

PEN magazine

May
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the full story

FROM OUR WRITERS

**PEN Sydney works to free writers who are at risk of being silenced.
The words of these writers are the impetus to continue.**

People should be free from fear, persecution and poverty. I genuinely expect to sit side by side with my readers one day, sharing 'democracy-peddler'-style stories; sharing laughter, tears and dreams.

Cover image: ***Save Dr Yang*** by **Badiucao**

In his recently published letter from prison to Prime Minister Albanese, **Yang Hengjun** expressed his deep appreciation of support from the Australian government in what he describes as the *'hardest and darkest chapter of his life'*.



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NSW teachers stand against the silencing of Palestine in schools

By Chris Breen

The question of Palestine is being silenced in NSW public schools; a silencing that extends to suppression of Palestinian identity itself.

This silencing is part of a wider political backlash that has seen journalist **Antoinette Lattouf sacked**, academic **Randa Abdel-Fattah** have her **funding frozen**, cricket commentator **Peter Lalor sacked**, artists **Khaled Sabsabi** and **Michael Dagostino dumped**, and NSW school support officer **Sheikh Wesam Charkawi** and Queensland private school teacher **Kellee Green suspended** from their jobs, for entirely reasonable comments supporting Palestine in a private capacity, outside their school roles.

The backlash is being **engineered** by politicians like NSW Premier **Chris Minns**, and Prime Minister **Anthony Albanese**, to try to **silence criticism** of their **continuing military trade with Israel** and their **political defence of the genocide** in Gaza. The backlash is being carried out in the media, by employers, and by university and school bosses. As University of Sydney academic **Nick Reimer** observed **'supporting Israel's genocide is the compulsory admission ticket to social and political power in the West.'**

Our rights to freedom of speech are being curtailed to enable the continuation of a world historic crime. Rather than Israel being sanctioned, it is **people who oppose genocide in Gaza who are facing sanctions**. This is particularly apparent in **schools**, where **top-down political control of education** is becoming more widespread.

Teachers and students impacted

Muslim Vote convener and student support office at Granville Boys High School, **Sheikh Wesam Charkawi**, was **ordered to work from home** by the **NSW Department of Education** after he **criticised** the **"selective moral outrage"** and **Islamophobia** behind the response to the video of Sydney nurses who threatened Israeli patients. Charkawi was reinstated after significant community opposition, including two student protests outside Granville Boys High School.

In November last year at Condell Park High School a **Year 12 student** who wore his keffiyeh (the Palestinian scarf) to his **graduation**, as is traditional in families of Palestinian origin, was then **banned** from his Year 12 **Formal** as **punishment**. He told the SMH 'The experience has ruined my high school memories. It's **supposed to be a place where I feel safe**, and I'm not judged for who I am, but I was wrong.'



Wasim El-Haj, a teacher from a Palestinian background at Sydney Girls High School and Careers Advisor of the Year, was asked in 2023 to wear his keffiyeh to work to **celebrate multiculturalism**. 'I was told to "wear that scarf thing you guys wear."' he told journalist Alex McKinnon. El Haj started wearing it regularly in the first four months of 2024. Then in May in a complete about face El Haj was banned from wearing his keffiyeh, he was told by his supervisor he **would face disciplinary action** if he continued to wear it. Students at his school launched an open letter that over **300 past and current students signed** stating in part that, 'At **no point** did Mr El-Haj's **cultural expression create concern** within the student body, **nor** did we believe it would **impede his ability to advise us.**' Despite this the NSW Education Department Secretary **Murat Dizdar** upheld the decision.



According to the Australian National Imam's Council, Wasim El-Haj 'faced months of repeated racial discrimination, harassment and bullying by senior officers from the NSW Department of education.' This treatment has had a profound effect on Wasim El-Haj, who has **recently resigned** his job.

The Australian National Imams' Council also reported 'A **Year 6 student** was repeatedly instructed to **remove a sweatband** featuring the **colours of the Palestinian flag**, and was **threatened with removal** from the **school athletics carnival** if she refused to comply.'

Students have been **given detention** for **drawing Palestinian flags** or had them **ripped up**. Students and teachers have been told they are not allowed to talk about "the conflict in the Middle East". **Teachers** have been given **written warnings** not to display anything "**promoting Palestine** or the **Palestinian flag**".

Bans on Harmony Day

Last year on the **International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination** ("Harmony Day" in schools) when students are encouraged to celebrate diversity, wear cultural dress and display their flags, **at least 10 schools banned** students from **wearing Palestinian colours** or **cultural dress**, or displaying the **Palestinian flag**. This year several schools simply **cancelled** the traditional dress up day, leading students at Moorebank High School to **petition to bring it back**.

Education Minister Prue Car and **NSW Education Secretary Murat Dizdar** both loudly claim a **commitment to anti-racism**. Car told the SMH Schools Summit, that 'every public school is a place where everyone can belong, no matter where you came from, where your parents or grandparents came from,' but the **suppression of Palestinian identity** in schools is a calculated political decision that **contradicts** this.

Australians of Palestinian origin have been subject to relentless racism over the last 18 months. The political defence of Israel, and denial of the genocide in Gaza by Australia's most senior politicians, has implied that Palestinian lives simply don't matter. **The NSW Department of Education's attempts to place Palestinians out of sight and out of mind, by suppressing Palestinian identity and symbols of Palestine,**

compounds the injustice.

Education secretary, **Dizdar**, told the SMH Schools Summit he wants teachers to '**teach** controversial issues **without fear** of aligning with the curriculum,' but regularly reminds teachers of the "**Controversial Issues in Schools Policy**" that **prevents** such teaching, particularly over Palestine.

Critical thinking at risk

Principals have told teachers not to talk about Gaza in the classroom. Teachers who have displayed support for Palestine have received warnings. NSW Teachers have witnessed the real consequences of education department policy: the victimisation of Wesam Charkawi and Wasim El-Haj. **Without public apologies and an end to silencing, with guarantees that such repression will not recur, teachers will fear the consequences of speaking about Palestine.**

Students are hungry to understand the world, but **under current NSW Department of Education policy** they can go from **watching genocide on their phones**, to the **classroom** where they are told they **can't discuss it**.

Classrooms are spaces of public inquiry and cannot be divorced from global or domestic political events.

However current policy leads teachers to second-guess what they can and can't say without putting their jobs or career prospects at risk; that practice can lead to **teachers self-censoring** on a range of topics. It **diminishes educational opportunities** for students, who learn that it is **dangerous** to voice some opinions, or apply **critical thinking skills** when it comes to **government policy**.

Greens MP Alison Boyd said to **Murat Dizdar** in parliament on the requirement for teachers to be neutral, 'Well, we're not neutral on murder.' Dizdar replied 'I think your line of questioning is fair.' and committed to look at the policy again. **The word "neutral" was quietly removed from the policy**, but in a recent email to all school staff Dizdar said, 'schools must remain neutral places for rational discourse.' Nothing fundamental has changed. **The Department of Education has taken an anti-Palestinian position, which is not neutral.**





Most recently Queensland teacher and musician, **Kellee Green**, was **suspended** from her teaching job at a private school, after comments she made at an awards ceremony. The phrase she used “from the river to the sea”, shouldn’t be controversial. It is in the Likud’s (party of Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu) founding charter, which states there will be no Palestinian sovereignty from the river to the sea. **The chant “from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” is a call for liberation in response to that, for one state, with equality between all people, in historic Palestine.** Israel is currently committing genocide against Palestinians “from the river to the sea”, but **it is those calling for Palestinian liberation who are sanctioned.**

Push back is possible

The repression of Palestinian identity and Palestinian voices in schools can be resisted. The **NSW Education Department does not have a consistent position on staff wearing the keffiyeh**, it has bullied individuals over it where it can, but in other schools is afraid of enforcing it, and teachers continue to wear it. **Sheikh Wesam Charkawi was reinstated** after mass protests by parents and students at his school. Where **NSW Teachers Federation union branches have backed teachers' right to wear the keffiyeh**, orders not to wear it have been challenged collectively. **Teachers at 40 schools** have stood up to intimidation and taken part in actions by **Teachers & School Staff for Palestine**, taking group photos in schools calling for an end to genocide, and wearing keffiyeh in solidarity.

This is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of support for Palestinian human rights, fear prevents more teachers from taking part. The repression is designed to create that fear.

It is crucially important to support individuals facing repression, and to collectively continue to protest and speak out against genocide.



Students celebrated Sheikh Wesam Charkawi's return to Granville Boys High School, image sourced from ABC article *Sheikh returns to work at Sydney school after alleged social media breach*, 28 February 2025.

Chris Breen is a member of Teachers & School Staff for Palestine, he is writing in a personal capacity.

Translating Poetry

to share a message of courage and hope

An imprisoned Filipina writer tells Tiffany Tsao about the inspiration in translating a fellow activist's poetry

Amanda Socorro Labana Echanis has written poems, essays, and plays in Filipino. But the idea of producing work in English didn't occur to her until 2023, when she embarked on a **mission to translate Kerima Lorena Tariman's poems**.

Born in 1979, in Legazpi City in the province of Albay, Tariman was a **poet and activist** renowned for her brilliance, remarkable literary output, and commitment to her revolutionary ideals. Her life was cut short in **2021**, at the age of forty-two, when she was **killed by the Philippine military**.

For Amanda, Tariman was not only an exceptional writer, poet, and activist – she **was also a dear friend**:

'Translating her poetry is my way of honouring her life,' says Amanda. 'A life she dedicated to the serving of poor and marginalised people, particularly the peasantry. I would like to believe that Kerima continues to live through her works and in her words, for the people she struggled for and struggled with.'

Lives mirrored in poetry and prison

Amanda's own life journey shares similarities with Tariman's. **Tariman spent a length of time in jail** for the illegal possession of firearms, a trumped-up **nonbailable charge used frequently by the state against activists**. Amanda was arrested more than **four years ago** on the very **same spurious charge** – and remains in jail. Her hearings have been repeatedly postponed, prolonging the process of clearing her name.

Like Tariman, Amanda has a **son**. He was **one month old** when Amanda was **arrested** at her home and taken into custody. He **remained in his mother's care in jail until** the time came for him to start **preschool**. He will turn five this year. In the meantime, Amanda yearns for the day when she will be with her son once more.

Creativity continues behind bars

And also like Tariman, Amanda refuses to let her circumstances dim her determination to use creative endeavour for the greater good. Amanda has **continued her studies while in prison**, attending creative classes online through the University of Philippines Diliman.

In 2023, Amanda Echanis published a collection of her writings titled ***Binhi ng Paglaya* (Seed of Liberation)**. Later that same year, Amanda's project to translate Tariman's poetry earned her a translation mentorship organised by, Singaporean publisher, Ethos Books and a Southeast Asian translators' collective called *the seams*.

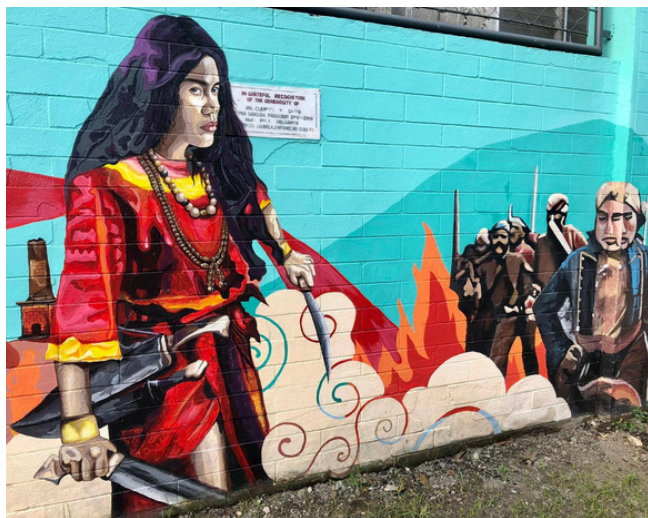


Published by Gantala Press, a Filipina feminist small press.

Amanda wants her translations of Tariman's poetry to inspire her fellow Filipinos who write and read poetry in English. She hopes that they will be inspired to **read the poems' original versions**, written in the national language, Filipino, and various regional languages as well. 'Hopefully,' says Amanda, 'they will also be **inspired by the works of Kerima** the way that I, too, was moved by her words.'

At the international level, Amanda hopes that her translations of Tariman's work will **open people's eyes to what is really going on in the Philippines: the ongoing**

oppression of the poor and the peasantry, who comprise 75 per cent of the country's population. Amanda observes that Tariman's poems bear testament to the historical and pivotal importance of the National Democratic Movement in the Philippines in fighting alongside the Filipino people for social change. She also wishes to share Tariman's message 'of **revolutionary hope, courage, and unwavering fervour in fighting for truth, genuine freedom, and social justice.**'



Kerima Lorena Tariman's image is "muralised" in Dumangas, Iloilo made by lead artist Cj Galpo, AVAC adviser Jesseca Abiera, AVAC president Hanna Celso, and other AVAC artists.

A woman's place is in the people's liberation movement

Tariman's poetry was rooted in her political and social ideals, but also in her identity as a woman and a mother, observes Amanda. **The poems give voice to women and mothers, but especially those actively involved in trying to bring about social and political change.** 'Kerima's unconditional love and strength as a revolutionary woman and mother is an inspiration and testament that, truly, a **woman's place is in the people's liberation movement.**'

One of Amanda's favourite poems by Tariman is '*The Handshake.*' To quote from Amanda's yet-to-be-published translation:

*The handshake
changes society.
The world shakes
from our convergence.*

Expressed in these lines, observes Amanda, is the **transformative power of people when they unite and form connections.** But the poem's lines are also relevant to the act of translation – its power to connect and bridge gaps.

While in jail, Amanda has had much time to reflect, read and explore new interests. And she enjoys the logical, creative, and pragmatic challenges involved in translating poetry.

Another of Amanda's favourite poems by Tariman is '*Cicada*':

*my son
is a cicada.
I hear him in the forest and in the fields
the deafening cacophony
of my longing.*

These lines were written by Tariman in 2003, about her infant son. 'It resonates so well with me and my present situation,' says Amanda, 'and **my deep longing for my son who has been separated from me because of my continued incarceration** . . . I, too, love my son so much and I have so much hope for the future. I hope that one day I will soon be free and reunited with my son.'

Amanda is nearly finished with her project, with only a handful of poems to go. The final English-language manuscript will consist of approximately **forty poems, selected with care by Amanda from Tariman's prodigious body of work.** An award-winning independent publisher based in the UK and US has already expressed interest in publishing Amanda's translation.

Hopefully, Amanda will be free by then, to launch her labour of love in person, with her son by her side.



Amanda's words, quoted above, were obtained through the aid of her legal counsel.

Tiffany Tsao is a writer and literary translator.

Her philosophical speculative fiction novel *But Won't I Miss Me?* will be released in mid-2026.

If you're moved by Amanda's story

[Sign this petition calling for her release](#)

[You can write directly to Amanda in prison](#)

[Stay in touch with the progress of Amanda's case by following her support page on facebook](#)

[Read the work of Kerima Lorena Tariman as translated by Amanda](#)

Zionist Federation lodges Federal Court Complaint against Mary Kostakidis

By Paul Gregoire

The Zionist Federation of Australia filed a legal action against renowned **Australian journalist** Mary Kostakidis with the Federal Court of Australia in late March, in respect of a complaint it first raised with the Australian Human Rights Commission in July 2024, claiming **posts** she made on social media platform X were **antisemitic** in nature.

This maligned attempt to charge Kostakidis, the former face of multicultural television network SBS, with propagating antisemitism takes its lead from uncountable other such complaints that have been **made against other figures critical of genocidal Israeli state actions lodged by Zionists globally, in order to demonise the most high-profile commentators** in an attempt to extinguish all such voices.

Zionist Federation chief executive Alon Cassuto lodged the complaint with the AHRC in July 2024, which was nine months into the Gaza genocide, the most brutal demonstration of inhumanity in recent times, and it relied on the **conflating of anti-Zionist and anti-Israel sentiment with antisemitism – or political criticism with religious prejudice – to silence outrage** over this crime.

Cassuto has lodged the complaint, under section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Cth), and following the AHRC conciliation process having been terminated without any resolution, the Zionist Federation then had sixty days to take the matter to the higher authority, and it lodged the legal action with the Federal Court on the last day possible.

Kostakidis is hardly alone in being locally targeted with these slanderous **accusations that serve to shield a genocide**, as quite a number of cultural figures have been singled out for criticism of Israel being purposely misconstrued as religious prejudice. And as she puts her case to the court, **Mary will be fighting for the right of all of us to speak freely and honestly about the crimes of the Israeli state.**

A settler colonial gripe

Cassuto announced on X on 14 July 2024 that he'd be lodging the complaint with the AHRC, because **Kostakidis had posted footage of Lebanese Hezbollah leader the late Hassan Nasrallah, who was warning Israelis they were not safe in the region**, at a point in time when Lebanon had been engaged in low-level fighting with Israel since October 2023, of which Tel Aviv was to dramatically escalate.

Kostakidis had suggested in the post that the **'Israeli government was "getting some of its own medicine"**, which was an obvious reference to the then **ten-month-long genocidal bloodbath that the Netanyahu government had unleashed upon Gaza**, killing mainly Palestinian children and women, of which the **International Court of Justice ruled was a plausible genocide on 26 January last year.**

The Zionists Federation made the complaint under **section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act**, which makes it unlawful to publicly act in a manner that's **"reasonably likely" to offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate a person or a group based on their "race, colour or national or ethnic origin"**.

This is a controversial law, as the Coalition attempted to remove "offend" and "insult" from the section in 2014, in order to give "bigots" a chance to express themselves in public.

The complaint against Kostakidis was made amongst a **political climate** that involved the **propagation of the idea that antisemitism was on the rise** in the Australian constituency, and Sky News had only recently run a highly publicised documentary based on this proposition, which was entitled *Never Again: The Fight Against Antisemitism*.

The suggested rise in antisemitism was occurring at the same time that the **suppression of any mention of the Gaza genocide in the public sphere** was, too, being promoted.

But following a **Naarm-Melbourne synagogue** being **burnt down** months later and on Gadigal land in Sydney a three-month-long spate of **graffiti and arson crimes** that involved anti-Israel and antisemitic messaging erupted. It **appeared to give proof** to the idea that rampant antisemitism was a spiralling issue in this country.

The **Australian federal police**, however, **publicly revealed** last month that the entire spate of "antisemitic" crimes perpetrated in the Greater Sydney region were **part of an elaborate criminal hoax** that sought to give organised crime figures an advantage over police. So, none of these crimes were fuelled by any antisemitism, and the synagogue arson attack down south remains unexplained.

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The genocide erasing conflation

At the time Cassuto filed a complaint with the AHRC against Kostakidis, it wasn't easy to assert that it was the result of the local Israel Lobby attempting to propagate the conflation of anti-Israel sentiment with prejudice against Jews, because back then, it was little understood. But **ten months on, the local constituency is a lot more privy to this technique.**

As US academic Professor **Judith Butler** explained during a conference in Paris in March last year, **Israeli actors commenced propagating the conflation of Zionism with antisemitism** in the **1970s**, as the latter **carries the weight of the Holocaust**, and therefore, it's a charge people want to avoid. So, construing criticism of Israel with hatred towards Jewish people, **makes people reluctant to criticise.**

Antisemitism is a term that was **coined in 1781** to describe European hatred or hostility towards adherents of Judaism, as prejudice towards Jewish people had been a significant issue across Europe for centuries, and it was **such bigotry that resulted in the Nazi Holocaust against the Jews.**

Zionism, however, is an ideological doctrine founded by Austro-Hungarian Jewish journalist Theodor Herzl in the late 1880s, which **advocated for Israel, a Jewish state, to be created on the historical lands of the Palestinians** in order to escape European persecution. But Palestinian dispossession was not a given at first, as **Argentina had too been considered a viable place for a Zionist state.**

*Many **Jewish people** are **not Zionists**. Many **Zionists** are **not Jewish people**. There are currently **more Christian Zionists** in the **United States** than there are **Jewish Zionists**.*



Photograph by Bianca de March, sourced from [*The Guardian*](#).

Since the 1970s, critics of Israel have been condemned as antisemites, as their anti-Zionist sentiment has been misconstrued as Jewish hate. Since October 2023, right across the western world, **critics of Israel, who are basically speaking out against a livestreamed high-tech genocide, are being labelled antisemitic and retributive actions are being taken against them**, to produce a societal chilling effect.

Universities Australia announced in **February** that the **39 institutions it represents have agreed to adopt a new version of antisemitism** that's based upon the **2016-adopted IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance) working definition of antisemitism**, which **conflates** certain criticisms of Israel, including **questioning the state's right to exist, with antisemitism.**

Reds under the bed

Following the termination of the AHRC conciliation process in December, Kostakidis made a clarifying statement on X in January, in which **she apologised to anyone who may have misconstrued her posting** of the Nasrallah speech **as an endorsement**. However, as she is a journalist, the content of the Lebanese leader's speech should **'not be a barrier to reporting.'**

And as Kostakidis faces court in the coming months, the journalist may have to stand alone but she will hardly be alone in spirit. A great number of locals understand that, as Mary's lawyers put, her **right to freely criticise mass atrocities, to stand up for human rights and to reject a settler colonial entity on a killing spree**, they too are **fighting for the rights of all of us to speak our minds.**

Mary is neither alone in being singled out by the Zionist Federation for an official complaint, as many others have borne the brunt of such attacks. Palestinian Australian academic and author **Dr Randa Abdel-Fattah** recently had her academic grant suspended under such circumstances, while Sydney University's **Dr Nick Riemer** and **Professor John Keane** **are facing action similar to that of Kostakidis.**

The political climate in relation to the antisemitic scare campaign based on the **unfounded notion** that when people **criticise Israeli state crimes** this somehow signals a **dislike of a religion**, is not only preposterous, but it is leading to a situation akin to **1950s US McCarthyism**, where intellectuals were singled out and **charged as communists**, as part of a **red scare witch hunt** run by conservatives.

So, as Kostakidis does have to front up to court to ensure all of our rights to speak freely in the face of catastrophic injustices, Mary can be **reassured** that a **significant portion** of the **Australian constituency** is **standing with her.**

Paul Gregoire is a Sydney-based journalist and writer, and winner of the 2021 **NSW Council for Civil Liberties Award For Excellence In Civil Liberties Journalism**. This was first published in **Sydney Criminal Lawyers®**.

A moving expression of humanity and hope in the face of repression

A letter written in **January** this year by imprisoned Australian writer **Yang Hengjun** has been made **public** for the first time.

In 2019 Dr Yang, an Australian-Chinese **democracy activist**, writer and businessman was imprisoned by Chinese authorities on **national security charges of spying**, which he **denies**.



Yang Hengjun speaking at lecture at Beijing Institute of Technology on 18 November 2010. Photograph from Imaginechina via AFP.

Now in his sixth year of unjust detention in China Yang Hengjun's health has deteriorated rapidly.

In defiance of the **looming suspended death sentence** hanging over him, **Dr Yang's letter** is a testament to his remarkable **resolve** and **aspiration** for a better world. Here is his letter in full.

Letter from Dr Yang to Prime Minister Albanese

10 January 2025, Beijing No. 2 Prison

Your Excellency, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese

At this moment of seeing out the old year and bringing in the new, on the **sixth anniversary of my imprisonment**, I really want to show **how grateful I am** to you and everyone who is caring for and supporting me. I have written millions of words over my career but I can't find the words to properly express my heartfelt gratitude and feeling.

Your Excellency, respected Prime Minister, you have repeatedly conveyed **your grave concerns** about my case and **deteriorating health** to China's paramount leader. You have advocated for me in all ways you can, and also

provided practical help to me and my family, along with spiritual support.

Her Excellency Foreign Minister **Penny Wong** sent me a letter which greatly encouraged me and helped me to maintain strength, resilience and courage. Members of Party leaders, and leaders of several government ministries have all stretched out their helping hands to me and my family. **Australian and international organisations, and many of my intellectual and media colleagues, have not forgotten me or allowed me to let me sink into helpless limbo.**

For six years, His Excellency Australian Ambassador **Scott Dewar** and his predecessor, and their excellent colleagues at the Australian Embassy have persisted in their support for me. They continue to visit me and care for my welfare, and convey my family's love and the concern of the Australian people. All of this solicitude and solace has helped me to bear what has been untold unbearable suffering. They are not family, and yet they are more than family. **How could words articulate my emotions?**

I feel all of your support beside me as I **stagger** through the **hardest and darkest chapter** of my life, allowing me to immerse in the warmth of humanity. It has helped me to understand the value of words and deeds of a government of the people, by the people, for the people - **to enable me to fully understand the true meaning of being an Australian citizen.**



Photograph by David Gray, sourced from Getty Images.

All of this renders with greater clarity than before that Australia is defined not only by its blue sky, beautiful beaches, vast lands and boundless oceans. It is also **defined by strong faith, common values, and a far-reaching vision based on facts and virtue**. As a young and humble nation, we've firmly embraced multiculturalism. We **uphold and safeguard individual freedoms of thought and speech while sticking to the common sense of mankind, and the shared core values of liberty, equality, democracy, and the Rule of Law**. This is the Australian dream I harbour and cherish, which extends beyond Australia's territory over mountains and across oceans, serving as a beacon attracting and inspiring many Asian people and people around the world.



Demonstration at Chinese Consulate General in Sydney in June 2024.
Photograph by Sopa Images from Reuters.

I deeply **love Australia**. It is my beloved children's motherland; its **nature** and **lifestyle** live up to its **principles** and **expectations**. I cherish and defend its core **values**. This is something I've sought for in my life, it is bigger than my own life.

I ardently **love China**, it is the motherland in which I was born, brought up in, and made strong. A long history, a splendid **culture** and tolerant people, the miracle of forty years of economic development initiated by the great leader Deng Xiaoping; it has great potential and a bright future. It has never been out of mind even for a second during these past six years behind bars. I have never regretted **devoting my young life to supporting and putting into practice reform policies working for the Chinese government**. I have never regretted **dedicating twenty years of my later life to writing twenty million words for my Chinese readers all around the world**. I shall never give up contributing my humble part to serving the **development of China and the benefit of the Chinese people**.

Since **2012**, I have had a China Dream, to promote and **practice the 24 character 'socialist core values'** under the Chinese government's strong leadership. I also share with millions of Chinese people the dream of a strong country with prosperous people. I cherish the various and colourful Chinese dreams, Australian dreams, African dreams, and American dreams.

I have a dream. That there is no war, no bullying, no incivility. People of different colours, cultures, and nationalities love each other like sisters and brothers. I **faithfully hope** the world's **longest civilisations** and **youngest civilisations** will one day sit together, to **learn from each other's good points - develop and progress** together, setting an example of **peaceful coexistence** by seeking **common ground** and **reserving differences**. And that I should give something useful to that project.

I have a dream that one day the **spirit of law** and the sunshine of **judicial justice** penetrate every corner of every country. **People should be free from fear, persecution and poverty**. I genuinely expect to sit side by side with my readers one day, sharing 'democracy-peddler'-style stories; sharing laughter, tears and dreams.

Dear Prime Minister Albanese, **words are now failing me**. Tears blur my vision. I can only use a silent voice to thank you and all the people who care for and love me. I know you and the **Australian Government** endeavour to do your utmost to **bring me home for medical care and reunification** with my family. I believe as long as we are together, with conviction and confidence, aspiration and determination, all dreams should come true, one day!

I have a dream: let peace win, let humanity gain, let love prevail, let freedom ring.

God bless all.

Respectfully yours,

Dr Yang Hengjun

Take two minutes to write your own letter to Foreign Minister Penny Wong urging her to call on the Chinese government to end Dr Yang Hengjun's unjust imprisonment and to allow him to be reunited with his family in Australia.



Image sourced from AP.

To Be Seen Without Disappearing

Fatimah Abdulghafur Seyyah on *Ritual*, an anthology of Australian Muslim poets

Opening the pages of *Ritual: An Anthology of Australian Muslim Poets* is like stepping barefoot into a prayer room after a long walk — your skin softens, your breath slows, and you start to notice the textures of things: grief layered with jasmine, anger braided with song, memory speaking in three languages at once.

The Opening Movement

This anthology does not beg to belong. It does not explain itself. Instead, it **offers what so many Australian Muslims have offered quietly for years: presence without performance, truth without apology**, and a kind of poetics that resists flattening — not by shouting, but by staying close to the pulse of the real.

To read *Ritual* is to be reminded that **poetry** is, and has always been, a **form of prayer, protest, and preservation**. These are not abstract voices; they are embodied ones. They carry the rhythm of prostration, the silence of missed calls from distant relatives, the taste of fried onions at iftar, and the **bone-deep ache of inherited exile**. They are the voices of poets from suburbia, with names Australians struggle to pronounce, who know what it means to be searched at the airport and smiled at with suspicion, and who write anyway — with elegance, rage, clarity, devotion.

As a reader — Muslim or not — you are not asked to agree, nor to pity, nor even to understand. You are simply asked to **stay long enough to listen**.

Who This Anthology Is for and Why It Matters Now

To be a **Muslim** in Australia is to live in a **country** that keeps **forgetting it knows you**.

You are **visible** when you're needed to represent multicultural harmony, and hyper-visible when the headlines sharpen. You are spoken about on talkback radio and edited out of national myths. But when it comes to the actual stories — the ones shaped in kitchens, on train platforms, in mosques and medical clinics and Centrelink lines — there has been a long silence. *Ritual* **begins to fill that silence**.

This anthology is not simply a literary project; it is an act of cultural rebalancing. It gathers together **Muslim voices** across **gender, ethnicity, language, and age**, and it allows them to speak from where they are — not from where others want them to be. This is important. Because too often, Australian Muslims are either flattened into a single archetype or forced to explain themselves in the language of the dominant culture. But in *Ritual*, the poets write with the certainty that their audiences include their mothers, their ancestors, their fellow believers, their neighbours, and yes — the curious outsider, too.

Published at a time when global **Islamophobia** remains entrenched, when wars abroad weigh on hearts here, and when younger generations are looking for ways to live whole and visible lives, *Ritual* offers something rare: **poetry as continuity**. Not survival alone, but inheritance, innovation, and insistence.

And it is especially significant that this collection is born here — on this continent, in these contested lands. The anthology implicitly joins a wider conversation about **colonisation** and **belonging**. For many readers, some of these poems may resonate as **parallel stories** of **dispossession, silence, spiritual endurance, and cultural sovereignty**.

The poets in *Ritual* are not claiming to be the first to suffer erasure here — but they are **refusing to remain erased**.

Grief, Ritual, and the Refusal to Disappear

The **five poems** — *Fake Islands*, *Desert Dweller*, *Backward*, *Lattouf v ABC*, and *When any limb aches* — are not linked by theme alone, but by a shared sense of emotional velocity. Each one is both deeply situated and spiritually unbounded, grounded in specificity but reaching toward something larger: **justice, remembrance, healing**. Read together, they offer a collective poetics of survival — not only of being Muslim in Australia, but of **insisting on one's full, contradictory, aching, beautiful self in a world that so often demands invisibility**.

Fake Islands

~ Omar Musa

I'm writing
an island for you.

Reclaiming it from waves,
white foam that dances like death throe.

The core unstable, but should hold for now,
compacted & shaped from some favourite things:

cowrie shells & coffee beans, gold teeth & keys
prized from pianos, typewriters, or broken locks; ball
bearings, button daisies & Sirat al-Mustaquims;
blue ice, Ursula K. Le Guin, flame heart emojis & Weezy F. Baby,
layers of geology, mended bones & UFO tail fins.

The core cast from some most hated things too, why lie?

Antipsychotic pebble beach the mooring spot; self
self self-centre of the earth a vitreous red,
self-torture instrumentals melted for telephone wire;
complicity,
the cream of friendship turned sour milk,
a thousand gotcha moments & unshakeable mistakes.

A pained magnetism. Add
sand. Metric tonnes.

Suction hoppers dredge the ocean floor, rainbow
spray the sand on shore, hum vibrations
between each grain to make solid, firm ground.
Let us make friends here.

Let us call this an environmental experiment — a micro-nation.

May lichens & moss stitch it together a fierce green, may
strings of gannets in ivory slipstream favour this place, puffins
& parakeets lay snow-globes, pray to plant turbines,
harness mood swing winds to light cities
of lyric and lustre. That is the hope.

I'm writing to you from the future, you who have not sighted this land yet.

If I'm lucky, you'll explore every cliff face & crevasse —
rejoice in pockets of shadow, declare this place unliveable, or say with
teeth chattering that the whole fucking hellscape is about to blow.

One person's fake island is another's safe harbour.

FAKE. FRAUD. LIAR.

CON MAN. SHAM. FALSE PROPHET.

I've been called it all in my allotted time.
By you, by you, by me.

No stress.

We might be all right.

How long before a fake island is real?

If a wayfarer bear bairns here,
builds planetarium then buries liver in its ruins, maybe
you'll forget who made it after all.

A place does not exist
until it has ghosts.

In *Fake Islands* we're handed an unstable refuge — an **imagined land** stitched together from **contradiction, memory, and cultural detritus**. Cowrie shells and typewriter keys. Phosphorescent hope and political fraud. The speaker builds this "island" from **personal relics** and collective **inheritance**, a terrain both surreal and painfully real. The poem constructs a place that is part sanctuary, part hallucination — an "environmental experiment" where friendship and turbines, grief and emoji hearts coexist. Its tone shifts between **grief, irony, and a tender futurism**. '*One person's fake island is another's safe harbour,*' the poet writes, collapsing judgment into compassion. The island may be unstable, but it holds — and in holding, it **dares to ask whether imagination itself is enough to survive**.

Desert Dweller

~ Yasmin Elbouch

They call my father a Bedouin:
The Desert Dweller, The Storyteller.

A legacy that you cannot measure. And they call me,
the Bedouin's daughter.

Where her stubbornness explains a resilience to reclaim culture.
Collecting its seeds in the back pocket of her jeans, waiting for harvest.
Preserving them with the hope to remember,
that this is where we come from. But.
To be and stay resilient must mean a sacrifice is made.

They call my father a Bedouin
And a rose,
Because even when you eradicate the Arabs:
 their stems,
 green foliage,
 those determined roots and blossoms,
They readapt to: new grounds
 new bodies of soil
 new countries

Salvaging heritage through sound, movement, family, and food
to emphasise that
there is a passion within us you cannot erase.

They call my father a Bedouin.
But instead of engaging in the nomadic herding of livestock,
he conquers Flinders St Station with a suit and tie, pen in hand. With
his camels invading and recolonising the train tracks,
this is what it is like to lead with: courage loyalty
 softy sagacious
Always finding an abundance of sand in your sleep.

They call my father a Bedouin.
Who belongs to the East, but nurtured in the West. Creating
this disjuncture from being a *real* Arab.
But, how can you expect us to be *real* when you
have uprooted our family tree?

They call me
the Bedouin's daughter,
and well, what do they expect?

For I carry my father's surname and his name is that of my second.
The fierce fighter.
Proud of her identity.
The Bedouin Arab that will not surrender.

Desert Dweller is a quiet epic. It **opens with reverence** and **closes with defiance**. The speaker names her father "**Bedouin**," not just as ethnic identity but as a metaphor for **rooted fluidity** — someone who belongs to movement, **who carries history** in his body. We watch as this father walks the modern streets of Melbourne with camels in tow, his **legacy both visible and unseen**. The poem does something rare: it speaks **across generations** without romanticising or indicting. It's filled with **pride**, but also **pain**. In describing herself as "the Bedouin Arab that will not surrender," the speaker claims not only a cultural past, but a **future** where such **identity no longer needs defending**.

Backward

~ Maira Nguyen

Mum stared at me, shaking her head. 'I
didn't send you across the seas
For you to turn out like this.
I worked hard to send you to Australia,
The tuition is not cheap.
Why did you turn out this way?
Why have you become
Backward?'

She calls me backward because I left my nine-to-five,
Refusing the chase for promotion.

She says I'm backward for marvelling
At creation's delicate interconnectedness —
The rain awakening the soil,
The seeds splitting open bringing forth fresh oranges and apples, Honey
stored miraculously in bees,
Silk spun by worms, and pearls birthed in oysters.

She thinks I'm backward for seeing
Rivers, mountains, wattles, birds, daisies
Not as soulless commodities for business,
But as beautiful sacred artworks,
God's servants, just as I am.
She calls me backward for believing
In what eyes cannot see, whispering,
'Alhamdulillah' As raindrops touch my face,

As I savour the sweetness of a mango at Preston Market,
Or share a smile with a stranger at a red light.

She says I'm backward for seeking advice
From strangers on the street.
'Mum, the entire universe is wrapped up inside you. I
want to catch a glimpse of it.'

She calls me backward for studying
The wisdom of ancient peoples —
Buddha's teachings, Rumi's poems,
The Greeks' Four Temperaments, Indigenous Australians' land care. Thanks
to them, I shift away from conquering others,
Instead, focusing on governing my own heart and soul.
Controlling, not being controlled.
Learning contentment, gratitude,
Forgiveness when my ego is hurt,
Speaking against genocide despite my fears.

She calls me backward for loving a Bengali man:
'Why not a White guy? You're in Australia!'
She exclaimed, breaking my heart.

She wants me to be more *western*,
To adopt the mindset of those who colonised us,
To embrace capitalism, materialism, racism.

Siphoned of words I sat quietly
Enduring her complaints.
Finally, I whispered,
'Con xin lỗi Mẹ.' (I'm sorry, Mum.)

In *Backward*, the accusation doesn't come from a stranger or a state — it comes from the speaker's own mother. 'Why did you turn out this way?' she asks, visibly hurt. Her anger is not cruel but laced with fear and disappointment. She has crossed seas, paid tuition, endured uncertainty — all in the hope of **securing safety and success for her child. But her daughter has chosen a different path**: she has left behind the nine-to-five, refused upward mobility, fallen in love with a Bengali man, and begun to live in rhythm with things the mother cannot measure — bees, mangoes, strangers' smiles, the language of prayer.

The word "backward" becomes both a wound and a mirror. But the speaker does not meet judgment with anger. She turns inward, toward the **wisdom she's cultivated in stillness** — in rain, in fruit, in stray cats, in unguarded moments of gentleness. Her resistance is not loud, but luminous.

The poem's most tender rupture comes in a line directed at the mother: 'Mum, the entire universe is wrapped up inside you. I want to catch a glimpse of it.' Here, defiance gives way to **reverence**. The daughter is not rejecting her mother's values but reaching for something deeper than expectation — a recognition of the mother's own **infinite interiority**, and her own. In this act, she teaches love back to its source.

The final whisper — 'Con xin lỗi Mẹ' (I'm sorry, Mum) — **is not surrender**. It's a kind of sorrow-tinged devotion, an apology that holds no regret for the path taken. The speaker may be called "backward," but in this poem, backward means returning — to awe, to slowness, to the vastness within.

In the matter of Lattouf v Australian Broadcasting Corporation

~ Sara Mansour

Your honour, I submit that the burden of proof should be on the respondent,
our national broadcaster, to prove that Lebanese, Arab or Middle Eastern
people are not a race

Otherwise

Un-bite every mother's tongue

Un-hiss every sneer of

Wog, terrorist, thug, go-back-to-where-you-fled-from

Un-accolade us

Unroll every small vine leaf miracle we shared

Un-savour every plate of baba ghanouj we prepared
(and the name of which you definitely mispronounced)

Un-mispronounce all our names

Un-ride the El-Magic train

Un-form the Middle Eastern Crime Squad

Un-arrest, un-mock, un-grievance

Unbox the prejudice you mask as free speech

Un-scapegoat us then, take responsibility for the rot

Un-stomp the boys' heads

Instead, hold them between your hands and tell them they are beautiful

Un-print every sensationalised front page

Un-publish Dutton's claim that it was Fraser who erred in letting us migrate

Untangle the dreams that drew us here in the first place

Reach into the back of our throats and loosen the knots that formed during
Cronulla

Ironically, or maybe not, exactly two decades ago

The year before my sister Ayah was born Unadorn
the verse in her name

She has only ever known the salt of those waves

I teach her in our culture, we kiss the hands of every displaced

And we write and memorise a thousand loud rhymes in a rage

Bundles upon bundles of evidence

That we will then ululate in praise

And yet the respondent mounts a legal argument in Court asking us to prove

We are a race.

Lattouf v ABC is both **court testimony** and **lyrical strike**. It begins formally — ‘Your Honour...’ — then fractures into a **poetic onslaught**: every line beginning with “Un-” becomes a linguistic undoing of **racial** and **media violence**. ‘Un-bite every mother's tongue / Un-hiss every sneer of / Wog, terrorist, thug...’ The poem holds up a mirror to the **systemic silencing of Arabs and Muslims in Australia** and then smashes it.

This is not a gentle critique. It is a reckoning with the **cumulative erasure of a people**: their names, their cuisine, their prayers, their dead. And yet embedded in this **fury** is **deep care** — for community, for memory, for those who have survived and for those who haven't. It's not just a poem about the **media**. It's about what it means to be **forced to prove you exist** — to prove your **identity** is real, your **grief** is real, your **people** are real. It ends, not with resolution, but with **ancestral voice**: ululations in praise, and **rage** that refuses to be tidied up.

When any limb aches
holds stillness like
prayer. Set during
Tarawih, the nightly
prayers of Ramadan, a
group of women pray
shoulder to shoulder.
Their presence is soft,
scented with attar and
Glen 20, their bodies
in sync on red and
green carpet. But the
poem, like the prayer
itself, stretches
outward — toward
memory, toward war.
The recitation of a
verse from the **Qur'an**
— *'We will certainly
test you with a touch
of fear and famine...'*
— opens a portal to
Gaza, where a pale-
faced boy recites atop
rubble, and a father
holds the body of his
son.

The speaker's grief
floods the prayer
room. The red and
green carpet sways.
The poem collapses
distance — between
here and there, the
sacred and the
political, the
whispered and the
screamed. The final
act — *'I weep in my
sujood'* — is not just a
moment of ritual. It is
full-body grief, full-
body empathy, full-
body remembrance.
Through the sacred
posture of **sujood** —
prostration — the
speaker becomes a
vessel of collective
mourning. And in the
act of **du'a** —
supplication — she
carries the weight of a
people's pain into the
unseen.

When any limb aches

~ Ferdous Bahar

There are seven aunties at tarawih, and me. Squashed
into each other's elbows and toes —
all smelling of attar, a faint whiff of samosas (from iftar),
and Glen 20 coating the red and green carpet.

Shoulder-to-shoulder, foot-to-foot. One body.

A rustle of curtain because an aunty is late.
We shuffie further into each other's shoulders and toes. It
is a small room for us ladies —
but there is always space.

The imam reads from Al-Baqarah. Eloquent, sonorous.
There is a sudden, deep ache in my limbs.

There was a video from my newsfeed this morning. A pale-faced boy,
skinny armed, a hungry look in his eye.
Reciting, with his full chest,

atop the rubble of his home in Gaza.

'We will certainly test you with a touch of fear and famine and loss of property.'

I blink. An aunty coughs.
The red and green carpet sways.
I steady my breath and press my hands into my chest.

An aunty at the back steps sideways into the twenty-four pack of water
bottles. A pause.

*'We will certainly test you with... loss of life, and crops. Give good news
to those who patiently endure—'*

A group of mothers in North Gaza stir a pot of grass and polluted water.

A father stares at the pale face of his deceased son.
'Hasbunallahu Wa Ni'mal Wakeel.'

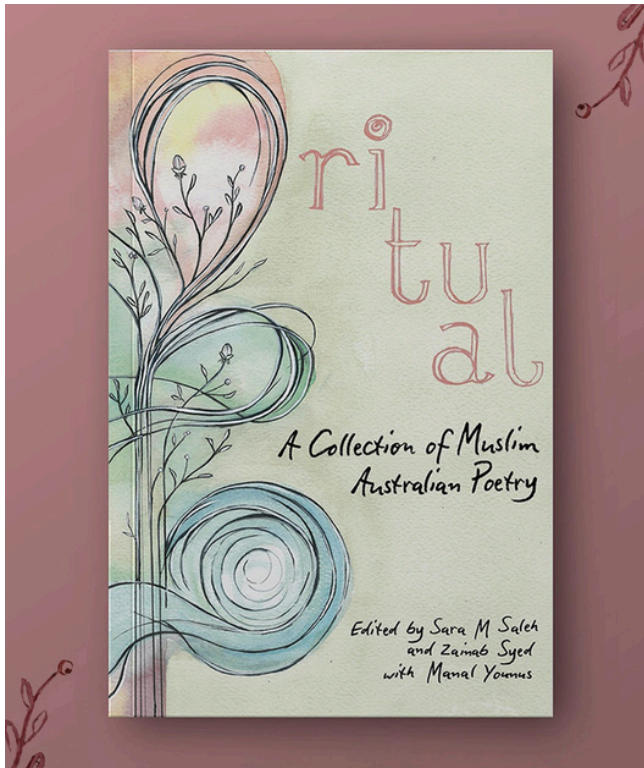
A young boy cries over the corpse of his brother.
'There will never be another brother like you.'

I blink. The red and green carpet swims.

*'Give good news to those who patiently endure — who say, when struck
by a disaster, "Surely to Allah we belong and to Him we will all return".'*

I weep in my sujood.

What unites these poems is not just a shared identity, but a shared poetic instinct: **to name what hurts without letting it disappear**. Whether through surrealism, lyric, testimony, or prayer, these poets are not simply documenting what it means to be Muslim in Australia. They are shaping new ways of speaking, remembering, and being — and refusing, always, to vanish quietly.



Echoes and Chorus — Other Voices in the Landscape

If these five poems form a kind of spine for the reader's journey through *Ritual*, these next voices extend the body outward — into anxiety, fragmentation, and confrontation. What makes this anthology extraordinary is not uniformity, but range: tonal, structural, and emotional. **These poems do not circle neatly around identity; they tear into it, with grief, absurdity, silence, and fire.** They are less a chorus than a multiplicity — poems that bruise and shimmer in different registers, each one revealing another face of **what it means to carry the name Muslim in Australia**.

In *Please don't let it be a Muslim*, Nadine Nasser Agha plunges us into the anxious, visceral moment of a crisis unfolding. The poem begins with a simple yet loaded prayer — “Please don't let it be a Muslim” — one that speaks to the **intersection of personal identity and public perception**. It captures the fear that Muslims in Australia experience when violence strikes: not only **fear** for the **victims**, but fear of **being collectively blamed**. **Nadine Nasser Agha**, a Lebanese-Syrian-Australian writer from South West Sydney, brings to the poem the precision of someone shaped by both lived experience and a media-trained lens — aware of how quickly a headline can become a verdict, and how **rarely Muslim voices are allowed to own the narrative**.

In *Lethologica*, **Lamisse Hamouda** captures the fractured, stammering tension of memory, diaspora, and return through a poem that reads like a scrambled invocation. The title — which refers to the inability to recall a word — becomes the poem's operating metaphor: language falters, collapses, resists linearity. What remains are **fragments** — “LOCUSTS,” “TRUST,” “BUREAUCRACY,” “FLESH” — disjointed yet burning with urgency. Each word feels retrieved from a dream or an interrogation, suggesting that the speaker is trying to name a **trauma that language itself cannot hold**. *Lethologica* is not about forgetting, but about the violence of almost-remembering — and the ache of what language leaves behind.

In *The Jihadi's Wife (I)*, **Ronia Ibrahim** detonates the lyric form — not just in content, but in tone, pacing, and audacity. The poem follows a woman consumed by something called *Yearning* — part **radicalisation, part romantic obsession, part spiritual sickness** — a force that grooms her, feeds her, Pays her, then disappears. Told in clipped, ironic bursts, the voice is intimate yet unsettling: grotesque, tender, absurd. Her death is presented without dignity, reduced to a severed arm and a vape, buried beneath slurs and bureaucratic coldness. Ibrahim doesn't sentimentalise or justify her subject, but she refuses to dehumanise her either. Instead, she makes us sit in the **discomfort of seeing someone who was vulnerable and complicit, banal and broken** — and in doing so, she offers not sympathy, but the dangerous clarity of recognition.

Reader Reflections — On Ritual as Contemplation

Ritual is not a book that draws lines between those who belong and those who don't. It doesn't ask who prays or who fasts or who knows the words — it asks only: **Have you ever stopped to notice what you carry?** This anthology is not about division. It is about the deeply human instinct to contemplate — to sit with memory, to trace identity through time, to reach into the past and into the unknown with equal tenderness.

You do not need to share the poets' histories to stand beside them. You need only the willingness to reflect. **To contemplate who you are, what has shaped you, and what rituals — spoken or silent — have kept you intact.** This is what the book offers, and what it quietly asks in return.

The Guiding Hands

The strength of *Ritual* also lies in the hands that gathered it. Editors **Sara M Saleh, Zainab Syed, and Manal Younus** are poets, organisers, facilitators — each of them deeply engaged in the transformative potential of language. Their own practices stretch across law, performance, teaching, and international dialogue, and it shows: this is not an anthology that merely collects voices. It nurtures, challenges, and makes space for contradiction. The poems here do not agree with one another — nor do they need to. What unites them is the trust of the editors

who recognised that **poetry**, when **given the freedom** to speak in all its fractures and fullness, becomes a ritual in itself: one of **witness**, of **survival**, of **becoming**.

Personal Coda — Remembering the Ritual

My own poem closes this anthology, but I do not think of it as a conclusion. If anything, *“Remember me when I am gone”* is a continuation — a ripple in the water long after the stone has been thrown. It is written as a call, but also as a return. Each line is an offering: broken glass, roses, glaciers, the quiet desperation of a stray cat, the memory of being someone’s child. These images do not belong to any one culture or tradition. They belong to the part of us — all of us — that **yearns to be seen, felt, remembered**. The poem is not asking to be glorified or forgiven. It is simply asking to be held in the same way *Ritual* holds all its voices: gently, without rushing, with **reverence**.

I hope that when the last line is read, the silence that follows will be full — not of endings, but of echoes. And in that echo, may you remember not just the poets, but yourself — **the part of you that has also longed to be named, held, and remembered**.

On The Poets

The poets in *Ritual* are, first and foremost, **Australians**. What unites them is not sameness, but a shared commitment to truth-telling — through forms that stretch across lineages, geographies, and tongues. They are **children of migrants and refugees, scholars and storytellers, daughters of resistance, sons of longing, voices shaped by languages** including Arabic, Turkish, Vietnamese, Bengali, Somali, Urdu, Malay, English, and more. Some write from the heart of suburbia, others from academia, law, activism, or performance. Their rituals are shaped by mosques and memory, yes — but also by classrooms, train stations, rivers, footy fields, and kitchens. **Together, they form a portrait of Australia that is expansive, intricate, and defiantly alive — an Australia that exists beyond stereotype, in the quiet, persistent pulse of lived experience.**

Fatimah Sayyah is an Australian poet

***Ritual is published by Sweatshop
Literacy Movement and available now
in all good bookstores.***



Editors of *Ritual*, Sara M Saleh and Zainab Syed.

How the Government tried to protect millennials from the internet

Stephanie Coombs looks at new social media laws through the longish lens of history

It's hard to believe but there was a time in Australia where, if you **saw something that you didn't like on the internet**, you could **contact a Government organisation**, complain, and **they would try to take it down**.

The year was **1999**, the internet was new, and the **Howard Government** wasn't very keen on all those "dirty" websites that were popping up. Their vision for the internet (if they had one at all) was something closer in tone to daytime television.

But how to make the entire internet a bit less like the back room of a video store, and a bit more like reruns of Dad's Army? The **Information Technology Minister** at the time, **Richard Alston**, had a plan. Borrowing heavily from television broadcast classifications, **Alston crafted legislation which targeted online content rated R or above**. It made bureaucrats from the now-defunct **Australian Broadcasting Authority** the prefects of the internet. They had the power to issue **take-down notices for websites and content they deemed to be offensive that was hosted in this country**.

It was an anachronistic law that arrived just in time for the new millennium – the legislation came into effect **January 1, 2000**.

Catching a tsunami with a sieve

One article, written in March of that year, said that in **three months** of operating, the ABA had just **90 complaints** on their hotline. They led to a total of **27 take-down notices**. What a simpler time. These days I'll see 100 things to complain about on the internet before it's midday.

All kinds of locally-made smut was affected by the new legislation. **Websites hosting pornographic photos, videos and brothel reviews were targeted**. It was a devastating time for these small, online businesses. Some of them were down for a whole hour before they **simply moved their website hosting offshore**.

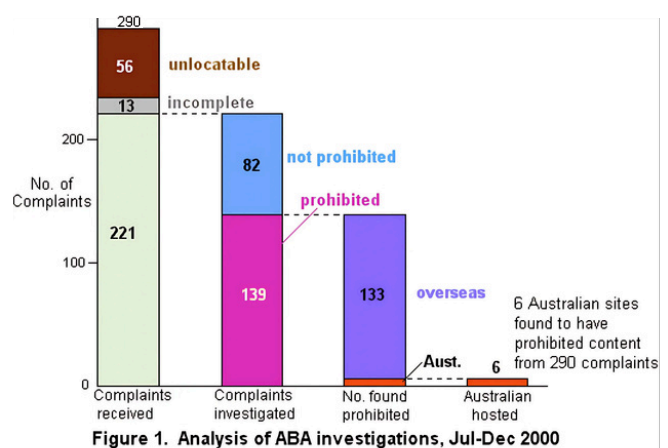
'The legislation is a little embarrassing - it shows how **out of touch with the issue** [the Government] are,' one academic said at the time.

But Alston was happy with how things were running. 'As far as I am concerned, the system is working pretty well,' he said. Here was a man promising to catch a tsunami

with a sieve, unaware, or unwilling to admit, the futility of this endeavour. Either way, he and the **Government were adamant they were doing the right thing in order to protect Australian children**.

Well, I was one of those children. Did Alston do it? Did he protect me and my peers from smut on the internet?

Unequivocally, he did not.



The above is sourced from **Regulatory Failure: Australia's Internet Censorship Regime**, published May 5th 2001 by Electronic Frontiers Australia.

Children of the information superhighway

We millennial children stumbled around the internet, saw some stuff we shouldn't, and largely survived it. Would we all have been smarter, happier, more empathetic without its intrusion on our collective childhoods? It's impossible to say.



Cartoons illustrated by Clay Bennet, originally published in the *Chattanooga Times Free Press*. Find more of his work: @BennettCartoons on X and @clay.bennett.cartoons on Facebook.

'We shape our tools, and then our tools shape us,' Marshall McLuhan's maxim states. I am no more able to suppose whether I'd have been better off growing up before the printing press, the radio or television.

But **if millennials do have some kind of psychological burden** from poking around in the dark nooks and crannies of the internet as children, it is **carried equally by all of us**. A **shared experience which informs how we navigate society**, both online and in person.

Is this such a bad thing? We don't arrive at adulthood suddenly one day, as though it were a train station. It's incrementally gained through years and experiences. **To hermetically seal children from the dangers of the world they will inhabit does them no favours.**

In any case, Australians learnt that porn on the internet, and people's insatiable appetite for it, was more powerful than any mere Government. That battle, at least, was abandoned. But **each generation gets to be the centre of its own moral panic**, and now the eye of Sauron has turned to the amorphously defined "social media".

Nobody knows how it will work

New legislation, rushed through late last year, means that you have to be at least 16 to access websites like Snapchat, TikTok, Facebook, Instagram and X. These companies have until the end of 2025 to develop the

necessary systems to comply with the laws. **No one really knows how, exactly, this age verification should work. Or, crucially, if it will work at all.**

'We don't argue that its implementation will be perfect, just like the alcohol ban for under 18s doesn't mean that someone under 18 never has access, but **we know that it's the right thing to do.**' Anthony Albanese said on the matter.

So here we are, once again, **enacting legislation that will likely be ineffectual**, because we seemingly have no collective memory.

What did we learn?

We tried to censor the internet in 2000 in order to protect children. It didn't work. Even with half a century of hindsight and the maturation of the first online generation, we've apparently learnt nothing.

It's almost comforting to know that, while **technology continues to move at an impossibly fast rate**, the **Government's responses** to it, at least, will be **constant** in its **short-sightedness**.

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Stephanie Coombes is a Sydney-based writer. She publishes a weekly newsletter called *The Carpet*.

How safe is it to blow the whistle in Australia?

In light of the recent election, **Tom Morton** reflects on discussion from the online panel held by PEN Sydney on Thursday 14th November



Former Senator **Rex Patrick**
Advocate for whistleblowers



Peter McCutcheon
Senior ABC Journalist on 730



Anneliese Cooper
Lawyer with Whistleblower Project



Moderator – **Michael West**
Journalist

Independent Senators Andrew Wilkie and David Pocock have been returned to Parliament in the 2025 Federal election.

While it's unclear as yet how much direct influence they will have, the newly-elected parliament will consider **stronger protections for whistleblowers**, which these Senators introduced earlier this year.

The **Whistleblower Protection Authority Bills** seek to establish a statutory Whistleblower Protection Authority which would be empowered to **receive and investigate disclosures** from whistleblowers, and conduct **public enquiries** into the **mistreatment** of whistleblowers.

Australia's **existing whistleblower laws are "broken"** according to former South Australian Senator **Rex Patrick**. Mr Patrick was one of the panellists on an online forum organised by PEN Sydney to mark the **Day of the Imprisoned Writer on 11 November 2024**. The forum was moderated by investigative journalist **Michael West** and co-hosted by the Media Arts and Entertainment Alliance (MEAA).



Photograph supplied by the Whistleblower Justice Fund.

Also on the panel were **Anneliese Cooper**, a lawyer with the Human Rights Law Commission's Whistleblower Project, and the ABC journalist **Peter McCutcheon**.

Rex Patrick began by discussing the case of South Australian **whistleblower Richard Boyle**. Boyle blew the whistle on **aggressive tax collection policies** at the Australian Tax Office and is **still facing three criminal charges for allegedly disclosing protected information**.

Rex Patrick: Richard Boyle blew the whistle on an egregious use by the Tax Office of its powers to garnish bank accounts. They were going in and **stripping money from bank accounts to recover tax debts** that simply put players out of business, put **small businesses** basically in a position where they **couldn't continue**, they couldn't pay their salaries, they were unable to trade out of the situation that they're in.

And Richard put up his hand and said, we do have these powers, but we're using them in a way that's improper. So he blew the whistle, basically saying we're doing the wrong thing. The investigator contacted the Adelaide office where Richard worked, and said, Are you doing these things? And they sent back a note that said, **Yes, we are. And this is where the law says we can do this. And left it at that.**

The investigator didn't look at the manner in which the power was being used. Essentially **they just said there's nothing to see here**. That left Richard in an awful position.

He ended up going to the **Inspector General of Taxation**, who said, Look, I can't do anything for you. And then, basically, the ABC ended up doing a story on it and blowing the whole thing open. And it's really interesting,

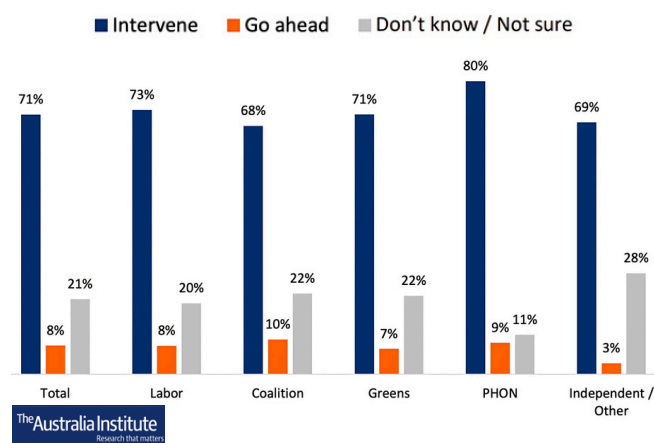
Richard is not charged with any disclosure of information other than to his lawyer. You know, he's not charged with disclosing something to the ABC. But interestingly, it was only **after** the ABC basically prepared its story for Four Corners that they **laid the charges**.

As part of his defence, it's raised some questions about the scope of the federal whistleblower protection laws and it went to the **Full Court of the South Australian Supreme Court**.

In effect, the Full Court affirmed that we have **broken whistleblower laws**, and that's left Richard in a position where he has **no shield** in relation to the alleged conduct.

The government knows that these laws are broken. The court knows it. The government knows it. **Mark Dreyfus** (Federal Attorney General) has been looking at how we improve our whistleblower protection laws in a very, very **slow** way. Mark Dreyfus ought to be using his powers under Section 71 of the Judiciary Act to simply say, I'm going to stop this prosecution.

Should the government intervene on the Richard Boyle whistleblower case or let the prosecution go ahead, grouped by voting intention



The Human Rights Law Centre collaborated with The Australia Institute to survey 1,002 Australians about whistleblowing in 2021.

Mark Dreyfus **should be dropping this case** for two reasons. One is Richard Boyle has gone through hell. The second reason is, if anyone was watching, there is no way they would ever want to blow the whistle, and that's extremely problematic from a public policy perspective.

If Mark Dreyfus had courage, he would simply drop this prosecution, so everyone would know that if you do the right thing, the government will have your back. Right now they don't. **They simply want to persecute whistleblowers**.

Michael West: Anneliese Cooper, you advise whistleblowers on the legal pitfalls that they face. **What would you say to a public servant like Richard Boyle, who saw corrupt practices and was contemplating blowing the whistle on a public sector agency?**



Richard Boyle. Sourced from The Walkley Foundation, Whistleblower Richard Boyle: 'I didn't have a chance, did I?' on November 21, 2024.

Anneliese Cooper: From our perspective, this advice is always very complicated. It depends on the jurisdiction that you're in, the **sector** that you're in, which Act you want to blow the whistle under. And the problem that our clients face is that following these whistleblower pathways is very prescriptive and very, very complicated, and it's very **easy to make a misstep** that can then mean that you're **no longer protected against criminal or civil liability**.

I think the pitfalls of these disclosures are twofold. The first is the legal issues. They're very complicated. It's very difficult to mitigate the risk. But the second is the **personal risks that our clients face**.

Even if you are technically protected under whistleblower disclosure laws, it's one thing to be protected and it's another thing **for your employer to actually abide by what their requirements are to protect you** as a whistleblower.

So what we often see is cases of reprisal that are very difficult, then to prosecute in court and to get any compensation for our clients in court. And also, we often see our **clients' confidentiality breached** because of a **lack of understanding**, sometimes in the public service, sometimes in the private sector, around the recipients obligations to protect whistleblowers.

So we have two issues. The first is that the **legal system** is very, very **difficult to navigate**. And the second is, regardless, our clients have **very serious personal risks** that they face in deciding when to blow the whistle.

Peter McCutcheon: Anneliese you were talking about the personal risk for whistleblowers. I saw that with someone I was interviewing earlier this year. It was like a really clear, cut case.

It was a **psychologist** who works with **children at risk in watch houses**, in Cairns. She saw first hand how they were being **mistreated**. They weren't getting the **food** and **support** they needed, and there was a problem of **different departments not talking to each other**.

She tried to handle it internally. That didn't work. She wrote a **document that got leaked**. I was trying to get her on TV, on the 730 program, and she knew about

whistleblower protection and putting out what we call (in Queensland) a PID, a **public interest disclosure**.

And then she rang me on the weekend, and she said something that, you know, we get from time to time as journalists. **She said, Peter, how safe am I?** You know, what could possibly happen to me?

And it's a really hard thing as a journalist, because I want to tell a story, but I've got to be honest with it too, you know?

What I said is, look, in my experience, your case, what you're saying, I think it's low risk. But don't just speak to me. I'm a journalist. I've got a vested interest in this. Get your own advice.

Anyway, she went ahead with it, but it turned out that her partner worked in a part of the public service that was responsible for dealing with these sorts of issues through the Queensland ombudsman, so she got expert advice. So I'm thinking, if you've got someone with a clear cut case, with a story to tell, who has got expert advice from her partner, and she's still unsure about it, you're thinking, well, **what hope is there for other people?**

Michael West: Well, as we've heard, **we simply have to fix our whistleblower laws. How do we do that?**

Anneliese Cooper: There's a few different overarching things that our organisation would propose. The first big

piece of reform would be some sort of **comprehensive whistleblower protection reform** and **set of laws for public servants**, and then a **set of laws for everyone else**. So that's the private sector charities, everyone who's not covered under public sector law. And that would mean that it's comprehensive, uniform.

Then it's very clear for everyone who wants to blow the whistle exactly where they're going and what those pathways are, and then, to the extent possible, the public sector and non-public sector reforms would be as **consistent as possible**, so that everyone just has a base level **understanding of what the procedure is, how their rights work and how their obligations work**, and it's a bit more instinctive, that's the first thing.

And the second big piece of reform that we would push for is a **Whistleblower Protection Authority**. So that would be a **Commonwealth statutory agency** that can **enforce** whistleblower laws. It can **investigate** detriment and reprisal and breach of confidentiality matters. It can **provide support** and **training** to other relevant regulators, and it would be **overseen by a commissioner** that would oversee the whole thing. So that would be like a one stop shop support mechanism for whistleblowers.

Tom Morton is a former ABC broadcaster and journalism academic, writing on the lands of the Gadigal of the Eora nation.



Photograph supplied by the Whistleblower Justice Fund.

Leila's nightmare

Leila Sadeghi was warned there would be consequences for translating feminist articles in Iran... and there were



Illustration by [Roshi Rouzbehani](#), sourced from [NYT](#) October 2022.

I stood at the **Tehran airport immigration** desk in my black raincoat, **wearing a hijab** that fully covered my hair, **trying to avoid any trouble from the authorities**. The airport officer held my passport, lifted the entry stamp, stared at the screen in front of him, put the stamp back down, looked at me, then took my passport and asked me to follow him to the airport security office.

I could see my brother through the airport glass doors, waiting to pick me up, after I'd landed from Sydney. He was wearing black and was unshaven. I'd never seen him like this before.

Iranians wear black for a while after losing a loved one, as black is a symbol of sorrow and loss. Men also tend not to fully shave, showing their grief over the loss of their loved ones.

I had been crying and thinking about my dad throughout the 18-hour flight from Australia. He had suffered so much, and I had already said my goodbyes to him, as early-onset dementia had taken him from us almost five years ago. My mother and sister had cared for him for so long.

While I'd been standing in front of the airport security officer, I kept staring at my handbag, my phone in it. My mouth was so dry, I couldn't breathe, and my heart was beating so fast. Little did I know that for the next six months it would keep beating like this. Later, I realised that what I was feeling was called **anxiety and fear**.

Free to go?

I could still see my brother through the barriers as my **passport was confiscated, and I was told I was not allowed to leave the country**. They told me to report to the Evin Prosecutor's Offices to follow up, my case to follow up, my case would be investigated by the notorious Iranian Revolutionary Guards. But I was "free to go—for now", they said.

I had **left my 13-year-old son with my husband** back in Australia, to be with my family for my father's funeral. And now, all I could think about was my boy. All the grief and sadness had been replaced by fear and confusion.

For the last few years, I had been **translating feminist articles** (cartoons, film reviews and biographies of strong international female figures) alongside a small group of dedicated Iranian women's rights activists who'd all been forced to leave Iran.



Protests in Berlin following the death of Mahsa Amini in 2022. Upper by Dilara Senkaya for Reuters and lower by Markus Schreiber for AP.

My friends and family had **warned** me there would be **consequences** for this work, but I hadn't listened. **At the time I had called them cowards.**

And yet, here I was—so scared and shaken, like a sparrow who had lost its wings.

Who was the coward now?

That night in Tehran, the only person who could bring me comfort was my six-year-old nephew. I kept hugging

him, seeking calmness, as he was the only member of my family who wasn't in shock—either from **losing a father** or from my **possible imprisonment**.

Friends and relatives visited us constantly to offer their condolences. I would hug them and sob so hard, my shoulders shaking in my black outfit. They weren't sure how to comfort me for losing my dad—because it wasn't just him, I was grieving. I was **mourning my freedom**, my lost wings.



Illustration by Bahar Demirtaş for NPR 2022 online publication, *Iran's protesters find inspiration in a Kurdish revolutionary slogan*.

The notorious Evin Prison

As soon as my dad's funeral was over, I went to the office of Evin prison to get my passport back.

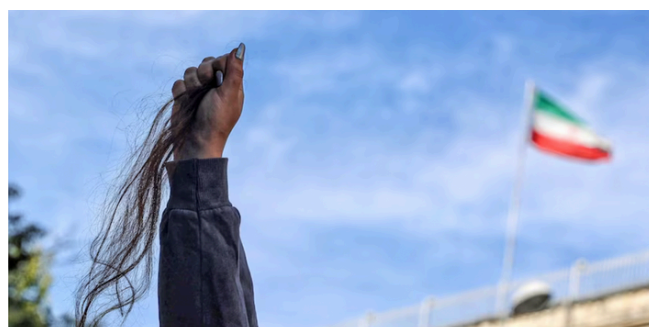
There was chaos in that infamous building. Families, friends, and lawyers of political prisoners were begging officers for answers—demanding to know why their loved ones had disappeared or why they had been incarcerated in solitary confinement for months without any charges.

I saw so many men and women from The Iranian Opposition—people who I had been following on social media—being summoned to Evin for interrogation, only to leave in tears.



Photograph by Majid Asgaripour, sourced via Reuters.

Later, when I read *The Uncaged Sky* by Kylie Moore-Gilbert, the Australian academic, I realised that while I was at Evin Prison chasing up my passport she was imprisoned there, in solitary confinement, being interrogated.



Photograph by Ozan Guzelce, sourced from Getty Images.

The agonising wait begins

After several visits to Evin and enduring the **staff's humiliating behaviour**, I was told to go back home and wait for them to contact me.

Every now and then, a man would call my mobile phone, asking for my contact details. Once, my sister received a similar call from a man requesting my information. Then—silence.

Every knock on the door made me jump. I kept **expecting the Revolutionary Guard** to storm my mother's apartment and arrest me.

Some days impatience would get the better of me, and I'd go to Evin, trying to approach the officer in charge of my case. And so, the vicious cycle continued.

My mental state was deteriorating—anxiety, fear, and guilt consumed me.

My husband and son were in shock, thousands of kilometres away, and my family in Iran was deeply worried about me. I had only told a few close friends about my situation—everyone else assumed I had decided to stay longer to support my mum.

I tried reaching out to a few women's rights activists for help and comfort. Some told me, **'You should have mentally prepared yourself for this. Be brave, and do not contact us again—it's not safe. You are being watched.'**

After three months, I received the call I had been dreading. **I was asked to attend a "meeting" (interrogation) in an unnamed building.**

The interrogation

My brother and sister-in-law drove me there. My lawyer had already advised me about how to prepare for the meeting. However, by the time we arrived at the address, I was already scared to death.

The building had no signage indicating any connection to the Revolutionary Guard. It looked just like a regular four- or five-story residential building in the centre of Tehran. I rang the bell. The heavy iron gate opened—they had obviously been expecting me.

At the reception, I was asked to **hand in my mobile phone** and any other devices I had on me. Then, I was directed to a bare, carpeted room, accompanied by a fully covered young woman. She asked me to take off my shoes, checked inside them, and then **scanned my body** with a device similar to those used at airports or in movies.

Next, I was led into a room with a large rectangular table. Two bearded young men—much, younger than me—were already seated behind it. I was asked to join them, along with the young woman. I suppose her presence was meant to imply that I was "safe" because a female staff member was in the room.

You're not being cooperative

They began by asking about my family, my son, how long I had been living in Australia, and the status of my residency. At first, they were softly spoken and gentle, but then the questions escalated. They began **accusing me of having connections with women's rights activists outside Iran, of being paid by Western governments to translate and publish articles on social media.** I denied all of it.

The man who seemed to be in charge raised his voice. **'It looks as if you don't want to return to your son and husband. You're not being cooperative.'**

He continued, 'I have documents proving that you assisted Iranian activists overseas.' Then, he turned his laptop screen towards me. A couple of unopened PDF files were displayed.

'Look at them,' he said. 'This is the evidence. **Don't expect to see your family anytime soon.**'

And then they let me go... it was back to silence again.

Australia felt so far away

I missed my 13-year-old son so much that I would burst into tears whenever I walked past a teenage boy on the street. I stayed up until midnight, so we could video call after he returned from school.

Often, I remember guiding him through making pizza dough, just like we used to do together. Once the dough was ready to rise, he would go to the supermarket with his dad to buy the toppings, and I would finally go to bed.

The next morning, I would wake up to photos of the pizza they had made—**without me there.** And once again, I'd burst into tears.

Every week, I went to Evin and waited for hours, hoping to speak with the clerk in charge of my case. But he refused to talk to me, instructing the receptionist to tell me they were still **waiting for a response from the interrogators.** Only after this would Haj Agha (Chief Prosecutor of Evin) remove the "ban" from my case and I could have my passport back.

I had even started considering the possibility of leaving the country illegally.

Nightmares wouldn't leave me alone—I was on my knees.



By Jawad Morad, from *the struggle*.



Nasibe Samsaei, an Iranian woman living in Turkey, cuts hair during protest outside the Iranian consulate in Istanbul, September 21, 2022. Photograph by Yasin Akgul, sourced from Getty Images.

A bittersweet reprieve

After **six months**, on my last visit to Evin, in a state of absolute hopelessness, I was unexpectedly given a clearance letter and referred to the passport office. I couldn't believe it. As soon as I got my passport back, I bought a one-way ticket to Sydney.

I suppose, from their perspective, I had already been punished enough. And since **I wasn't yet an Australian citizen, I held no real value to the Revolutionary Guards or the Iranian regime because I couldn't be traded in a prisoner swap for some terrorist imprisoned in the West.**

My family and friends, both in Iran and Australia, were ecstatic. At the departure gate, as I watched the officer stamp my exit permission, I knew I wouldn't return to Iran for a long time.

Flying back home, I revisited the horror and trauma of my story. Yet, **I knew mine was just a drop in an ocean of pain and suffering—thousands of innocent people in Iran still fighting for freedom and basic human rights.**



No to Mandatory Hejab. *Iran Politics Club 2021* publication by Ahreeman X and Cartoonists.



Leila Sadeghi is a librarian living in regional Australia.

The torture and death in custody of Ukrainian journalist, Viktoria Roshchyna

PEN International
calls for urgent investigation

An award-winning freelance journalist from Ukraine, **Viktoria Roshchyna went missing on August 3rd 2023 while reporting in Russian-occupied eastern Ukraine.** She was looking for the **location of unofficial places of detention,** where Russian forces systematically use **torture** to **interrogate Ukrainians** or **coerce** them into making **false confessions.**

In **April 2024,** the Russian authorities **confirmed** Roshchyna was being **detained** in the Russian Federation. According to the Russian Ministry of Defence, she **reportedly died on 19 September 2024** while being transferred from Taganrog to Moscow for a **prisoner exchange.**

She was **27** years old. Roshchyna reported exclusively on the Russian Federation's war against Ukraine for several Ukrainian outlets and notably covered the siege of Mariupol. Previously, in **March 2022,** she was captured by Russian forces and **held for 10 days** in Berdyansk.

The Russian authorities have repeatedly refused to provide information about Roshchyna's death. **Her body was eventually repatriated to Ukraine in February 2025.**

The Viktoriia Project, a **joint investigation** by media outlets published on 29 April 2025, revealed that Roshchyna had been **repetitively subjected to torture while in Russian custody,** 'including **abrasions** and **haemorrhages** on various parts of the body, a **broken rib,** **neck injuries,** and **possible electric shock marks** on her feet'. According to the Ukrainian Prosecutor General's office, Roshchyna's body had been returned 'with signs of an autopsy that was performed before arrival in Ukraine' and **missing certain organs** –possibly to **hide** the cause of death. A **war crimes investigation** has been opened with a view to prosecuting those responsible.

At least **16,000** Ukrainians, including civilians and **prisoners of war,** are **reportedly detained** in the Russian Federation and Russian-occupied Ukraine. A harrowing **report published by Amnesty International in March 2025** documents how the Russian authorities systematically subject them to **torture, prolonged incommunicado detention, enforced disappearance** and other inhumane treatment, which amount to war crimes



Photograph by Maks Levin.

and crimes against humanity. **A culture of impunity continues to embolden perpetrators.**

At least 16 journalists have been **killed** by Russian forces in Ukraine while carrying out their **professional duties** since **24 February 2022.**

"PEN International utterly condemns the horrific torture of Ukrainian journalist Viktoria Roshchyna, who died in Russian custody. As the Russian authorities are trying to cover up their crimes and continue to act with blatant impunity, we renew calls for justice and accountability for Viktoria and fellow Ukrainians held in Russian captivity. All those responsible must be brought to account." said Germán Rojas, Chair of PEN International's Writers for Peace Committee.

Worsening health of British-Egyptian writer

The man who whispered to Peter Grete when he first entered prison 'Peter, it's okay, you're with friends here. We'll look after you.' is now fighting for his life on a hunger strike. **Alaa Abd El-Fattah has joined his mother Laila who is also on a hunger strike in London, calling on her son's release from an Egyptian jail.**

Arrested in September 2019, Alaa Abd El-Fattah was **sentenced to five years in prison in 2021** on trumped-up charges, including 'joining an illegal organisation', 'spreading false news,' and 'misusing social media' after a **grossly unfair trial** before the Emergency State Security Court.

Abd El-Fattah has been **subjected to torture and other ill-treatment** and held in deplorable prison conditions, as well as **prohibited from accessing books and newspapers**, all of which have impacted his health. Egyptian authorities also deny Abd El-Fattah access to a lawyer and British consular visits.

Last September, Abd El-Fattah **completed his five-year sentence**; however, Egyptian authorities continued to **arbitrarily detain him** beyond his prison term. According to his family, the Egyptian authorities refuse to recognise more than two years that Abd El-Fattah spent in pre-trial detention, **pushing his release date out to January 2027.**

His mother, academic and human rights activist Laila Soueif, **started an open-ended hunger strike** on 29 September 2024 to protest Abd El-Fattah's arbitrary imprisonment. In March this year **she was admitted to hospital.**

Alaa Abd El-Fattah has also been on a hunger strike since March **after hearing news of his mother's hospitalisation.** According to the family, Alaa has only consumed **herbal tea, black coffee and rehydration salts** over the past two months. They reported that his health

sharply deteriorated in April, and he is being treated in Wadi El-Natrun prison.

In February this year UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer **publicly pledged to do all he could** to secure Alaa Abd El-Fattah's release and reunite him with his family. However, there has been **no tangible progress** in freeing Alaa in recent months.

Dual British-Egyptian national Alaa Abd El-Fattah was a **crucial voice of the 2011-2012 Arab Spring** uprisings, during which he **documented human rights abuses and advocated for democracy.** His book, *You Have Not Yet Been Defeated* (2022, Seven Stories Press), which compiles some of his profoundly influential writings, has received widespread acclaim. He won the 2022 **Electronic Frontier Foundation Award** for Democratic Reform Advocacy and PEN Canada's **One Humanity Award** in 2023. Abd El-Fattah was named the **2024 Writer of Courage** by PEN Pinter Prize 2024 winner Arundhati Roy.

"We are deeply concerned for Alaa's health and well-being in prison as he continues his hunger strike. We are all shocked to see the toll it has had on his mother, Laila, who has been previously hospitalised for her own ongoing hunger strike. Neither Alaa nor Laila should have to put their lives at risk to secure his fundamental right to freedom and human dignity. The UK should ensure his reunification with his family immediately," said Burhan Sonmez, President of PEN International.



6 November, 2022 activists demonstrating outside Downing Street for Alaa Abd El-Fattah. Photograph by Alisdare Hickson.

A Rohingya poet living in Cox's Bazar refugee camp on resistance and resilience

Sirajul Islam writes of his experience

When I was made an exile and my life became nothing more than a mere means of breathing, it was poetry that gave me a means of hope. I didn't look for poetry but **poetry found me**. And in my tiny, fragile heart, I have made a place for poetry. It holds a space in my heart as wide as my pain is deep and it has borne me a sense that **as long as I can behold the sky, my life is not barren**.

A black day

I was born to Rohingya parents in the countryside in Buthidaung township, Arakan (now Rakhine) State in Myanmar. Unlike children all over the world, I was not lucky enough to be issued with a birth certificate, so **my first crime started with my birth**.

When I was fifteen and a student in grade 9, all that I knew -home, books and backyard - suddenly had to be abandoned. We left home because home no longer remained home.

Just before dawn on **August 25, 2017**, I was woken up by a sudden, loud explosion. It was a **bomb**. I was so aghast that I became mute. I walked on my tiptoes to my mother's room and we cuddled each other. 'Quiet, Quiet! We shall leave home as soon as the dawn falls,' she murmured.

It felt as futile as hoping for the sun to rise in the West, holding onto the belief that we would remain alive until dawn. We left home in our pyjamas, our **deadly and desperate bid for survival** beginning in bare feet and bare food.

Before we departed, I asked my mother for a cup of water. And she said, 'Haven't you ever drunk water before?' I felt like even the water in my home had turned into poison. And with an extreme thirst, I left home.

Tears clouded my eyes, but my mother screamed '**it's not the time to weep but to strive for one more chance to breathe**.' She then clutched my left hand so tightly I couldn't escape and began our journey to our new home.

When I asked, 'where are we going, mama?' she acted as though she didn't hear me. 'Just rush along with me,' she insisted. She was frantic, just saying 'Oh Allah, you are the most merciful and only your mercy that I can rely on. **Please grant us a place to live under your sky.**'

Who are the Rohingya?

The Rohingya are a **peace-loving minority ethnic group indigenous to Arakan state of Myanmar**. We are described as one of the most persecuted minorities in the world. Since the 1960s, we have been **denied** our right to **citizenship** and fundamental **human rights**. Since then, several crimes against humanity were imposed on us by the Myanmar military.

Since 1978, we have been **compelled to flee** our land of origin. In August, 2017 we experienced a surge of violence against us which has been classified as a genocide and **called a textbook example of ethnic cleansing by the United Nations**. It resulted in the **deportation of some 700,000 Rohingya**. We eventually, painstakingly, sought shelter in neighbouring **Bangladesh**. Since then we have felt abandoned, in limbo, forgotten by the world, trapped in a political dilemma in exile.



Rohingya refugees being relocated on December 27, 2023. Photograph by Chaldeer Mahyuddin/AFP.

Life in Cox's Bazar Rohingya refugee camp

Cox's Bazar Rohingya refugee camp, **next to the Myanmar border**, is known as the **largest refugee settlement in the world**. It is home to **one million-plus Rohingya refugees**, initially home to those who fled during the earlier outbreaks of violence, prior to the huge influx in August, 2017.

Our living conditions have deteriorated in these densely populated camps. Surrounded by barbed-wire fences, we are confined to an **open air prison**, where life is dire and staying alive is a daily struggle.

Education for the children growing up in the camp is **very poor**. The schools run by humanitarian

organisations can't equip the children to lead a better life in the future. Young people like me who completed our secondary education in Myanmar and the camp **struggle to pursue** higher studies.

We are all entirely **dependent on humanitarian aid**. The World Food Programme (WFP) provides us with **\$12 of food individually per month**. None of us wish to be dependent on such aid but we are stranded, we have no other choice except to wait for the month to end for that very \$12. This is how the **so-called humanitarian system** hampers our right to live a life we rightfully deserve, in the name of humanity.



Cox's Bazar refugee camp. Sourced from Amnesty International's 2024 publication on *The inhumane conditions in Cox's Bazar and what must be done to support refugees looking for a dignified, hopeful future.*

Some **Rohingya youth**, in search of a better life, choose to **risk their lives on boats** that are prone to sink, aiming to settle in southeast Asian countries like Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia. As a result, **many die** on the journey, they **drown or starve** to death.

Fed with an uncertain future

On March 14, 2025, in the month of Ramadan, the Secretary General of the United Nations, **Antonio Guterres**, visited the refugee camp as a mission of solidarity with the Rohingya refugees. And there he said 'I'm here to **shine a global spotlight** on the plight - but also the potential - of Rohingya refugees.'

During the visit, The Chief Advisor of Bangladesh's Interim Government, **Dr Muhammad Yunus** (Nobel Peace Laureate, 2006) accompanied Mr. Guterres. He optimistically expressed his **hope** for the Rohingya's **return** to their **homeland**, that they would be able to celebrate next year's Eid in Arakan.

However, thus far, there **hasn't been any tangible move towards a lasting solution** to the crisis. The solution seems as far away as ever and the future seems even bleaker.

We feel forgotten and forsaken by the global community.

Discovery of poetry for resistance and resilience

In my childhood, before I became a refugee, my **dream** was to be a **doctor**. But when my schooling stopped and

I was **restricted from pursuing further studies**, I swapped my dream with writing and have been writing ever since.

I have **published two collections of poetry**, *If I were a Bird* and *Still I Smile* and am currently working on my third volume.

When I feel that my suffering and the echoes of freedom are nothing more than media headlines, and human rights for me are nothing more than hallucinations, I have nothing left to choose except resistance. My journey to writing didn't begin with romanticism but with lurking soreness. **I discovered poetry as a way to resist and remain resilient.**

Like me, there are **many fellow poets** whose purposes for writing poetry are similar to mine. They are **not acquiescent** to their plight. They stand tall in the face of adversity and they aim for their poetry to collectively **contribute to their community's quest for freedom.**

'The pain of my people, the hope we hold, and my deep desire to speak out give me the power to write poetry. My writing gives a voice to my community's struggles and hopes. It helps me raise awareness about our pain and resilience, encouraging others to understand and act. Through poetry, I aim to inspire change and keep our story alive,'
Rohingya poet, Jaitun Nara says.

When I chat with my fellow Rohingya poets, **we share an unwavering commitment to amplify the voice of our marginalised community**. But they always complain about the **lack of access to platforms** where they can publish their work.

I would like to establish PEN Rohingya to help literature flourish in our community and to open a corridor for us to showcase our work at an international level.

Who can imagine what it is like to be a poet in such an unprecedented milieu, cluttered with chaos? Yet I hold it and appreciate it as an influencing atmosphere, to write about what matters. When I write, I don't feel that my writing would soothe my readers, bring them peace, but it soothes me. I write poetry to be a **voice for the voiceless**, to replace tears with smiles, to find solace, to remain humane and to be my truest self.

Poetry gives me the **power to resist uncertainty**, sustain resilience in the face of adversity, transform pain into power and replace tears with a smile. Between a piece of paper and my pen's nib, lies my means for survival and the power to hold onto hope. **It's poetry that gives me the resilience to resist exile and limbo.**

Sirajul Islam is a poet and journalist living in Cox's Bazar.

The following pages publish the works of Sirajul and his fellow young poets of Cox's Bazar Refugee Camp.

Refugee's Voice

~ Mohammed Arshad Amin

I am not
a faceless stranger,
not just a shadow in the crowd.
I have no home, no worth assigned—
Empty hands, empty plates.
I feel trapped behind walls,
yet none of this was my choice.

I am not
the whisper they see,
not the gunfire or the war-torn sky.
Life has woven danger around me,
but I stand still,
buried beneath a weight I didn't choose,
stuck in this prison of circumstance.

I am not
the loneliness of sleepless nights,
not the tears that never dry.
Friendless, forgotten,
the classrooms I once knew abandoned.
I am locked in a barrier
built by others' hands,
a fate I never asked for.

Yet here I stand,
My whisper rise in the silence,
My struggle, unseen, unheard of,
but it still sings in the wind,
as I fight for what was taken,
for the life that was never my choice.



Mohammed Arshad Amin

'We are humans, not just refugees. Our lives, our stories and our dreams matter. I write to make the world see the truth we live with every day. Sometimes, I feel ignored—like our pain isn't important enough to be heard. But I keep writing because silence should never be the end of our story,' Mohammed

Arshad Amin, one of the many Rohingya poets in Cox's Bazar says.

The Pulse of My Homeland

~ Mohammed Arshad Amin

I was born in a land of gentle winds
Innocence wrapped around me like sunlight
Now, there is no room for tears
Because Arakan has become a dream I can no longer touch.

Arakan, you are the pulse of my heart
A place where my blood was shed in silence
Each night, I see you in my dreams
But waking up without you leaves me empty.

I look at the sky, once endless and free
And remember the laughter that resonated with friends
Now, I sit in silence
Surrounded by memories of those I've lost
Left behind in the diaspora that scattered us all.

Still, the moments we shared refuse to diminish
Like whispers in the wind
They remind me of the life we had
A life that now feels away from the world.

My heart aches when I see others laugh
Living a life I can no longer claim
I feel the sting of lost freedom
As children struggle for education
Held back from the future that should be theirs.

Tears rise when I see the flag of my motherland
Waving in a sky I cannot return to
I long to stand on the soil I once knew
To breathe in the scent of rain-soaked earth
And hold the pieces of my past in my hands.

If I could close my eyes forever
And find myself back in those moments
Oh, Arakan, how I miss you
You are more than a memory—
You are the essence of who I am
Until my spirit is free
My heart will always belong to you.

Wounds and Wings

~ Jaitun Nara

A Rohingya girl once dreamed—
A bird, lost in the paddy fields, under an open sky.
They say night means rest, peace and sleep,
But for us, it is a time of wounds and fear.

A harsh midnight in the fields of mud.
The cold glare of the Myanmar military's lights,
And I, alone,
Their lights felt like my soul was caught in the jaws of a tiger.
Lost in the darkness still in the search of light .
I scream, "Maa! Maa!" (Mom! Mom)
But only silence answers.
Crying is all that remains,
Fear and darkness my only companion.

Darkness cloaks my life as the night swallows the sky.
Yet, through my wounds, I fight.
I fall—I rise—I fall again.
Tears carve new paths,
And each drop of my eyes gives birth to wings.

The night turns to dawn,
Darkness surrenders to light,
Wounds transform into flight.
And when the sun finally rises,
I see the bird was me all along.
Not a dream—
But the truth I survived.

Colourism

~ Jaitun Nara

Dark skinned are like the night,
Not often seen as beauty's light,
Yet they hold a power profound,
As the moon brings brightness to the ground.

They can shine in the world like stars,
Illuminating dreams from afar.
Dark skinned have a right, just like the sun,
To bring their brilliance; they are not outdone.

Black and white are made from the same soil,
So why does colourism cause such turmoil?
Our creator never discriminated between you and I,
So who gave you the right to let judgments fly?

We too deserve to live free from strife,
To thrive in peace, embracing all life.
Let us unite and celebrate our hues,
For diversity is a strength we can choose.



Jaitun Nara

The Night Of The Rohingya

~ Jaitun Nara

The night which brings darkness
The night darkness brings
The opportunity for the intimidators
The dark of the night which brings afraidness
The night which brings the power to the persecutors
To oppress the innocent Rohingya people

The dark night approaches the Rohingya,
On the brink of death.
The moon silently witnesses all the assassins
With its bright face as the Rohingya
Emerge from the shelter with smiling faces.
The night is full of darkness.

In this darkened field,
Where sorrow hangs heavy,
Some have lost their cherished children,
others their beloved parents
And many of their dear siblings.
Countless women have been stripped of their dignity,
The quiet night that feels quite apprehensive.



Jaber RC

I'm a Witness

~ Jaber RC

My grandparents lived
In Golden Arakan,
With freedom and peace—
They enjoyed all their human rights.
I was a witness.

My parents once lived
A life of freedom and peace,
Where everything was theirs.
It feels like only yesterday.
I was a witness.

Now it's my turn to live in Arakan,
As my ancestors did,
But for me, there is no freedom, no
peace.
Even my basic rights are invisible.
I am a witness.

Now my people and legacy
Are torn from my grasp,
But the world doesn't listen to me.
And still, I am a witness.

We Were Peaceful Until Peace Betrayed Us

~ Jaber RC

We asked for justice,
they gave us jail.
We asked for land,
they gave us fire.
We asked to live,
they gave us numbers,
as if we were nothing.

So don't ask us
why we carry steel now.

Ask why the world
let it come to this.

I'll Teach My Son to Stand

~ Jaber RC

Not to hate other,
but to never bow to injustice.

I'll teach him
our history Buddhists buried,
our truth they twisted,
our blood they spilled
and called it law.

And when he asks me,
"What must I do?"

I will tell him,

stand.

Speak.

And if the world still cages you,
break it without any fear.

Peace Is for All

~ Jaber RC

Peace is for all,
Every creature should be
In peace, like the sky,
If equality is still alive.

No matter the difference—
My religion or race,
Let me create a peaceful life,
As I am a creature of God.

Peace belongs to
Every creature.
It knows no inequity,
And the law is its witness.

If peace is for all,
Why is it not allowed
For a genocide survivor,
For a poor refugee,
For an innocent Rohingya like me?

Where Are You From?

~ Sirajul Islam

The very odd question
I have been haunted by.

I'm from somewhere,
without any clouds
wandering in the sky,
on sunny, dazzling days
there futilely rains
but no raindrops knock
on the rooftop but waft
across the soft breeze,
by which a singing bird
in a jiffy swaps quiet
and from her funeral,
butterflies fly away.

I'm from somewhere
I darted away from
my beloved's funeral,
abundant with the lush
but I lack oxygen,
all around looks so faint
and I inhale the very whiff
contaminated by the very storm
that blows without gusts,
the weather is pleasant enough
but thunder strikes abruptly,
unnaturally though.

I'm from somewhere
I want to forget but I can't,
and even in my coma,
I take its name with pride.

International Law

~ Sirajul Islam

I've read very many dramas,
each left me amused,
except the one:
so-called international law,
so witty and phoney,
miserable though,
the very drama
that left me in tears.

I Condemn My Mother

~ Sirajul Islam

I condemn my mother
for making me bloom
like a rose
in a world of hatred.

I condemn my mother
for teaching me how to sing
in the language of sparrows
in a world of hunters.

I condemn my mother
for letting me grow up
inhabiting a home
in a world of arsonists.

I condemn my mother
for galvanising me
to fly like a vulture
in a world of storms.

I condemn my mother
for giving a birth to me
in such a world wherein
being a human is a crime.

And Vice Versa

~ Sirajul Islam

In exile afar from you,
oh my motherland
nothing seems what it is
the sun seems a wound
in the vast open sky
ground seems a shade of sunset
over the vast open ocean.

Since I no longer
lay alight on your bosom
I'm as though
a salmon at the fish mart
afar from her kingdom
where sings of the charm
of water lily,
a mere lit commodity.

In exile afar from you,
oh my motherland
I'm just an exile,
I'm no longer who I am
not even a human being
the sunlit sky looks so dim
the clouded sky consorts
with my burdened being,
the world calls me a burden
and vice versa.



***'I would like to establish PEN Rohingya to help literature flourish in our community and to open a corridor for us to showcase our work at an international level.'* Sirajul Islam**

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