the government. Ahmed Fituri and Ali al-Rhibi were arrested in Tripoli two days later. Rodwan Bushwisha and Al-Jilani Tribshan were accused, but luckily they were outside the country at that time, escaping arrest and detention. On May 1, 1980, the court suspended their sentences, along with that of three others. Eleven of the other writers were tried and sentenced to prison. Omar Al-Kikli is the first among those talented and courageous Libyan writers to write a book about his prison experience. (*Courtesy: Ali Abdullatif Ahmida*)

Omar Abulqassim Al-Kikli (b. 1953, Tunisia) is a well-known short-story writer, essayist, and translator from English into Arabic. In late 1978, while pursuing university studies in philosophy, he was imprisoned in Libya under the pretext of false political accusations, with other writers and intellectuals, and sentenced to life in prison. Eventually, he was pardoned after nearly ten years in jail. His first short-story collection, *Sina'atun mahalliyatun*, has been translated into French and published in a bilingual edition, and some of his stories have been translated into German, Russian, and English.

Awareness

The soft sunlight that was covering the yard stung his eyes. He raised his head, shading his face with his palm, gazing at the sky.

Its remoteness and blueness, which loomed deliciously, astonished him.

For the first time, he could see the clear sky with a mixture of delight and suffering.¹

He wondered why he hadn't recognized such splendor before now.

He started hanging his clothes.

He remembered that his mother sometimes would say to him, when he was a child: "Be quiet! You're trying to take a fragment from the sky?!"

He finished hanging his clothes.

He stood looking at the distant, wonderful blueness.²

Just then, he appreciated the originality and charm of his mother's comment.

He wished that he could take, from the sky, a blue fragment abundant with clarity and brightness and keep it with him.

The commanding voice came to him: "Let's go back! You're done hanging your clothes."

March 22, 1979

The Technocrat

There was a prison warden, specializing in torture, who used to help in giving out food or taking prisoners to the prison doctor when he had no torture duties.

Surprisingly, those whom he tortured remembered him with respect and gratitude!

The reason for that, they say, was because he tortured with a technocratic efficiency! He did his job without eliciting on his victim (the material he worked on, according to him) any kind of moral torture; he just did it with great care and sincerity, in silence, till the material became ready for another phase and entered the next stage of the investigation.

Tripoli

Sources: "Awareness" is from Homemade, translated by the author and revised by Ashur Etwebi. "The Technocrat" is from Sijniyat (Prison scenes), translated by the author and revised by Ashur Etwebi.

¹ In Arabic, *othuba* (delight) and *athab* (suffering) are derived from the same root.

² In Arabic, *ba'eeda* (distant) and *badee'a* (wonderful).

Life on Death Row

Tha Zin

In the essay below, Burmese author Tha Zin (not her real name) recounts her imprisonment in Myanmar's notorious Insein prison in the 1990s.

The cell I was allotted measured about fifteen feet square, with a row of metal bars forming one wall. It was lit by a 40-watt bulb. One corner had a bamboo mat, and there sat my cellmate, a young woman. I joined her, sitting at one corner of the mat and answering her questions: "Who are you? What interrogation center did you come from? How was your interrogation?"

We chatted, describing our experiences. I described the beatings and the kicks, and she showed me how her fingers had been injured by her interrogators with a sharp piece of bamboo.

At about 8 p.m., as the prison fell into silence, I heard knocks on the back wall of the cell. My companion knocked in reply—this was apparently one method of communication between the prisoners. We were also able to talk directly through the bars to three young women in a cell facing ours. We talked into the night and finally turned in around 2 a.m. I found it difficult to sleep in these new surroundings and with the light burning all night.

The prison was awake early, and there was activity outside our cell. A plate of warm porridge was served up at 7 a.m.

Around 10 a.m., I heard rhythmic shouts of what sounded like "take" and "pour," accompanied by the splashing of water. The noise came from a yard beyond our cell, and to find out what the commotion meant I unfastened a window at the top of one of the cell walls and peered out. Up to twenty women were splashing themselves with water from a brick-built tank, supervised by a cane-wielding warder shouting the commands "take" and "pour." At the command "take," the women would scoop water from the tank and then splash themselves clean with it when the warder yelled "pour."

As I watched that strange scene, I heard a loud voice behind me. "Who opened the window?" asked a warder.

I had unfastened the window by untying a piece of metal wire that secured its two handles and then sliding back a bolt. "I opened it," I confessed.

"Who ordered you to do that?" the warder barked.

It was just a window, I protested. Where was the harm in opening it? But opening a window seemed to be a cardinal crime, for after again haranguing me the warder condemned me to be transferred to the prison's "Death Row."

I picked up my small pile of clothes, bid goodbye to my cellmate and the three inmates of the neighboring cell, and followed a warder to my new, ominously named quarters.

Death Row was a brick building, divided by a narrow passageway lined by five small cells and two larger ones. As its chilling name implied, it housed prisoners sentenced to death. And now I was one of them.

I was assigned to one of the larger cells, which measured about twenty feet by twelve feet. About ten women shared the cell, and they gave me a noisy welcome, showering me with questions. Within one week, all but two of them had been led away.

The cell in which I was to spend several months had a slop pail in one corner and a pot of drinking water in another. We shared three plates and two bamboo mats, surviving on a diet of boiled peas, spinach, sour soup, fried prawn paste, and tamarind. When we were able to leave the cells and cross the yard to take a shower, we collected what vegetables and greens we could find to add some variety to our meals, using a knife fashioned from a hair clip to cut the meager produce.

Sometimes women who received food parcels from visiting family members shared such treats as homemade curry, fish paste, and fried vegetables. I noticed, however, that the parcels weren't

Tha Zin's work has appeared in numerous journals and magazines and been adapted into radio plays. She has written short stories, a collection of essays, and a novel. An interview with her, under her real name, will appear in a forthcoming issue of *WLT*.



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as big or as appetizing if they were brought in by husbands of the imprisoned women.

One woman inmate told me: "When men are imprisoned, their wives struggle to visit them, despite many difficulties. But when women are imprisoned, their husbands just try to be dutiful. They offer such excuses as caring for the children, household work, and daily chores. Some husbands even take up with another woman."

We had some freedom on Death Row—freedom to talk and argue among ourselves. And to pray. I still didn't know how long I would have to serve in prison. And why Death Row? It was not a good omen.

There were worse places to be, however. One punishment cell was a dark, windowless place with a floor of wet sand. Four or five days in this dank, fetid hole was the punishment for violating prison regulations.

At night, we boosted spirits by singing. Some of the inmates knew the popular songs of performers like Zaw Win Hut and Hay Mar Ne Win, and they had good voices, too. I'm no singer, so I related some of the books I had read.

After four months, just as I was getting used to the routine on Death Row, my name was called and I was escorted to a jeep parked at the prison entrance. The jeep drove to another prison building, where two intelligence officers, two soldiers, and a woman warder accompanied me inside. It was crowded with students, all waiting to appear before a prison court-martial.

I can't remember the details of the charges against me—only the sentence. Ten years. At least now the uncertainty was over. As the sun set on a hot summer day, I was led away to begin my prison term, not on Death Row but in a special ward for women prisoners.

Rangoon

Freedom of Expression around the World: **BURMA**

Burma (Myanmar) has been a closed society since 1962, under one of the world's most repressive military dictatorships. The people of Burma enjoy none of the core values of an open society. The Burmese junta continues to suppress all dissent. There are no individual or community rights, no rule of law or independent judiciary, no freedom of expression or association. The regime controls and regulates information, particularly on religious, ethnic, and political issues. Freedom of speech and the press are forbidden by law, and every publication (including newspaper articles, cartoons, advertisements, and illustrations) are reviewed and censored by the Press Scrutiny Board (PSB) of the Ministry of Information. In 2008 Burma ranked 170th among 172 nations on the Reporters Without Borders worldwide press freedom index.

In Burma, an individual can be imprisoned, without trial, for at least seven years for harboring a dissident and up to fifteen years for having an unregistered modem. Over the course of 2008, the number of political prisoners doubled, and kangaroo courts gave dozens of activists draconian prison sentences of up to 104 years. According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) based on the Thai-Burma border, there are currently forty-eight journalists, bloggers, and writers in detention. Since 1996, the junta has passed a number of laws to control distribution of information, freedom of speech, and expression. In a September 2009 report, Human Rights Watch described the laws frequently used against political activists and journalists, including section 32b of the Television and Video Law. **Zarganar** (Maung Thura), a popular Burmese comedian and poet, was arrested in June 2008 and sentenced to fifty-nine years in prison. The junta convicted Zarganar using section 32b as well as three others laws often used to imprison activists.

In Burma, censorship affects everyone. The Myanmar Information Communications Technology Development Corporation (MICTDC) licenses cybercafés. Users are required to register, and owners are forced to save screen shots of user activity every five minutes. Despite these challenges, bloggers, writers, and journalists like eighty-year-old U Win Tin, released in 2008 after nineteen years in prison, daily take great risks to defend the freedom of expression in Burma. Other high-profile cases of creative writers on the PEN International 2009 case list include **Aung Than**, **U Aye Kyu**, and **Saw Wei**. For more information, visit the AAPP website (www.aappb.org), and join the Human Rights Watch (www.hrw.org) campaign to free 2,100 political prisoners by 2010.

Courtesy of Maureen Aung-Thwin / Open Society Institute



Seven Years with Hard Labour

Stories of Burmese Political Prisoners

Sara Masters

Iceandfire's latest testimony script tells the stories of individuals who have endured harsh sentences for speaking out against the Burmese regime. Now living in the United Kingdom, the ex-political prisoners share their experiences and ongoing commitment to raising international awareness about what is really going on inside Burma's borders.

People are hungry to know about what is happening in Burma. As demonstrated by the recent success of the award-winning *Burma VJ*, demand for real stories from inside the country is high. But, as the film reaffirmed, telling those stories puts individuals in real danger, with many making great personal sacrifices.

Such dangers are personified by the notorious (as he describes himself) Zarganar, the Burmese comedian who made international headlines last year when he received a thirty-five-year sentence for talking to the foreign media about the regime's slow response to the Cyclone Nargis disaster. This hugely disproportionate response by the Myanmar government starts to put into context the constant struggle that the Burmese people have endured for over forty years and what individuals like Zarganar try to illuminate through their work.

In Zarganar's case, the huge impact of his work has propelled him to international recognition. Winner of both the Fund for Free Expression's Lillian Hellman and Dashiell Hammett Award and PEN Canada's One Humanity Award, he also became the first winner of the "Imprisoned Artist" category of the ArtVenture Freedom to Create Prize in 2008. This prize was, although no one knew it then, the catalyst for our script, *Seven Years with Hard Labour*. Zarganar was keen to use the publicity these awards brought to draw attention to the many thousands of Burmese people who have sacrificed their freedom to voice their opposition to the regime and raise awareness of what is happening in their country. Some, like him, remain in Burma's prisons; others, like the subjects of the script, have made the difficult decision to leave Burma, coming to countries such as

the United Kingdom to protect themselves and their families and develop international support to strengthen the campaign.

Our focus at iceandfire is to explore human rights stories through performance. We maintain working relationships with many NGOs and campaigning organizations, and we were already working closely with Index on Censorship, Britain's leading organization promoting freedom of expression, whose award-winning magazine shines a light on these vital issues. Their cultural arm, Index Arts, approached us to help them respond to Zarganar's request. Together we decided to create a documentary script telling the stories of Burmese ex-political prisoners who now continue Burma's struggle in the United Kingdom, and *Seven Years with Hard Labour* was born.

Iceandfire is primarily a theatre company, creating fictional plays that engage with and humanize often complex and contentious human rights issues, but in 2006 we added a new string to our bow with the launch of our pioneering outreach network, Actors for Human Rights. Made up of over four hundred professional performers who donate their time to help draw public attention to contemporary human rights concerns, the network has become a unique force in the British campaigning landscape. Utilizing actors' unique strength—the ability to communicate and engage with a live audience—we tell, using their own words, the often invisible stories of people who are, in many cases, on the periphery of mainstream society: asylum seekers, undocumented migrants, and people living in poverty, to give just a few examples. First-hand interviews are edited, without embellishment or addition, into a sixty-minute script that weaves together up to seven or eight individuals' experiences. Performed as rehearsed readings (to keep the work as portable and economical as possible), the scripts have been seen by over twenty thousand people with audiences ranging from university students to professional bodies to the theatre-going public.

In order to generate the raw material for *Seven Years*, Christine Bacon (co-artistic director of iceandfire) and myself sat down at the kitchen table of Vicky Bowman (former British Ambassador to Burma) and her husband, Burmese artist Htein Lin, and prepared to interview four remarkable people: our host Htein, Ko Aung, Nita May, and Khun Saing. Over the course of the day, which resulted in eight hours of interviews, a picture emerged of a people who managed to remain determined and unafraid in their opposition to a

remorseless state. What also emerged was their indomitable humor and their gift as storytellers. The ability to stand back and laugh about what they had been through, along with the truly compelling and deeply moving stories, is one of the great strengths of the script. Nita described the camp she was held in as "better than a gym" because she lost ten pounds while she was held there, waiting to be sentenced. Htein and Ko dissolved into laughter when talking about the Burmese officials who demanded that artists change the red in their paintings to orange, so it would not be interpreted as "blood" by anyone looking at it.

This humour runs through the core of the script, as do the sacrifices all four have made. This does not just include the years of their lives robbed by being imprisoned for what we would consider harmless activities. All described the pain of separation from their families—Nita gave birth in jail and immediately handed over her baby to her husband because of the rampant disease in the prisons, experienced first-hand by Khun who was diagnosed with tuberculosis, and only then because he was a medical student and recognized the symptoms. His desire to be a doctor was thwarted by his activism; upon release, he was not allowed to re-enter medical school. Khun now studies both counseling and computing in the north of England, while Nita works for the BBC World Service in London, using the media to tell her people's stories to as wide an audience as possible. This is where *Seven Years with Hard Labour* can also contribute—harnessing the warmth and the bravery of these individuals to engage audiences with the ongoing situation in Burma.

The script had its international premiere in Oslo as part of the Global Forum on Freedom of Expression, followed by a London launch on August 8, 2009, the twenty-first anniversary of the 1988 uprisings. Performed in the newly opened Free Word Centre, the London home of a group of organizations dedicated to the promotion of freedom of expression, the event was a sellout with Khun, Ko, Htein, and Nita all in the audience. After the performance, each spoke with emotion about the effect of hearing their stories shared in such a way, and each strongly reinforced the huge importance of continuing to speak out and campaign against what is happening in Burma. As Zarganar said, "It is very important to have freedom of expression. You must say what is right, what is wrong. This is the people's first step."

London

Editorial note: All of iceandfire's outreach scripts, including *Seven Years*, are available on a rolling basis and can be seen across the United Kingdom and have also been hosted internationally. For more information about how to book a performance or where to see one, please visit www.iceandfire.co.uk. To find out more about the work of Index on Censorship, go to www.indexoncensorship.org.

Sara Masters is co-artistic director of iceandfire.



“My Camera Was My Power”

A Conversation with Nahid Persson Sarvestani

Nathan Aduddell

Documentary filmmaker Nahid Persson Sarvestani was born in Shiraz, Iran. She now lives in Sweden after being forced to take political asylum for her activism during and after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Her critical films have cost her the ability to return to her home country but have earned her the respect of many. In the midst of a tumultuous year in Iran, Sarvestani graciously spoke with me about her life, her work, and her country.

Nathan Aduddell: After founding a local radio station in Sweden, you enrolled in film school in 1993. Why did you take that step?

Nahid Persson Sarvestani: I was a journalist in Iran. When I arrived in Sweden, I wanted to continue writing, but the language was a problem. I liked science as well, so I studied to become a

microbiologist. But I soon realized I am not the kind of person who can be locked up in a lab. At the same time I was doing voluntary work at an Iranian community radio station. I found, however, that this was not really what I was looking for either; something was missing. One day I borrowed a camera and shot my kids at their daycare center, then edited the material and added music.

ABOVE Sarvestani and Farah Pahlavi in a scene from *The Queen and I*, the filmmaker's latest documentary.

It became a film. I called it *A Day at the Daycare Centre: A Memory for Life*. Parents were buying copies of it, and I realized I had done something that was working well. I liked this way of telling stories—through sound and moving images.

NA: Your films about Iran have told the stories of women—prostitution, polygamy, return from exile, and, most recently, the life of the former empress Farah Pahlavi. How do you choose the stories you want to tell?

NPS: You could write a book about how I come up with these ideas! When I went back to Iran after seventeen years in exile, I saw with my own eyes how the Islamists had ruined the country and its people. There were junkies, street kids, and young prostitutes everywhere. I could not just sit there with my family and enjoy my return. I had to do something. I wished I had the power to change the country, but I didn't. My camera was my power. I decided to make films about my people and the oppression and violence to which they were exposed. Then, by coincidence, I met two prostitutes and started filming them. During the editing of that film, I came up with the idea of making a film about a man with several wives. I wanted to show the moral double standard and the oppression of women.

NA: You had several encounters with Iranian police while shooting *Prostitution Behind the Veil*, but you continued to make *Four Wives—One Man* even though it was dangerous for you. Can you talk about those experiences?

NPS: When I decide to do something, I have to do it. Nothing and no one can stop me. During the shooting of *Prostitution Behind the Veil*, I was caught by the police several times. Most of the times I managed to escape, but on one occasion we were taken to the police station, where we were to be searched for hidden tapes. We were able to finish shooting the film, and even before it was shown, I had filmed much of *Four Wives—One Man*. After *Prostitution* was shown, however, I knew everything would be different. I still needed to do some additional shooting in Iran to complete *Four Wives*, but I knew it would be dangerous for me to return. It was a very tough decision, but I knew the government wouldn't kill me because a lot of people knew who I was. So I went back. When I did, they put me under house

arrest, and I was questioned and threatened by the police. They had a hearing and banned me from making more films about Iran. They were calling me a "royalist," and that's how the idea for *The Queen and I* was born.

After two months they let me go. So I sent my daughter to Iran and she finished the film. We were lucky because she didn't have the same name; she had her father's family name, so they didn't know she was my daughter. That was fortunate, because I was worried what they might do with her. She had grown up in Sweden so she was scared sometimes—this was my country, not hers—but she and I both knew how important it was for this film to be made. While there, she stayed at a house in a little village, so no one saw her filming except for the family she filmed. She called me every day and asked what I thought about this or that. I just directed the film from Sweden by phone. After two or three weeks, the shoot was complete, and we smuggled the film out of the country. My daughter couldn't take it with her because sometimes they check everything you have when you leave the country. Everything went well, but it was very painful to make. It was the most difficult film I have ever done.

NA: In your most recent film, *The Queen and I*, you form a friendship with former empress Farah Pahlavi. She was once your adversary during the 1979 Iranian Revolution when you demonstrated against her husband, the Shah. How have you changed in your thirty-year journey since the revolution?

NPS: Well, first and foremost, I am not a Communist anymore. I was just seventeen years old when the revolution happened. The revolution was for my people; I didn't do it for my own family because when you are young you want to change the world, and you think you can. We went out and demonstrated against the Shah; we thought we could bring a good life to the people of Iran.

NA: Iran is currently amidst a turbulent time following its tenth presidential election. What are your thoughts about the recent events?

NPS: People in Iran have for a long time refused to participate in the elections. They knew that their votes had no meaning, and that Khamenei would choose whomever he wanted in the end anyway.

Since 1999, **Nahid Persson Sarvestani** has focused her films on Iran and the position of its women under the Islamic Republic regime. *Prostitution Behind the Veil* (2004), which documented the lives of two prostitutes in Tehran, merited an International Emmy nomination as well as numerous other awards, including the Golden Dragon at the Kraków Film Festival, Best International News Documentary at TV-Festival 2005 in Monte Carlo, and the Crystal Award by SVT (Swedish State Television). Her most recent film, *The Queen and I* (2008), was released this year in conjunction with the thirtieth anniversary of the 1979 revolution and had its North American premier at the Sundance Film Festival.

Nathan Aduddell graduated from Marymount Manhattan College with a bachelor's degree in theater performance. After graduating, he moved to Los Angeles and worked in independent and feature films. He is now a law student at the University of Oklahoma College of Law.

His last choice, Ahmadinejad, and his extremist views have made the situation unbearable for many people. They simply have had enough and wanted a change in this year's election. After being deceived by the regime yet again, they could not be quiet anymore. Despite the fact that the regime imprisons, tortures, and executes young people in order to keep others quiet and under control, people will not be silenced or stopped. They will continue to fight. I wish I could be there and join them in the fight, but I cannot return to Iran. Instead, I am doing what I can with my films.

NA: Do you know of any other writers or artists who have been imprisoned or persecuted as a result of responding to the election issues?

NPS: Yes, many Iranian filmmakers and journalists are in jail now. And they have more problems than someone who goes back to Iran to make a film like me, because I have people in other countries supporting me. When you live in Iran, you have no power—they can do anything they want. In my situation, I was a Swedish citizen in Iran, so the Swedish government talked to them. They

had several meetings with important people so I could go back. But the journalists and filmmakers are not free in Iran. They are all people who want to talk about their freedom, but they cannot because they will be put in jail. My people in Iran are fearful but they are not afraid; they have energy; they do not give up, and I'm so happy about that. And we outside the country need to support them and not simply watch what happens there. So it's what we do as exiled Iranians.

NA: What can we look forward to seeing from you next?

NPS: I will keep my focus on Iran and keep telling stories related to what is going on there. I have just started working on a new project. We are quite early in the production, but I think this film will be interesting and important both for me and the audience, and hopefully will make people around the world aware of the injustice in Iran. I'm also writing a book about my life—the revolution, and going from Iran to Dubai to Sweden.

September 2009

Freedom of Expression around the World: **IRAN**

Against the backdrop of the 2009 election protests and the recent show trials of hundreds of Iranian journalists, political dissidents, and other intellectuals, three high-profile cases of Iranian creative writers stand out:

Amin Ghazaei, a writer, editor, and leader of the group Students for Freedom and Equality, is best known for his work on gender identity and for translating several postmodern critical studies into Persian. He was arrested in January 2008, held without charge in Evin prison for two months, and reportedly tortured, then released on bail in March 2008. In March 2009 government agents entered his home and arrested four other student activists, but Ghazaei managed to escape; his current whereabouts are unknown.

Maziar Bahari, a leading Canadian-Iranian journalist, editor, playwright, and filmmaker, was arrested in June 2009. A *Newsweek* correspondent, Bahari is among scores of journalists who were arrested in Iran following this summer's disputed elections. At a staged "press conference" during his trial on August 1, he delivered statements echoing the regime's propaganda about Western plots and the alleged role of journalists in fomenting them. Bahari remained in detention, without charge, as of October 2009.

Yaghoob Yadali is an award-winning short-story writer and novelist who has also worked as a television director and has published many articles and cultural commentaries in newspapers and journals. He was arrested in March 2007 and sentenced on charges of insult, libel, and publication of false information in two of his fictional works. Since his release, Yadali has been banned from publishing.

Countless other authors and journalists have been intimidated, arrested, imprisoned, and even executed for their work, as the Iranian government continues to fight to keep a protective bubble around the country. For more information, visit the Iranian PEN Centre in Exile website at www.iran-pen.org/english. The complete case list of the International PEN Writers in Prison Committee can be found at www.internationalpen.org.uk.

Compiled by Lauren McMillan

In Those Days

Saadi Youssef

After being imprisoned for a year and a half for his political views, Saadi Youssef left Baqouba prison in 1964 and made his way to Algeria, then to a dozen other cities of exile over the past forty-five years; he currently lives in London. The Baathist regime in Iraq was notorious for its persecution of intellectuals and artists—through censorship, imprisonment, torture, forced exile, and execution—during its four-decade reign of power. In “Reception” (1997), Youssef writes: “I do not need a bullet. My only fortune in this world is the wall behind my back.”

1

On the first of May I entered Central Prison
and the Royal Officers registered me a communist.
I was tried, as was the custom then,
and my shirt was black with a yellow tie.
I left the hall followed by the soldiers’
blows and the derision of the judge. I had
a woman and a book of palm fronds. In it I read
the first names. I saw detention stations
filled with lice, others filled with sand,
others empty except of my face.
When we were thrown in the imprisonment that has yet to end,
I vowed: “This heart’s yearning will not end.”
You who will reach my kin, tell them it will not end.
Tonight we rest here, and in the morning we reach Baghdad.

2

I celebrate this night with the moon visiting
from behind bars. The guard asleep, and the breathing
of Sibah is weighed with the humidity of the Shatt.
The visiting moon turns toward me. I am humming
in the corner of the holding station. What have you brought me
in your eyes? Air I can touch? Greetings from her?
The visiting moon enters through the bars and sits
on the corner of the station covered with my blanket.
He holds my palm. “You’re lucky,” he says
and leaves.

And in my hands I hold
a key made of silver.

All songs disappear except people’s songs.
And if a voice can be bought, people will not buy it.
Willfully, I forget what is between people and me.
I am one of them, like them, and their voice retrieved.

3

On the third of May I saw six walls crack.
A man I knew emerged through them, wearing
workers’ clothes and a black leather cap.
I said: “I thought you left. Wasn’t
your name among the first on the list?
Did you not volunteer in Madrid? Did you
not fight along the revolution’s ramparts in Petrograd?
Weren’t you killed in the oil strike?
Did I not see you in a papyrus thicket
loading your machine gun? Did you not raise
the commune’s red flag? Did you not organize
the people’s army in Sumatra?
Take my hand; the six walls may collapse
at any moment. Take my hand.”

Neighbor, I believe in the strange star.
Neighbor, life’s nights echo: “You are my home.”
We’ve traveled wide and long
and the heart is still aimed at home.
Neighbor, don’t stray.
My path leads to Baghdad.

1973

*Translation from the Arabic
By Khaled Mattawa*

Editorial note: From *Without an Alphabet, Without a Face* (Graywolf, 2002), 52–53. Translation copyright © 2002 by Khaled Mattawa. Reprinted by permission of Saadi Youssef & Khaled Mattawa.

Born in 1934, **Saadi Youssef** (www.saadiyousif.com) is considered the greatest living Iraqi poet and one of the pioneers of modern Arabic poetry. With thirty-six volumes of poetry, nine books of prose—including a novel and three plays—and numerous translations of major works into Arabic (by Whitman, Cavafy, Lorca, Ungaretti, Soyinka, and Ngugi, among others), Youssef has been a central cultural figure and has inspired generations of younger poets and intellectuals. His only collection in English, *Without an Alphabet, Without a Face*, served as the representative text when he was a candidate for the 2008 Neustadt International Prize for Literature.

Wounding the Dark

Amer Hanna Fatuhi

Like a creeping slug came the pitch-black
and like fingers skilled in the art of pickpocketing
All the lights of our souls were extracted
to be left circling a space
of darkness and emptiness

.

A man of blood
A man of flesh
And a woman a dream a home
Or a home a dream a woman
Of glowing coal
Of charcoal

My home refreshes me like the Euphrates
Or the Tigris
A hyena enjoying pulling out my right foot's toenails
Putting out his cigarette stub
In my side
Raining on me "my homeland's pimps" with all kinds of pain
For just a sketch or a word
I travel between alienation
and the affinity

My home is a spike
and I am a sparrow from Babylon
with irises of palm fronds
who does not care about the thirty silver pieces
or a traitor
who would hand me over
to the hangman with a kiss
It is wounded: that home, the dream, the tattoo
and I'm bleeding words
bleeding paintings
making light
that darkness is afraid of

.

Suddenly
a white dot
opened
a wide wound in the dark

*Translation from the Arabic
By Amer Fatuhi with Daniel T. Ames*

Amer Hanna Fatuhi (www.amerfatuhiart.com), a native Iraqi (Chaldean Babylonian) artist, historian, professional writer, activist, and co-founder of the Iraqi Artists Association, was detained and tortured several times during the reign of Saddam Hussein. He was asked to do a portrait of Saddam but refused, did not participate in the annual Baath Party exhibit (1974–2003), and refused, as head of the visual arts magazine *Funoon*, to glorify the regime by writing articles about Saddam and his sons. As a result, he was sentenced to death three separate times. After fleeing Iraq and living in exile for many years, he is currently finalizing an exhibition between his hometowns of Madison Heights, Michigan, and Baghdad, entitled "Iraq . . . Love, Death, and Beyond." He is also in the process of translating his book, *The Untold Story of Native Iraqis: Chaldeans 5300 B.C.–Present* (2004), into English, and completing the manuscript for his next work, *The Art of Native Iraqis*.

Freedom of Expression around the World: CHINA

In 2009 the climate for freedom of expression in China remains troublesome. Despite continued pressure, both internal and external, on the government of the People's Republic of China to improve its record on human rights, little progress has been made in reversing the tide of China's strict censorship policies. China's efforts to control the country's increasing Internet access have been stepped up in response to the use of social networking websites to spread news of riots and protests within the country; in recent months, websites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Blogger have all but disappeared from Chinese Internet, while the Chinese government has covertly instituted a requirement that users must register their true identities before commenting on news articles, ensuring that authors of subversive comments can be held personally accountable. The consequences are dire for those found expressing opinions deemed subversive by the Chinese government. The official stated policy of the republic provides for the blacklisting of problem journalists, jeopardizing the career and livelihood of any outspoken dissident; yet the reality for such offenders is often much worse. The PEN American Center detailed the situation of the country's most recent literary prisoner, writer and critic **Liu Xiaobo**, who was detained in December 2008 and held for six months without charge for his involvement in drafting the "Charter 08" promoting human rights and democracy in China. Liu currently remains imprisoned, now charged with "inciting subversion of state power" and likely facing many years of continued imprisonment as a result. For the Chinese writer, the pursuit of a free and open public debate within the country remains a risky and dangerous one. Other high-profile cases of creative writers on the PEN International 2009 case list include **Iham Tohti**, **Shi Tao**, **Nurmuhammet Yasin**, **Zheng Yichun**, **Mehbube Ablesh**, **Tsering Woesser**, and **Ven. Richen Sangpo**. For more information, visit the Independent Chinese PEN Center website at www.penchinese.com/wipc.

Compiled by Justin Archie

Freedom of Expression around the World: CUBA

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of Fidel Castro's revolution in Cuba, but unfortunately twenty-five writers remain in Cuban prisons, arrested for their allegedly anti-government positions. Twenty-two of the currently imprisoned writers have been in jail since March 2003, when a group of thirty-five writers and librarians—among them some of the country's most significant journalists and poets—was arrested in a crackdown on cultural dissidents. During that period, now called Cuba's "Black Spring," all writers were charged and tried at closed-door, one-day court hearings, without having been given time to assemble appropriate defenses.

The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has formally determined that all such prisoners are being held arbitrarily, and Raúl Castro's 2008 offer to exchange their release for that of the Five Heroes (five Cubans convicted of spying for Fidel Castro's government, leading to the deaths of several Brothers to the Rescue planes headed to drop anti-Castro literature over Havana) suggests their continued imprisonment may be considered by the government to be a bargaining chip. PEN International, the Cuban Writers in Exile PEN Centre, and other PEN centers around the world actively advocate the release of Cuban writers. Human-rights organizations are concerned with the poor treatment of prisoners in Cuba; additionally, several of the imprisoned writers suffer from various health conditions for which they do not receive treatment, dramatically threatening their quality of life.

Writers today, and especially journalists, can be charged and prosecuted at the whim of the government because of Penal Code Article 91 and/or Law 88, two vaguely articulated laws condemning nondescript behaviors that aim to "[subvert] the internal order of the Nation." Many of today's most important Cuban writers, like Cuban Writers in Exile PEN president **Ángel Cuadra** and poet-journalist **Raúl Rivero**, both having served prison time, live and write in exile. Other creative writers, including **Ricardo Severino González Alfonso** and **Régis Iglesias Ramírez**, remain imprisoned inside Cuba, serving lengthy sentences.

Compiled by David Shook (<http://moloss.us>)