

Free the poet İlhan 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 İlhan Çomak.

İlhan 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. İlhan maintains his innocence of the charges to this day.

At PEN Norway we will be campaigning for İlhan 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 İlhan's poems in English
- the publication of an anthology of poems written FOR and WITH İlhan
- face to face advocacy at the Turkish Embassy, Oslo
- İlhan's case will be raised with the Ministry of Justice during our September mission to Turkey
- the publication of a campaign booklet detailing İlhan'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 İlhan'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 İlhan. 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 İlhan this is also possible. I am a poet and translator of Turkish poetry and have been writing with İlhan 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 İlhan to us in your own form, style and length.

We feel that it is interesting for İlhan to collaborate with leading European poets in order to get a taste of their form and style. İlhan 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 İlhan's poems and facilitate their sending between parties. The poetry is being translated by Erkut Tokman and Caroline Stockford. İlhan 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 İlhan. 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 İlhan in the spring of this year.

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

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

'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.'

İlhan'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 İlhan'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 İlhan 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

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