



PEN magazine

David Malouf our
prose laureate

Cheng Lei on
writing for
the stage

The ambiguity of
Persian poetry

Queer Fijian
writers

The American
Dissident

Türkiye's day
of the slain
journalist

August 2026

FROM OUR WRITERS

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

'Usually book banning happens when people are feeling angry and they feel somebody has to be blamed for something. it's usually a power grab on behalf of a certain group of people who want to demonstrate their dominance by squashing other people underfoot. So I think they should take up knitting, you know?'

~ **Margaret Atwood** while accepting last year's Bravery in Literature Award from the Eleanor Roosevelt Centre



@pensydney



@sydneypeninternational



@pensydney

PEN Sydney Magazine editorial team:

Claudia Taranto
Yasmina Chotchova
Chris Baker



PEN Sydney is supported by the Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, University of Technology Sydney



Printed by UTS Printing Services

Cover photograph by **Conrad Del Villar**



David Malouf AO (1934-2026)

Former PEN Sydney President, **Nicholas Jose**, pays tribute to our prose laureate

As the literary community mourns the death of David Malouf, who died on the Gold Coast on 22 April, aged 92, it is worth reflecting on his presence in our community, including the community of PEN in Australia and worldwide.

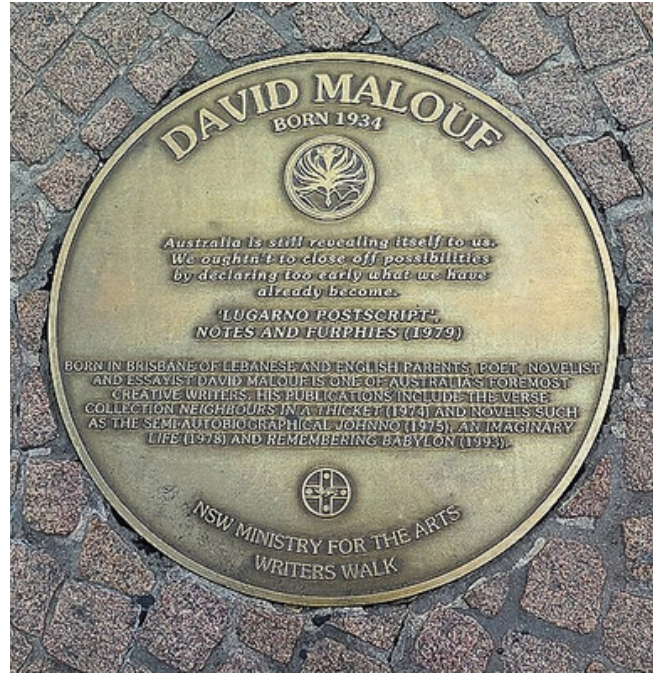
David joined the advisory board of PEN Sydney in the 2000s and later became an honorary life member. He attended PEN activities such as The Day of the Imprisoned Writer, for which he gave the Free Voices address in **November 2015**. Malouf said:

*'As a writer who has the **freedom to write without fear or constraint**, and for whom **silence is a choice**, I would feel ashamed if I did not **speak up for a writer** anywhere on whom **silence is enforced with all the terrible machinery of the state.**'*

In those years PEN Sydney had an office on Broadway and held events at nearby Gleebooks, where David was a regular. He lived nearby in Chippendale and kept up with what PEN was doing as part of his daily round. Sometimes after a PEN gathering we would go back to his house to continue the discussion.



David Malouf at Perth Festival Writers Week 2019. Photograph by Samuel, via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY 4.0)



David Malouf Sydney Writers Walk plaque at Circular Quay, Sydney. Photograph by Snapandrattle33 (CC BY-SA 4.0)

Asylum Seekers and PEN Sydney

The history of the **Sydney Centre** notes how **PEN members in Australia** responded to the issue of asylum seekers, as 'one of the central moral issues of the time' and 'arguably the most controversial subject in Australia' then (and recurrently): **'the experience of seeking asylum – the journey to escape death, starvation, poverty, or terror ... is deeply embedded in Australian culture.'**

Yet recognising those principles in relation to people arriving by boat required sustained argument and advocacy from PEN.

In **2001** the **MV Tampa** rescued **433 refugees** at sea off the **Australian coast**, mostly from Afghanistan, many fleeing the Taliban.

As asylum seekers they were forcibly **refused permission** to enter Australia and classified as **illegal**, rather than having their **right to seek asylum** acknowledged, despite the Australian government's international commitments.

This brought the **values of the International PEN Charter** back home. Many of those **refugees**, including **writers** and **journalists**, were punitively detained for long periods. **Others became writers by bearing witness** to their ordeal—as **Behrouz Boochani** would show with his award-winning memoir ***No Friend But the Mountain***, written in Australia’s offshore detention centre on Manus Island, PNG.

Australian PEN Centres partnered with other organisations such as the **Refugee Council of Australia** (which had an office in Glebe back then) to keep the issues of asylum seekers and offshore detention in the public eye. We put it on the agenda of PEN internationally.

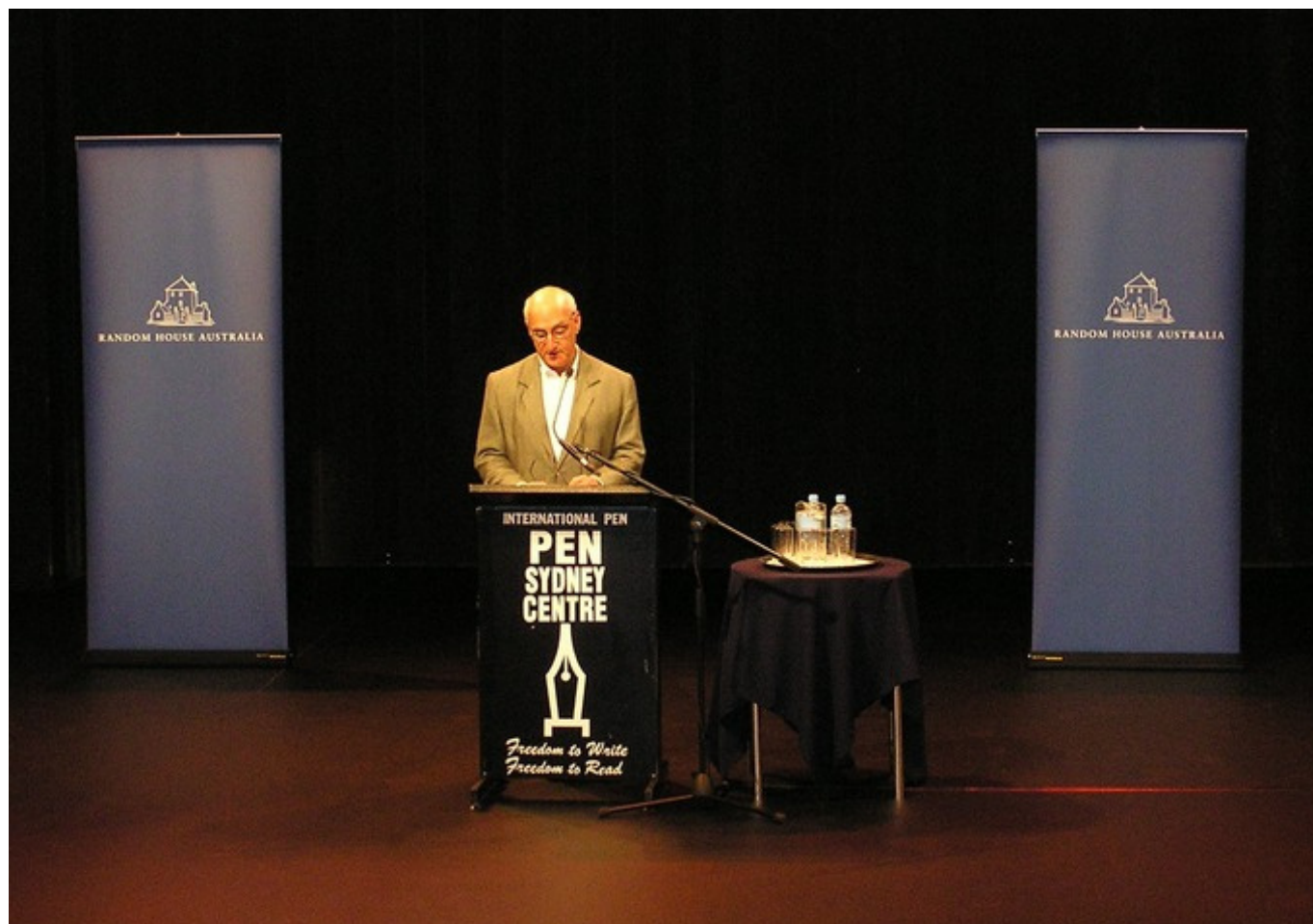
In November **2004**, **PEN Sydney**, as part of the Australian PEN network, **won the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Community Award for its work with asylum seeker writers held in Australian detention centres**. In that process, as responses, actions and approaches were thrashed out, **David Malouf’s advice was invaluable**. As President of PEN Sydney from 2002–5, I am pleased to have this opportunity to acknowledge his support and good counsel.

David Malouf was personally involved

I remember David standing on a street corner, hands in pockets, tilting back and forth on his feet, keen to know more. He was personally involved.

David met **Abdul Karim Hekmat** in Harris Farm on Broadway, for example, from whom he heard directly about the experience of a **Hazara refugee from Afghanistan**, arriving in Australia by boat and spending five months in a detention centre. With David’s help Abdul was able to make a new life for himself in Australia, successfully completing studies at UTS and becoming a journalist and photographer. It’s another PEN story.

David was no stranger to PEN. His longstanding friend, the poet **Judith Rodriguez** (1936–2018), was a **PEN leader in Australia** and internationally for decades. Judith was elected an **International Vice-President of PEN International**, championing women writers and translation and linguistic rights. She kept David informed. Her **daughter Zoë Rodriguez** followed in her footsteps, keeping in touch with David on PEN matters. As Zoë says, ***‘You cannot have a free world without free intellectual exchange.’*** David would have agreed.



David Malouf introducing J M Coetzee at PEN Sydney Centre event.

David enjoyed writerly exchanges around the world, meeting with **Homero Aridjis** in Mexico, for example, International PEN President, 1997-2003, and **John Raston Saul** in Canada, International PEN President, 2009–2015.

In 1998 David gave the **annual address to English PEN in London**, entitled *When the Writer Speaks*. It is reprinted in *The Writing Life*, Book 2 of the three-volume set of David's essays published by Knopf in 2014–5, a good place to encounter the matter and the manner of David's public conversation. Those wonderful essays include autobiographical pieces such as *A First Place*, where he maps the topography of the Brisbane house where he grew up onto his psyche as a writer. There's another occasional talk given in Italy in 1984 called *My Multicultural Life* and an essay about his parents for a collection called *Family Pictures*, edited by Beth Yahp (1994). Then there's *A Spirit of Play*, David's celebrated Boyer lectures for ABC radio (1998), among other reflections, where David takes on the burden of interpreting Australia to itself.

He “showed up”, as we say, speaking of and from and to the community of which he was part—tentatively, personally: ‘*it is the variousness of the strands I want to keep in sight*,’ he said. The address to English PEN reflects his wariness of taking on a public role and at the same time his recognition that as a writer it is expected of him. He begins that talk with a provocation: ‘**The real enemy of writing is talk.**’

Our problem is selective memory

‘To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,’ as Adorno wrote in 1949.



David Malouf and Nicholas Jose at the launch of Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature in 2007.

Born only two years after Sylvia Plath, David belonged to a generation that took Adorno's message to heart. Writers who came of age in the 1950s, as the unspeakable inhumanity of the Holocaust was revealed, they repudiated any art that was complicit with grandiosity, finality and ideological extremes. **They were mistrustful of ideas and ideals, preferring language that was oblique, hesitant and modest in the scope of its attention.**

When the Writer Speaks warns against taking up a fixed position or a cause, against becoming a representative or an opinionated spokesperson. Yet in an empathetic consideration of Thomas Mann, who exiled himself from his German homeland and language in order to be free to speak out against Nazism, David might be thinking about his own place and responsibility as a writer in his homeland. A place where the lessons from Europe were only slowly being applied, articulated awkwardly and in the face of resistance: lessons of complacency and denial and a too-easy belief in a second chance.

‘One of the things we seem to find difficult is to see our **history**—all that has happened and was done here—as a **continuity**, a whole,’ Malouf writes in *A Spirit of Play*. ‘**Our problem ... is one of selective memory. We remember the bits that speak well of us ... the dark bits we suppress.**’ The writing—talk, really—is designed to engage. It is public in a way that the poetry and fiction are not; inclusive, relaxed, with a quality of “mildness” (Malouf's word) that belies its care and force. With this voice and this position, arrived at when the time was right for the country to listen, David Malouf became our prose laureate. As his exemplary presence grew, his capacity for imagining and joining was something we recognised and needed. The spirit of an elder whose loss is felt now in the wave of tributes on his passing.

Nicholas Jose has published eight novels, three short story collections, essays and nonfiction. His most recent novel is *The Idealist* (Giramondo, 2023). Jose was President of Sydney PEN, 2002–5, and general editor of *The Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature* (Allen & Unwin, 2009)

Fear and Hope

On 27 May 2026, Arts House presented the world premiere of ***1154 Days***, a play created through a collaboration between Australian-Chinese journalist and author Cheng Lei, director Emma Valente and dramaturg Clyde White. ***Drawing on Lei's own experience of being detained by China's Ministry of State Security for 1,154 days***, the production transformed her story of solitary confinement, Residential Surveillance at a Designated Location and eventual release into a powerful meditation on freedom, resilience and the enduring human capacity for hope.

A stage. A light.

I raise my arms, push my sleeves down, lift my pant legs, and a tsunami rises inside me.

This is me. This was me.

My hands reach towards an imagined sun. **I am not in Melbourne but back in detention**, shoulder to shoulder with my cellmates during our precious exercise hour.

Cheng Lei reflects on staging her recent play at Melbourne's Arts House

Our faces are earnest, our bodies like trees stretching towards sunlight that is measured in hours per year.

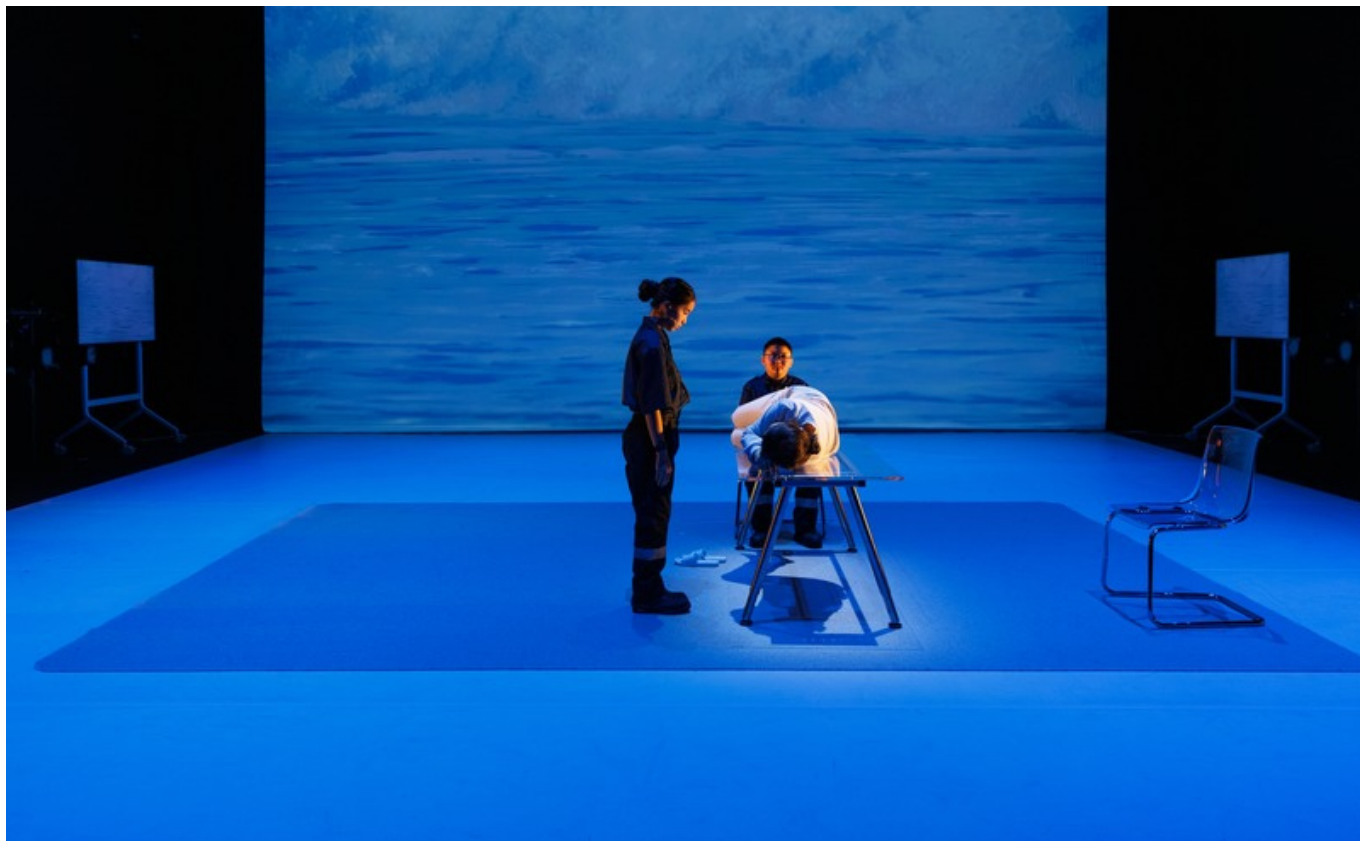
The sound of crashing waves fills the theatre. The audience is in front of me, but I do not see them. Instead, I see the television on the wall of my cell. A brief image of surfers tunnelling through seawater. In an instant I am transported across the equator. I can taste salt and feel the somersault of the ocean's embrace. The harsher the deprivation, the more fiercely the imagination bloomed.

Then: *beep, beep*. The metallic slide of steel doors.

How I hated the sound that heralded disappointment. Yet hope still flared. Perhaps a book. A T-shirt. A letter. Anything to puncture the suffocating sameness.



Photograph by Sarah Walker.



Photograph by Sarah Walker.

Songs drift into my consciousness and out of my mouth. The voices of my former cellmates awaken and superimpose on the Melbourne skyline and bushland and onto swimming clouds that are now my vistas of freedom.

The audience as witness

Knock, knock, knock, knock, knock.

Knock, knock.

Knock.

The audience smiles.

The knocking was our secret rebellion. Communication between cells was forbidden, but we refused to become silent numbers. Through concrete walls, we tapped messages, jokes, encouragement and companionship. Grains of sweetness in an ocean of bitterness. **With our hands and hearts, we broke the walls.**

There is often laughter in the opening scenes of the play. The montage is colourful, chaotic, musical. Every night I found myself thinking, both to the audience and to my former self on **12 August 2020: 'You have no idea what is coming.'** The plunge. The pain.

Residential Surveillance at a Designated Location, or RSDL, was the most **extreme isolation** I have ever experienced. Yet performing it in the play became its opposite.

I was no longer yearning for scraps of human companionship. Instead, **hundreds of people were with me**, to understand—no, **to feel—every second of its perversity and cruelty.** To share a rueful smile, a derisive snort, a sympathetic sigh. The play was a hug to myself of six years ago.

It was also **the ultimate revenge, turning those hateful and hated interrogation questions into public satire.** State secrets by the bucket, all out in the open, come arrest us all, performers and audience, our presence poking holes in the giant omnipresent lid of state security.

The play is also for those still inside.

Moving feet – four women. Stepping in unison, dancing clumsily, reluctantly still. Women I knew. Women who remain imprisoned.

What shoes are they wearing now? What books are they reading, if any? Will they ever have the chance to see this play?

Collaborating with the audience

Theatre is a communion. My co-creators and audience members noticed details I had overlooked. They found truths I had not yet found words for. Through their artistry and attention, experiences that had been trapped inside me entered the imaginations of hundreds of strangers. People ask whether performing the play was re-traumatising?

The answer is no.

I reclaimed something that had been taken from me. For 1,154 days, my freedom of expression was severely restricted. Laughing and singing were punishable acts. Pen and paper were precious commodities.

Now I stood on stage speaking freely.

It was hard won.

Chinese State surveillance is everywhere

The play itself faced obstacles. A few Chinese withdrew from auditioning after learning its subject matter. Rising Festival dropped the production from its program three months before opening, offering explanations that shifted from "risk and audit review" to financial concerns. Public calls for transparency went unanswered.

Thankfully, Arts House stood firm.

All six performances were largely sold out.

The Chinese Consulate in Melbourne pressured Melbourne City Council officials not to attend my play.

But opening night, people from across political, cultural and diplomatic worlds defied the behind-the-scenes pressure to witness a story that some would rather remain untold.

I was moved by the support, especially when I saw Chinese faces in the audience.

Fear travels. Many Chinese people know that criticism of the Chinese state can carry consequences even outside its borders.

A few days after the production closed, I attended the **Tiananmen Square Massacre vigil outside Melbourne's State Library**. I reflected on how different things were from 1989, when **hundreds of thousands marched openly in support of China's democracy movement**.



Today, **protesters wear masks** for fear of repercussions. University of Sydney student **Cheng Fangwei** has been **sentenced to six years** for having taken part in **democracy protests** on campus.

Fear travels. Yet courage travels too.

A few Chinese people approached me at the vigil. They had missed the play and wanted to know whether it would return.

Messages of hope

Like we did at the PEN Sydney event for my book last year, at the play we prepared Australian postcards for prisoners of conscience in China. Reading the messages people wrote reduced me to tears. During my imprisonment, letters from strangers brought warmth. I imagined these postcards doing the same for others.

One audience member later wrote to me online: *'Although I am gravely disappointed that you were cancelled from Rising, I am also simultaneously glad that it occurred, as the media coverage is how I found out about this show – one that I will never forget. Thank you for telling it.'*

Fear is powerful.

But hope is stubborn.



Cheng Lei is a Chinese Australian journalist with over twenty years of experience who was unjustly imprisoned by China for over three years. She was released in 2023 and now works as presenter for News24 (formerly known as Sky News Australia).

IMAGINE

a world in which
freedom ends when
expression begins.

Writing should not
come at a cost.



Imagine your notebook being used against you in court. Imagine a poem being called evidence. Imagine writing a song and never coming home. Imagine your last post being your last day of freedom.

This is not imagination. This is happening. Right now.
To people exactly like you and me.

As you read this, **a poet sits in a cell**, separated from their family for years. A **journalist has vanished**, their whereabouts are still unknown. A **blogger's children ask every day when their parent is coming home**.

**They were persecuted for their words.
Now their freedom depends on our actions.**

Your tax deductible membership of PEN Sydney can make a real difference.
Voices being silenced. Writers disappearing. Families without answers.

Will you stand with them today?



Thank you for taking action today
and standing up for the right of us
all to speak, create, and be heard.

*Adapted from **PEN International***

Focus on Fiji

Poetry by **Peter Sipeli**

Peter Sipeli is an arts manager, and supporter of the spoken word arts movement in Fiji. Peter founded *The Poetry Shop, Fiji* in 2013, a poetry collective that facilitates regular poetry events in Suva. He works as a gay activist using storytelling as advocacy and was one of the speakers at the inaugural Tedx Suva.



Peter has published four poetry collections – *Blue Man Dreaming* (University of the South Pacific Press, 2014), *Maps to the Ancestors* (Les Petites Allées, 2016), *Lialiaci* (University of the South Pacific, 2018) and *Sleeping Ancestors* (USP Press, 2020).

In 2023, Peter established *Walking Tours Suva*, a creative and cultural enterprise developing narrative-based walking tours of Suva through the lens of locals. Incorporating oral storytelling, cultural advocacy and a commitment to broadening perceptions of Fiji's capital city, the enterprise is a rapidly diversifying platform for workshops, talks and events centering local stories and local people.



Those words

Those words,
Fall from your mouth,
And, I can feel it on my face hot
and spreading.

Those words

Yes, you know those words.

The same words that I saw in
people's eyes.
The same words I saw them
whisper to each other and laugh
into their hands.
If I could take each of those words,
each one filled with the ashes of
apathy,
And bury each one in the sand,
close to the water, I would.
But the ashes stay with me, it
hangs in my hair and on my
hands,
And leave me dirty, and thirsty
and sad.

Those words that hang in the air,
Leaving a stench, like a 'left'
feeling in a room after a fight.
Words with sharp edges and
movement.
Words that draw blood.
Words with claws and twisted
definitions.
And you, you said those words.
Those words came from your
mouth and I allowed it.
All those uncounted moments of
shame and fear are on your hands
and I allowed it.

And those words won't leave me.
Just like the ashes ...
And those words are heavy.
Heavy, like a body of life 'without'.
Heavy, like the yellow star that
clung to the breasts of Jews.
Or the pink triangle branded into
the hearts of the queer.

I have seen children carry those
words in their mouth.

I have seen the brethren of Jesus,
carry those words in their books.
I have seen the mothers and
fathers and brothers and sisters,
Throw those words carelessly on
the floor.

And those words litters our
streets and it litters our minds.

Each time you say those words,
A hole burns hot in my chest.
I am filled with shamed and beset
with gloom.

Each time you say those words,
You stand over me, towering
above,
Full of might, and judgment and
power and right ,
Each time you say those words,
You build the wall of fear between
me and you,

And you rob us all of the
opportunity to love and celebrate
life,
And you rob your children of the
joy of being different, you strip us
bare of these things.

And then in a dream, I
remembered.
I remembered, my roots and the
place of my belonging.

And I know that here, where the
wound in my chest lay open.
I remember,
Family and faces and people and
friends.

I remember,
I am worthy.
I am loved.
I have power and I can breathe
fire.

And like children, we can learn
new words.
And soon, one day, hopefully ...
words and be just words again.

The Day I Chose to Speak

Mark Lal's reflection on his Journey from an HIV Diagnosis to Advocacy in Fiji

On 1 May 2024, I walked into the Sexual Reproductive Health Clinic in Suva, known by many Fijians as "The Hub". I walked in as Mark Shaheel Lal, a 23-year-old Indo-Fijian man with dreams, plans, fears, and a future I thought I understood. I walked out carrying a diagnosis that I believed had changed everything.

I was HIV positive.

I still remember that moment clearly. I sat there listening to the doctor explain my results, but my mind struggled to process the words being said to me. I was not crying. I was not angry. I was silent. It felt as though the world continued moving around me while my own life had suddenly paused.

The first thing I felt was fear. I feared dying. I feared the medication. I feared telling my family. I feared losing the people I loved. Most of all, **I feared that people would stop seeing me as Mark and only see me as someone living with HIV.**

That fear is something many people living with HIV understand. The diagnosis itself is only one part of the journey. The stigma, the silence, and the shame placed on people by society can become the heavier burden.

In Fiji, our communities are built on connection. Our families, churches, villages, and neighbourhoods are deeply important parts of who we are. But in a small island nation where people know each other, privacy can become difficult.



A person can fear being seen entering a sexual health clinic. A person can fear that a diagnosis will become public before they are ready to share their own story.

I experienced that fear.

But I also discovered something important: **HIV did not take away my life. Stigma tried to.**

After my diagnosis, I began antiretroviral therapy and started learning the truth about HIV. Treatment works. People living with HIV can live healthy, fulfilling lives. We can love, work, travel, dream, and contribute to our communities.

But when I first received my diagnosis, I needed more than medicine. I needed human connection. I needed someone who understood the emotional weight of that moment. I needed reassurance that my life was still valuable.

My partner stood beside me during one of the most difficult periods of my life. He saw me when I was afraid, vulnerable, and still trying to understand my new reality. His support reminded me that I was not defined by a diagnosis. I was still a person deserving of love, respect, and happiness.

I also found family in people who were not connected to me by blood. Amitia Huggett and Luke Seeto became two of the people I hold closest to my heart. They became my chosen family, people I could rely on, people who encouraged me when I doubted myself, and people who reminded me that I did not have to walk this journey alone.

Last year, Nelson De La Cruz and Maria Fountoukis De La Cruz came into my life and expanded that circle of love and belonging. They brought warmth, acceptance, and kindness into my journey. They became part of a beautiful chapter in my life that I will always cherish. They reminded me that even after moments of pain, life can still introduce us to people who help rebuild our hearts.

Their support gave me the courage to do something I never imagined.

I chose to speak

On 1 December 2024, World AIDS Day, I made the decision to publicly share my story. I came out as an Indo-Fijian gay man living with HIV.

It was one of the hardest decisions of my life.

My family was not happy. There were difficult conversations and painful moments. But I realised that silence was not protecting me anymore.

Silence was protecting stigma.



I decided that my story could not remain only my own. **If sharing my experience could help another person feel less alone, then it was worth the vulnerability.**

That decision led to the creation of **Living Positive Fiji**, a platform dedicated to HIV awareness, education, prevention, treatment, and human

dignity. It became a space to challenge misinformation and remind people that HIV is not the end of someone's story.



But advocacy is not only about sharing hope. It is also about **speaking honestly** about what needs to change.

Fiji has made progress in responding to HIV. We have access to antiretroviral treatment, and **pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP)** is available as an important HIV prevention tool for people who are HIV-negative. However, access means more than simply having a service available.

People need to know about it. People need to trust it. People need to feel safe accessing it.



Many people still do not know about PrEP. There is limited awareness, and access remains mainly through specific sexual health hubs. For some members of the public, walking into these spaces can create fear of being recognised or judged. Privacy remains a major concern. The same applies to people accessing HIV treatment.

Medication saves lives, but dignity, confidentiality, and respect must be treated as essential parts of healthcare.

We must also have honest conversations about people who use drugs. If Fiji is serious about addressing HIV, we cannot ignore communities that are often pushed into the shadows. People who use drugs are human beings who deserve healthcare, compassion, and evidence-based support. Access to clean needles and harm reduction services is about protecting lives and reducing HIV transmission.

Ignoring these realities does not make them disappear.



Our response must include everyone

This includes people living with HIV, LGBTQI+ communities, young people, people who use drugs, healthcare workers, government, civil society, and faith communities.

Our churches also have an important role to play. Faith has deep meaning in Fiji, and churches have the ability to influence how communities understand HIV and those affected by it. Prayer is meaningful to many people, but compassion must be accompanied by action. **We cannot pray for people while allowing stigma, discrimination, and exclusion to continue.**



Dr Jason Mitchell, who heads Fiji's HIV task team and Mark Shaheel Lal at AIDS 2026, the 26th International AIDS Conference 26 - 31 July.

Over the past two years, my journey has taken me into spaces I never imagined. I have spoken at the University of the South Pacific, the WIN Convention, with healthcare professionals, students, and communities. My story has reached local and international audiences through platforms including [The Fiji Times](#), [The Fiji Sun](#), [The Lancet HIV](#), [ABC Pacific](#), [UNAIDS](#), and [The Washington Post](#).

But the moments that matter most are not the headlines.



Mark Lal at a vigil on 1 December 2025, World AIDS Day, he reflects 'the vigil reminded [him] that HIV activism isn't just about awareness days, it's about showing up for each other... creating moments where people feel safe, loved, and valued.'



They are the quiet conversations.

They are the people who tell me that hearing my story gave them courage. They are the messages from people who were afraid to test, afraid to seek treatment, or afraid to believe they still had a future.

On 30 January 2025, I received the news that my viral load was undetectable. **My treatment was working. My body was healthy. My future was still mine.**

Today, in 2026, I look back at the young man who walked into The Hub on 1 May 2024. He was afraid. He was uncertain. He believed his life had changed forever.

He was right.

But he was wrong about what that change meant.

The same person who once sat in silence after hearing his diagnosis is now preparing to board a plane to travel to Brazil as a youth representative at AIDS 2026: The International AIDS Conference. It is an opportunity I never imagined would become part of my story.

I never thought that a diagnosis I once believed would destroy my future would eventually lead me to a global platform where I could share Fiji's story, advocate for communities, and stand alongside people from around the world working towards ending HIV stigma and inequality.

I carry Fiji with me. I carry the voices of people living with HIV who are still afraid to speak. I carry the stories of those who have experienced rejection, discrimination, and loneliness. I carry the hope that future generations will experience a Fiji where healthcare is accessible, where people are treated with dignity, and where nobody is forced into silence.

When I received my diagnosis, I thought my story had ended.

Instead, it had only begun.

HIV did not destroy my future

It gave me a purpose

I share my story because every person has the right to tell their truth. Free expression is not only about having the ability to speak; it is about creating a society where people are safe enough to be heard.

For too long, HIV has been surrounded by silence. But silence cannot save lives.

Honest conversations can. Compassion can. Education can. Human rights can.

As I prepare to travel to Brazil, I do so with gratitude, humility, and hope. I go not only as Mark Shaheel Lal, but as someone representing every person who believes in a future where HIV is met with dignity instead of judgement.

The young man who once thought his story was over is now helping write a new chapter. And that chapter is **just beginning**.



The Art of Ambiguity

The Survival of Expression in **Persian Poetry** under the Dark Shadow of **Censorship**

by Yazdan Mansourian

Forty years ago, when I was a high school student in Iran, I remember a question that often came up in our literature class. We would ask our teacher, *‘When poets like Khayyam and Hafez wrote about wine and praised it so vividly, did they mean real wine, or was it a symbol for spiritual joy and mystical experience?’*

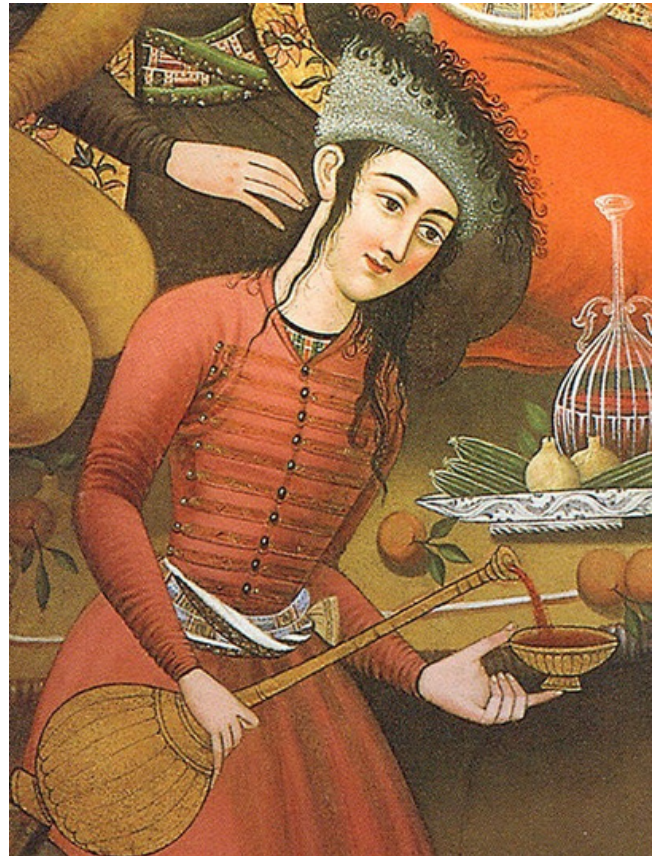
The answer was always the same: it was **“spiritual wine”**. But the way our teacher said it, with a subtle smile, made it clear that the answer had to be given that way, whether it felt convincing or not. Everyone sensed but no one said. Even though we were young and naive, **we all understood the code**. We knew our teacher had to answer the question that way; otherwise, he **would face consequences from the authorities**.

I always felt sorry for our teachers because they had to censor themselves, but I did not have the language to express that feeling at the time. **Only later did I realise** that this classroom moment reflected something much larger in the history of Persian literature: **the delicate relationship between language, interpretation and authority**. In cultures where religion, politics and literature overlap, meaning is rarely simple. It is shaped not only by what is written, but also by what can safely be said.

The “wine” of Persian poetry is just one example. For centuries, it has been explained as a metaphor for spiritual joy or mystical experience. That interpretation is certainly valid, but it does not fully capture the **richness and deliberate ambiguity of the poetry**. Persian poets have long written in ways that allow multiple meanings to exist simultaneously, inviting readers into a space where certainty is never complete.

For example, **Omar Khayyam’s** poetry leaves little doubt about how he celebrates wine. In one of his famous *Rubaiyat* (quatrains), he declares:

*‘I can’t live without pure wine; I can’t
bear the burden of my body without
wine. I am dying for that moment when
the cupbearer says, “Take another cup,”
and I can’t take any more.’*



Detail of a 17th-century Safavid wall painting depicting a Persian woman pouring wine, Chehel Sotoun Palace, Isfahan, Iran. Photograph by Zereschk (PD-Art / PD-old-100).

Whether read literally or metaphorically, the tone is unmistakably affirmative: **wine is a source of vitality, release and truth**. At the same time, within the long tradition of Persian poetry, wine can also be understood as a **symbol of mystical awakening**.

This **dual possibility, between the literal and the symbolic, is what gives Khayyam's language its enduring power**, allowing multiple interpretations to coexist.

That thread of ambiguity runs through the work of many acclaimed **Persian poets**, including **Khayyam, Hafez** and **Forough Farrokhzad**. Each used indirect language to navigate social and political pressures that limited freedom of expression.

A quatrain from the Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám

Here we are: with wine, a musician, and this ruined corner;
Soul, heart, cup, and clothes all stained with the dregs of wine;
Careless of hope for mercy, and free from fear of hell;
Liberated from earth and wind and fire and water.

ماییم و می و مُطرب و این کنجِ خراب
جان و دل و جام و جامه پُر دُرْدِ شراب
فارغ ز امیدِ رحمت و بیمِ عذاب
آزاد ز خاک و باد و از آتش و آب

Omar Khayyam: saying Everything in just a few lines

Writing more than 900 years ago, the **Persian polymath and poet** Omar Khayyam (1048 – 1131) made many significant contributions to mathematics, astronomy and philosophy. However, he is best known for his aforementioned *Rubaiyat*: short and striking four-line poems that appear deceptively simple.

Within just a few lines, Khayyam raises questions that remain profoundly unsettling: **What is the meaning of life? What happens after death? Can we trust religious belief?**

One reader may find scepticism, another spiritual reflection and another a celebration of life's fleeting pleasures.

This openness is not accidental. It is one of the reasons his poetry has endured for centuries.

By refusing to explain himself, **Khayyam creates space for interpretation**. His images of wine, gardens and fleeting moments of joy can be read in multiple ways: literal, philosophical or symbolic. He is not making an argument; he is offering possibilities. **In that openness, he remains elusive, and that very elusiveness creates a buffer against censorship**. His deliberate ambiguity protects his poetry while inviting readers to complete its meaning for themselves.



Rubā'ī 34, Edward Heron-Allen's 1898 edition of Khayyam's *Rubāiyāt*, in Shekasteh calligraphy. Baba66 (CC BY-SA 3.0).



Divan of Hafez (801 AH/1398–99 CE), one of the oldest surviving manuscripts of Hafez's collected poetry, held in the Nur-i Osmaniye Library, Istanbul.

Verse from the Divan of Hafez

Bring me a bitter wine, so fierce, so strong;
That for a fleeting breath I may find rest from all the
world's loud tumult and unrest.

شراب تلخ می خواهم که مردافکن بود زورش
که تا یک دم بیاسایم ز دنیا و شر و شورش

A single poem by Hafez can feel like a **mystical meditation, a love lyric and a subtle critique of hypocrisy all at once.**

At the centre of Hafez's poetic world is the concept of **Rendi**, a way of life defined by **deliberate nonconformity, ironic detachment from social and religious convention, and a commitment to authenticity over outward piety.**

A *Rend* is someone who refuses to conform and willingly occupies the position of an outsider.

In Hafez's poetry, however, this figure becomes far more than a social rebel: the **Rend is a symbol of authenticity in a world shaped by hypocrisy.**

The Rend speaks through hints, irony and coded language. They appear to break the rules, but in doing so they reveal deeper truths. **They push censorship to its limits, exposing what it seeks to conceal and testing how far its boundaries can be stretched.** This is not simply an act of rebellion.

The Rend does not stand outside the system to build a new one or claim moral superiority. Instead, they move within its cracks, speaking through **ambiguity and irony.** In doing so, they **reveal how fragile official boundaries can be,** especially when they depend upon **unspoken agreement.** The reader is invited to look beyond the surface. **What appears to be transgression becomes a form of ethical and intellectual honesty because it refuses to accept hypocrisy as normal.**

Verse from the Divan of Hafez

Though I am a lover, a rogue, a drunkard, and my record is black with sin;

A thousand thanks to God that everyone else in this town is completely blameless!

من ار چه عاشقم و رند و مست و نامه سیاه

هزار شکر که یاران شهر بی‌گناه‌اند



(Right) Decorative doublures of a 1842 Divan of Hafez. The painted lacquer panels depict scenes associated with the manuscript, including Hafez presenting his work to a patron. Artist unknown. (PD). (Left) Illuminated manuscript of Hafez's collected poems (Divan), Iran, 1801. Library of Congress Persian Manuscript Collection. (PD).



Two pages of Hafez Shirazi's *Divan*, a handwritten Persian poetry collection, preserved in the Malek National Library and Museum, Tehran. (PD).

Forough Farrokhzad: The Modern Inner Voice

Centuries later, Forough Farrokhzad brings this tradition of ambiguity into the modern world. **Forough Farrokhzad (1934–1967)** was an Iranian poet and film director whose **iconoclastic, feminist writing transformed modern Persian literature**.

Her life was tragically cut short at the age of thirty-two in a car accident, yet her influence has continued to grow.

Farrokhzad's poetry is modern, personal and emotionally direct, yet it retains the richness of layered meaning.

At first glance, her poems often seem autobiographical as she writes about her own life, desires and struggles. **The more one reads, however, the more these intensely personal moments expand into something universal.**

They become reflections on freedom, confinement, identity and existence itself.

In poems such as *Another Birth*, images of awakening, vision, darkness and light recur throughout her work. These images invite multiple readings: they can be understood as expressions of personal transformation, philosophical inquiry or a quiet challenge to social expectations, particularly those imposed upon women.

Unlike Khayyam's compressed paradoxes or Hafez's playful irony, Forough's **ambiguity** is **emotional** and **existential**. It arises from **lived experience** rather than intellectual play. It is felt more than it is declared. Everyday experiences

become symbolic, carrying meanings that are never fully explained. In this way, **Farrokhzad** continues the **Persian tradition** of layered expression while reshaping it for audiences of the modern age.



Portrait of Forugh Farrokhzad. Photograph by the Forugh Farrokhzad Team, 2014. Wikimedia Commons. CC BY-SA 4.0.

An excerpt of Forugh Farrokhzad's poetry

In a room that is the size of a loneliness,
My heart, which is the size of a love,
Looks at the simple excuses of its own happiness:
At the beautiful decay of flowers in the vase,
At the sapling you planted in our garden,
And at the song of the canaries,
Who sing the size of a window.
Oh... This is my share ... This is my share ...

در اتاقی که به اندازه یک تنهایی است،
دل من، که به اندازه یک عشق است،
به بهانه‌های ساده خوشبختی خود می‌نگرد،
به زوال زیبای گل‌ها در گلدان،
به نهالی که تو در باغچه خانه‌مان کاشته‌ای،
و به آواز قناری‌ها،
که به اندازه یک پنجره می‌خوانند،
آه... سهم من این است ... سهم من این
است...

Why Ambiguity Endures

Despite living in different eras, **these three writers shared a common poetic instinct: they refused to reduce meaning to a single, fixed interpretation.**

Omar Khayyam, Hafez Shirazi and Forough Farrokhzad all understood that ambiguity was not a weakness, nor was it a puzzle waiting to be solved. **It was a way of speaking when direct speech was restricted, and a way of preserving meaning when expression itself was under pressure.**

Over time, this approach became more than a literary technique; it became a tradition. **What appears to be indirectness is often something far more profound: a form of resilience.**

Persian poetry has learned, over centuries, how to say more by saying less, and how to remain open when closure is impossible.

The power of Persian poetry lies not only in what it reveals, but also in what it **allows readers to discover for themselves.** Through wine, silence,

metaphor and ambiguity, **poets have created a language capable of surviving changing authorities, shifting interpretations and the passage of time.** Its openness is not a lack of meaning; it is the reason its meaning continues to endure.

Yazdan Mansourian is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Information and Communication Studies at Charles Sturt University. Beyond academia, he explores questions of meaning and human experience through his lifelong interests in philosophy and Persian poetry.



Hafez at the Court of the Muzaffarid ruler Shah Shuja, created in 1954 by Iranian artist Husayn Taher-zadeh Behzad. Image by Bonhams via Wikimedia Commons.

The Honour of Truth and the PEN

A message from **PEN Türkiye**
– writing in a time of war

Our country, Türkiye, is suffering in a geography that has endured decades of imperialist aggression. We live with the **pain of the bombs falling on children in Iran, Palestine, and Lebanon, feeling it in our hearts.** Aggression, poverty, and death recognize no borders. We continue to **feel shame on behalf of humanity** for the people who are losing their lives under a barrage of bombs.

On one hand, there is the expansionist plunder of the imperialists; on the other, war tears apart the hearts of people struggling for freedom and democracy.

As **writers who collectively recreate humanity's shared heritage, we mourn** the children and civilians who have been killed. We will continue to defend a future in which people will live together freely.

At that ancient crossroad, where the aesthetic concerns of literature meet the ethical responsibilities of journalism, defending human dignity and objective reality against all forms of authoritarian domination is an existential necessity. In a climate where words are not free, **it is impossible for thought to flourish and for society to build its own future.** Unfortunately, in Türkiye today, **the pen is constantly tested** by systematic **fear**, sophisticated **censorship**, and legal encirclement - before it even meets the page.



Protests by university students in front of Beyazıt Square in Istanbul. Image by Mellonsapka CC BY 4.0 via [Wikimedia Commons](#).



Turkish journalists protesting imprisonment of their colleagues on Human Rights Day in 2016. (PD)

Türkiye's long history of silencing journalists

As PEN Türkiye, on the occasion of April 6, the Day of Slain Journalists, we once again proclaim a universal truth:

**Thought is not a crime;
reporting is not a crime.**

This dark chain in the history of the **press** and **freedom** of expression in Türkiye is not merely a collection of isolated incidents, but the continuation of a **state tradition** aimed at **suffocating the truth**. This bloody chronology, which began with the bullet fired at **Hasan Fehmi Bey** on the Galata Bridge in 1909, has taken from us some of our most precious values—from the tragic end of **Sabahattin Ali** to **Abdi İpekçi**, from the enlightenment of **Uğur Mumcu** to the wisdom of **Musa Anter**, from the youth of **Metin Göktepe** to **Hrant Dink's** 'pigeon-like unease'.

Today, physical assassinations have been replaced by **'legal assassinations'** aimed at paralysing pens and minds.

As of 2026, imprisoning writers and journalists through vague and elastic concepts that lack legal certainty—such as 'spreading misleading information to the public'—is a deep and incurable wound in the body of our democracy.

War on Türkiye's doorstep

As the international climate drifts toward the brink of regional devastation, and tensions escalate through the aggressive policies of the United States and Israel toward Iran, we know that the **first casualty of war is always 'the truth'**. While the shadow of imperialist weapons falls across our region, what Türkiye needs most is not intensified domestic repression but transparency; not silence but the powerful voice of peace.

Yet, regrettably, we see that the cries for war rising abroad are being converted into a policy of 'securitisation' at home, and society is being condemned to a spiral of censorship and self-censorship. **As PEN Türkiye, we are determined to defend both the dignity of words and the sanctity of peace against global war profiteers and local injustices alike.**



Members of PEN Türkiye.

Journalists jailed and murdered

The message intended to be conveyed through the **15 journalists** who spent time in **prison**, foremost among them **İsmail Arı, Merdan Yanardağ, and Alican Uludağ**, is clear: to **erase society's memory**.

Yet a journalist is the living memory of a country.



The murder of environmental journalist **Hakan Tosun**, targeted by street gangs—and all unresolved cases left unsolved—are signs, not only that **justice** is delayed, but also that it is being **obstructed** through a **deliberate culture of impunity**.



Hakan Tosun died three days after a violent attack on 10 October 2025. The murder case is ongoing.

Self-censorship as a response to intimidation

Censorship is not merely the suppression of a news story; it is an **attack on the individual's right to understand and interpret the world**.

Self-censorship, meanwhile, is the most insidious and darkest prison that this mechanism of **repression builds within individual minds**. As writers, poets, and workers of thought, we will not abandon the vision of a future Türkiye where words can spread their wings freely and intellectual security is guaranteed.

We salute our friends in prison in solidarity. The greatest and most profound silence is that which rises from the cells of those who are condemned — and it is that silence which those in power fear most. All imprisoned writers and journalists must be released immediately, and all shackles on the public's right to receive information must be removed.

It must not be forgotten that societies cannot be free until words are free.

**Halil İbrahim
Özcan**

President, PEN
Türkiye Centre

Translated by
Mansour Razaghi



The American Dissident

Dominic Wexler writes about the erosion of free speech under Trump and the repression of political dissent

The Trump administration's sustained attacks on dissent have created an atmosphere that's **hostile to free expression** and **independent thought**. The pace and trajectory of these abuses warrant re-evaluation of the United States' presumed fidelity to **freedom of speech**.

Historically, successive American governments have (sometimes begrudgingly) left their critics alone, as part of the unspoken agreement between state and society to respect the **First Amendment**. However, with Trump's second term in office, we have seen the President create a climate hostile to political expression. Political **activists**, the **media**, and even **comedians** have been subjected to **harassment**, **censorship**, and arbitrary **imprisonment**.

Facing reprisal for speech critical of the government, the United States is witnessing an emergent oxymoron: **the American dissident**.

A dissident is a critic the State cannot tolerate, and it seems impossible to square the existence of dissidence alongside a constitutional guarantee to freedom of speech, when America's First Amendment specifically bars governments from making laws "abridging the freedom of speech".

This unequivocal legal protection is designed to shield citizens from, among other things, a **President willing to exploit the power of their office and silence their detractors**. Indeed, **freedom of speech** can be viewed as the ultimate source of **democratic legitimacy** and an instrument for **political change**. It grants citizens the space to share their political views - critical or otherwise - and access to opinions that will inform future political questions, including who to vote for. Yet in fewer than two years, the current administration has betrayed these principles with a spate of domestic abuses.

Trump has demonstrated a **willingness** to **encroach** on **fundamental civil liberties** and disregard the First Amendment's guarantee of freedom of speech, thereby creating the **nascent dissident**.



Image of Palestinian activist Mahmoud Khalil from his meeting with Representative Jim McGovern in June 2025. (PD).

Khalil is disappeared

The most egregious contravention of First Amendment principles and the right to political speech occurred in 2025 when the activist Mahmoud Khalil was targeted as part of a wider government crackdown on **pro-Palestine student protests at Columbia University**.

In March, **Khalil was 'disappeared' off the streets of New York City by plainclothes ICE agents** - no warrant was provided - and transported to an immigration detention centre in Louisiana on spurious national security grounds; the Trump administration labelled him a **terrorist and a domestic threat** to the United States.

Although Khalil was **released** from detention **after 104 days**, **no criminal charges** pertaining to terrorist activity have been filed in what was a clear **violation of his constitutional right to due process of law**. In fact, he has not been charged at all. This has prompted the American Civil Liberties Union to characterise his detention as a "frightening escalation in the Trump administration's efforts to silence speech of which they are critical".

Khalil's imprisonment was not a product of administrative error or a legal blunder; it was and continues to be, part of a **coordinated effort to silence dissent**. Not since John Adams' 1798 Sedition Act has a president of the United States worked this cynically to **abrogate civil rights and suppress political criticism**.

Jimmy Kimmel becomes a target

American citizens have also drawn Trump's ire and broken under the pressure, as when the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) acquiesced to Trump's vitriol towards late-night talk show host Jimmy Kimmel. From the 17th to the 22nd of September 2025, *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* was pulled from the airwaves, after the comedian had caricatured the President's reaction to the shooting of right-wing activist and Turning Point USA founder Charlie Kirk at Utah Valley University.

Now, **mocking presidents is a long-practiced American pastime** where, in the words of First Amendment advocate Anthony Lewis, "every President is the target of criticism and mockery". Trump is arguably the most mocked in Presidential history, and, unfortunately, he is also one of the most sensitive. His fragility in the face of humour prompted the head of the Federal Communications Commission, Chairman Brendan Carr, to publicly **threaten ABC with punitive action** if Kimmel did not apologise for his political transgression. "We can do this the easy way or the hard way," said Carr, both compounding the controversy and revealing that nominally independent government agencies are not immune to Trump's influence.



Trump uses the law to silence

The President has also attacked journalists and writers, like Michael Wolff, who publish disparaging material about him or his allies. Trump has threatened to sue authors relying on anonymous sources for their books, and he has filed **exorbitant defamation suits** against The BBC, The New York Times, and The Des Moines Register for unfavourable political coverage. He is even suing The Wall Street Journal for reporting on his close personal relationship with the deceased child sex offender, Jeffrey Epstein.



The President's strategy is to gum up the **publishing industry** and entangle **editorial boards** in **prohibitively expensive—and consequential—lawsuits** to chill speech critical of his administration. In **2025**, The President managed to rack up **\$86.5 million from legal settlements** with media and tech companies alone. If it were anybody else this vexatious litigation would be trivial. But the writers and media outlets Trump has targeted are up against the world's most powerful person, a person with tremendous personal resources and contempt for the First Amendment.

Repression lies within a spectrum. Plenty of ostensibly liberal-democratic nations have authoritarian tendencies, and the United States of America has emerged as one of them. When governments ratchet up their abuses, they are obstructed by a commensurate rise in criticism. In turn, the inability to tolerate criticism leads to further abuses, thereby **shrinking the realm of acceptable political discourse** and **justifying future state-sanctioned infringements of civil liberties**, including freedom of speech. With the **political weaponisation** of the **court system**, **censorship**, and **prolonged detention** of political dissent **without due process**, the President's record has exposed the United States' commitment to freedom of speech as parchment-deep.

Writers like James Baldwin have claimed their intense love for America grants a right "to criticise her perpetually", but in 2026, the loving critic has become the imperilled dissident. Trump has reconciled a contradiction.

Dominic Wexler is a Brisbane-based writer, member of PEN Sydney, and editor for the Australian Fabians and Aôthen Magazine. You can find him on Substack @dominicwexler.

War has not silenced the voices of Iranian writers

A powerful statement against the tyranny of censorship

In the media coverage of the war between the US and Iran, little has been said about the **impact on the lives of ordinary people in Iran**. During the January uprising, the **regime killed thousands** of people who were **protesting for freedom and a better economic life**. According to reports from human rights organisations, the **regime** has **executed** more than **370 people**. A further 76 people remain at **high risk of execution**. The regime also **cut off internet** access during the January mass protests and throughout the 39 days of the war.

The **Iranian Writers Association** (IWA) has been **fighting for freedom of expression and against censorship since 1968**, under both the Shah's and the Islamic Republic's regimes. IWA members have been subjected to **censorship, persecution, imprisonment, torture, execution, abduction and assassination**. Yet they have **never remained silent**. As soon as internet access was restored in Iran, they published a statement **condemning both the war and the tyranny of the Iranian regime**. In this exclusive English publication of their statement, they declare that the only option for the people of Iran is to determine their own destiny.

The IWA Statement

Neither plundering powers nor a repressive government; the people are the sole owners of their destiny!

Now the saviour-like image of war has completely fallen apart. In the midst of the **bloody repression**

of the people's latest uprising, so-called **"humanitarian military intervention"** descended from the sky with bombs and missiles to prove that the promised **"freedom"** offered by plundering powers means nothing other than the **"erasure of civilisation"** and a "return to the Stone Age."

The **result of the United States and Israel's military action** against Iran was not only the **deaths** of **children** and other **defenceless** people, the **destruction** of infrastructure, and the **collapse** of our already fragile **economy**; as many feared, the achievements of years of struggle for **freedom** and equality were also **diminished** and pushed to the margins. People who demanded freedom at the cost of blood have now been driven to the **edge of mere survival**.

The internet is a weapon of war

The widespread wave of **unemployment**, uncontrollable **inflation** and increasing **poverty** testify to the horrific conditions of livelihood and the further collapse of a war-torn society. The Islamic Republic (Iran), under the cover of war, **intensified its repressive laws** and pushed society to the brink of **social and economic collapse**; for nearly three months it cut off the internet, severing the lifelines of many people's economic existence - state and mainstream media became the only available voice.

In the midst of silence and blockage, long-standing methods of government repression—such as the confiscation of assets, **televised confessions**,





Iranian Writers: Reza Khandan Mahabadi, Keyvan Baja and Baktash Abtin, who died after being denied proper treatment in prison.

arrests, enforced **disappearances**, and the **execution of political prisoners**—took on an even more terrifying form than before.

After some time, the **authorities sold the access right to the internet, to their chosen people**, and at the same time, with the **government engineered hubbub of “consensus and unity,”** they covered up this suppression.

The path the Islamic Republic seeks in this moment is to push back progressive movements and independent organisations, further repress protesters and freedom-loving people, and pave the way for fresh and new exploiters.

The seed of freedom

On a land worn down by plunder and scorched by war, the seed of freedom does not grow. Now, in the limbo of “neither war nor peace”, **predatory powers** continue to pound the drum of their own interests; one, after decades of occupation and genocide, **dreams of a “new Middle East”**, while another seeks to open the gates of yet another round of **plunder** under the slogan “help is on the way”.



(Left) **Arash Ganji**, writer, translator, and Secretary of the IWA, was detained for 29 days in 2019. In 2020, was sentenced to 11 years in prison on charges of propaganda and breach of national security for translating a book about a Kurdish-led uprising in northern Syria. His appeal was denied, Ganji was reported to prison in October 2021 and was released in an amnesty in February 2023.

The Islamic Republic (Iran), which previously in the 1980s massacred its opponents and freedom-lovers under the pretext of war, once again considers **war a “blessing”**, and while it is engaged in **executing and “purging” protesters**, it negotiates for its economic interests and political survival. In the meantime, the mighty force that, backed by 47 years of freedom-seeking movements, aimed to seize its own destiny has been driven into obscurity, because **war itself produces restriction and exception**.

The people are the sole owners of their destiny

The Writers’ Association of Iran, following its previous statements, **condemns the aggression of the United States and Israel** against Iran and the horrific **censorship and repression** of the government, and once again emphasises the truth that **people are forced to choose between plundering powers and a repressive government**. The destiny of society is not inevitably a return from current misery to the illusions of the past.

The people are the sole owners of their destiny, and **even after this immense devastation they will rise again**, consciously organise their strength, find their path toward freedom and equality, and **shape the future** differently.

Iranian Writers Association (IWA)

2 June 2026

Translated by Mansour Razaghi

FREEDOM TO WRITE

FREEDOM TO READ

PEN Sydney has been protecting freedom of expression for **over 90 years**

Raising awareness about writers in prison

Fighting censorship of the media, the internet and publishing

Promoting the voices of writers who are marginalised

Supporting writers fleeing war or political oppression

Defending the right to write and read in any language

Creating a community of writers, readers and activists sharing ideas

**Be a part of the conversation – become a
PEN Sydney friend**

You'll receive: the PEN Sydney magazine and early tickets to our events

Annual membership is \$80 or \$40 concession

Use the QR code to make a difference

