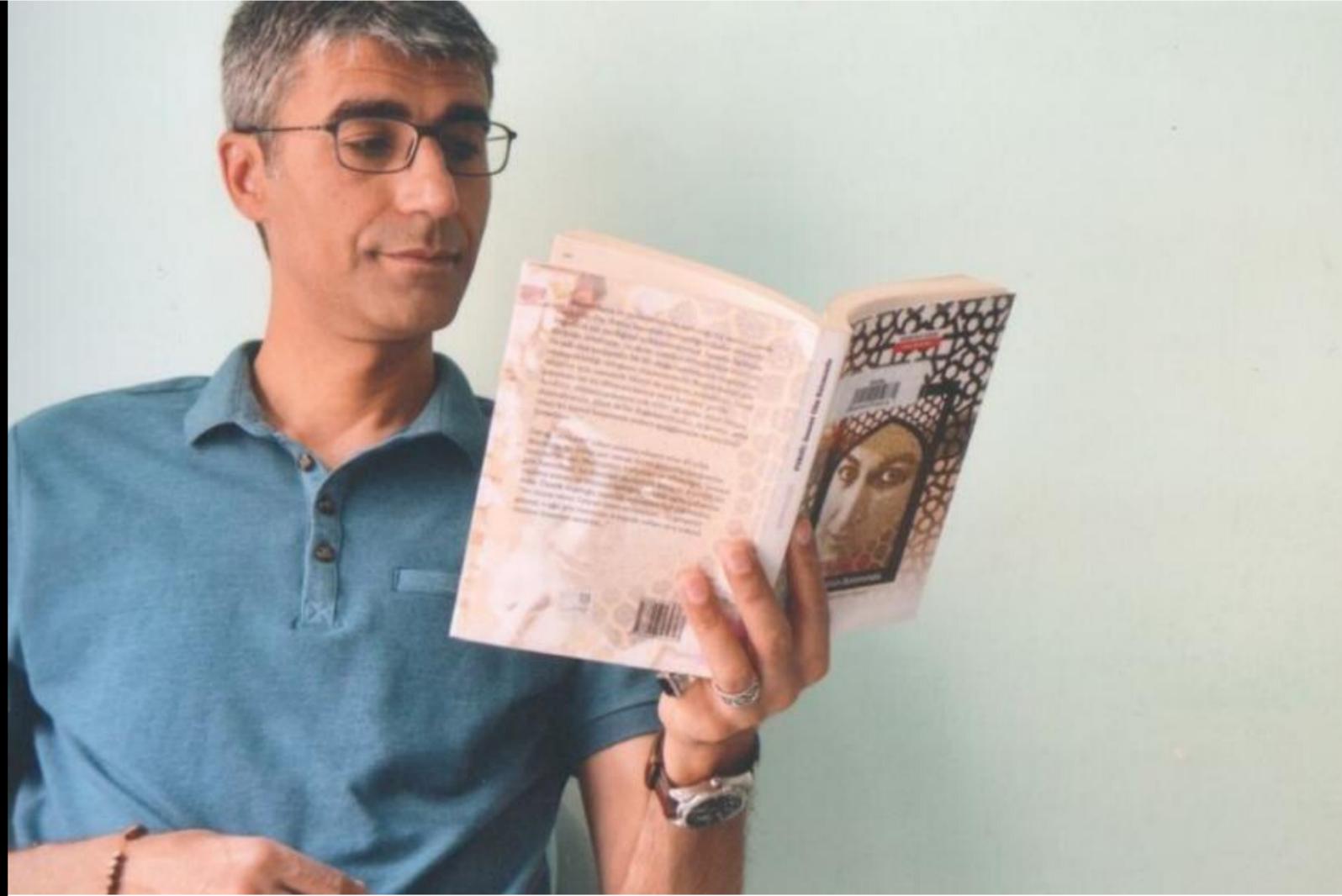


CAMPAIGN TO FREE THE POET



norsk p.e.n.

# ILHAN ÇOMAK

Eugene Schoulgin  
Author, Norwegian PEN member,  
Vice President of PEN International  
writes:



'To lower a rescuing ladder into the well where Turkish injustice has placed their great poets and writers for decades is, tragically, still required for all of us who enjoy freedom of expression and can search for truth in the strength of words and the beauty of creating.

To encounter Ilhan Çomak's poems is to realize how important it is to find this ladder, and at the same time how useless it is to deprive a poet and a beautiful soul of a ladder.

These poems show how far above the prison roof poetry can fly. Only when they hit us do we understand how much we were longing to read these lines. The truths they show us are as old as mankind, and always fresh as if they were newborn.

Filled with gratitude for having been allowed to meet these words, I look forward more than ever to the day when we can have Ilhan himself, and not only his thoughts, among us! (Oslo, April 2020)

FREE THE POET ILHAN ÇOMAK

# BACKGROUND



FREE THE POET ILHAN ÇOMAK

Ilhan Sami Çomak (*pr.Chomak*) is Turkey's longest-serving student prisoner. He was held in pre-trial detention for 22 years until his life sentence was confirmed in 2015. Ilhan was arrested in 1994 whilst studying geography at Istanbul University. After 19 days of continuous, heavy torture, Ilhan signed a statement saying that he had lit forest fires near Istanbul in the name of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Ilhan has always maintained his innocence. The statement signed under duress is the sole piece of evidence in his case.

Ilhan has been in prison for 26 years. The freedom of expression and activist organisation Norwegian PEN is campaigning, with others, for Ilhan's release.

During his time in prison Ilhan has published 8 books of poetry. The most recent, 'Geldim Sana' ('I came to you'), was awarded the Sennur Sezer Prize for Poetry in 2019.

Help us to campaign for his release from Silivri prison,  
Istanbul.

Help us to free Ilhan Comak.

## A LETTER FROM ILHAN

In March 2020 a group of major British poets and supporters of Ilhan's campaign wrote a letter to the Guardian demanding the intervention of the United Kingdom Foreign Secretary in Ilhan's case.

This is an excerpt from Ilhan's letter to those who signed:

Dear Friends

There is a line in an Anatolian folk song I love that goes: They left me in blind wells with no ladder!

Perhaps the reason for keeping me in prison without a break for the last 26 years was to increase the sense in my soul that I had been left in a dark well with no ladder, and to put my very concept of self, all of my senses and my mind under seige. However, I know of something secret that fights against time and people's cruellest aspects. It is something secret that I learned in childhood, that I learned from good people I met, something which always steered me towards the truth and to the good side; something secret that drew its strength from my creative power, from the limitless power of my imagination, something I could feel rather than know, that then guided my behaviour.

When I was a young, a 21 year-old university student, I was unlawfully arrested and put in prison. Now I am 47 years old. I can't touch or communicate with other people or with animals. The great beauty of nature is so very far away from me. This is something that burns not just my mind but my heart and is a pain that is very hard to overcome. I am not just talking about the absence of actual physical contact, no. For all this time I have been without something else: the warmth, that incomparable shine that flows from a person's eyes and which makes a person happy, which makes them able to share their feelings and which makes a person feel proud to be human. I've been without that for all this time.

They left me in blind wells with no ladder...

Our sense of conscience, our moral compass, is the quickest way in which we can reach one another. One of these 'short cuts' is poetry, of course.

My poetry has developed by looking at other people; at what pain and the injustice in their lives has done to them; what it has brought them. I learned so many things by studying this; and I changed. I am writing about people who are like me, of course, those who have a strong sense of conscience and who recognise that which is true.

And you, as you read and share the good things that I have not been allowed to live, but that I have only been able to write into my poetry; as you try to make known my voice further afield, and read out the poetry of that little boy poet who cried at the goat's wounded eye, you are being a ladder into the blind well for me. Be so!

And what was that secret thing that I professed to know? Of course it was poetry! To never give up on poetry and to walk on despite everything, with the power of my imagination, to follow my path even though there may be a price to pay. To walk on!

My sense of conscience has been with me since I was a small child. By adding to it the stories of the lives that have been called to me by poetry, I've tried, stubbornly, to be a good and hopeful person. To know that my voice has been heard outside shows me that I am on the right path. It is still true that good people find one another!

You are a ladder for me. And I thank you all!

Ilhan Sami Çomak

Excerpt from:

I came to you, Life  
for Ipek Özel

And the tree's shade buckles,  
birds give all they know to their wings.  
The wind blows an ovation  
and from the sun comes the need to touch.

There is no city we need to reach. Everything is here.  
Open the window. Open it as the horses whinny  
in the wideness of the world. Open it without speaking

of the shortness of summer, the never-ending winter.  
Open it, that the sky stirs with the hidden symbols of my mind.

I came to you saying, 'Open the door to the presence of existence'  
as the sky stirs in its form.

I came to you saying, 'Open the door of becoming.'  
Open the door of existence, to me.'

SONG, POETRY, COMMENTARY & LETTER WRITING

Exiled Writers Ink and Norwegian PEN present

# ONE MORNING I WALKED...

MONDAY 3RD FEBRUARY 2020 AT 7PM  
POETRY CAFÉ, 22 BETTERTON ST, LONDON WC2H 9BX

An evening for **Ilhan Çomak** and for all political prisoners, for the power of poetry and writing to publicise the resilience of people suffering injustice, incarceration, torture... **who will not be silenced.**



FREE THE POET ILHAN ÇOMAK

## PARTICIPANTS

**George Szirtes** Poet and translator. He was born in Budapest in 1948, and came to England after the 1956 Hungarian uprising. His collection *Reel* won the TS Eliot prize in 2004; his latest book is *Bad Machine* (2013).

**Erkut Tokman** (b. 1971, Istanbul) Turkish poet, translator, interviewer, and editor. He is a member of the Turkish and Italian PEN centres, works for the Writers in Prisons Committee, and serves as a president of Intercultural Poetry and the Translation Academy of Turkey.

**Ipek Özel** Lecturer and human rights activist, specialised in students in prisons and political prisoners. Lectures on human rights law and associated issues at MEF University, Istanbul.

**Margaret Owen** Human rights lawyer, who, as a Patron of Peace in Kurdistan, has been observing and reporting on political trials in Turkey for several years. She attended and reported on Ilhan's trial in 2016, where he received a life sentence.

**Suna Alan** Kurdish/Alevi singer and journalist based in London. She has been involved in a variety of causes, including human and women's rights and the environment.

**Caroline Stockford** Turkish literary translator and poet. She advocates for writers in prison as Norwegian PEN's Turkey adviser and attends the trials of journalists. She is Chair of the Search Committee of PEN International and member of the Executive Board of Wales PEN Cymru.

**Michael Baron** Retired solicitor and a poet. Enthusiast for Ilhan Çomak's poetry and supporter of the campaign to free him and the many wrongly imprisoned writers.

**Ali Has** Practising Solicitor-Advocate and Human Rights Lawyer. He has a vast amount of knowledge and experience in defending criminal prosecutions, which is his main area of practice.

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exiled writers ink  
voices in a strange land

*"Last year I visited Ilhan Sami Çomak at Istanbul's Siliври Prison. He's tall, slim. His voice is soft. He uses delicate words. He is an innocent prisoner and a fine poet, with a warm heart that has been swallowed by a brutal system. We talked about our Kurdish villages, literature and the university campus that we both studied at. As I exited from the prison I felt that I had not left a poet behind but a brother."*

Burhan Sönmez

Author

Board Member PEN International

*"It is time for Ilhan's freedom. He is the forgotten case; a mild man who collects bird feathers and writes the poetry of nature, the outside world, of folk traditions and of the suffering of those other unjustly imprisoned men he has come into contact with over 26 years. We ask the Foreign Ministers not only of the UK but of Europe as a whole to intercede on his behalf, to raise his unjust case and demand the freedom of Ilhan Çomak."*

Caroline Stockford

Norwegian PEN Turkey Adviser

*"It is difficult to grasp how Ilhan Çomak can produce poems on such a high level despite being jailed for the last 26 years. He articulates lines of stunning insight and paints breathtakingly beautiful pictures without being overwhelmed by hatred and bitterness, in spite of his ongoing detention. His work radiates an energy that conveys an indomitable fascination with life's small and great wonders, as well as a deep longing to come out and take part in life again. Such strength, resilience and imagination can generate great poetry, and in the case of Ilhan Çomak, it truly does."*

Øivind Hånes, author

Norwegian PEN

Writers in Prison Committee Chair

# POETRY OF EARTH & SKY

Leading Turkish  
poet Haydar  
Ergülen wrote the  
following article in  
February 2020 for  
Norwegian PEN on  
his admiration for  
the imprisoned poet  
Ilhan Çomak:

1. When I was writing my weekly column 'Open Letter' for Radikal newspaper between 1998 and 2007, I used to get a lot of letters from prisons, including F-type high security prisons. I still have some of these letters. Prisoners used to send letters to quite a few columnists who they thought were democrats. In these letters they'd tell of their problems, issues, hunger strikes, death strikes and violations of their rights. I used to get a lot of letters. As a journalist for the arts and culture pages I couldn't always find a way to feature them, but I would mention, often, these letters from political prisoners who were detained awaiting verdicts or already convicted. Some letters contained poems, short stories and essays, although it was mostly poetry and essays. I would reply to some of them and I think I even used to send my poetry books in return. One of the prisoners I used to write back and forth to was the author Sami Özbil who went on to write a novel. It was a long time ago. I'd have to find the letters to remember all the names. I hope all of them have now found freedom.

## HAYDAR ERGÜLEN: POETRY OF EARTH & SKY (continued..)

2. I can't remember if Ilhan Sami's letter came first, or if I first received an email from his sister Suna. She and I met in Taksim. She spoke of her brother's situation and of his poetry. She asked me if I would look at some of his poems. I did. I loved them. I was really excited about his work and I wrote to Suna. At that time, Ilhan had been in prison for about 10 or 12 years. He'd been convicted under anti-terror law in 1994 when he was just 22 years old and given a life sentence. Now the year is 2020. Ilhan has been in prison for exactly 26 years and he's now 47 years old. He's published eight books, eight of them are poetry. Eight books of poetry and all eight are different from each other. I don't know if his work has been translated into other languages. Why did I even think of this? If he'd been translated into English perhaps John Berger would have read him and then written about him in the way he wrote about Latife Tekin and Bejan Matur. I think he would have been moved by both Ilhan's situation and his poetry. If the great Turkish poet Can Yücel were still alive I'm sure he would have written a few incendiary poems about Ilhan.

3. As for me, I've been writing poetry for almost 40 years. I feel a sense of shame and even pain at being a poet, at being called 'poet' by others, not in connection with writing, but for the fact that Ilhan Sami has been in prison, continuously for 26 years. Turkey's greatest poet, Nazım Hikmet, spent twenty-two and a half years in prison, saying, 'I love my country/I've passed my time in its prisons'. How many years has it been that Ilhan Sami has not seen the very face of the earth, the sea, trees, roads, the birds? How long since he has boarded a ferry and thrown sesame seeded bread to the seagulls? How long since he drank an ice cold beer, or walked for hours? How long since he held a lover's hand? It's never ending. How many years has it been? It's been longer than his entire life before prison! In his book Geldim Sana (I've come to you) (Manos, June 2019) he wrote of what was missing from his life in the poem, 'Burda neler yok' (What things are not here?): 'There are no children scaling the garden wall to skip school/no human good that makes words into friendships/no vineyards/no stones for throwing stones/no flowers to gather dew/no rivers to run off the map/.../no kitten's paws no sweat of a speeding horse/no curtain raised by the breeze/no decaying bunch of grapes/life lies separated from the sun. Here/there's no direction.'

## HAYDAR ERGÜLEN: POETRY OF EARTH & SKY (continued..)

4. When I think of Ilhan Sami being in prison for his political ideas, the words of Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi come to my mind, as do the words of Ruhi Su, the Armenian-Turkish opera singer: 'They are among thorns/but they are like roses./They are in prison/but they are like wine./They are stuck fast in mud/but they beat like a heart./Night is around them/but they are like morning.' When I read Ilhan's poems I feel like replacing all those words, 'rose, wine, heart and morning', simply with 'poetry', he is like poetry. I have never met Ilhan Sami, I've only seen one or two photos of him in the newspapers but when I read his poems I realised that he had literally turned into poetry during his time in prison. Ilhan Sami, whilst in prison, has turned everything to poetry. Whatever his eyes, his soul, his heart and his mind have touched has turned into poetry. There were many comrades who turned to poetry after being locked up following the coup d'état of 12 September, 1980. We read their work when it was published in magazines and books. I'm sure we were touched by their work both in a political and poetic sense. Excellent poets such as Nevzat Çelik and Emirhan Oğuz were among them. The poetry of Ilhan Sami Çomak, however, is not really written in the context of prison. Those poems could have been written inside or outside those wall, one cannot tell. In recent years, his have been the poems that have had the most profound effect on me, which have both delighted me and surprised me. It is quite certain that nothing can take the place of freedom... not even poetry and not even love. With these poems Çomak has transcended poetry. He has taken flight with poetry and has made poetry fly from behind those iron bars and solid walls. It is perhaps in his poetry that we most genuinely see demonstrated the fact that poetry is truly a form of freedom.

## HAYDAR ERGÜLEN: POETRY OF EARTH & SKY (continued..)

5. I haven't seen his first book of poems and it seems he has no intention of showing it to anyone. I know this because the introduction to his second book, Açık Deniz (Open Sea) reads: 'My poetry book Gitmeler Çiçek Kuruşu (Their Leaving was as Dried Flowers) was prematurely born in 2004 and the result of the combination of bad fortune, amateurism and careless mistakes.' The poet Ahmet Oktay also said, 'the first book of poems is a mandatory mistake', and this is true for the first books of most of us. That first book is dedicated, 'I kiss his hands', to his late brother Sami Çomak whose name İlhan then took as his middle name. This tradition of taking the name of a lost brother is something we see with Muzaffer İlhan Erdost, who took as a middle name that of his brother İlhan who had been beaten to death by soldiers during the coup d'état of 12 September 1980. Pain, tragedy and chills of fear accompany such losses. When you lose a brother you lose part of your soul. I felt this upon losing my brother Halil, and understood İlhan Çomak's words: 'This is like fire falling into a forest/the narrow rivers are stolen from our eyes.' Also, İlhan writes, 'I'll write now what I learned once you were gone/Living can mean guilt in another form.' But then he likens his brother to the folk hero of Yaşar Kemal's novels, 'there's the joy of a Slim Memed, holed up in the mountains', adding, 'to speak of a person one should speak of a bird.' One must live as closely as one can to freedom, to poetry and to love.

6. Çomak's third book of poetry is Günaydın Yeryüzü (Good Morning Earth) (2011). And his fourth book, Kedilerin Yazdığı İlahi (Hymns Composed by Cats) is a veritable fount of images and poetry. In one of his poems İlhan Sami tells us he will always be a student. He'd been studying geography at university all those years ago. He took his university life within the walls with him and turned his cell into a poetry school. And what a magnificent and magical school! It's as if he took in to prison with him the earth, sky, the cosmos, nature, botany, zoology, love, friendship, the world and time itself. He turned all that into language, to words and to veritable truth. For him to be able to say so many things and yet not to repeat himself in his work demonstrates that İlhan Sami has a timeless skill at poetry. If the great Turkish poet Behçet Necatigil said of his own writing room, 'my room is larger than the world', then one should say that İlhan's cell has been turned into a realm of geography, history, sociology, psychology, physics, chemistry, mathematics, music, astronomy and geology. He has reached the wisdom to be able to say, 'My sun is the moon.' He published his book entitled 'Dicle'nin Günlüğü' (Diary of the Tigris') in 2017 and also 'Yağmur Dersleri' (Lessons of the Rain). These were followed by 'Bir Sabah Yürüdüm' (2017) which contained his epic poem of the same name. The one, single line of this lengthy poem, 'It's fifteen years since I saw a horse', is, for me, equivalent to a whole book of poems.

## HAYDAR ERGÜLEN: POETRY OF EARTH & SKY (continued..)

7. With his eighth book, Geldim Sana (I Came to You) he won the prestigious Sennur Sezer Labour and Resistance Prize in 2019. That's all well and good, but a prize alone is not enough for Ilhan Sami's poetry. A symposium on his work should be held, where it can be debated and examined at length before papers are collated into a book of criticism on his work. But before this all of Çomak's previous books should be reprinted in Turkey. It is a sad stroke of fate that the publisher of his works, Yasak Meyve press, closed upon the death of its owner and our dear friend Enver Ercan. Çomak's books should be reprinted by another press so that this poet, one of the most valuable living poets in Turkey, Ilhan Çomak can be read by other poets and poetry lovers. His poetry must be spread in a wider circle and be shared across the country. And this man, who long ago found freedom through his poetry, must be allowed to see the sky again, to mingle in the flow of life and to meet with his dear loved ones again. Because, just as he says in his latest book, in the poem 'Life is seeing the flight of the Butterfly,': 'I am friends with the memory of light, with the apricot's kernel/the solidity of stone/ inscribing my book with the will of the waves/ the stillness of the sea/my mind is filled with questions and the insistence of migrating birds/- I repeat to myself/ life is seeing a butterfly land and then fly!'

I salute the hands, eyes, soul, heart, wrists and poems of Ilhan Sami Çomak with love.

Haydar Ergülen, February 2020

translated by Caroline Stockford

Life does not lie  
for Michael Baron

I am between the moon and the tide  
between the whisper and the scream.  
When I was a child, had still the script of a child  
when I was hostage to my mother's pomegranate smile  
when I looked from the window to the full light of the garden  
watching the practical philosophy of hands plucking the fruit tree  
in those times when we still heard the sound of frogs  
when women passed through my life, and the lake was blue  
I knew the value of blue.  
I understand there is pain, too, on the steps of life.

On the day of existence the wind rose up to meet me  
resistance, sitting like dew on the grass met my feet  
Ripe fires grew across my body, and doves  
- my feelings were met by the rustle of their wings.  
In spring's demeanour I hear the sounds of cleaning  
I hear footsteps of plains and mountains and the law of snow  
melting. Earth grows damp in my memory, fruit ripens,  
stones' habitual weight grows light, makes it to flow  
and tremble as it wishes. In my place between trouble  
and wellbeing I hear the song of happiness from the world  
as goodwill blossoms: Life does not lie! I say  
it does not lie!

Ihan Sami Çomak  
translated by Caroline Stockford

Things that are not here

There are no kids scaling back walls  
to skip school. No human bond of good  
that makes friendship from mere words.  
There are no stones for throwing stones.  
No flowers that pool dew, no rivers  
overflowing the map. No fresh-baked smell  
of sesame bread to summon up a crowd.  
There are no women of selflessness and beauty,  
no possibility to stretch out on grass  
and test the constancy of sky.  
There is no candle, just as there is no lamp.  
No darkness. There is absolutely no darkness.

There are no turnings of the seasons,  
no eclipses of the moon. No earth,  
no plants in their simple elegance.  
No cat's paws, no sweat-drenched speed  
of a horse. No curtain for the breeze to lift,  
no moldering bunches of grapes.  
Life, separated from the sun.  
There's no direction here.  
But there is a way out.  
Always a way out.

Ihan Sami Çomak  
translated by Caroline Stockford

# HOW CAN YOU HELP ILHAN?

You Decide

But whenever I think of myself you appear  
by my side in the form of a silence.  
We swallow the light. A rose garden,  
think of it, in the middle of the desert.  
You touch that place with your wound,  
The desert softens somewhat.  
At that moment, right at that moment,  
like taking a copper tray, hanging it on the wall  
you think of me with fresh new eyes, love me.  
You create me anew.  
Should we name this thing? You decide.  
But whenever an alarm clock goes off  
here and there in places that I cannot hear,  
you become a ringing thing,  
like a nun thinking of renewing her vows,  
you say "Welcome" to the greatness of living.  
You give form to water. Is this the surface tension?  
With a strange love you open your mouth,  
and you may regret, too, that some things don't work out.  
With these eyes that come from when you first began to love me  
- their depth, the burden of meaning,  
with these things I say, 'love me'.

Poem by Ilhan Sami Çomak

Translated by Caroline Stockford

- WRITE TO HIM

ILHAN ÇOMAK,  
SILIVRI 5 NOLU TIPI CEZAEVİ , F9 ALT  
SILIVRI, ISTANBUL, TURKEY

- WRITE TO THE TURKISH AMBASSADOR TO THE UK

HIS EXCELLENCY MR ÜMIT YALÇIN  
TURKISH EMBASSY  
43 BELGRAVE SQUARE,  
LONDON SW1X 8PA

- WRITE TO THE MINISTER OF JUSTICE, TURKEY

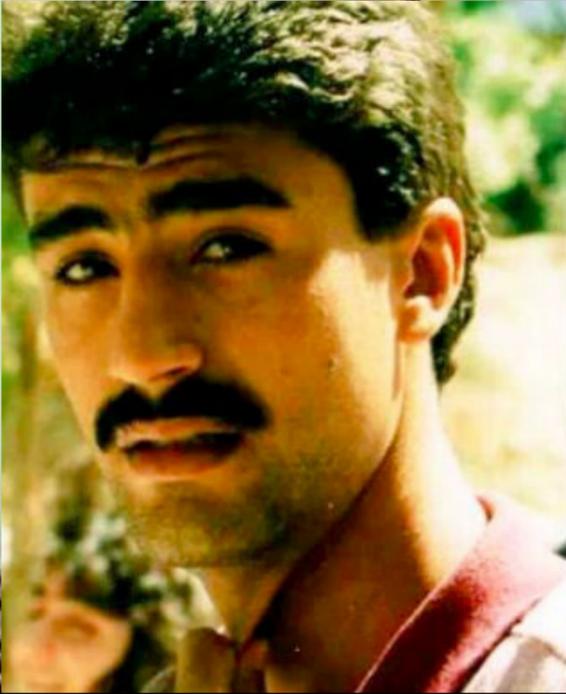
MINISTER ABDULHAMIT GÜL  
HUKUK BIRIMI  
06659 KIZILAY  
ANKARA, TURKEY

- WRITE TO THE UK FOREIGN MINISTER ASKING FOR HIS INTERVENTION IN ILHAN'S CASE WITH THE TURKISH GOVERNMENT

MINISTER DOMINIC RAAB  
FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE  
KING CHARLES STREET  
LONDON SW1A 2AH

- HOLD A POETRY EVENT OR WRITE POEMS AND MAKE ART FOR ILHAN
- SHARE YOUR WORK ON SOCIAL MEDIA #FREETHETHEPOET
- CONTACT CAROLINE@NORSKPEN.NO FOR MORE INFORMATION

THANK YOU!



After the book of rain,  
with its tone unseen by day,  
with its shape that can't  
be sensed, as the bird flies  
with memory of shade,  
the seasons dream new colours.

I think of the falling leaves  
in your presence.

from Life's Voice  
Ilhan Çomak  
tr. C.Stockford

As the whole city sleeps,  
let us speak little  
in a corner the light  
can't reach.  
There is belief between us  
and the dryness of a thirsting mouth.  
Let us sit, and pour out  
the pictures in our heads  
onto the surface of the water.

..  
let the doves coo, but let us not speak.

from Let Us Not Speak  
Ilhan Çomak  
tr. C.Stockford

Oh you suns!  
I have grown lighter by abundance.  
I know, of course, that distances  
have been memorised by way of my white,  
my brilliant white feathers.  
On my breast are sidelong glances.

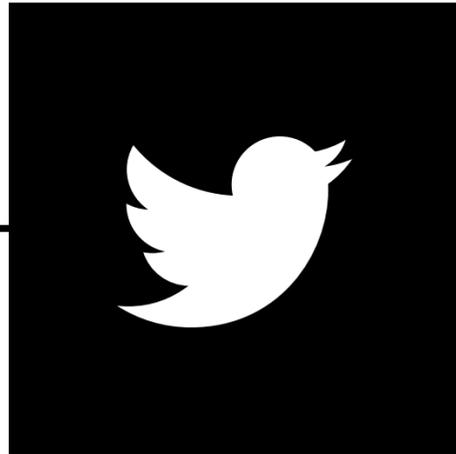
The tinder is in my chest, trees crackling,  
I feel you burn: I, the Huma bird,  
never lands on the plains of your loins.  
Like stunned and cageless animals  
We live on water's other shore.

from I have my Reservations  
Ilhan Çomak  
re. C.Stockford

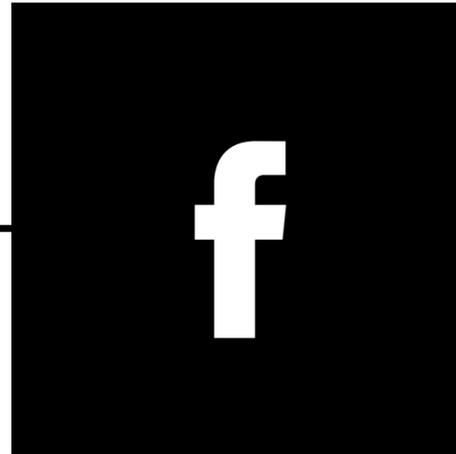
My child, we use the wings of the sea  
when delaying the rains.  
When the skies cave into my eyes,  
it's because I worship blue.  
My fear is a meaning derived from the  
wildernesses, And yes, I change  
when I hear the tap-tap of rain.

Time come, time go, my sisters, my brothers.  
Of course my body puts me down.

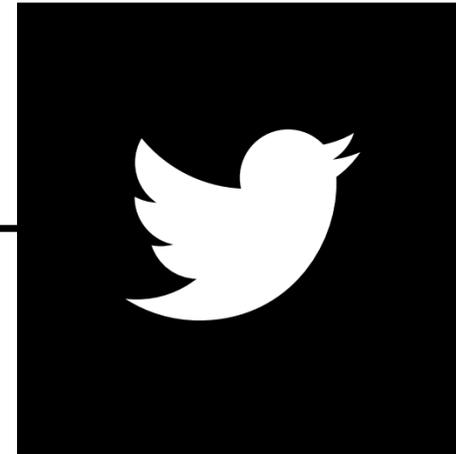
from The Wings of the Sea  
Ilhan Çomak  
re. C.Stockford



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@ilhan\_comak