

A Pilgrim's Petition

by Genevieve Chornenki

In September 2019, I—a dubious Christian in more ways than one—walked on the Way of St. Francis. A one-hundred-and-eighty kilometre trek through the Umbrian countryside, much of it on dry, cracked mountain trails that ascended and descended without mercy.

Shortly before starting out, I'd finished reading Behrouz Boochani's *No Friend But the Mountains* and was aghast at what he and other asylum seekers had experienced. Behrouz had been imprisoned on a remote Pacific island without charges or trial, with inadequate food and inferior medical and dental care for over six years. I was indignant on his behalf. How, I asked, could a supposedly benevolent deity countenance renewed concentration camps and contemporary gulags?

In the cathedral in Citta di Castello, the first church on my walk, I lit a candle for Behrouz. A statue of the Madonna stood beside the candles, her head turned to the right, her gaze off in the distance. "Look me in the eye," I challenged her. "Get Behrouz off Manus Island. Now."

The next day, I continued towards Pietralunga and from there south through Gubbio and Valfabbrica and towards Assisi.

Outside Assisi's cathedral, I noticed a few people queuing at a small wall cavern. I drew closer and saw that it contained a table with pens and paper and a box for written petitions to St. Clare, the female counterpart of St. Francis. I got in line. When my turn came, I wrote a polite petition. "Santa Clara. Please. Get Behrouz off Manus Island."

The climb out of Assisi was steep and challenging, the slope strewn with cobbles and scree. Behrouz became a dusty pink stone that I slipped into the back pocket of my jeans. We were pilgrims together, I by choice, he by circumstance. The ascent was arduous, and I distracted myself with a mantra, *Behrouz Boochani off Manus, Behrouz Boochani off Manus...* Two hours later when I arrived at the top, I could barely cough out his first name. Still, I continued my petition at the hermitage where St. Francis used to contemplate.

There were other opportunities to intercede on Behrouz's behalf. On the rural parts of my trek I found small stone chapels, privately owned, locked and inaccessible. When I finally encountered one with an open grate on the windows, I scrawled a note on a paper napkin and shoved it past the metal bars. "Behrouz Boochani. Asylum seeker jailed by Australia. Remember." I used big capital letters and added a row of exclamation marks. Only later did I realize that I had misspelled his name.



Churches big and small peppered my route. Wayside shrines. Crosses. Occasional inukshuks. At each location I marked my intention with a candle, a note, a stone, a command. I stood before a statue of St. Anthony bearing the words “Si quaeris.” *Yeah, I’m asking*, I muttered. *Who’s listening?*

When I finally returned to Toronto, I turned on my computer for the first time in two weeks.

Any news about Behrouz? Still on Manus Island.

And Operation #NotForgotten, a campaign to raise \$3 million dollars to bring refugees like him from Manus and Nauru to Canada? It had yet to reach \$10,000.

How disappointing.

I added Behrouz’s name to the prayer list at the back of the church but listened with cynicism to a sermon about red, green, and orange lights that came in response to petitionary prayer.

I wasn’t seeing lights of any colour.

On the morning of Thursday, November 14, 2019, I picked up my wrist watch and started to strap it on.

“That’s curious,” I said. “Must need a new battery.”

The watch had stopped running shortly after 2 AM.

I reset the time and hurried off to a morning appointment. For the balance of the day, the watch worked normally. Then, around 7 PM, I was surprised and delighted to hear on the radio that Behrouz was a free man. The government of New Zealand had given him a visitor’s visa to attend a literary festival in Christchurch, and he told the media that he did not intend to return to Manus, ever.

I rarely pay attention to social media, but something prompted me to check out Behrouz on Twitter. I saw that upon arrival in New Zealand, he had tweeted, “I just arrived...So exciting to get freedom after more than six years.”

Then I looked at the time of his tweet: 2:02 AM - 14 Nov 2019.