

SELECTIONS FROM
WE ARE ALIVE AT LAST

İLHAN SAMİ ÇOMAK

İlhan Sami Çomak was born on March 8, 1973 in Karlıova, Bingöl. As a university student, he was detained and arrested on false charges and has been in prison since 1994. Çomak, whose poems have been translated into English, Norwegian, Russian, and Welsh, has published ten poetry books and one play.

Translated from the Turkish by DURU DUMANKAYA &
DEREN ERTAS

M Y D E S K

I sit at my desk with notes I don't know
On a day with
seaweed, sea grass, and snow falling on its night
With pebble stone, couch grass and wrong answers . . .
unlike those who don't dream, I like flowers
 with gentle and wicked words
Rose petals fly off your flowing skirt . . .

I sit at my desk with words I memorized
They stole my words my notebook,
They stole my water my morning with crimson blood
 that flows when the rock smashes the head;
I sped up; I stopped; I ran and ran, I couldn't find my way
They stole my pain adding the rain in front of them;

M A S A M

Bilmediğim notlarla oturuyorum masama
Yosunlar, deniz otları ve akşamına karlar
yağan bir günde
Çakıltaşı, ayırıkotu ve yanlış cevaplarla . . .
Düş görmeyenlerin aksine seviyorum çiçekleri
narin ve hınzır sözlerle
Savrulan eteğinden gül yaprakları uçuşuyor . . .

Ezberlediğim kelimelerle oturuyorum masama
Benim kelimelerimi defterimi çaldılar,
Suyumu sabahımı taş başı yararken akan kızıl
kanlarla çaldılar;
Hızlandım; durdum; çok koştum bulamadım yolumu
Yağmurları katarak önlerine benim acılarımı çaldılar,

My voice that says in forgottenness, love is generous;
As mournful winds hurl grass, they altogether stole me from me!

A pigeon was flying on the open page of the book.

Unutulmuşlukta aşk cömerttir diyen sesimi;
Hazin rüzgârlar otları savururken hep birlikte beni benden çaldılar!

Kitabın açık sayfasında bir güvercin uçuyordu.

WITH THE WEIGHT OF THE CLOUDS

You know, you can't drink muddy water
You can't touch rusty iron
I am that far from this cold winter, the snow's symmetry

On my mind is a ghazel¹ that rises on warm nights
From the darkness, the stony ground, the grace of women with hüzma²
I am running late to the morning

Suddenly the rain stops
This is how dictionaries imply getting wet:
1- Pool. 2- River. 3- Sea.

I was mistaken when I was measuring myself with the weight
of the clouds

¹ Lyric poetry that tends to deal with themes of love and loss, resembles an ode.

² Nose piercing.

B U L U T L A R I N A Ğ I R L I Ğ I Y L A

Bilirsin, bulanık sudan içilmez
Paslı demir tutulmaz
Öyle uzağım işte bu soğuk kıştan, karın simetrisinden

Aklımda sıcak gecelerde yükselen bir gazel
Karanlıktan, taşlıktan, hızlı kadınların inceliğinden
Gecikiyorum sabaha

Ansızın duruyor yağmur
Islanmayı şöyle ima ediyor sözlükler:
1- Havuz. 2- Nehir. 3- Deniz.

Yanılmışım bulutların ağırlığıyla ölçerken kendimi

TO-DO LIST

A structure based on days, months or a to-do list:

1- Questions about the sea will be eliminated; the floss of foam
and salt will be cleaned:

With an old blue: With a yellowish white

2- And the wind will linger in the desert

Whether sand can be an ornament will be evaluated

But on the coast: With time

3- Jesus Messiah save me! Jesus Messiah save me!

Jesus Messiah save me!

The day's recitation: With while-walking

4- Towards the night notebooks will fill with idle writings

The moon is always cold: With that line

5- If we take the cloud out of the writing

There would be left a naked house.

Not much would be left: With the sky

YAPILACAKLAR LİSTESİ

Güne, aylara göre bir düzen veya yapılacaklar listesi:

1- Denize ilişkin sorular elenecek, köpük ve tuzun havı

temizlenecek:

Bir eski mavi ile: Sarı bir beyaz ile

2- Ve rüzgâr oyalanacak çölde

Kum bir süstür ihtimali tartılacak

Ama sahilde: Zaman ile

3- İsa Mesih kurtar beni! İsa Mesih kurtar beni!

İsa Mesih kurtar beni!

Günün ezberi: Yürürken ile

4- Geceye doğru defterler dolacak sebepsiz yazılarla

Ay durmadan üşüyor: Dizesi ile

5- Bulutu çıkarırsak şayet yazıdan

Çıplak bir menzil kalır.

Az kalır: Gök ile

6- Neglected flowers. Foremost violets

Cloves, crocuses as well as others

Will be loved through and through: With good tidings

7- Yet spring has come. Everything will rise up and will kiss the sun
the light

With saying how lovely how lovely

8- There will be found new things attributed to darkness

The road, loneliness, and labyrinth . . .

Should be reproduced with other things: With gloom

9- Later, acting, the lamp will be turned off, satiated

With one breath the skin of the flame will thin out

Silence will come: After lovemaking

10- It came and went with one wish: As fog

It appeared on the mountain, on the water with its skirt aflame

The water bloomed flowers: With steam

- 6- İhmal edilen çiçekler. Başta menekşe
Karanfil, çiğdem ve dahi diğerleri
Baştan başa sevilecek: Müjdeler olsun ile
- 7- Ne var ki bahar geldi. Kalkıp güneşi ışığı öpecek her şey
Ne güzel ne güzel demek ile
- 8- Karanlığa ithaf edilen yeni şeyler bulunacak
Yol yalnızlık ve labirent . . .
Başka şeylerle çoğaltılmalı: Hüzün ile
- 9- Sonra davranıp lamba söndürülecek, tok
Bir nefesle alevin teni incelemek
Sessizlik gelecek: Sevişmekten sonra
- 10- Geldi gitti bir dilekle: Sis diye
Belirdi dağda, eteği tutuşan sulara
Su çiçek açtı: Buhar ile

TRANSLATORS' NOTE: "Writing doesn't open the door to real life for me. Nevertheless, I know that spending my life in poetry, what poetry offers, is much more valuable, real and livable than the 'real' life offered by prison. That is why I defend my own repetition. This will be the case until the door of life opens for me, I will maintain myself and the colorfulness created by my soul with the discipline of poetry, the discipline I have reached through poetry."³

İlhan Sami Çomak was born in the province of Bingöl in 1973 to a Kurdish Alevi family. In 1994, he was taken into police custody while a student at the Geography Department at Istanbul University. He was accused of being a member of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)⁴ and starting

a forest fire in Bingöl. There was no evidence connecting him to the alleged crimes. However, once the Turkish state designated the PKK a terrorist organization, it became a means for criminalizing Kurdish political activists, even those not connected to the party. Like many others, Çomak confessed to the allegations under the duress of torture. In 2000, he was sentenced to life in prison, which he continues to serve today.

We first encountered İlhan Sami Çomak's poetry at a play in Istanbul's Moda Theater. Titled *Life, I Love You Very Much*, it depicted his childhood, imprisonment, and turn to writing as a mode of engagement with the world beyond prison walls. The play was performed in both Turkish and Kurmanji, simultaneous translation between

³İlhan Sami Çomak, *Hayat Seni Çok Seviyorum* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2022), 19.

⁴The PKK is a Kurdish autonomist Marxist-Leninist organization founded in 1978. It started an armed struggle against the Turkish state in 1984, which continues intermittently to this day.

the two made possible by there being two actors on the stage. An interesting choice by the director: a man and a woman both played Çomak. Throughout, it maintained the dualisms of feminine and masculine, Kurdish and Turkish, reality of imprisonment and dreams of freedom. Having encountered Çomak's forceful words on the theater stage, we decided to translate a few of his poems from an earlier compilation titled *We Are Alive At Last (Hayattayız Nihayet)*, published in February 2022.

Çomak's poems fill the void of having lived a stolen life. In his repetitions, he weaves together nature motifs with his routines in imprisonment. There is a grave importance to the words that his imagination produces, as they build a different world than the one he inhabits. One can detect in his lines the world-making capacities of poetry. However, translating Çomak's imaginary universe brings its own difficulties. Ambivalences

abound in his lines. As translators, we had to ask ourselves several times, what does he mean here? We were often unsatisfied with our own interpretation. And then we had to ask, how can we both render the lines into English and maintain the ambiguity of meaning? This produced a translation practice where we had to stay loyal to the words without digging too much into an interpretive exercise. Furthermore, we had to deal with numerous wordplays that produced rather awkward results. For example, in the poem "to-do list," we had to translate "yürümek ile" as "with while-walking." As odd as this string of words appears in English, it preserves the poetic wordplay in Turkish. At other places, we took liberties with syntax in English in order to stay true to the text in Turkish.

DURU DUMANKAYA is a translator and program coordinator at Postane, a social center primarily

focused on the environment. She is currently based in Istanbul, where she has worked in several public and cultural institutions.

DEREN ERTAS is a Turkish-American researcher and writer currently based in Berlin. She is a PhD Candidate in History and Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University.