

**NEVERTHELESS**

**SHE**

**PERSISTED**

PEN CANADA ANNUAL REPORT  
2018/2019

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## INTRODUCTION

“The place for literature,” writes Arundhati Roy, “is built by writers and readers. It’s a fragile place in some ways, but an indestructible one. When it is broken, we rebuild it. Because we need shelter... Shelter of all kinds.”

In the last four years, under the leadership of Jennifer Clement, its first female president, PEN International has focused on the shelter that freedom of expression ought to offer women. A manifesto adopted at the 2017 Congress condemns the “legal, physical, sexual, psychological, verbal and digital” violence levelled at women writers and journalists around the world, and warns that “the act of silencing a person [denies] their existence. It is a kind of death.” The Women’s Manifesto concludes that “Humanity is both wanting and bereft without the full and free expression of women’s creativity and knowledge.”

This report pays tribute to five women who embody the value, and fragility, of that creativity and knowledge. Our title comes from a minor political skirmish in the US senate. In 2017 Elizabeth Warren, a senator from Massachusetts, read parts of a 30-year-old letter which condemned Jeff Sessions, the candidate for US attorney general, for using his office “to chill the free exercise of the vote by black citizens.” Warren was warned that the United States Senate rules forbid imputing to a colleague “any conduct or motive that is unworthy or unbecoming.” Unfazed, she continued. After successfully moving to silence her for the rest of the hearing – more than 30 hours – Majority Leader Mitch McConnell justified himself thus: “Senator Warren was giving a lengthy speech. She had appeared to violate the rule. She was warned. She was given an explanation. *Nevertheless, she persisted.*”

Instantly the phrase became a flashpoint; a rallying cry for resistance to the unctuous – and nearly always entirely male – bureaucracies that misrule so much of the planet. It wasn’t hard to see why. #MeToo and #TimesUp had altered the inner life of the culture. McConnell’s condescension could no longer be passed off as old-fashioned *punctilio*; it was clearly a brazen attempt to shield a candidate for America’s highest legal office from credible allegations of racism.

Lydia Cacho, Martha Kumsa, Anna Politkovskaya, Nasrin Sotoudeh and Liu Xia faced more malevolent censors. They were arrested, assaulted, jailed and, in Politkovskaya’s case, killed, for refusing to yield to men who tried to silence them. *Nevertheless, they persisted.*

# PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

RICHARD STURSBURG

It has been a year of transition for PEN Canada as Brendan de Caires, our former head of programs and communications, took up the challenge of being our new executive director. He brings to the position a passion for justice, a deep knowledge of world literature, and a profound grasp of the increasingly perilous state of freedom of expression in the world today.

During the last year, PEN has continued to push ahead with its three priorities: celebrating literature, defending freedom of expression, and aiding writers in peril. This past year we did so with a particular emphasis on women.

The highlight of our celebration of literature was our gala dinner, honouring Margaret Atwood and Graeme Gibson, two of PEN Canada's earliest presidents and tireless champions of freedom of expression. The dinner was our most successful to date, featuring a brilliant and very funny conversation with Rick Mercer (available at our website), and the auctioning of a book club evening with Margaret Atwood, a copy of *The Handmaid's Tale* annotated by her and a handsomely bound script of the first episode of the TV series, signed by all the actors.

The One Humanity Award was given to Nasrin Sotoudeh, a great human rights lawyer, imprisoned again by the Iranian government. It is the second time PEN Canada has given her this award. It was presented by Margaret Atwood and accepted by Nazanin Afshin-Jam Mackay, herself a noted champion of human rights, on behalf of her friend and mentor, Nasrin.

Finally, PEN continued its work with writers in peril by assisting their escape from countries that seek to jail or murder them. By its very nature, the work often remains secret to ensure that the escaping writers cannot be found, and to limit reprisals against their families.

As intolerance and repression continue to grow across the world, the work of PEN Canada and its fellow members of PEN International becomes ever more important. The struggle against darkness and tyranny never ends.

**PEN CANADA  
ENVISIONS  
A WORLD WHERE  
WRITERS ARE FREE  
TO WRITE,  
READERS ARE FREE  
TO READ, AND  
FREEDOM  
OF EXPRESSION  
PREVAILS**

**ARTICLE**

**9**

# THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

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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.

# EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

BRENDAN de CAIRES

**“One of the things I remember,” says Graeme Gibson when he recalls co-founding our PEN centre in 1983, “was that for the first time we were working for an organization that was not going to benefit us.... PEN is intriguing for many reasons – not the least of which is that you are there to do stuff for someone else.”**

I joined PEN Canada in January 2009, at a desperate moment for three of our Honorary Members. Normando Hernández González, a Cuban journalist, was six years into a 25-year prison sentence; Parwez Kambaksh, an Afghan student, awaited execution for blasphemy; Zarganar, a Burmese poet and comedian, faced a 48-year prison sentence on trumped-up national security charges.

Each was, eventually, freed because hundreds of our members did “stuff for someone else.” William Wordsworth once wrote that our “nameless unremembered acts of kindness and love” profoundly shape our lives. For PEN members these acts can be letters to an imprisoned author, vigils, protests, petitions – or any of the many gestures we use to insist that peaceful dissent is not a crime.



This year we continued to work with PEN America on freedom of expression in Myanmar; with ICORN, Simon Fraser University, and Kwantlen Polytechnic University to create Canada's first City of Refuge in Surrey, B.C. and with The Shoe Project to help newcomers recount their journeys to Canada. We helped writers in foreign countries escape from imminent danger, launched a pilot project to draft basis-of-claim statements for refugees, maintained residencies, promoted emerging authors, and acknowledged the work of lawyers and journalists who defend freedom of expression.

In this report we honour five women who have defended freedom of expression at great cost. During its 36 years, PEN Canada's distinguished record of supporting such women is largely due to our ten women presidents. Sadly, five of them – June Callwood, Alison Gordon, Ann Ireland, Constance Rooke and Ellen Seligman – have now passed away. This report is dedicated to their memory.

While gathering material for an archive that PEN will publish for its 2021 centenary, I had to sift through correspondence for campaigns in Bangladesh, Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, Nigeria and Mexico, and support letters for a rogues' gallery of local writers and artists. It was a useful reminder that, from its inception, this centre has defended free speech both at home and abroad with equal vigour. In a year in which we pay tribute to co-founders Margaret Atwood and Graeme Gibson, it is worth remembering this, and the moral value of standing with those who speak and write their truth despite extraordinary pressure to do otherwise.

PASSED WITH UNANIMITY AT  
THE ASSEMBLY OF DELEGATES OF PEN INTERNATIONAL  
83RD WORLD CONGRESS IN LVIV, UKRAINE  
SEPTEMBER 21, 2017

**THE PEN  
INTERNATIONAL**

**WOMEN**

**MANIFESTO**

The first and founding principle of the PEN Charter asserts that “literature knows no frontiers.” These frontiers were traditionally thought of as borders between countries and peoples. For many women in the world – and for almost all women until relatively recently – the first, the last, and perhaps the most powerful frontier was the door of the house she lived in: her parents’ or her husband’s home.

For women to have free speech, the right to read, the right to write, they need to have the right to roam physically, socially, and intellectually. There are few social systems that do not regard with hostility a woman who walks by herself.

PEN believes that violence against women, in all its many forms, both within the walls of a home and in the public sphere, creates dangerous forms of censorship. Across the globe, culture, religion and tradition are repeatedly valued above human rights and are used as arguments to encourage or defend harm against women and girls.

PEN believes that the act of silencing a person is to deny their existence. It is a kind of death. Humanity is both wanting and bereft without the full and free expression of women’s creativity and knowledge.

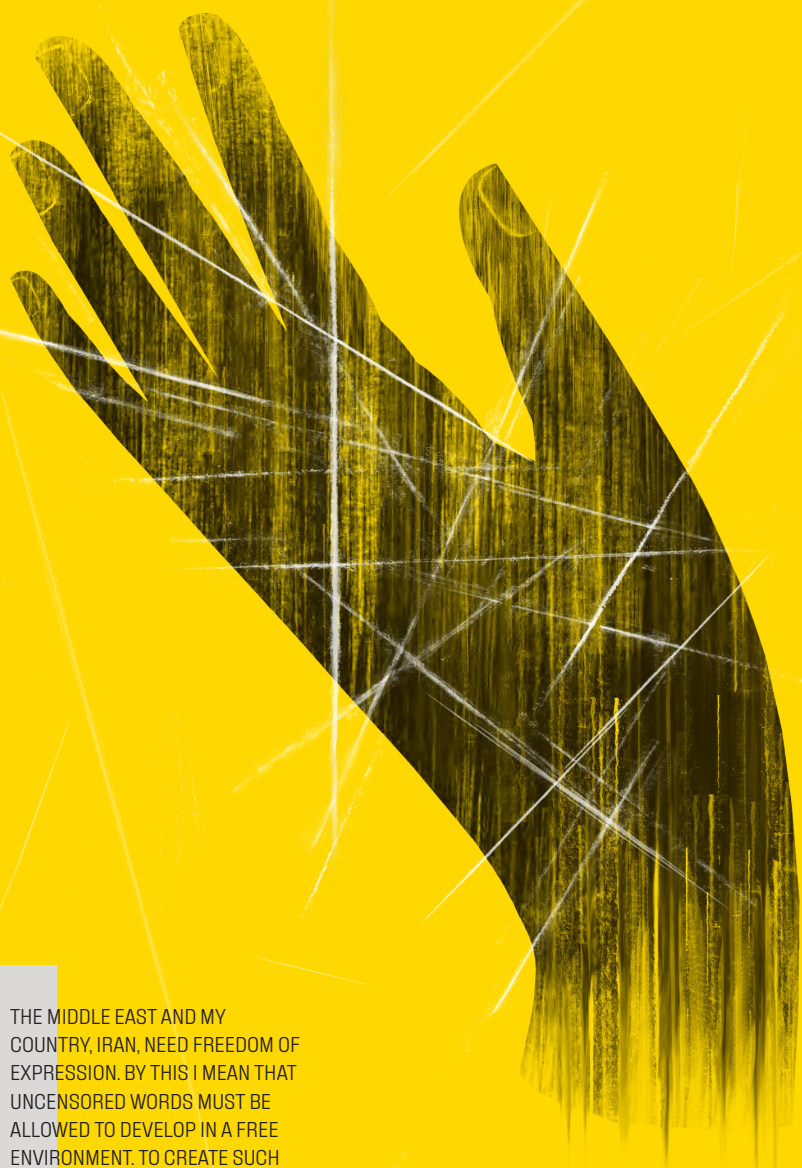
**WOMEN'S**

**ESTO**

**NASRIN**  
**SOTOUDEH**  
**IRAN**

~~38~~  
~~YEARS~~  
~~144~~  
~~LASHES~~

**SENTENCED TO A 38 YEAR PRISON TERM AND 144 LASHES  
FOR DEFENDING WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS**



THE MIDDLE EAST AND MY  
COUNTRY, IRAN, NEED FREEDOM OF  
EXPRESSION. BY THIS I MEAN THAT  
UNCENSORED WORDS MUST BE  
ALLOWED TO DEVELOP IN A FREE  
ENVIRONMENT. TO CREATE SUCH  
CONDITIONS, ONE NEEDS TO LEARN  
AND RECEIVE SUPPORT FROM  
OTHER SOCIETIES.

**During the last decade, while many other human rights lawyers fled Iran, Nasrin Sotoudeh stood her ground. She defended children who faced the death penalty and women who resisted discriminatory laws. For this, the regime has sentenced her, on fabricated charges, to 38 years in prison with 144 lashes.**

I had the pleasure of working with Nasrin when I headed an organization called Stop Child Executions. She knew the laws inside and out and could recite them without hesitation. She was caring and diligent, took calls at any hour, and was always willing to take action. Fearless and determined, she resists injustice no matter what risks and sacrifices this entails. So instead of surrendering her principles, she has chosen to forgo sleeping in a warm cozy bed, embraced by her husband and two beloved children, for a prison cell with cold stone floors, and rats and cockroaches for companions.

In Persian, Nasrin means “wild rose” and I believe she embodies her name. Softspoken and of delicate stature, she nevertheless remains a thorn in the side of the Islamic Republic. Even though resistance to its edicts has landed her in prison before, she continues to say “I will not be silenced.” Freedom-loving Iranians who admire her perseverance often refer to her as a “Persian lioness” or even “Iran’s Mandela.” Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi remembers her as the lawyer human rights defenders sought “when the government harassed us or put one of us, or one of our family members, in jail.”

Shaparak Shajarizadeh, a former client, was a pioneer in the White Wednesday movement. She was jailed for removing her headscarf and waving it on a stick to protest Iran’s compulsory hijab laws. Shajarizadeh later recalled her mistreatment in prison – being beaten and placed in solitary confinement – as the most frightening

“I have now been in prison for almost a year. Whenever my husband brings me officially approved published books, they are confiscated and kept for months before being released. This is the reality of regions of the world which lack freedom and justice.”

Nasrin Sotoudeh

experience of her life. “But then Nasrin showed up. She told me that my struggle is her struggle – the struggle of all Iranian women – that I am not alone, and that she would not relent until I am free.” Nasrin even showed her solidarity by appearing in court without a headscarf – a gesture which prompted her arrest and led to charges of “encouraging immorality and prostitution.”

The regime fears her. They pressure clients not to retain her as their lawyer and have even offered her freedom if she will abandon legal work for 20 years. It hasn’t worked. In fact Nasrin has even refused to appeal her current sentence because a new policy forces defendants who face national security charges to use state-appointed lawyers. She won’t recognize the regime’s kangaroo courts because this would mean “a final farewell to the profession of independent lawyers in Iran.”

When groups like PEN recognize people like Nasrin it sends a clear message that the world is watching. It elevates their status and makes it harder for the authorities to brutalize and oppress them. It keeps people like Nasrin alive inside, nurturing their hopes, boosting their spirits and reminding them that they are not forgotten.

*Nazanin Afshin-Jam Mackay, an Iranian-Canadian human rights activist, received PEN Canada’s 2019 One Humanity Award on behalf of Nasrin Sotoudeh at our April 11 gala.*

# HONORARY MEMBERS



# RE LEASED



## **TURKEY**

On February 24, 2019 after serving a 20-month prison sentence for a painting which the Turkish government described as “terrorist propaganda,” the Kurdish journalist, artist, and activist Zehra Doğan was released from a closed women’s prison in “southeastern” Turkey. Doğan was sentenced to two years and ten months in prison on March 24, 2017 after she painted the war-torn city of Nusaybin with Turkish flags draped over ruined buildings. She was charged with having connections to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which has been fighting an insurgency against the Turkish government.

## **AZERBAIJAN**

Rashad Ramazanov, an Azerbaijani blogger and writer who was arrested on May 9, 2013 and sentenced to nine years in prison on trumped-up charges of illegal possession and sale of drugs, was released on March 16, 2019 when President Ilham Aliyev pardoned or commuted the sentences of 431 prisoners to mark the Novruz holiday. Rashad Ramazanov is the author of seven books and many articles. His academic articles have been published by the National Sciences Academy of Azerbaijan and other institutes. He has also been an active and outspoken political commentator on social media.

## **UZBEKISTAN**

The journalist and activist Dilmurod Saidov was released on February 3, 2018, after nearly nine years of wrongful imprisonment. Saidov – aka Sayyid – was sentenced to twelve-and-a-half years in prison on February 22, 2009 on charges of extortion and forgery. Before and during his trial, several witnesses recanted testimony and admitted that they had made false allegations under duress. Saidov was nevertheless convicted and sentenced on July 30, 2009 and his appeal was denied later that year. In May 2019, Amnesty International reported that the Uzbek government continued to harass and spy on peaceful activists – months after the international human rights community had complained about these activities and received assurances that they would cease. Saidov was one of two activists who reportedly face “constant surveillance ...harassment, intimidation and threats, including thinly veiled death threats.”

# **ANNA** **POLITKOVSKAYA** **RUSSIA**

**DIED**  
**OCTOBER 7, 2006**  
**AGED 48**  
**MOSCOW**

ON OCTOBER 7, 2006. ANNA POLITKOVSKAYA WAS GUNNED DOWN IN AN APARTMENT BLOCK IN CENTRAL MOSCOW. SHE WAS ONE OF RUSSIA'S MOST FAMOUS JOURNALISTS, BEST KNOWN FOR HER FEARLESS REPORTING ON THE BRUTAL MILITARY CONFLICT IN CHECHNYA AND FOR EXPOSING WIDESPREAD LOCAL CORRUPTION.



SELF-CENSORSHIP IS NOW THE BUSINESS OF TRYING TO GUESS WHAT YOU NEED TO SAY AND WHAT YOU SHOULD NOT MENTION IN ORDER TO STAY AT THE TOP. THE PURPOSE OF SELF-CENSORSHIP IS TO KEEP YOUR HANDS ON A LARGE, VERY LARGE, SALARY. THE CHOICE IS NOT BETWEEN HAVING A JOB OR BEING UNEMPLOYED, BUT BETWEEN EARNING A FORTUNE OR A PITTANCE.

- A RUSSIAN DIARY

**If only Anna Politkovskaya were here. That thought comes unbidden whenever the news is dominated by Russian president Vladimir Putin’s violent campaign to suppress the nationalist movement in Ukraine, the homeland of her parents.**

She would surely be on the ground, discovering hidden details and interviewing victims, no matter the personal risk, as she did so formidably in Chechnya when she reported on the brutal human rights abuses from the frontlines of that heartbreaking and ancient struggle for independence.

Born in New York in 1958, the daughter of Soviet diplomats at the United Nations, Politkovskaya grew up in Moscow, where she made her life and her journalism career. Although she carried an American passport, the relative safety of exile did not mesh with her need to expose corruption, and to speak truth to power in post-Soviet Russia under Putin.

She was about to publish explosive and incriminating new details about the Russian leader when she was murdered in the elevator in her Moscow apartment building by hired killers on October 7, 2006, the president’s birthday. She was 48 and at the peak of her career as a writer and an investigative reporter.

“We are hurtling back into a Soviet abyss, into an information vacuum that spells death from our own ignorance,” she had written prophetically in *The Guardian* two years earlier. “All we have left is the internet, where information is still freely available. For the rest, if you want to go on working as a journalist, it’s total servility to Putin. Otherwise, it can be death, the bullet, poison, or trial – whatever our special services, Putin’s guard dogs, see fit.”

“I am absolutely sure that risk is [a] usual part of my job and I cannot stop because I think it’s my duty. I think the duty of doctors is to give health to their patients, the duty of the singer to sing. The duty of [the] journalist [is] to write what this journalist sees. It’s only one duty.”

Anna Politkovskaya

In the article, she described how in early September 2004 she had been given tea laced with poison aboard a plane en route to cover the infamous seizure of a school in Beslan, in the north. After a three-day standoff, Russian security forces charged the building with tanks and incendiary rockets, causing heavy loss of life including the deaths of nearly 200 children.

She sometimes decried what she derisively called the “joys” of the role she had chosen: the arrests, a mock execution, the frequent death threats and the scurrilous depictions of her as “the madwoman of Moscow” in the State-controlled media. And yet she was undeterred. It behooves all of us to model her refusal to take the easy and safe path, celebrate her legacy and stand in her place as witnesses to outrage and repression.

*Sandra Martin is a former President of PEN Canada*

# WRITERS IN PERIL COMMITTEE REPORT

On March 11, 2019 the Iranian human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh was sentenced to 148 lashes and 38 years in prison. Ms. Sotoudeh, an honorary member of our centre, has defended children facing death sentences, and women who flout mandatory hijab laws. The charges against her included “encouraging (moral) corruption and prostitution” (12 years); “assembly and collusion to act against national security” (seven-and-a-half years); “publishing false information to disturb public minds” (three years, 74 lashes); “disrupting public order” (two years); “propaganda against the state” (one-and-a-half years); and “appearing without a headscarf in public” (74 lashes). The sentences were confirmed in late April.

A few days later the Azerbaijani blogger Rashad Ramazanov, another honorary member, was freed after serving six years in prison for fabricated drug charges. He was released with 430 other prisoners, including fellow bloggers and journalists. Two months earlier, Rashad and several other prisoners of conscience held a hunger strike to prevent the authorities from extending the imprisonment of activist Mehman Huseynov as he neared the end of a two-year prison sentence – also on trumped-up charges. Their solidarity worked: charges against Huseynov were dropped and he, too, was released a few weeks later.

On May 3, World Press Freedom Day, the director-general of UNESCO, Audrey Azoulay warned of a “growing discourse of mistrust and delegitimization of the press and of journalism” and she noted that UNESCO’s observatory had recorded 99 journalists killed in the previous year – out of a total of 1,307 killed between 1994 and 2018.

This is the backdrop to PEN’s recent advocacy. Our centre has tried to resist these trends by focusing on the marginalization and criminalization of the press in several countries. Since 2015 we have authored or contributed to reports on Brazil, Honduras, Guatemala, India and Mexico. We have also established a prize for investigative journalism in Honduras and run a security training workshop in Guatemala. Within Canada we have supported the asylum claims and resettlement of dozens of foreign writers and journalists and, during the last year, launched a project to help exiled writers prepare basis-of-claim statements for their refugee hearings. We began our pilot project just as the Ontario government announced deep cuts to Legal Aid – almost completely removing provincial legal assistance to refugees. In the year ahead we will seek funding to place all of these projects on a more secure footing.

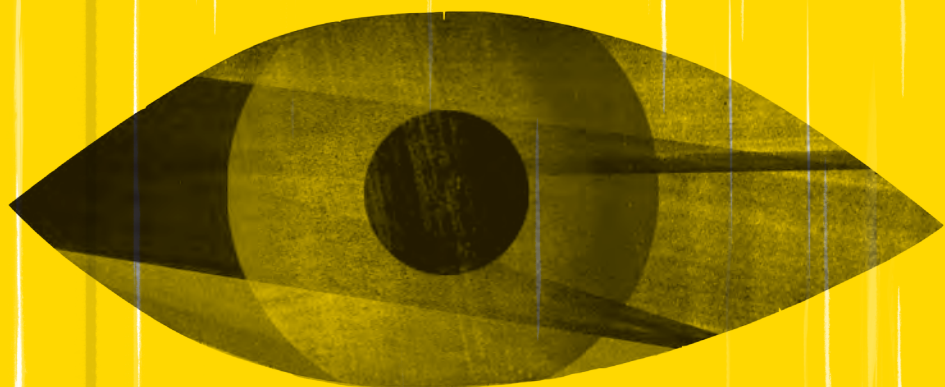
# LIU XIA

**CHINA**

**SIX YEARS OF  
HOUSE ARREST AND  
SURVEILLANCE**

THE ARTIST AND POET LIU XIA, HAS BEEN UNDER POLICE SURVEILLANCE SINCE 2010, THE YEAR THAT HER HUSBAND, LIU XIABO, WAS AWARDED THE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE.





"THE CONSTITUTION SAYS CITIZENS  
HAVE THE RIGHT TO FREE SPEECH.  
BUT IN 20 YEARS IN CHINA, [LIU]  
XIAOBO HAS NEVER ENJOYED THAT  
FREEDOM. THE WORDS HE WROTE  
WERE ONLY PUBLISHED OUTSIDE."

- INTERVIEW WITH *THE GUARDIAN*,  
FEBRUARY 2010

## **Her name is fused forever with that of her colleague, lover, and husband: Nobel Laureate Liu Xiaobo.**

They were founding members of the Independent Chinese PEN Centre, one of PEN's most active centres since 2001. He was its first president. Liu Xiaobo was first arrested in 1989 for his leadership in Tiananmen Square. Over the next decade he was imprisoned three times; during his third incarceration, Liu Xia was allowed to visit him once a month. She travelled 36 times between Beijing and the labour camp in Dalian, a round trip of more than a thousand miles.

In December 2009, Liu Xiaobo was arrested for his role in creating Charter 08 and he was sentenced to 11 years in Jinzhou Prison for “inciting subversion of state power.” Again, Liu Xia was permitted to see him once a month, their visits strictly monitored. In October, 2010, he received the Nobel Peace Prize and immediately Liu Xia was placed under unofficial house arrest – without any charges or legal due process. For almost seven years she endured constant physical and electronic surveillance, and was denied visitors. She suffered from profound depression and illness. In 2013 her brother was convicted on property fraud charges, a case believed to be retribution against the family.

On July 13, 2017, Liu Xiaobo died, heavily guarded, on medical parole, from recently diagnosed liver cancer. In an official ceremony, his ashes were scattered at sea; he was thus denied a public funeral and commemoration at a burial site in China.

For his December 2010 Nobel acceptance speech— the prize was placed on a pale-blue-tapestried empty chair in Oslo—Liu Xiaobo wrote: “I look forward to the day when our country will be a land of free expression ... a country where all political views will be spread out under the sun for citizens to choose among... I hope I will be the last victim in China's long record of treating words as crimes.”

Since his death, the human rights abuses in China have increased; in XinJiang, as many as one million Turkic Muslims are detained without charge in political re-education camps; Tibetans are denied religious freedom, freedom of speech, movement, and assembly; civil liberties in Hong Kong are under increased threat; and the harassment, surveillance, and detention of Chinese writers, journalists, and activists continue. Response and criticism from the international community have subsided.

In July 2018, following an intense, year-long campaign by governments and human rights groups, including PEN Canada and many other PEN centres, Liu Xia was granted permission to travel to Germany, “for medical reasons”; she now lives there. Here is a poem she wrote in 2011:

# FRAGMENT

## ***Fragment No. 8***

I often look at the light  
from death  
and feel warm, then loss  
when I have to leave the page.  
I want to be in light.  
My strength, worked for years,  
has become dust. A tree  
can be destroyed  
by lightning,  
which ends the thinking.  
For me the future is  
a closed window  
where night has no end  
and nightmares can't be lifted.  
I want to be in light.



*Marian Botsford Fraser is a former president of PEN Canada and a former Chair of PEN International's Writers in Prison Committee*

# HONORARY MEMBERS

CHINA AND  
AUTONOMOUS REGIONS

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ERITREA

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MEXICO

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RUSSIA

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SAUDI ARABIA

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PEN CANADA WORKS ON BEHALF OF HONORARY MEMBERS AROUND THE WORLD.  
WE WELCOME YOUR HELP, AS AN ADVOCATE OR SUPPORTER, FOR THE WRITERS  
HIGHLIGHTED IN THIS REPORT AS WELL AS THOSE ON THIS LIST.

### **CHINA AND AUTONOMOUS REGIONS**

The 2010 Nobel Peace Laureate, **Liu Xiaobo**, was a former president and board member of the Independent Chinese PEN Centre. In June 2009 Liu was arrested for signing Charter 08, a declaration calling for political reforms and human rights. He was kept under residential surveillance, a form of pretrial detention, at an undisclosed location in Beijing, until he was formally charged with “defaming the government,” “subversion of the state,” and “overthrowing socialism.” Liu received an 11-year prison sentence on December 25, 2009. After spending the last eight years of his life in Jinzhou prison in northeast China, with little access to friends, family or colleagues, Liu died in July 2017. His wife – the poet and photographer Liu Xia – was only allowed to visit him once a month under the supervision of prison guards. They were forced to change the subject if they discussed anything that was deemed offensive to the state. Despite these privations, Liu’s communications with the outside world reiterated messages of peace, hope, and love. His prison poetry spoke of his love for Liu Xia and his hope for a China free from discrimination and human rights abuses. After learning of his death, PEN International President Jennifer Clement recalled the empty chair – PEN’s symbol for imprisoned writers – which represented Liu at the 2010 Nobel ceremony. She wrote: “On that day the world honoured and celebrated Liu Xiaobo’s courage as it does again today. Liu once said, ‘I hope I will be the last victim in China’s long record of treating words as crimes.’ We must continue to uphold his dream.”

# HONORARY MEMBERS

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## ERITREA

In September 2001, 13 newspaper journalists were arrested after President Issaias Afeworki closed Eritrea's independent newspapers, leaving only the state-run Hadas Eritrea. PEN Canada adopted the following as Honorary Members: **Yusuf Mohamed Ali** (editor-in-chief of *Tsigenay*), **Mattewos Habteab** (editor-in-chief of *Meqaleh*), **Dawit Habtemichael** (reporter for *Meqaleh*), **Medhanie Haile** (editor-in-chief of *Keste Debona*), **Emanuel Asrat** (editor of *Zemen*), **Temesken Ghebreyesus** (reporter for *Keste Debona*), **Dawit Isaac** (writer and co-owner of *Setit*), **Fesshaye Yohannes** "Joshua" (playwright, poet and publisher of *Setit*) and **Said Abdelkader** (writer, editor of *Admas* and owner of the press that printed most of the independent newspapers). In September 2009, Reporters Without Borders reported that many of the imprisoned journalists were being held in metal containers or underground cells in Adi Abeito Military Prison, in Eiraeiro Prison and in the Dahlak archipelago.

In 2007, reports indicated that four of the journalists had died in custody between 2005 and early 2007: Abdelkader, Haile, Ali and Yohannes. Their deaths were attributed to harsh conditions and lack of medical attention. Some sources indicate that Yohannes had been tortured prior to his death, including having his fingernails ripped out. In May 2007, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACPHR) of the African Union ruled that the detention of the journalists was arbitrary and unlawful and called on the Eritrean government to release and compensate the detainees.

Isaac, who spent a number of years in Sweden during the Eritrean war of independence and the border dispute between Eritrea and Ethiopia, holds Swedish citizenship.

In a TV interview in 2009 President Afeworki said he did not know what crime Isaac had committed and added that Eritrean authorities would release him or put him on trial. In an interview published on the website of the Swedish daily newspaper Aftonbladet on August 1, 2010, a senior adviser to President Afeworki said that Isaac was being held for his involvement in a "conspiracy" by a group of Eritreans "to facilitate" an invasion of the country by Ethiopia during the border war between the two countries. He declined to provide assurances that Isaac was still alive. **Seyoum Tsehaye**, a TV and radio journalist who wrote a weekly column for the newspaper *Setit*, has been held without charge or trial since September 2001. He is one of ten Eritrean journalists adopted by PEN Canada. In 2007 Reporters Without Borders named him their "journalist of the year."



# HONORARY MEMBERS

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## MEXICO

**José Armando Rodríguez Carreón** was a veteran crime reporter for *El Diario*, a daily newspaper based in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua state. He was shot at least eight times by an unidentified person on the morning of November 13, 2008, as he was about to drive his daughter to school. José had covered drug-related violence and organized crime in Ciudad Juárez and, after receiving death threats, had briefly left Mexico to live in El Paso, Texas. On his return, he refused to stop covering crime stories despite receiving further death threats. Shortly before his death, Rodríguez told the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ): “The risks here are high and rising, and journalists are easy targets. But I can’t live in my house like a prisoner. I refuse to live in fear.” In the weeks after his murder, several other *El Diario* journalists received death threats, as did other media in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua. Two prosecutors in charge of investigating the case have reportedly been assassinated. On May 26, 2011, the Inter American Press Association sent a letter to President Calderón, signed by hundreds of newspaper readers throughout the Americas, calling on him to intervene in order to ensure that the stalled investigation into José’s murder moves forward and those responsible are brought to justice. There has been no progress on the case since then.

## RUSSIA

In May 2014 the Ukrainian film director **Oleg Sentsov** was detained in Crimea on charges of terrorism. On August 25, 2015 he was sentenced to 20 years in a Russian prison. The Russian Supreme Court rejected appeals of his sentence in November 2015 and June 2016, and a request for his extradition to Ukraine was denied in October 2016 on the grounds that he had become a Russian citizen upon the annexation of Crimea. Sentsov is currently serving his sentence in Polar Bear Penal Colony No. 8 in Labytnangi, in the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug. He declared an indefinite hunger strike on May 14, 2018 after declaring that “the one and only condition for its termination is the release of all Ukrainian political prisoners that are currently present on the territory of the Russian Federation.” On October 6, after 145 days, he was forced to end the strike under the threat of being force fed. PEN organized a Global Day of Action for Sentsov on February 26, 2018 and he is the winner of the 2017 PEN/Barbey Freedom to Write Award.



## SAUDI ARABIA

Blogger **Raif Badawi** was arrested on June 17, 2012 in Jeddah after organizing a conference to mark a “day of liberalism.” The event was banned and his online forum – created to foster political and social debate in Saudi Arabia – was closed by a court order. On May 7, 2014, Jeddah’s Criminal Court sentenced Badawi to 10 years in prison, 1,000 lashes and a fine of 1 million Saudi riyals (CAD \$291,700) on charges of “founding a liberal website,” “adopting liberal thought,” and “insulting Islam.” When Badawi appeared in court to collect a written account of the verdict on May 28, 2014, he discovered the insertion of two additional penalties: a 10-year travel ban and 10-year ban from participating in visual, electronic, and written media following his release. Badawi received 50 lashes in January 2015 but has not been subjected to further flogging since. Badawi was awarded PEN Canada’s One Humanity prize in 2014.

Saudi Arabian-born Palestinian poet, artist, and curator, **Ashraf Fayadh**, was arrested in August 2013, and accused of “misguided and misleading thoughts” after the Saudi Arabian Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice received a complaint about him. According to reports, the complaint contended that Fayadh had made obscene comments about God, the Prophet Muhammad, and the Saudi Arabian state. Released on bail, he was rearrested on January 1, 2014 on charges including “insulting the divine self” and having long hair. He has been held in a prison in the city of Abha ever since. According to court documents seen by PEN International, during his trial held over six hearings between February and May 2014, Fayadh stood accused of numerous blasphemy-related charges, including “insulting the divine self and the Prophet Mohammed,” “spreading atheism,” “refuting the Qur’an,” and “insulting the King and the Kingdom,” among other charges. Evidence compiled against him included at least ten pages from his collection of poetry *Instructions Within*, published by the Beirut-based Dar al-Farabi in 2008 and later banned from distribution in Saudi Arabia. On November 17, 2015, the General Court of Abha sentenced Fayadh to death for the crime of being an infidel (*kufr*) following a retrial. The court argued that Fayadh’s repentance for the crime of apostasy was a matter of the heart and should have no bearing determining whether or not the crime had been committed. Fayadh appealed the sentence. In February 2016, a Saudi Arabian court replaced the death sentence with an eight-year prison term and 800 lashes. Fayadh has further appealed against this conviction. Fayadh was chosen for PEN Canada’s One Humanity Award in 2017.

**LYDIA**  
**CACHO**  
**MEXICO**

**JAILED AND**  
**TORTURED**

INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST, AUTHOR, POET AND  
HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST WHO REFUSES TO BE SILENCED.



"IN MEXICO YOU NEED A GOVERNMENT PERMIT IN ORDER TO GET NEWSPRINT ... [WHICH IS] WHY THE OWNERS OF ALL OF THE MEDIA ... [HAVE] THIS COMPLICIT AND QUITE OPAQUE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE GOVERNMENT. WE FOUND THAT WE HAD TO QUESTION THE OWNERS OF THE NEWSPAPERS WE WERE WRITING IN. IT HAPPENED TO ME, I'VE BEEN FIRED FROM PROBABLY 12 [NEWSPAPERS] ... I DON'T KNOW IF I SHOULD GET A MEDAL FOR THAT."

- HAY FESTIVAL 2017


## **Investigative journalist, author, poet and human rights activist Lydia Cacho cannot be silenced.**

Her 2005 book, *Los Demonios del Eden (Demons of Eden)*, revealed a pedophile ring in Mexico – and angered powerful men in business and government. Arrested and held by corrupt officials from Puebla on trumped-up charges at the behest of two of those men, Cacho was raped, tortured, and repeatedly threatened with death before she was released.

But Cacho, who founded a high-security shelter for women and children who have been abused and trafficked, refused to be intimidated. In the years since, she has continued to risk her life by researching and publishing scorching exposés of the trafficking of women and children.

“I am 55 years old, and I have been a journalist for 30 years,” Cacho said recently. “I have received 27 death threats and [survived] many attempts. I have been tortured and put in jail, and this has only spurred me to understand that I have to defend my own human rights and the rights of every other girl.”

Cacho took the government to court over her abuse in Puebla. When Mexico’s judicial system failed her, she turned to the United Nations. Last year, the UN Human Rights Committee ruled Mexico had violated Cacho’s human rights. Afterwards, reporters asked Cacho why she persevered in her quest for justice.



IN JANUARY OF THIS YEAR, CACHO RECEIVED A PUBLIC APOLOGY FROM THE MEXICAN GOVERNMENT FOR THE HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AGAINST HER IN 2005. IN APRIL, A FEDERAL JUDGE ISSUED ARREST WARRANTS FOR THE FORMER GOVERNOR OF PUEBLA AND A BUSINESSMAN FOR THEIR ROLES IN HER ARREST AND TORTURE.

“The reasons I continued are many, but the most important of all has nothing to do with heroism or with courage or with the desire to continue,” she said. “It has a lot to do with the suffering of others, it has to do with the death of many of my colleagues who, over the years, have been disappearing for doing their job properly.”

Mexico has long been one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists. Cacho continues to face death threats and harassment even as international awards for her courageous journalism pile up: the PEN/Printer Prize, the World Press Freedom Hero Award, the Olof Palme Prize, France’s Legion of Honour – and many more. She is also a recipient of PEN Canada’s One Humanity prize.

In January of this year, Cacho received a public apology from the Mexican government for the human rights violations against her in 2005. And in April, a federal judge issued arrest warrants for the former governor of Puebla and a businessman for their roles in her arrest and torture.

“Through my investigative reporting I willingly put my safety at risk to fight against discrimination, racism, and violence against women and girls, by writing it,” Cacho said recently. “I will never stop questioning. I will never stop reporting. I am a journalist.”

*Jennifer Lanthier is a board member of PEN Canada*

LITERARY  
EVENTS  
AND  
AWARDS  
2018/2019

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**Blue Metropolis Literary Festival, Montreal (April 2018)**

PEN participated in three events including a discussion about how different cultures cohabit a shared place, how the Indigenous languages Stó:lo and Quécha represent space and time; and Jerusalem as a symbolic place, a city one imagines, remembers, dreams, and writes about.

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**RBC/PEN Canada New Voices**

Jaclyn Desforges, winner of the 2019 RBC/PEN Canada New Voices prize read at The Canadian Taiwan Cultural Festival in the Harbourfront Centre, at Untethered Magazine's launch party at The Gaslight in Toronto, for Six Minute Memoir: Queer Love Stories and Lit Live at The Staircase Theatre, Hamilton and at Glad Day Bookshop's Emerging Writers Reading Series.

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**The Poetess**

PEN co-sponsored The Poetess at the Human Rights Watch Film Festival. The documentary follows the Saudi poet Hissa Hilal – the first woman to reach the finals of the Arab world's biggest televised poetry competition: "Million's Poet" – as she seizes an opportunity in front of 75 million live television viewers to critique patriarchal society and religious extremism.

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**Action for Oleg Sentsov: literary reading outside Russian consulate in Toronto (August 2018)**

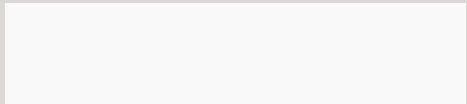
Members of PEN Canada and the Ukrainian Political Prisoner Project gathered at the Russian consulate in Toronto to call for the release of filmmaker Oleg Sentsov, on the 100th day of a hunger strike in a Russian prison. David Bezmozgis read short stories by Sentsov and members of the Ukrainian Political Prisoner Project delivered 200 postcards addressed to Sentsov.

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**Our Shoes, Our Streets**

PEN Canada and The Shoe Project presented readings from newcomers to Canada at "Our Shoes, Our Streets." The readings were held at the Studio Theatre in North York on Sunday, September 23. There were ten performers from Turkey, China, Colombia, Nigeria, Nepal, Syria and more. The two performances were held five-months after a van attack in the neighbourhood killed 10 people, most of them women.

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### **Making Sense of the Khashoggi Killing**

The murder of Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi has jeopardized America's support for the Saudi monarchy and highlighted the West's willingness to tolerate or ignore repressive behaviour in its allies. Historian, biographer, journalist and editor Sam Tanenhaus and award-winning CBC journalist Susan Ormiston discussed the consequences of the murder and consider how they relate to the threats and violence faced by thousands of working journalists in other parts of the world. Moderated by Brendan de Caires. St Michael's college, November 29.

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### **The Universal Declaration of Human Rights at 70: What's at Stake for the Next 70 years?**

Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland moderated a panel in Ottawa marking the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. She was joined by Rachel Pulfer (Executive Director, Journalists for Human Rights), Brendan de Caires (Executive Director, PEN Canada), Raheel Raza (President, Council for Muslims Facing Tomorrow), and Rachel Vincent (Director of Advocacy and Media, Nobel Women's Initiative). The discussion focused on freedom of expression and the protection of journalists. Lester B. Pearson Building, Ottawa. December 12, 2018.

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### **Patron Salon: Where The Truth Lies: *Untangling Fact and Fiction in Memoirs And Novels***

How do novelists and memoirists negotiate the grey area between fact and fiction? What are the ethical challenges of writing creative nonfiction and autobiographical fictions in an age of "fake news"? Catherine Porter, Toronto bureau chief of the *New York Times* discusses the entanglement of public writing and personal experience with award-winning novelist Randy Boyagoda. February 2019.

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# AWARDS

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### **One Humanity Award**

Introduced in 2006, the One Humanity Award is presented to a writer whose work “transcends national divides and inspires connections across cultures.”

Nasrin Sotoudeh, the Iranian human rights lawyer renowned for her defense of women’s and children’s rights, was awarded the 2018 prize at PEN Canada’s gala on April 11, 2019. In March 2019 Sotoudeh was sentenced to 148 lashes and more than 38 years imprisonment for national security offences. The award was presented by Margaret Atwood to Iranian-Canadian human rights activist Nazanin Afshin-Jam MacKay.

#### ***Previous winners***

- 2018 Nasrin Sotoudeh
  - 2017 Ashraf Fayadh
  - 2016 Azimjon Askarov
  - 2015 Eskinder Nega
  - 2014 Raif Badawi
  - 2013 Nguyen Văn Hai, aka Dieu Cay
  - 2012 Liu Xiaobo
  - 2011 Nasrin Sotoudeh
  - 2010 Sayed Parvez Kambakhsh
  - 2009 Lydia Cacho
  - 2008 Maung Thura, aka Zarganar
  - 2006 Jiang Weiping
- 

### **Ken Filkow Prize**

Named in memory of Kenneth A. Filkow, Q.C., a distinguished Winnipeg lawyer, former chair of the Manitoba Human Rights Commission, and an active member of PEN Canada’s Canadian Issues Committee, the prize celebrates champions of freedom of expression. The 2019 prize, adjudicated by Grace Westcott, Philip Tunley, and Brian MacLeod Rogers, was presented to Tim Bousquet at PEN Canada’s gala on April 11, 2019. Bousquet is a founder, editor, and publisher of the *Halifax Examiner*, an independent online daily established in 2014. The award is funded by Cynthia Wine and Philip Slayton

#### ***Previous winners***

- 2018 Justin Brake
  - 2017 Desmond Cole
  - 2016 Raihan Abir
  - 2015 Franke James
- 

### **RBC/PEN Canada New Voices**

The RBC/PEN Canada New Voices Award is open to unpublished Canadian writers aged 17-30. The winner receives a \$3,000 cash prize and mentorship from a distinguished Canadian writer. The 2019 award was judged by the novelists Omar El Akkad, Esi Edugyan, and Lisa Moore.

#### ***Previous winners***

- 2018 Jaclyn Desforges
  - 2017 Mikko Harvey
  - 2016 Laura Legge
  - 2015 Nadine Sander-Green
  - 2014 Emily Izsak
  - 2013 Claire Battershill
-

QQA

**WITH 2019 FILKOW PRIZE WINNER  
TIM BOUSQUET**

*PEN Canada's Ken Filkow prize recognizes an individual or group that has advanced freedom of expression in Canada. It is named in memory of the distinguished Winnipeg lawyer Kenneth A. Filkow, Q.C. Tim Bousquet is founder, editor and publisher of the Halifax Examiner, an independent online daily newspaper established in 2014.*

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**PEN Canada:** Your article, “A Tale of Enormous Suffering” – about the exoneration of Glen Assoun, after 16 years in jail for a crime he did not commit – reads like a Grisham novel, or a case from the Innocence Project. As these comparisons suggest, many Canadians tend to think that stories like this happen elsewhere. Why does the mainstream press cover stories like this so poorly?

**Tim Bousquet:** For several reasons, I think.

The obvious reason is that there is a lack of resources for newsrooms, and reporters are stretched too thin. When I last worked at a corporate daily newspaper (in 2004), I was required to file two articles a day, plus a weekly “enterprise” piece. That was taxing, to put it mildly, and every day I had to make decisions about which stories I would pay more attention to, and which I would basically phone in. I’m not proud of that; it was simply the only strategy to make it through the day.

Since then, the demands on reporters have only increased. They’re increasingly expected to do audio and video, and to engage with readers on social media. This necessarily means that less time is available for long-term and investigative projects.

Weirdly, because I own a smaller niche publication, I can actually spend more time and money on selected projects than can the big corporate media. My investigation into the Assoun wrongful conviction case took 11 months of my time, and around \$5,000 in costs. (That’s increasing by another \$3- or \$4,000 as we go to court to get a publication ban lifted.) I made that decision based on my personal bet that this was a story that needed to be told; but that kind of bet would never pass the cash-strapped corporate CEO test in place at the legacy media organizations.

Another reason the mainstream press covers wrongful convictions badly is that there is an enormous pro-prosecution bias. Reporters on the court beat have ready access to crown prosecutors and police, and are hesitant to burn those bridges. It’s easier to simply rewrite a crown press release or transcribe the prosecutors’ opening statement than it is to actively engage with the case as an independent observer.

**PC:** Where do you get your news? Which journalists/outlets do you rely on for important but under-reported stories?

**TB:** Oh, I’m on the lefty blog and news circuit. I read all the radical press in the U.S., and here in Canada I subscribe to publications like the *Tyee* and the *National Observer*. Closer to home, I support my colleagues trying to match what the *Halifax Examiner* is doing, like Mary Campbell with her *Cape Breton Spectator*.

**PC:** The Trump presidency has reinvigorated investigative journalism in America, particularly for complex stories like the president’s finances. If you had resources comparable to the *New York Times* or *Washington Post*, what big stories would you investigate?

**TB:** The *New York Times*’ investigation into Trump’s wealth and tax history is incredible. My back-of-the-envelope calculation was that they spent something like \$2 million on the first article alone – for one article! That’s important work that should be applauded.

If I had such resources, I would turn that sort of investigative power towards climate change and the related issues of inequality and human migration. That is, I’d work to make the connections between those issues tangible: how the wealthy are quite literally speeding the destruction of the planet for their own temporary personal profit at the expense of the rest of humanity.

**PC:** In “*Breaking News*” Alan Rusbridger writes: “We are, for the first time in modern history, facing the prospect of how societies would exist without reliable news – at least as it used to be understood ... There is a new democracy of knowledge that has swept over us so suddenly and so overwhelmingly that it is almost impossible to glimpse, let alone comprehend. Much of it is liberating, energising and transformative [and much is] poisonous and dangerous ... In the new horizontal world people are no longer so dependent on the ‘wisdom’ of a few authority figures. The reach and speed of public connectedness is unbeatable by any media organisation on earth. Journalists, business and politicians are left looking out of touch and flat-footed.” How has the shifting media landscape in Canada affected your work?

**TB:** For the present, I think it helps the *Halifax Examiner*. People are trusting us as an alternative, and often a better alternative — more truthful, more willing to break the code of the powerful — to the mainstream press.

I have, however, worries about the general degradation of the notion of “truth.” What scares me most about Trump and his supporters is their utter abandonment of an external world that exists outside their own perspectives. Up is down, black is white, it doesn’t matter so long as it suits their purposes.

This is madness; left unchecked will lead to terrible, unimaginable horrors.

I don’t know what reporters are supposed to do about this. We tell ourselves that we should double down on truth-telling and hope that the fictional worlds built around white nationalism and protofascism burn themselves out. But that hasn’t been how it’s worked in history. I need to make the time to learn more about that history, by, for example, taking a deep dive into Hannah Arendt’s work. I particularly want to think about how the press operated in the 1920s and 1930s.

I’m not sure I’m answering your question. I guess I’m saying that while I find the current democratization of media liberating, it may contain the seeds of its own destruction. I’m not very hopeful, to be honest.

**PC:** What books/articles would you recommend to someone interested in read good investigative journalism in Canada?

**TB:** Oh, start with my own Dead Wrong series! There are lots of other reporters doing good work. I enjoyed listening to Justin Ling’s podcast (on CBC) about gay people who have been murdered in the Village. Hilary Beaumont at Vice is doing under-recognized but essential work on Canadian mining companies around the world. Bruce Livesey’s work on the Irving family (in the *National Observer*) is fundamental to understand the Maritimes. And of course Andrew Nikiforuk, now writing for the *Tyee*, is pretty much the only honest broker on the energy industry in Canada.

# GALA COMMITTEE REPORT

VALERIE CONNOR, CHAIR

On April 11, 2019 our gala paid tribute to Margaret Atwood and Graeme Gibson at the Carlu, a National Historic Site and one of Toronto's most striking examples of Art Moderne architecture. The evening began with the presentation of the Ken Filkow award to Canadian journalist Tim Bosquet. Margaret Atwood then presented our One Humanity Award to Nasrin Sotoudeh, the heroic human rights lawyer currently imprisoned in Iran. We were able to get a letter from Nasrin, an emotional and powerful message which was read by Nazanin Afshin-Jam MacKay who accepted the award on Nasrin's behalf.

Graeme Gibson's many accomplishments were honoured with an inspiring short film in which John Ralston Saul discussed Graeme's work in heading PEN Canada and hosting the historic 1989 congress in Toronto and Montreal.

Rick Mercer first took the stage as an auctioneer. His flawless comic timing was matched only by his ability to drive up bids for our auction. We sold three unique items. The first was a hand-bound copy of the pilot script for *The Handmaid's Tale* TV series, autographed by the Emmy award-winning cast. Excitement grew as this was followed by a book package which included a first edition of *The Handmaid's Tale* annotated by Atwood herself – revealing her personal reflections and second thoughts on almost every page. Finally our bibliophiles got to bid for a coveted private book club evening with Margaret Atwood where she will discuss *The Testaments*, the much-anticipated sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale* which will be released this fall.

Rick Mercer's conversation with Margaret Atwood was the highlight of the evening. It was preceded by a clip from the *Mercer Report* archives in which Margaret, fully dressed in hockey gear, gave a series of hilarious goaltending tips. The conversation was personal and insightful, warm and thought-provoking.

This year's gala sold out in record time, and for the first time in PEN Canada's history, the event was waitlisted. It was our largest fundraiser to date and revenues from ticket sales, sponsorship, and donations exceeded all previous records.

One's responsibilities as a writer are going to be very similar to one's responsibilities as a citizen. I mean if you live in a community I think you have responsibilities. You don't get the benefits without responsibility. The so-called freedom, freedom of expression and so forth, that is earned, it's all earned. It's not the template. It is something that has to be achieved and it has to be maintained.

– *Graeme Gibson*




*[From raw footage of a documentary that White Pine Pictures is making about Margaret Atwood.]*

**MARTHA**  
**KUMSA**  
**ETHIOPIA**  
**10 YEAR**  
**PRISON SENTENCE**

IN JANUARY 1980, MARTHA KUMSA WAS THROWN IN JAIL  
BY ETHIOPIA'S MILITARY GOVERNMENT. SHE WAS HELD WITHOUT  
CHARGE OR TRIAL FOR TEN YEARS.

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I WAS RELEASED IN SEPTEMBER  
1989 AFTER A DECADE OF TORTURE  
AND INCARCERATION. EVEN THOUGH  
MY IMPRISONMENT WAS LIMITED  
TO THE RADIUS OF THE PRISON  
COMPOUND—ETHIOPIA ITSELF  
WAS A GIANT CELL.

*(SOURCE: THE TAXI PROJECT)*

**Jailed for 10 years and tortured for her political views in her native Ethiopia, Martha Kuwee Kumsa came to Canada in 1991. I met her shortly after. When we speak again in May 2019 she harks back 30 years to a T-shirt. “It had a chair on it and it read ‘Sit Down and Take a Stand.’” That was for the 1998 PEN benefit, when I was president, and we had a chair auction. I had thought it was pretty clever but didn’t know anyone remembered. “I cherish those things,” she says, “the wit and the wordplay.”**

PEN Canada, Amnesty, and a church group had helped save her life and Kumsa and her three teenage children were remarkably successful in Canada. She got a PhD and then became a professor. Her husband Leenco Lata joined her. But four years later they had all gone their own ways, the children to Alberta and the US, her husband to Norway: an Oromco rebel leader, he had been refused immigration status.

“It feels like I fell off the edge of a cliff,” says Kumsa. “I just bury myself in work.” Although she knows she should be grateful, and she is – to have a free life after ten years in prison, separated from her children and subjected to torture – life has not become easy. “I spend all my time in that lonely place where I work. I cannot say no to the students. Writing has become very difficult, every word has to come together in so much pain.”

It does not get better? No. In fact the opposite. “When I came here there was a lot of hope and life. I’m on the other end of that energy to change the world. I’m more beaten down. [The depression] doesn’t represent the whole of me but it’s real and I don’t want to whitewash it. It needs to be told. The pain comes back more strongly and you can’t leave that behind.”

Part of the sadness was Ethiopia. “Five years ago the place was a slaughterhouse; I couldn’t sleep, work or eat. People think it’s out there happening, and I’m here. It’s not. It shakes me profoundly.”

But is there hope in the world? “What do you call them – sprouts? Lively people. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is one. I see myself in her. That is hopeful.” And now there has been a miracle. The Ethiopian government has changed for the better. She has been invited back. She becomes animated.

“It is a beautiful thing. The unthinkable happened. People who came out of that intolerable regime rose up and said we just can’t kill our way out of this. They came out and said, we have been the terrorists. Forgive us, you are not the terrorists. Come back, our people.’ I have never seen that, ever, over the whole world.”

Her husband heeded the call, and so will Martha. The pair will meet again and perhaps repair what was broken.

*Katherine Govier is a former president of our centre.*

# WALKING IN HER SHOES

**Last year PEN Canada partnered with  
The Shoe Project, an initiative led by Katherine Govier,  
a former president of our centre**

I wanted to work with immigrant women who had the potential to lead, and help them hone their writing skills in English. Elizabeth Semmelhack, Senior Curator of the Bata Shoe Museum, wanted a small exhibition featuring “the shoes that brought me to Canada.” We met at a dinner party. Our two ideas came together, we found a private sponsor, and The Shoe Project was born.

Every Thursday in the fall of 2011 I met with 12 women, aged 18 to 60. They had come to Toronto from China, Chechnya, Colombia, Ukraine and many places in between. Elizabeth opened Bata’s rich storage vaults and spoke about the cultural significance of shoes. We talked about writing, and immigration. We laughed at the expressions for shoes which are common to many languages: “waiting for the other shoe to drop” puzzled almost everyone; “filling someone’s shoes” and “walking a mile in his shoes” seemed universal. Shoes are quite profound: intensely personal, their idioms speak of geography, weather, work, religion, and gender. In fact, there is little that shoes don’t speak to.

All of the women all had a shoe-inspired tale. One had been smuggled across the border from Eritrea in 40-degree heat in a pair of Nikes. Another described the terror of donning ski boots to slide down a hill in the Canadian Rockies. One had the tiny Gerber baby shoes her one-year-old daughter had worn on the flight from Pakistan. Eight weeks later each had composed a personal essay and provided the footwear to match. When our “snapshot exhibition” opened at the Bata, it seemed like a good idea to have them read the stories into a microphone. That raised another idea. Why not have actors help them project their voices, even act a little. Enter Leah Cherniak, director, mime, and performance coach.

A couple of years later we have worked with two dozen women, and moved to bigger spaces, among them a theatre. Now we have teamed up with PEN Canada. Most of our writers are regular people, with stories of bravery, trauma, and even humour to tell what, without some help, will be lost between languages.

Between June 2018 and June 2019 we held workshops and performances in Vancouver, Canmore, Calgary, Toronto and Antigonish. These were led by Caroline Adderson in Vancouver, Pam Clark in Canmore, Barb Howard in Calgary, myself in Toronto and Anne Simpson in Antigonish. The theatre professionals, from Vancouver heading east, were: Alison Matthews, Tara Cheyenne Firedenberg, Nan Hughes Pool, Denise Clarke, Leah Cherniak, Kate Lynch and Laura Teasdale. We are very grateful for their work, which goes above and beyond the honoraria we can afford.

In 2020 we will expand to new centres. We are always looking for senior women writers and theatre artists to lead workshops. If you'd like to contribute, please write to [shoeprojecttoronto@gmail.com](mailto:shoeprojecttoronto@gmail.com) or visit [www.theshoeproject.online](http://www.theshoeproject.online)

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