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Short List of Nominations for the 2018 Vaclav Havel Library Foundation's Award for a Courageous Writer at Risk

Since 2016, The Vaclav Havel Library Foundation recognizes writers who share Havel's passionate commitment to human rights and have suffered unjust persecution for their beliefs. The award for a *Courageous Writer at Risk* is given each year to a writer of a distinguished work of fiction, literary nonfiction, biography/memoir, drama, or poetry, who is courageous in dissent and has been punished for challenging an oppressive regime.

The five nominees for 2018 include Ahmet Altan (Turkey), Ketty Nivyabandi (Burundi/Canada), Patrice Nganang (Cameroon/USA), Liu Xia (China) and Liao Yiwu (China/Germany).

The award, which includes a \$5,000 cash prize, supports talented individuals who embody Havel's legacy while drawing attention to the many writers worldwide who bravely fight human rights violations. The winner will receive the prize at a Gala event at The Bohemian National Hall on September 27, 2018. It will be presented by Carl Gershman, President of the National Endowment for Democracy, a private, congressionally supported grant-making institution with the mission to strengthen democratic institutions around the world through nongovernmental efforts.

Nominations for the award are collected each year from international institutions prominent in literature and human rights. A short list is prepared by the VHFLF

Award Committee and forwarded to three jurors, who select the awardee. The previous recipients of the Disturbing the Peace Award were Kurdish novelist Burhan Sönmez (2017) and Burmese writer Ma Thida (2016).

In 2018, the VHLF consulted with the following organizations:

- Freedom House
- PEN International
- Vaclav Havel Library
- Words without Borders

The jury members for 2018 include:

Burhan Sonmez, a human rights lawyer, was severely beaten and left for dead by security forces while taking part in a demonstration in his native Turkey in 1996. While receiving treatment in the United Kingdom, he began to write novels and to date has published *Kuzey (North)* (2009); *Masumlar (Sins and Innocents)* (2011), which received the Sedat Simavi Literature Award; and *Istanbul, Istanbul* (2015). Sönmez's works have been published in thirty-one languages, including English. He currently lives in Istanbul. He's awarded the EBRD Literature Prize in London (2018) for his novel *Istanbul Istanbul*.

James Ragan, the author of the poetry collections *In the Talking Hours* (1979), *Womb-Weary* (1990), *The Hunger Wall* (1995), *Lusions* (1997), and *Too Long a Solitude* (2009), he also co-edited and translated from the Russian, with Albert C. Todd, *Yevgeny Yevtushenko: Collected Poetry, 1952–1990* (1991). In his work, Ragan frequently draws on his international travels and observations of political dramas as well as more personal concerns. A screenwriter for Paramount Pictures and a playwright, Ragan directed the University of Southern California Master of Professional Writing program for 25 years.

Deborah Treisman, New Yorker fiction editor, began her post-college career as an editor at *The Threepenny Review*, then earned an internship at *Harper's Bazaar*. At 23, Treisman became the editor of *Grand Street*, a now-defunct quarterly literary magazine. In 2002, after an introduction to Bill Buford, she joined *The New Yorker* as a deputy fiction editor. When Buford left to pursue his writing career, Treisman took his place.

About the Nominees:

Ahmet Altan (1950) is one of Turkey's most-read novelists as well as being among the country's best-known political columnists. In 2007, Altan became founding editor-in chief and lead columnist of the daily Taraf newspaper and remained in that position until resigning in December 2012. In the purge that followed the failed July 2016 attempted coup, Altan was arrested for encouraging the putschists by sending "subliminal messages." A trial which began on 19 June 2017 ended on 16 February 2018 with Ahmet Altan (along with his brother Mehmet and four others) being sentenced to life in prison without parole. He remains in Silivri prison, outside the city of Istanbul. The appeals process is underway.

He has an amazingly strong voice, imprisoned in solitary for 23 hours a day after publishing an essay from behind bars last fall. He shares much with Vaclav Havel, including a liberating sense of imagination that he says keeps him from feeling confined.

As he said himself before his sentencing, "they may have the power to imprison me but no one has the power to keep me in prison, because wherever you lock me up I will travel the world with the wings of my endless mind... Like all writers, I have magic. I can pass through walls with ease." Along with Havel before him, imagination, courage, a refusal to turn away, an unbending insistence on liberal democratic principles and human rights are moral givens. They sustain him as well as countless others who are unjustly accused, imprisoned, silenced, oppressed, whether in Turkey or elsewhere in the world.

Ketty Nivyabandi

Poet and essayist **Ketty Nivyabandi** was born in Belgium in 1978. She lived and worked in her hometown, Bujumbura, Burundi, until she was forced into exile first to Rwanda in 2015 and now in Canada. During the violent political unrest that followed President Pierre Nkurunziza's bid for a third term, Nivyabandi led protests and demonstrations in Bujumbura that made her a target of the police.

She is a rising star now in the forefront of those advocating for more humane refugee policies throughout the world. Poet, essayist, blogger. Her poetry, written mostly in French, has appeared in *Words without Borders*, *World Literature Today*, and *Molossus*, and in several anthologies. In 2012 Nivyabandi was selected to represent Burundi in the London Poetry Parnassus as part of the Summer Olympics. She is outspoken, persistent, creative. After fleeing Burundi in '15 under threat of death, Ketty Nivyabandi remains an outstanding advocate for democratic reform in Burundi, but at the same time has expanded her focus to include the 65.5 million people who have been forced to flee their homes worldwide. Her mission—how to lead in doing a better job in supporting, inspiring, resettling refugees wherever they are.

She has led street protests against the government and fights for women's rights in her native Burundi. After a brutal crackdown on protestors and death threats for her criticism of the president's effort to seek a third term (which he won), she left Burundi and now works from other locations in Africa and lives in Canada. She continues her activism, largely by using digital platforms, such as tweeting poetry and publishing statements on the digital literary space that she founded. In this way she's exploring new media to reach audiences in a country that doesn't have a publishing industry but where everyone uses a cell phone to communicate. She was recently invited to become a part of the Nobel Women's Initiative, which supports grassroots activist efforts led by women.

Patrice Nganang

Alain Patrice Nganang (born 1970) is a Cameroonian writer, poet and teacher. He was awarded a Ph.D. in comparative literature at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University. During 2006–2007 he was the Randolph Distinguished Visiting Associate Professor of German Studies at Vassar College. He was an instructor at the Shippensburg University until 2007, and is now a Professor of Comparative Literature at Stony Brook University. His 1999 novel *Temps de chien* was awarded the Prix Littéraire Marguerite Yourcenar in 2001 and the Grand prix littéraire d'Afrique noire in 2002.

On December 7, 2017 Nganang was reported missing at the Douala airport where he was to catch a flight on Kenya Airways to Harare, Zimbabwe, the day after publishing an article on the site Jeune Afrique, criticizing Mr. Biya's government for his handling of protests by English-speaking Cameroonians. Mr. Nganang was detained for three weeks as he was about to fly out of his country of birth. On December 27, 2017, a judge in Cameroon ordered his release. He was deported back to the US, where he also holds a dual citizenship.

Young, vigorous, brave, Nganang persists as an outspoken voice for press freedom and human rights in his native country. His recent detention in Cameroon for criticizing the Biya government caught the world's attention. Nganang is already a writer, poet, professor of distinguished accomplishment but now, increasingly, a human rights activist of notable global presence. As Pen America noted: "Detaining an important independent voice like Patrice Nganang, who has used his writing to investigate the consequences of violence, is indicative of a movement by the government to silence all political criticism and dismantle the right to free expression."

Liu Xia

Liu Xia is a poet, artist and founding member of the Independent Chinese PEN

Center. Her husband, poet, literary critic and human rights activist Liu Xiaobo was serving an 11-year prison sentence for “inciting subversion of state power.” In 2010, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Two months before the awards ceremony, Liu Xia disappeared under extralegal house arrest, where she has remained with no access to phone, Internet, or mail, and where around-the-clock security prevented her from seeing visitors. When her husband was diagnosed with late-stage liver cancer in June 2017 and released on medical parole, Liu Xia was reportedly able to visit him. However, since his death in July, she has not been seen in public for several months. In May 2018, Liao Yiwu, the Chinese author and poet living in Germany and friend of Liu Xia, reported, with Liu Xia's permission, that she was suffering debilitating clinical depression, after the Beijing government had broken multiple promises that she would 'soon' be free to travel, including, in early April 2018, an arrangement made by Heiko Mass, the German Foreign Minister, to facilitate her travel to Germany.

English translations of Liu Xia's poetry by Ming Di and Jennifer Stern have been published by PEN America, Chinese PEN, the BBC, the Guardian, the Margins for the Asian American Writers' Workshop, Poetry, the Poetry Society of America, and Words without Borders. Liu Xia's photographs have appeared in galleries throughout the world.

Liao Yiwu

Liao Yiwu also known as **Lao Wei**, (born 16 June 1958 in Sichuan), is a Chinese author, reporter, musician and poet. He is a critic of China's Communist regime, for which he has been imprisoned. His books, several of which are collections of interviews with ordinary people from the lower rungs of Chinese society, were published in Taiwan and Hong Kong but are banned in mainland China; some have been translated into English, French, German, Polish and Czech.

The exiled Chinese writer Liao Yiwu is the son of schoolteachers in Sichuan Province who were persecuted during the Cultural Revolution. Mr. Liao left home at the age of 10, took a succession of jobs and eventually became involved in avant-garde poetry. In 1990, he was arrested after publicly reciting his poem "Massacre" in memory of the victims of the Tiananmen Square military crackdown on June 4, 1989, and spent four years in prison. After his release, he wrote several books under pseudonyms, all of which were banned in China but sold well on the underground market. His "Interviews With People From the Bottom Rung of Society" was published in Taiwan in 2001 and became his first book to appear in English, in 2008, as "The Corpse Walker: Real Life Stories, China From the Bottom Up." A memoir of his prison years, "For a Song and a Hundred Songs," was published in English in 2013.

Though he lives in Germany under asylum, his works have been shared underground inside China, where he remains known.

Vaclav Havel (1936-2011) was a playwright, essayist, political dissident, and, after 1990, president of Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic. In the 1960s Havel's plays *The Garden Party* and *The Memorandum* were widely performed around the world. But in the climate of political orthodoxy that followed the 1968 uprising in Czechoslovakia, Communist authorities forbade the publication and performance of Havel's works. Havel refused to be silenced and continued to write on behalf of the unjustly oppressed. He became an outspoken human rights advocate and in the 1970s was an author of *Charter 77*, the manifesto of the Czechoslovak dissident movement, which called on the government to honor its human rights commitments under the Helsinki Accords. During the next two decades Havel was arrested many times for alleged anti-state activities and was sentenced to more than four years in prison. Havel's seminal essay, "*The Power of the Powerless*," written in 1978, had a profound impact on dissident and human rights movements in Eastern Europe and around the world.

About Vaclav Havel Library Foundation

The Vaclav Havel Library Foundation is a nonprofit organization established in the United States to honor, preserve, and build upon the legacy of playwright, dissident, and former President of Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic, Vaclav Havel.

The Bohemian Benevolent and Literary Association (BBLA)

The Bohemian Benevolent and Literary Association (BBLA), established in 1891, was founded as an umbrella organization representing approximately eighty Czech and Slovak cultural, educational and athletic community groups and clubs.

About Carl Gershman

Carl Gershman is President of the National Endowment for Democracy. In addition to presiding over the Endowment's grants program in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union and Latin America, he has overseen the creation of the quarterly *Journal of Democracy*, International Forum for Democratic Studies, the Reagan-Fascell Democracy Fellows Program, and the Center for International Media Assistance. He also took the lead in launching in New Delhi in 1999 the World Movement for Democracy, which is a global network of democracy practitioners and scholars. Mr. Gershman is currently encouraging other democracies to establish their own foundations devoted to the promotion of democratic institutions in the world.

Members of the VHLF Award Committee are:

- Elizabeth Littlefield, governor, Off-The-Record
- Pavla Niklova, VHLF executive director
- Martin Palous, former ambassador of the Czech Republic to the United Nations and the United States, and president, VHLF board of directors

- Bill Shipsey, chair, Art for Amnesty, Amnesty International, and member of the VHLF board of directors
- Lise Stone, member of the VHLF board of directors
- Salil Tripathi, chair, Writers in Prison Committee, PEN International
- Marilyn Wyatt, consultant and member of the VHLF board of directors