



norsk p.e.n.
June 2020

Free the poet Ilhan Çomak!

Dear poets,

PEN Norway, the Norwegian branch of the international PEN family, defending freedom of expression and the right to read and write, is leading a global campaign to call for the immediate and unconditional release of the prize-winning Kurdish poet Ilhan Çomak.

Ilhan has written 8 books of poetry in his 26 years in prison. He was arrested as a 22-year-old student in Istanbul and signed a confession to having lit a forest fire in the name of the separatist, outlawed PKK. This confession came after 19 days of heavy torture. Ilhan maintains his innocence of the charges to this day.

At PEN Norway we will be campaigning for Ilhan during the 4 years that he has left to serve in prison. We call for his immediate and unconditional release and we have planned the following publications and events:

- the translation and publication of Ilhan's poems in English
- the publication of an anthology of poems written FOR and WITH Ilhan
- face to face advocacy at the Turkish Embassy, Oslo
- Ilhan's case will be raised with the Ministry of Justice during our September mission to Turkey
- the publication of a campaign booklet detailing Ilhan's case and giving examples and a critique of his poetry by the Turkish poet Haydar Ergülen
- an international meeting of PEN centres online to further disseminate his work
- a physical event and reading of Ilhan's poetry at a later stage in Oslo.

Can you help? We would love you to read the campaign booklet, attached, to learn more about one of Turkey's most unjust cases in its legal history.

Please consider writing a poem for Ilhan. This will be translated into Turkish for him to read and will be published in our anthology due out in 2021. The anthology, entitled 'Anatomy of Freedom' is being edited by the Turkish poet and critic Erkut Tokman and the Welsh poet and Turkish translator Caroline Stockford.

If you wish to write WITH Ilhan this is also possible. I am a poet and translator of Turkish poetry and have been writing with Ilhan for a few months. We write 5 first stanzas of new poems and send them to each other. The person receiving then finishes the poem. It helps if the stanzas are 8 to 10 lines long to shorten the process, as it can take up to 2 months to get a letter through at the current time. However, the length and style are not to be dictated by us, so please feel free to send the first part of a 'call and response' with Ilhan to us in your own form, style and length.

We feel that it is interesting for Ilhan to collaborate with leading European poets in order to get a taste of their form and style. Ilhan has access to only 7 books at a time (currently no new books permitted due to the COVID-19 outbreak).

We will translate yours and Ilhan's poems and facilitate their sending between parties. The poetry is being translated by Erkut Tokman and Caroline Stockford. Ilhan is very buoyed up by the new campaign and referred to his supporters in the UK as '*a ladder into a blind well*'. A wonderful event and reading was organised in February this year at the Poetry Cafe, London for Ilhan. We hope to hold future events and readings online or in person.

There has also been a letter to and article (by George Szirtes) in The Guardian concerning Ilhan in the spring of this year.

Ilhan is special. He is a highly regarded poet in Turkey of whom the poet Haydar Ergülen said, '*In prison, Ilhan has turned everything to poetry.*'

PEN Norway recently made Ilhan an honorary member and Writers in Prison Committee Chair Øivind Hånes wrote about Ilhan:

'As a 47-year-old, he has been incarcerated for more than half his life. It is striking how little hatred and bitterness his text exudes. Rather, it is a radiance of energy that conveys an impassable and indomitable fascination with life's small and great wonders, as well as a longing to once again be out in the open and participate in daily life.'

Ilhan's poetry soars over the prison walls and reaches us in the wider world. He is in solitary confinement, and yet, by your efforts in writing to or in collaborating with him we might bring him close, show him our concern and solidarity and create a poetic community into which he can be welcomed now, and upon his release from prison.

Examples of Ilhan's poetry in English can be found in the Turkey issue of Trafika Europe Magazine (ed. M. Baron) and in the attached campaign booklet.

Please send your poems for Ilhan to us here at PEN Norway and we will translate and pass them on. If you have any enquiries or would like further information on an aspect of our project, don't hesitate to contact me.

We really hope you will help us to Free The Poet!

all best wishes

Caroline Stockford
Turkey Adviser
PEN Norway
caroline@norskpen.no