



AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL
IMPRISONED WRITERS 2017

REINALDO ARENAS

Reinaldo Arenas is acknowledged as one of the great Cuban writers. Born on July 16, 1943, in the rural poverty of the Cuban countryside, Arenas' childhood can only be described as wretched. One of his first memories was of eating dirt because of a scarcity of food. He overcame these significant obstacles to become a best-selling author at the age of 22.

In the mid-1960s, the Castro regime openly persecuted homosexuals, and Arenas' dissatisfaction with the government deepened when his writings – unconventional, and supportive of the individual's right to self-expression – were declared “antirevolutionary” and censored. Soon afterward, Arenas was no longer permitted to publish on the island. Defiant, he secretly sent his manuscripts abroad, where they were immediately published, an act that infuriated the regime, which on various occasions confiscated and destroyed his work and ultimately branded him a nonperson in Cuba.

Having been persecuted, mistreated and imprisoned in Cuba, he left in the Mariel exodus of 1980. A film based on his autobiography (*Before Night Falls*) received extensive critical praise.

The following poem is dedicated to and translated by Arenas' mentee Lázaro Gómez Carriles who also co-wrote the screenplay of *Before Night Falls*.

AS LONG AS THE SKY WHIRLS

As long as the sky whirls
You will be my redemption and my doom,
magnetic vision,
 lily in underwear,
salvation and madness
 every night waiting.
As long as the sky whirls
no infernal could be a stranger
because I have to take care that that would not harm you,
No joy would go by inadvertent
Because in some way I have to reveal it to you,
 As long as
 the sky

whirls
you will be the truth of myself,
the song and the venom,
the danger and the ecstasies,
the vigil and the sleep,
the dread and the miracle.
As long as the sky whirls . . . but perhaps the sky whirls?
Well: *as long as the sky exists.*

As long as
the sky
exists
you will be my pain most noticeable,
my loneliness most tragic
my bewilderment unanimous
my perpetual silence
and my absolute consolation.
As long as the sky exists . . . but perhaps the sky exists?
Well: *as long as you yourself exist.*

As long as
you yourself
exist
you will be the mirror and the time,
the infinity and the imminent,
the memory and the unusual
the defeat and the verse,
my enemy and my image.
Because there would be no more suns than the ones you yourself radiate
like there would be no other penance than to know that you exist.
But perhaps you do exist?

After battling AIDS, Arenas committed suicide by taking an overdose of drugs and alcohol on December 7, 1990. Before his death, he sent this letter to newspapers around the world:

NEW YORK, DECEMBER 7, 1990

Dear friends:

Due to my delicate state of health and to the terrible emotional depression it causes me not to be able to continue writing and struggling for the freedom of Cuba, I am ending my life. During the past few years even though I felt very ill, I have been able to finish my literary work, to which I have devoted almost thirty years. You are the heirs of all my terrors, but also of my hope that Cuba will soon be free. I am satisfied to have contributed, though in a very small way, to the triumph of this freedom. I end my life voluntarily because I cannot continue working. Persons near me are in no way responsible for my decision. There is only one person I hold accountable: Fidel Castro. The sufferings of exile, the pain of being banished from my country, the

loneliness, and the diseases contracted in exile would probably never have happened if I had been able to enjoy freedom in my country.

I want to encourage the Cuban people out of the country as well as on the island to continue fighting for freedom. I do not want to convey to you a message of defeat but of continued struggle and of hope.

Cuba will be free. I already am

(signed) Reinaldo Arenas

RAIF BADAWI

Imprisoned for expression

Raif Badawi was sentenced to 10 years in prison and 1,000 lashes for setting up a website that championed free speech in the autocratic kingdom of Saudi Arabia. His blog, the Saudi Free Liberals Forum, was shut down after his arrest in 2012.

These extracts from his key published Arabic writings show a man who risked his freedom to question some of the basic tenets of life in Saudi Arabia – especially the central role of religion.

EXTRACTS FROM RAIF BADAWI'S BLOG

Reflecting on the role of the Muslim religious establishment in 2010, Badawi warned about the stifling of creativity:

As soon as a thinker starts to reveal his ideas, you will find hundreds of fatwas that accused him of being an infidel just because he had the courage to discuss some sacred topics. I'm really worried that Arab thinkers will migrate in search of fresh air and to escape the sword of the religious authorities.

This extract from an article denounces the demand of Muslims in New York that a mosque and community center be built on the site of the World Trade Centre. It goes against the official Saudi position by linking the terrorist group to the kingdom and accuses Muslims of intolerance.

What hurts me most as a citizen of the area which exported those terrorists ... is the audacity of Muslims in New York that reaches the limits of insolence, not taking any regard of the thousands of victims who perished on that fateful day or their families. What increases my pain is this [Islamist] chauvinist arrogance which claims that innocent blood, shed by barbarian, brutal minds under the slogan "Allahu Akbar", means nothing compared to the act of building an Islamic mosque whose mission will be to ... spawn new terrorists ...

Suppose we put ourselves in the place of American citizens. Would we accept that a Christian or Jew assaults us in our own house and then build a church or synagogue in the same area of the attack? I doubt it. We reject the building of churches in Saudi Arabia, not having been assaulted by anyone. Then what would you think if those who wanted to build a church are the same people who stormed the sanctity of our land?

Finally, we should not hide that fact that Muslims in Saudi Arabia not only disrespect the beliefs of others, but also charge them with infidelity to the extent that they consider anyone who is not Muslim an infidel, and, within their own narrow definitions, they consider non-Hanbali [the Saudi school of Islam] Muslims as apostates. How can we be such people and build ... normal relations with six billion humans, four and a half billion of whom do not believe in Islam.

In May 2012, shortly before his arrest, Badawi addressed the nature of liberalism.

For me, liberalism simply means, live and let live. This is a splendid slogan. However, the nature of liberalism – particularly the Saudi version – needs to be clarified. It is

even more important to sketch the features and parameters of liberalism, to which the other faction, controlling and claiming exclusive monopoly of the truth, is so hostile that they are driven to discredit it without discussion or fully understanding what the word actually means.

They have succeeded in planting hostility to liberalism in the minds of the public and turning people against it, lest the carpet be pulled out from under their feet. But their hold over people's minds and society shall vanish like dust carried off in the wind.

NIEN CHENG

Imprisoned for expression

Nien Cheng was a Chinese author best known for her memoir *Life and Death in Shanghai*.

The widow of the former manager of Shell in China, one of the only foreign companies permitted in the country at the time, Cheng was accused of being a British spy and imprisoned for six-and-a-half years.

As a prisoner in Shanghai's First Detention Centre, Cheng was subjected to torture and solitary confinement as she refused to give a false confession. During interrogation sessions, Cheng would use Mao's teachings against her interrogators and was often able to turn the tide against the authorities.

Upon her release, Cheng was told that her only daughter had committed suicide, but later learned that she had been murdered by the Red Guards. Cheng left China in 1980 and eventually settled in the United States. She died on 2 November 2009, at the age of 93.

From '**THE SPIDER**' by Nien Cheng

Within the gloomy cell, I studied Mao's books many hours a day, reading until my eyesight became blurred.

One day, in the early afternoon, when my eyes were too tired to distinguish the printed words, I lifted them from the book to gaze at the window. A small spider crawled into view, climbing up one of the rust-eroded bars. The little creature was no bigger than a good-sized pea; I would not have seen it if the wooden frame nailed to the wall outside to cover the lower half of the window hadn't been painted black. I watched it crawl slowly but steadily to the top of the iron bar, quite a long walk for such a tiny thing, I thought. When it reached the top, suddenly it swung out and descended on a thin silken thread spun from one end of its body. With a leap and swing, it secured the end of the thread to another bar. The spider then crawled back along the silken thread to where it had started and swung out in another direction on a similar thread.

I watched the tiny creature at work with increasing fascination. It seemed to know exactly what to do and where to take the next thread. There was no hesitation, no mistake, and no haste. It knew its job and was carrying it out with confidence. When the frame was made, the spider proceeded to weave a web that was intricately beautiful and absolutely perfect, with all the strands of thread evenly spaced. When the web was completed, the spider went to its centre and settled there.

I had just watched an architectural feat by an extremely skilled artist, and my mind was full of questions. Who had taught the spider to make a web? Could it really have acquired the skill through evolution or did God create the spider and endow it with the ability to make a web so that it could catch food and perpetuate its species? How big was the brain of such a tiny creature? Did it act simply by instinct, or had it somehow

learned to store the knowledge of web-making? Perhaps one day I would ask an entomologist. For the moment, I knew I had just witnessed something that was extraordinarily beautiful and uplifting...

Khadija Ismayilova

Imprisoned for expression

Investigative reporter Khadija Ismayilova worked with Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty's Azerbaijani service and with the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project covering the corruption of Azerbaijan's ruling family before she was arrested on Dec 5 2014 and sentenced to seven and a half years in prison in September 2015. She was set free after a successful appeal to Azerbaijan's Supreme Court on May 25 2016, two days before her 40th birthday.

Khadija believes the Azerbaijani government released her from prison after 18 months because her detention had failed to prevent other reporters from pursuing stories about high-level corruption.

In an interview after the Supreme Court unexpectedly ordered her released from prison in Baku, the journalist vowed to continue her work and shrugged off fears for her safety.

INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST KHADIJA ISMAYILOVA FREED IN AZERBAIJAN

"My mother joked about this. She said: 'When you're in prison, you're safer than when you're free because they wouldn't just kill you [in there]'," the reporter said, speaking from her home in the capital.

"[But] I can't let it bother me. I'm going to continue my investigations. There is always work to do in a country like Azerbaijan where corruption is on such a large scale."

Ismayilova was detained in December 2014. In September, she was sentenced to seven years in prison after being convicted on charges widely seen as retaliation for her award-winning reporting on the secretive wealth Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev's family.

Her most notable investigations include a report on how Aliyev's relatives allegedly profited in the construction of a \$134m concert hall built for the 2012 Eurovision song contest in Baku.

Amid a mounting campaign against independent media, civil society activists and opposition politicians, her arrest elicited international condemnation against the Aliyev government.

Ismayilova agreed the decision to suspend her sentence on the 25 May was unexpected given the continuing pressure on journalists and activists.

The US-based rights watchdog Freedom House estimates there are still more than 80 political prisoners in Azerbaijan, while at least five reporters remain jailed on a range of charges, including alleged hooliganism and drug-related offences.

"I wasn't convinced that the government was prepared to show goodwill toward political prisoners and prisoners of conscience," she said.

“But evidently, the pressure put on the authorities to release me was very effective, and the government realised in the end that holding me in prison was more costly than letting me go, and therefore they simply released me.”

Ismayilova said that by arresting her, the government had clearly hoped to frighten others from investigating high-level corruption and cronyism.

“This didn’t happen. There weren’t fewer [reports]. In fact, there were more. There were a greater number of investigations published both in the international media and the national press. Therefore, they didn’t succeed,” she said.

She called on Azerbaijan’s government, which denies that it has political prisoners, to allow Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, where she worked until her arrest, to reopen its Baku bureau, which was shuttered by authorities in December 2014.

“It’s important for the Azerbaijani people to receive the professional and unbiased news coverage,” she said. “It’s very important for the Azerbaijani audience that the radio staff should be able to continue to work.”

Ismayilova, who turned 40 just two days after her release, said she hoped others would continue to work to free the political prisoners still being held in Azerbaijan.

“My birthday wish is: keep doing whatever you can to get someone out of prison, because it is important,” she said. “It worked with me. It can work with others.”

Guardian online

A version of this article first [appeared on RFE/RL](#)

DAREEN TATOUR

Imprisoned for expressed

Dareen Tatour was arrested in October 2015, charged in November and spent several months in prison before being placed under house arrest in January 2016. She was confined to an apartment in Tel Aviv, with no access to the internet. The Israeli authorities alleged that restricting her movements was necessary as she represented 'a threat to public safety.' She is now allowed limited freedom and is able to work part-time but is still prohibited from using the internet.

At her first court hearing in April 2016, she was charged for Facebook postings and posting a poem on Youtube. In July 2016, she was permitted to return to her family home of Reineh and to remove the electronic tag she had been forced to wear. Recently, after more than a year of house arrest, the terms of her confinement were amended to a curfew. She can leave her home, accompanied by a family member, between 9am and 7pm. She is still banned from using the internet. In June 2017, her trial was again delayed after the prosecution failed to submit their paperwork.

This is the poem for which she was arrested, as translated by poet Tariq al Haydar:

RESIST, MY PEOPLE, RESIST THEM

Resist, my people, resist them.

In Jerusalem, I dressed my wounds and breathed my sorrows

And carried the soul in my palm

For an Arab Palestine.

I will not succumb to the "peaceful solution,"

Never lower my flags

Until I evict them from my land.

I cast them aside for a coming time.

Resist, my people, resist them.

Resist the settler's robbery

And follow the caravan of martyrs.

Shred the disgraceful constitution

Which imposed degradation and humiliation

And deterred us from restoring justice.

They burned blameless children;

As for Hadil, they sniped her in public,

Killed her in broad daylight.

Resist, my people, resist them.
Resist the colonialist's onslaught.
Pay no mind to his agents among us
Who chain us with the peaceful illusion.
Do not fear doubtful tongues;
The truth in your heart is stronger,
As long as you resist in a land
That has lived through raids and victory.
So Ali called from his grave:
Resist, my rebellious people.
Write me as prose on the agarwood;
My remains have you as a response.
Resist, my people, resist them.
Resist, my people, resist them.

ALBERT WOODFOX

On February 19 2016, Albert Woodfox, was released after more than four decades in solitary confinement in the USA, on his 69th birthday in a move Amnesty International called 'long overdue and undeniably just'. Amnesty campaigners had been working on his case for almost 25 years.

After his release, he was interviewed by Rowan Moore for the Guardian.

Everybody has fear," says Albert Woodfox. "Fear is the soul telling the body that it's in danger. Some people overcome that fear. I overcame it by having a cause ..."

This February, as he puts it, "I walked through the gates of hell into freedom." He was released from a 45-year incarceration, almost 44 of them in solitary confinement, for most of the time in the Louisiana State Penitentiary, also known as Angola prison.

Originally imprisoned for armed robbery, he was later sentenced for the fatal stabbing in 1972 of a prison guard called Brent Miller, a conviction ruled unsafe three times by a federal judge. Together with two other prisoners subjected to decades of solitary, Robert King and Herman Wallace, Woodfox was one of the "Angola Three", whose treatment provoked sustained campaigns for their release.

Even had he been guilty of Miller's murder, decades of solitary confinement would be an exceptionally sadistic punishment, one defined as "torture" by the United Nations.

[He spent] 23 hours a day locked into an 9ft by 6ft (2.7 metres by 1.8 metres) cell, barred at one end, in a tier of "14, 15, 16" similar cells. Some communication was possible with neighbours, even if he could not see them, or with other inmates on their way to the showers.

The former attorney general of Louisiana James "Buddy" Caldwell has tried to argue that this wasn't really solitary at all, on the basis of the limited human contact allowed – that, rather than being absolutely unsurvivable, it was merely almost so. The United Nations disagrees with his definition and says that no form of solitary confinement should be imposed for more than 15 days – that is, about a thousandth of Woodfox's punishment – after which some of the harmful psychological effects of isolation can become irreversible.

He himself suffered panic attacks – sweating, a feeling of being smothered that obliged him to sleep sitting up.

He has had the Rip Van Winkle experience of leaving society in one era and re-entering it in another, except that he didn't find that racial politics in the United States had made as much progress as you might think. He sees the successes of Donald Trump as evidence: "He has made racism and bigotry legitimate. He is not going to go away if he loses. It will take another generation to get rid of this kind of garbage."

In 1992 Woodfox's conviction was overturned. In 1993 he was indicted again and for some reason he had to wait until 1998 before a retrial, at which point he was convicted again. The jury's forewoman at the time of the reindictment was Anne Butler, formerly married to a former Angola warden, Murray Henderson, and author

of a book in which she stated her belief in the guilt of the accused. Even she, it was reported, wondered why she was allowed on the jury.

Woodfox's second conviction was overturned in 2008 and then reinstated in 2010 by a higher court, the Fifth Circuit. It was overturned again in 2013, a decision upheld in 2014 by the Fifth Circuit. In 2015 the state indicted Woodfox for the third time after which Judge Brady issued a rare writ banning a retrial, on the basis that the state were unlikely to give him a fair trial, that key witnesses were all dead and that Woodfox's age and health meant that he too might die before the process was concluded.

It was, he says, "so disappointing when I got out to find that conditions when I left 45 years ago are still here. With the first black president, everyone thought we had reached a milestone, but it just looked different." If, he continues "America has nothing else to thank Donald Trump for, it is to show that racism is very much alive. He didn't come out of nowhere. I thought the battle would be economic, not sick-assed philosophy about racism 45 years later."