



Un

entitled

PEN CANADA ANNUAL REPORT 2015/16

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Unentitled

PEN Canada has recently supported seven asylum and refugee claims

Why do we take so many freedoms for granted? Unlike a disarmingly large fraction of humanity we get to live our lives with minimal interference from the state. We can criticize the powerful, even mock them, with impunity. Life in Canada has so few restraints that we tend to underestimate the scope of our freedoms. We are free to choose the language we speak and the gods we worship, or repudiate; to determine our sexual orientation and gender identity; to argue with, affirm, or ignore, the jostling opinions that make liberal democracies so diverse. All too often we discount these freedoms, these entitlements.

During the last six months PEN Canada has helped seven writers and media workers seek refuge from political environments that routinely prevent the exercise of these freedoms. None did so illegally, and each surrendered the comforts of their homeland with considerable reluctance. In each case the writer – and occasionally their family and colleagues – faced harassment, detention, assault, even murder, for nothing more than speaking their truth. Their journey here, towards a place that would entitle them to freedoms denied in their homelands, is the theme of this report.

A refugee hearing – its specifics shrouded by non-disclosure guidelines – tends to move at two speeds. At first a judge sifts through details, seeking clarifications and confirmations. However courteous it may sound, the necessary scepticism of the exchange lends a certain edge to the proceedings. Even when they are telling the truth, applicants may falter or stammer. Once a claim seems genuine, however, the pace tends to quicken. Ahead of a formal decision a judge may indicate that the application will be accepted. Suddenly, a few short official sentences clear the way for a new life.

The transition from asylum seeker to landed immigrant is more gradual, but no less momentous and disorienting. The former is a supplicant; the latter, a citizen-in-training. One hungers for choices, the other must decide which of many entitlements to enjoy first. As one member of our Writers in Exile Network says: “I have been watching Canadians and learning how to be free.” This report follows the challenges of that transition, and considers PEN’s role in supporting these brave newcomers as they learn how to be free.

President's Message

Randy Boyagoda

We are storytellers. We believe in the power of stories to explore, inform, challenge, inspire, and above all, reveal the inherent dignity of the human person and the complex reality of our experience. Our stories also make us, more or less, congenital Aristotelians, invested in beginnings, middles, and ends.

Witness

*(during the last year
at PEN Canada):*

Beginnings: we have supported asylum claims for seven writers and media workers.

Middles: we have hosted a series of ongoing literary programs and advocacy efforts that speak to freedom of expression challenges at home and abroad.

Endings (i): we have been encouraged by the federal government's overdue but finally right and welcome decision to end CRA audits of the political activities of charitable organizations.

Endings (ii): we were saddened by the death of Ellen Seligman, a decisive leader, stalwart, supporter and former president of PEN Canada, not to mention one of the most important literary editors in Canadian history.

These are a few of the endless variations of the stories we tell about ourselves and others, as individual writers, as a community, as an organization. This report offers testaments to our vital plurality, and to much more, under the theme "Untitled." This is a theme that asks us to give attention and support to those who seek to be heard, and to provide a safe place from which they can tell their stories.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Article

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.

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Executive Director's Report

Tasleem Thawar

It's been an extraordinary year. In the spring we awarded two inaugural prizes: the PEN Canada/Ken Filkow Prize to the artist Franke James, for demonstrating courage and integrity in the interest of freedom of expression, and the *Escribir sin Miedo* prize – a joint initiative with PEN Honduras – to Fred Alvarado for public interest investigative journalism.

In the summer we got a taste of the bigger challenge we would face in the fall. A Brazilian fixer and a Bangladeshi blogger visited us hoping to make refugee claims. Since it had become increasingly difficult to get to Canada, we hadn't handled requests like this for years. We helped them find lawyers, establish their cases, and a PEN representative attended each hearing.

In the fall, the 81st PEN International Congress was hosted by PEN Quebec, our sister centre, in Quebec City. There we caught up with our colleagues from PEN Ethiopia. The Ethiopian delegation had travelled to Canada in fear. Their homes had been searched by government officials just before they left the country because of their affiliation with PEN. They risked imprisonment on their return. We helped them find accommodation in Toronto – complete with winter coats and boots – and to file their refugee claims.

The Ethiopians' claims coincided with Fred Alvarado's trip to Toronto to pursue the journalistic training that was part of winning the *Escribir sin Miedo* prize. About a week into Fred's stay in Canada, his father, a broadcast journalist whose show Fred had produced, was harassed by the Honduran government and prevented from leaving the country, making the situation in Tegucigalpa too dangerous for Fred to return. By late October we had seven writers claiming asylum on the PEN Canada roster as part of our writers in exile program, seven more than any of the previous four years.

Then came the breakthrough winter. Between December 2015 and March 2016, six of our seven writers were accepted as convention refugees and granted refugee status in Canada. The seventh awaits his hearing.

You can read some of their stories on the following pages. All of them are remarkable. None of this work would have been possible without the dedication of our staff, board, and volunteers. Mary Jo Leddy, Chair of our Writers in Exile committee, performed miracles, including finding volunteers to host many of the writers while they awaited their hearings. Brendan de Caires, programs coordinator, worked to put together the cases and to find supporters to attend the hearings. Amy Smith and Pari Rajagopalan put together a successful campaign to create an Emergency Fund to help support the writers until they were eligible for government assistance. Marian Botsford Fraser, former president and long-time PEN supporter, and Grace Westcott, our current VP, kept track of a number of the cases, and reached out to family and friends to help grow the emergency fund.

A more general thanks to PEN Canada's president Randy Boyagoda, for his steady hand in leading the ship. Grace will be stepping in as Executive Director for the next year as I embark on a more personal adventure – maternity leave. PEN is in good hands. Thanks to all who keep it running.



Fred Alvarado

Journalist/Filmmaker, Honduras

A New Beginning

It's my first Sunday lunch in Toronto and I'm at El Pulgarcito, an east side Salvadoran bistro, savouring pupusas with a Colombian family. We're talking about journalism in Honduras when a Latino man walks over, looks me in the eye, and says: "I know your voice! Aren't you Fred Alvarado from *Globo TV* in Honduras?" Gratifyingly, he adds, "I admire your work." I shake his hand, happily shocked by José Moreno's greeting. He is one of thousands of Hondurans who have swapped our home for the coldest part of the Americas, hoping to escape from the violence and impunity that followed the coup in 2009. Like him, many of those immigrants follow the daily news in Honduras and they know that journalism there has become as deadly as living in a war zone.

Canada was a new beginning. I wanted protection from the paramilitary groups that had been trying to silence me since June 2013. I'd received death threats and had self-censored my weekly documentary program on *Globo TV* after the kidnapping and brutal murder of a colleague. For years, I hadn't felt safe. Honduras is a country where more than nine out of ten crimes against journalists go unpunished. Fear harassed me constantly. PEN helped me to get past that fear and to find safety in Canada.

It was autumn when I arrived at Pearson Airport. An atmosphere of relief and cheerfulness was literally in the air as I spent my first three days with producers of the CBC's *Fifth Estate*. Justin Trudeau was about to win the elections and the Blue Jays had made the World Series. "Welcome to your new home," said the headlines, quoting Trudeau's greeting to the Syrian refugees. I embraced these words as I pursued my refugee claim, and they kept my spirits up when I learned that my father, a well-known journalist, faced a one-year prison sentence. (PEN International took up the case with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and got the sentence lifted.)

Living in exile, adapting to a "sophisticated" society has been a challenge, and an adventure. Toronto is extremely competitive for a third world journalist who has just arrived here. It demands outstanding language proficiency. Fortunately, thanks to PEN Canada, I've never felt alone; I've been accompanied by a group of Canadian writers, journalists in exile, and filmmakers during my settlement process. This has made a big difference especially during the tough moments. This is an expensive city and I've seen the financial hardships so many immigrants face – toiling away at their jobs just to make ends meet. But I remain optimistic and believe that finding work as a writer is a matter of time, hard work and making the right contacts.

**PEN Canada works
on behalf of its
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 listed below.**

AZERBAIJAN

KHADIJA ISMAYILOVA

The investigative journalist and radio host Khadija Ismayilova is serving a seven and a half year prison sentence for embezzlement and tax evasion following her arrest on December 5, 2014. Ismayilova is well known – both within Azerbaijan and internationally – for her exposures of high level corruption and for her criticism of the Azerbaijani government's crackdown on opposition voices. Because of her work, she has been the target of a relentless campaign of intimidation and judicial harassment over the last two years. PEN believes her imprisonment is a politically-motivated response to her work exposing corruption at the highest levels of Azerbaijani society.

CHINA AND AUTONOMOUS REGIONS

LIU XIAOBO

The 2010 Nobel Peace Laureate, Liu Xiaobo, is a prominent writer and dissident and 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 pre-trial detention in China, at an undisclosed location in Beijing, until he was formally charged with “spreading rumours and defaming the government,” “subversion of the state,” and “overthrowing socialism.” Liu received an 11-year prison sentence on December 25, 2009.

ETHIOPIA

ESKINDER NEGA

The editor and journalist Eskinder Nega was arrested in September 2011 on charges brought under Ethiopia's 2009 Anti-Terrorism Proclamation. Before his arrest, Nega published a column questioning whether detained journalists were suspected terrorists and he criticized the arrest of a well-known government critic. Nega was charged with having affiliations with Ginbot 7, a banned political party, and for receiving weapons and explosives from Eritrea. Convicted on June 27, 2012 he was given an 18-year prison sentence on July 13, 2012. The Ethiopian Supreme Court upheld the conviction on May 2, 2013 in a ruling several international human rights groups described as “highly dubious.”

ERITREA

YUSUF MOHAMED ALI
MATTEWOS HABTEAB
DAWIT HABTEMICHAEL
MEDHANIE HAILE
EMANUEL ASRAT
TEMESKEN GHEBREYESUS
FESSHAYE YOHANNES
DAWIT ISAAC
SEYOUM TSEHAYE
SAID ABDELKADER

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 Debena*), Emanuel Asrat (editor of *Zemen*), Temesken Ghebreyesus (reporter for *Keste Debena*), 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 People's Rights (ACHPR) 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 refused to provide assurances that Isaac was still alive.

Seyoum Tsehay, a TV and radio journalist who wrote a weekly column for *Setit*, has also been held without charge or trial since September 2001. In 2007 Reporters Without Borders named him their “journalist of the year.”

MEXICO

JOSÉ ARMANDO RODRIGUEZ
CARREÓN

José Armando Rodriguez 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, Rodriguez told the Committee to Protect Journalists: “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.

SAUDI ARABIA

RAIF BADAWI

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 corporal punishment since.

UZBEKISTAN

DILMUROD SAIDOV

Dilmurod Saidov – aka Sayyid – was sentenced to twelve and a half years in prison on February 22, 2009 on charges of extortion and forgery according to a statement made by a head of the Agricultural Equipment and Tractor Park in Samarkand, who claimed that Saidov had sought to extort US\$15,000 from him. Authorities added a second charge of extortion in March and a charge of forgery in April. Saidov’s case was riddled with procedural violations but when his lawyer appealed the sentence in late 2009 the Samarkand Region court upheld the journalist’s sentence. Saidov suffers from tuberculosis and was admitted to hospital for 27 days in mid-August 2011. His family requested a provisional release during the trial but this was rejected on the basis that he is a “dangerous criminal.” Saidov has reportedly been subjected to harsh prison conditions and psychotropic drugs during his detention. In April 2012, Saidov’s family were allowed to visit him in prison for his fiftieth birthday. They expressed concern that he was not receiving adequate treatment for his acute tuberculosis and that his health continued to worsen due to harsh treatment in prison.

R E
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July 7,
2015

Reeyot Alemu

Ethiopia

Ethiopian journalist Reeyot Alemu was released from Kaliti Prison in Addis Ababa on July 9, 2015 after serving four years on terrorism-related charges. Alemu, a newspaper columnist who criticized the government, was arrested on terrorism charges on June 21, 2011 and sentenced to 14 years in prison on January 19, 2012. In August 2012, an appeals court acquitted Alemu of two charges and reduced her sentence to five years. While in prison Alemu was reportedly held in unsanitary conditions and her psychological and physical health deteriorated. She was released a day after five other Ethiopian journalists were freed ahead of U.S. President Barack Obama's 2015 state visit to Ethiopia.

“Shooting people who march through the streets demanding freedom and democracy, jailing opposition party leaders and journalists because they look different from the ruling party, preventing freedom of speech, association and the press, corruption and [the] domination of one tribe are some of the bad doings of our government. As a journalist who feels responsibility to change these bad facts, I wrote articles that oppose [these] injustices ... [I knew] that I would pay the price for my courage and I was ready to accept that price. Because journalism is a profession [to which] I am willing to devote myself ... That’s why I wrote many articles which reveal the truth of the oppressed ones. Even if I am facing a lot of problems because of it, I always stand firmly for my principle and profession ... In real Ethiopia, a lot of repressions are being done. My story can show you the story of many Ethiopians who are in prison because of their independent thinking.”

— Alemu’s statement on being awarded the 2012 International Women’s Media Foundation Courage in Journalism Prize





Eden Feyasu

Journalist, Eritrea

The Journey to Freedom

Toronto was my destination. It took me more a week to realize that I'd arrived. I shouted: I'm free! But no one heard because the shout was inside me. A sigh of relief followed; it lasted for months. Then I stood still and began to think. I'm free now, aren't I? What, then, is troubling me? What is wrong?

The problem was that I found myself asking questions that elicited perplexity, or pity, from others. Can I say this? Can I do that? Some assured me I could. They seemed sad and pleased at the same time. Others looked at me with eyes that clearly did not understand. It wasn't that I did not know Canada was different. I knew. At least, in my mind I knew that people have freedom and rights here. Canada is not Eritrea, nor is it Sudan. I understood. Yet there was the strain of living in what I thought I knew and understood: freedom. Living it was almost impossible. The confusion it caused was nerve-wracking.

At first I had only questions. If I'd left behind oppression and come to freedom, why did I find myself neither there nor here? Where was I? In confusion? No man's land? Why is it difficult to live like these people? When it became unbearable, I became analytical. I told myself that the journey is two-fold. One journey in the physical world, the other in a private, inner world. Each affects the other to varying degrees. One involves paths everybody can see, choose from and travel on. So if freedom was a place all I had to do was ask how to get there. I did just that. The place was Canada. The other journey, however, was different. For that one I needed a personal map.

I had no idea how complicated and lengthy this other journey would be. I used to think that once you reached a free place you changed gear automatically. You attained freedom. Even if it wasn't a place but an emotional reality, something abstract yet tangible. I told myself: go back to basics. Just be. Because I'd dreamt of walking aimlessly, I did that. I also people-watched, mostly in parks. I wanted to re-learn the habits of freedom from those who lived in it. Children were the best teachers. It was like they took my hand and showed me the way.

As with walking, so with freedom. Once you know the way, the rest is practice. Keeping at it. Getting used to it. I used to tell people: I am getting used to life in freedom. It is about remembering, self-reflection, getting to know Freedom the place (Canada) and freedom the new internal reality. I don't claim that I've arrived at Freedom. Not yet. However, various agents including the PEN group around the exiled writers' table, their presence and the discussions that take place when those who love words come together have had a tremendous positive impact.

I'm sure I'll get there someday. In fact, I can see it from where I am sitting.

Writers in Exile Committee Report

Mary Jo Leddy

Our committee has been very active this year. We have welcomed new members from Ethiopia, Honduras, and now Bangladesh. Our exiles supper club e-list now has 36 members; all are interested and about half are very active.

Welcoming our new members has been an exciting experience of solidarity. Some of these writers were known to PEN International and had already formed a relationship with John Ralston Saul and Charlie Foran. Many were welcomed into homes in the neighbourhood around Romero House or by PEN members across the city. The connection with Romero House became ever more practical as staff there helped the newcomers through the refugee determination process.

Members of the exiles group initiated “gatherings” to help the newcomers with job searches and to meet other Canadians in the publishing and film industries. This informal networking is the strength of the PEN exiles group and it is done with energy and enthusiasm.

One of our most significant efforts this year was advocating for permits to enable the family of Ilamaran Nagarasa to leave a dangerous situation. Our past and present presidents of PEN Canada made a direct appeal to John McCallum, the Minister of Immigration, and members of the exiles group pressed this point at the Minister’s office in Markham for two weeks. Maran’s wife and child will soon be arriving in Canada. Here is his expression of thanks:

I feel after seven years of struggling in Canada there is finally light at the end of the tunnel. I am feeling happy and hopeful after a long time, finally.

I have discovered the bond of true humanity for the second time in my life. The first was during my 45 days voyage to Canada and the second one from my PEN friends and what we have achieved right now. This really needs to continue to make this world a beautiful and safe place for all humans. Thank you all my PEN family members. I hope our journey will continue together to help others in similar situations.

Looking ahead: we would like to expand this committee to a national level with supper clubs in other cities. To initiate this we hope to have a national gathering of writers in exile and will apply for the funds to do so. We will develop a website which will act as a catalyst for gathering the energies of writers in exile. And finally, given our recent experience with Maran, we will join in efforts to address the inordinate power which has been given to Canada’s security agencies. This is a threat to freedom of expression.

*I feel after
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ILAMARAN NAGARASA

Literary Events

2015-2016

Writing War: An Evening with Margaret MacMillan and Charlotte Gray

April, 2015

Award-winning historians Margaret MacMillan and Charlotte Gray discuss the challenge of describing battles and the necessity of giving meaning to tragedy.

The Right to Free Expression

May, 2015

Ioan Grillo, author of *Narco*, a definitive account of Mexico's drug cartels, and Cecil Rosner, CBC managing editor and author of *Behind the Headlines: A History of Investigative Journalism in Canada*, discuss working in a country where free expression is more a fight than a right, and why North Americans should care.

Ideas in Dialogue: Fighting Words

June, 2015

How, in a culture saturated with violent images, have words — and, occasionally, cartoons — retained the power to harm, exclude, objectify and disparage others? Joseph Boyden and Andrew Pyper discuss the challenges of writing intelligently about hateful subjects. Moderated by Becky Toyne.

Japan-Canada Literary Conversations: A Woman's Image: From Anne of Green Gables to The Ghost Brush

October 2015

Japanese translator and novelist Yuko Matsumoto and Canadian author Katherine Govier explore images of women in Japan, Matsumoto through her translation of *Anne of Green Gables* into Japanese, and Govier through her writing of *The Ghost Brush*. Moderated by Ayako Sato.

Serious Illustration: Telling difficult stories in books for children

Japanese children's book critic Akira Nogami speaks about the challenges of conveying the tragic experience of Hiroshima-Nagasaki through manga and discusses writing about difficult topics for children with Canadian children's author Jennifer Lanthier.

Writing about War: Jiro Asada and John Ralston Saul in conversation

Award-winning Japanese novelist and President of PEN Japan Jiro Asada discusses the challenges of writing about war with Canadian public intellectual and president of PEN International John Ralston Saul.

Fighting Silence in Honduras

October, 2015

Dina Meza, Jorge Miralda, and Fred Alvarado discuss searching for answers on the frontline of the battle against corruption, impunity and violence in one of the world's most dangerous countries.

Writing Violence

October, 2015

Canadian intellectuals Steven Pinker and Ken Dryden explore the surprising and far-ranging capacities of the human brain, from the writer's narrative instinct to the athlete's aggressive drive.

Putting Faith in Hate

November, 2015

Writers Richard Moon and Randy Boyagoda examine hate speech cases that involve religion, focusing on the regulation of anti-Muslim speech and speech that ridicules religious beliefs, practices, and symbols.

What will Bill C51 mean for Canada?

February, 2016

John Ralston Saul and Monia Mazigh discuss Bill C-51's implications for free expression in Canada.

Embattled Truths: Reporting on Gaza

February, 2016

Max Blumenthal, author of *The 51 Day War: Ruin and Resistance in Gaza* and *Toronto Star* foreign affairs reporter Olivia Ward discuss the challenges of sifting truth from propaganda when reporting on conflict in the Gaza Strip. Presented in partnership with Another Story Bookshop and Independent Jewish Voices.

Spring Patron Salon

February, 2016

New York Times Technology Columnist Farhad Manjoo and novelist Stephen Marche, discuss the state of freedom of expression in an increasingly technological age. Moderated by Rachel Giese.

Mind the Gap: Crossing Imaginary Lines

April, 2016

Junot Díaz, author of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, interviewed by Sunil Yapa, author of *Your Heart is a Muscle the Size of a Fist*, about writing as an act of empathy.

A black and white photograph of a young man with dark hair and a mustache, looking slightly to his left. He is wearing a light-colored, button-down shirt. A large, solid red diagonal bar cuts across the upper right portion of the image.

Raihan Abir

Writer, Bangladesh

Freedom to Disbelieve

In February 2013, my friend the atheist blogger Rajib Haider was stabbed to death in front of his home for expressing his views and for promoting science, reason, and secularism. This was the first of the many targeted killings that have been used to silence liberal and secular voices in Bangladesh. After the killing of Rajib Haider, Islamists demanded that the government hang all the atheist bloggers. The government responded by arresting four bloggers for hurting the religious sentiments of the Sunni Muslim majority in Bangladesh.

I was also an atheist writer and in 2011 I published a book entitled "*The Philosophy of Disbelief*" with Avijit Roy. After Rajib Haider was killed and the government started prosecuting writers using its pseudo blasphemy law, I went to Germany with my wife so that we wouldn't have to go prison or face murder by machete. We stayed in Germany for six months, and after that we thought that the situation had improved, so we returned to Bangladesh. It was only when Avijit Roy was hacked to death on February 26, 2015 that it dawned on us that we were again facing a serious threat. My wife and I had invited Avijit to our house for the following day, to let him know that we were going to have a baby. In the next few months, more bloggers and friends and a publisher I had worked with were killed with machetes.

After Avijit's murder, I kept going to Dhaka University where I was doing my PhD in Biomedical Engineering. My supervisor told me to go home early, because I often stayed late working in the laboratory. Within one month Washiqur Rahman was hacked to death for expressing his atheistic and humanistic values on Facebook and on a blog. My supervisor suggested that it was dangerous for me to come to the university every day, because the author profile on my book had the address of my office. So I started working from home.

During that time, a friend in Canada who was worried about my safety mentioned that I should think about coming here, or going to Australia or some other safe place. My supervisor felt the same, so I registered for the World Biomedical Engineering Congress in Toronto in June. I chose Canada because I thought of it as a leader in human rights and an advocate for the freedom and safety of people, as a place that values human life. I knew that Canada would grant me protection if I asked, but I wasn't sure that I wanted to leave Bangladesh for good, so I applied for a visitor's visa.

When I got to Canada, I met the world! Lots of different people living in harmony – something we strive for in Bangladesh but usually fail to achieve. From what I've seen, Canada shows that you can include everyone in a multicultural society and still be a successful, peaceful nation. Unlike Scandinavian countries, which are so homogeneous, Canada embraces differences; it takes in people from all over the world. It is what all countries should be: tolerant, inclusive, respectful of other people's rights. Canadians are so friendly and co-operative and I felt accepted from the very first day. Early on I was invited to John Ralston Saul's house where everyone made me feel completely at home, fully accepted as a fellow human being.

Freedom to Disbelieve

As I've settled in to my new life, I've noticed that public debates here – like the recent discussion of euthanasia – are based on facts and reasons. Religion coexists with secular society. On paper, Bangladesh is the same way, but in fact we concede far too much to religion. Here you have freedom from religion which is just as important to people like me as having the freedom to practise your religion.

Although I haven't been here for a full year, I already have precious memories. When I left Bangladesh, I left my pregnant wife and wasn't sure when I would be able to see her again. But my friends here in Canada and all over the world made it possible. My wife joined me two months later with a visitor's visa. My daughter Sophie was born in Toronto, in September. We didn't have to pay hospital bills, or for medicine, it was taken care of by Canada's social system. Sometimes I feel that Sophie is Canada's baby and this country has shown itself very capable of taking care of her.

One highlight of my experience here was meeting Rohinton Mistry on the day of the immigration hearing. He was there to lend moral support on behalf of PEN Canada. I remember when I told my lawyer that Rohinton Mistry was going to come to the hearing, he beamed and said: "He's my favorite writer, I should bring my books to get them signed!" I know Mr. Mistry is a very private person, so it was enormously flattering to see that he would set aside the time to stand in my corner.

PEN Canada, the Centre for Inquiry Canada (CFI), the Canadian Journalists for Free Expression (CJFE) – both friends – were also there to support us that day. It showed me that Canadians are willing to help people regardless of where they are from or what they do. The lady who assessed my refugee claim was also very respectful of my circumstances and handled my paperwork with great tact. I kept thinking, so many people must have worked so hard to build this great system!

Another highlight was the chance to meet Steven Pinker, who is one of my intellectual heroes, after he and Ken Dryden appeared at PEN Canada's benefit on the opening night of last year's International Festival of Authors. We took a photograph together and he spoke to me about Avijit Roy and the importance of maintaining the presence of secular thought in such difficult circumstances. Later, when Bonya, Avijit's widow, moved from her home, she sent me all the Pinker books that Avijit had bought and marked!

When I was accepted as a refugee, I felt relieved that I would be able to live here. But I also felt guilty for those I'd left behind in Bangladesh. I'd love to go back there one day, probably by myself.

If I could share my experience here with someone back home, I wouldn't choose one of my friends – who have a good idea of what life here is like – but one of those religiously indoctrinated madrasah students, fanatics who have attacked and killed my friends and colleagues. They should also have the opportunity to see the wider world. I would bring them here and take them on the subway. I'd say "Look! There are so many different kinds of people here, living peacefully. We should be able to handle our lives like this. We should all be able to live in peace."



**CANADA EMBRACES
DIFFERENCES; IT TAKES IN
PEOPLE FROM ALL OVER
THE WORLD. IT IS WHAT
ALL COUNTRIES SHOULD
BE: TOLERANT, INCLUSIVE,
RESPECTFUL OF OTHER
PEOPLE'S RIGHTS.**



Writers in Prison Committee Report

Jim Creskey

Last year two new members joined the Writers in Prison Committee (WiPC), both in Ottawa: Joe Gunn, Executive Director at Citizens for Public Justice and Les Whittington, a recently retired political journalist from the *Toronto Star*.

As ever, crises in the wider world were noticeable here in Canada, particularly the increase in refugees. During the last six months PEN Canada has supported refugee and asylum claims for seven writers from three continents. In several cases the writers remain wary of using their real names or speaking in public, lest family members back home suffer repercussions. Listening to their accounts of harassment, threats and violence is a humbling experience for any Canadian.

PEN Quebec hosted the 81st PEN International from October 13–16 and, among others, focused on the case of the imprisoned Saudi blogger Raif Badawi, an Honorary Member of our centre and recipient of our 2014 One Humanity award. Afterwards we were pleased to welcome PEN Honduras president Dina Meza and vice-president Jorge Miralda to Toronto, where they joined Fred Alvarado for “Fighting Silence in Honduras,” a panel discussion hosted by Ryerson University’s International Issues Discussion series. Fred, the winner of our inaugural *Escribir sin Miedo* prize for investigative journalism, spoke about the intimidation (including death threats) that he’d faced since 2013. Shortly afterwards he filed a refugee claim which, in March 2016, was formally accepted.

During 2015 we continued to work with the International Human Rights Program at the University of Toronto Faculty of Law. We contributed to the UN Universal Periodic Review for Brazil and drafted an update to the challenges outlined in our 2014 India report, “Imposing Silence” on the use of antiquated legislation to restrict free speech in India.

Avijit Roy, the secular intellectual who was brutally murdered in Bangladesh last year, was our Empty Chair for the International Festival of Authors and Eskinder Nega, an editor currently serving a 18-year prison sentence under Ethiopia’s draconian national security legislation, received the 2015 One Humanity award.

In the year ahead we hope to work more closely with the Writers in Exile Committee in order to reach writers who are neither in exile nor in prison, and to forge partnerships with regional and international bodies who can support and fund larger projects to fight impunity. At the same time we will continue to support the Honduran prize for investigative journalism, *Escribir sin Miedo* and search for new ways to improve our advocacy.

*In several
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the writers
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Gezahagn Mekonnen

Journalist, Ethiopia

Land of Hope

I left a country where powerful people live above the law and criticizing them is a crime. If you write and speak freely, you can end up on a list of “terrorists.” I tried to speak the truth but I don’t know how far my voice travelled. I ran away when my life was threatened. I escaped from the fear of death.

I never imagined that Canadians would be so welcoming. I’d heard a lot about the egocentric Western world and thought Canada was no exception. Now I know different. Canadians are generous and have a lot to share. That is why I believe that this is a land of hope for a newcomer.

In Canada, my fear of death has gone, but it has been replaced by doubts about the future. Dictators are not a problem here and I feel safe in the streets and on the subways. There is tranquillity throughout the city of Toronto. Instead, the big question is how to navigate this cosmopolitan culture. How to sail, and in which direction. I keep thinking about Tracy Chapman’s lines:

I used to be a sailor

Who sailed across the seas

But now I’m just an island

Since they took my boat away from me

I don’t like being stationary

My old home, with 3,000 years of history, was full of difficult facts: propaganda, religion, overcrowded neighbourhoods, deceptive politics, corruption, and terrifying security forces. Gunmen could invade townships and villages at will. They could shoot people in the streets as they pleased.

Here, many things seem younger, more recent. Religion is not much of a concern and ideas are respected. The population is relatively small and although I notice many differences I see no chaos. How wonderful it is to see differences resolved at a roundtable; to watch profoundly dissimilar people living in harmony. That is the beauty of the North.

The southern and northern hemispheres are separate realities: one world upstairs, the other down below. When I crossed the Atlantic I thought I’d leave the painful memories behind: the oppression, discrimination, and injustices. That hasn’t happened, for although I am thousands of miles across the ocean, my memories and regrets and hopes have come with me. Maybe it is a good thing to hope, like the biblical Joshua, that one day a new generation will occupy ‘Canaan’, that one day my children or grandchildren will go home to claim their ancestral land.

When my feet touched Canadian soil for the first time it felt as though the whole country had been painted the yellowish colour of maple trees in fall. I thought that Canada always looked like this. Later, when I learned that the trees turned yellow to prepare themselves for winter, the landscape looked like a painter’s masterpiece. This is my image of Canada.

I’ve learned that I can prepare myself for what lies ahead, for the coming seasons, and that when you move to a new house, you cannot afford to miss the old one too much.

Canadian Issues Committee Report

Elise Moser

Last June, the inaugural PEN Canada/Ken Filkow Prize was presented to artist Franke James at PEN Canada's Ideas in Dialogue event. The award was created and endowed by Philip Slayton and Cynthia Wine to honour our friend and past Canadian Issues Committee (CIC) member, Ken Filkow. The award is presented to a person or institution in Canada who has demonstrated courage and integrity in the interest of freedom of expression. The CIC will consider nominations for the second annual award this spring.

With the change in government, the CIC is following the Liberal government's plans to review the Canada Revenue Agency's (CRA) rules governing charities' political activities and the use of CRA audits to enforce them. The CIC is also following events such as the reconsideration of Bill C-51, the National Security Act. PEN Canada will seek to participate in public consultations on these subjects; we have already requested the opportunity to participate in the CRA review. Also following the election, PEN placed an op-ed written by Bill Kowalski in the *Toronto Star*, urging the new government to take strong action to strengthen freedom of expression in Canada.

Grace Westcott prepared an intervention into hearings on Ontario anti-SLAPP legislation. The Protection of Public Participation Act, 2015, was subsequently passed on October 28.

The Censorship Tracker, a joint effort with the Canadian Civil Liberties Association, the BC Civil Liberties Association and Canadian Journalists for Free Expression, was launched in late 2014; the CIC hopes to assess and expand its reach. The "Know Your Rights" series of guides and tools, now features four topics: "Can the Police Search my Phone?", "Public Photography is No Crime," "Protesting," and "Prisoners' Reading Rights." Each of these guides is accompanied by a tool to help you exercise the rights: a mailing label giving notice of prisoners' right to access books; a striking T-shirt that explains your right to peacefully protest; downloadable cellphone wallpapers setting out the limits on police authority to search your phone, and a pocket guide to your right to take photographs in public.

CIC is also considering its best course of action regarding Quebec's Bill 59, an act to prevent and combat hate speech and speech inciting violence, which would create far-reaching limits to freedom of speech. It is currently in hearings.

*I have
been watching
Canadians
and learning
how to be
free.*

EDEN EYASU,
ERITREAN JOURNALIST



Dejene Tesemma

Journalist, Ethiopia

Settling In

When I first got to Toronto, I was amazed at how much coffee everyone drank. Ethiopia is Africa's leading coffee producer but we don't drink it while walking in the streets or travelling on public buses. We drink in cafés, or at home, with small cups. The rest of my week was taken up with worries. How would I get through winter? Would the Refugee Board accept my claim? Could I learn to cook? (In my culture men usually don't!) Above all, how would I handle homesickness?

Gradually I was able to settle in to Toronto and let go of these worries, thanks to the support of Romero House and PEN Canada. Mary Jo Leddy of Romero House – she is also Chair of PEN Canada's Writers in Exile committee – is exceptionally passionate about helping refugees, and PEN Ethiopia's board members were her top priority. When we decided to stay here after the PEN Congress in Quebec City, Mary Jo and PEN offered their full support. PEN found us accommodation in Toronto and helped us through every part of our refugee claims, until we were accepted.

Soon after we came to Toronto, we moved to a new house. Our host, Lisa Clarkson, welcomed us and introduced us to her husband, Gordie, and their nine-year-old twins. I wanted to hug and kiss the kids, as we do in my culture. Back home, parents don't frown if you make a child your friend right away. But I'd been told that here a stranger should be wary of interacting with kids. It felt sad to be nervous about showing affection and I yearned for my own children, thousands of miles away. I wished they could be here with me.

On Halloween my host family gathered on the porch and the son asked me to distribute candies. I was delighted. The daughter seemed a little envious that I'd been chosen; she wanted to give them out too. I agreed to split the task with her and we became firm friends. Now the kids are comfortable with us and happy to share their stories. We are also the little boy's hockey fans. They have been a great comfort to us and have helped to soothe my nostalgia for home.

There have been other challenges. One day, we made the mistake of trying to skate at Dufferin Park. After fitting the skates we took to the ice with a Canadian friend. What a nightmare! I'd never experienced such fear. I've used all sorts of transportation in my life, but I've never shrunk into such a shell of fear as I did when I slipped around on those skates. A fall felt inevitable. I tumbled dramatically. Fortunately, I was dashed forward and only my jaw struck the ice. My eyebrow got slightly cut and it bled for a while. I got first aid from the facility's clinic. Likewise, Gezahegn fell backward, smacking the ground with his buttocks. No wound, just lots of pain. What an adventure! I doubt that we'll repeat the mistake, but our children will probably learn to skate.

Q

8&A



If you could relive the
last year, what would you
do differently?

In January 2015, with her usual dark humour, Rafida Ahmed Bonya told me: “We are coming ... and hoping nobody will butcher us!” She and her husband, Avijit Roy, were returning after a long absence. They were brutally attacked – in his case, fatally – after visiting the book fair in Dhaka. I wish I’d told her “No! Don’t come.”

RAIHAN

Q &A

Do Canadians appreciate their freedoms?

Too many Canadians don't know, or ignore, that some Canadian companies are involved in activities that cause environmental damage, or facilitate corruption and human rights abuses in other countries. Too many of us are distracted by consumerism and advancing our careers. We should care more about politics and freedom of expression.

FRED

If you could change one thing about Canada, what would it be?

I'd change the last line of the national anthem. I like the rest of it but I can't agree that God keeps this land glorious and free! People do! Why should God enjoy the credit? When Saudi Arabia bombs Yemen, which land is God protecting? Do we blame God for all the bad things happening around the world? And what do we mean by God, really? People believe in billions of gods. Which one is in charge of Canada?

RAIHAN

Canada should have a "reconciliation and healing ministry."

EDEN

What has been the hardest thing to adjust to in Canada?

Freedom. I've had to learn that freedom is relative and that not everyone necessarily has as much of it as you assume.

EDEN

The proper use of the Canadian dollar. Struggles with food and loneliness.

FRED

What has surprised you most about life here?

That the air is so clean. The respect shown to pedestrians and cyclists. The love of dogs even to the point at which their owners clean up after them with plastic bags.

FRED

The value of life, and of other people's happiness, dignity and freedom! Where I'm from people can get killed in public and quickly forgotten. Canadians care about other lives, not just their own! They appreciate the value of ordinary lives and this makes them care for others and uphold their right to life!

RAIHAN

Canadians care about other lives, not just their own! They appreciate the value of ordinary lives and this makes them care for others and uphold their right to life.

Where do you think you will be in five years?

In the middle of my Canadian Dream.

GEZAHEGN

Married with two kids. Planning my first trip with a Canadian passport. Speaking French.

FRED

Hopefully somewhere where I never learn to take anything for granted. Still marvelling at the ‘ordinary miracles’ (Erica Jong’s phrase) that come my way and trying harder to inspire others.

EDEN

What do you hope to be doing then?

Writing, activism, lobbying to protect human rights. I hope to contribute as much as possible and to rid the world of dogmatic ideologies and oppression. One day I’d like to be Canada’s Minister of Science and Innovation.

RAIHAN

Working as a journalist and filmmaker. Playing with my kids in a new apartment.

FRED

Working as an independent filmmaker.

GEZAHEGN

Writing poems and books and telling stories. Working with the underprivileged.

EDEN

“I am absolutely sure
[a] usual part of my work
cannot stop because
I think the duty of the writer
give health to the world.
duty of the singer
duty of [the] journalist
write what this job demands.
It’s only one duty.”

ure that risk is
my job... and I
use it's my duty.
f doctors is to
eir patients, the
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nalist [is] to
ournalist sees...
”

• **Anna Politkovskaya**

Anna Politkovskaya was a Russian journalist who wrote for the *Novaya Gazeta* newspaper. She was harassed and intimidated throughout her career and murdered in October 2006. Politkovskaya wrote extensively about human rights abuses in the Chechen Republic and about political corruption in Russia.

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