

**in libraries**

**s writers in**

**in libraries**

**writers in**

**ies**

**writes**

**libraries**

# writers in libraries

This book contains the works of the five South Gippsland writers who took part in South Gippsland Shire's recent project, Writers in Libraries.

In February 2021, four local writers and one writers group undertook a one month residency, in which time they developed a single piece of written work, based around the themes of 'isolation / emergence / connection'. The residencies were hosted by West Gippsland Libraries (WGL), with each writer basing themselves in and around their local library within the Shire. Some of the writers could be found in their libraries on a daily basis, while others travelled to libraries on the other side of the Shire. Some reached out to the broader community to undertake interviews and research, which then fed the piece they had in mind. Most of the writers were solo in their endeavours, while one worked as a group, meeting and trading ideas and drafts on a weekly basis.

Writers in Libraries was designed to provide professional opportunity for local writers, to help bring visibility to a creative endeavour that is by nature, isolating. This project was also intended to help connect local writers to one another, and to the communities they live among, particularly in this post-COVID reality.

Within these pages are the written pieces submitted.

South Gippsland Shire is very proud to have the opportunity to collate and publish these works in the following book.

Copyright © 2021

Writers in Libraries



TO READ THE  
FULL STORY  
USE QR CODE



For more information on this project, please check – [southgippsland.vic.gov.au/WritersinLibraries](https://southgippsland.vic.gov.au/WritersinLibraries). #WritersinLibraries  
Writers in Libraries is delivered as part of Council's \$2M COVID-19 Community Support Package.

## Contents

### C S Hughes

Vainglory morning	6
The sound of days & books	7
Jesus on Mars	8

### Jillian Durance

We have been here before	9
--------------------------	---

### Jenny Taylor

Library song	27
--------------	----

### John Tebbutt

Singing in a storm	29
--------------------	----

### Melissa Austwick\*

Witness	35
---------	----

### Joel Evans\*

Witness	40
---------	----

### Heather McCloy\*

Witness	44
---------	----

### Anne Taib\*

Witness	47
---------	----

### Allana Young\*

Witness	51
Witness One	53

Acknowledgments	55
-----------------	----

#### \*Loch writers

The Loch Writers Group is made up of five local residents who all share a love of writing: Anne Taib, Allana Young, Heather McCloy, Melissa Austwick and Joel Evans.

## Vainglory morning

In the atrium  
The statues grow  
Life moving slow as sundials  
Faces blind  
Even when the painted eyes  
Of their subjects blink  
The tears away and light  
Slanting from the transom window  
The morning vainglory gold  
But the marble  
Translucent as a sigh

## The sound of days & books

The streets are library quiet  
A clarity, hid in the serried facades  
Serrated trees and telegraph lines  
Crossing at that infinite point  
Where perspective fails  
I put my reading glasses on  
Finding in the shapes of words, clear and close  
The world – not so far, gone indistinct  
We abide in our houses, like rough, disordered books  
The leaves of other people's dreams  
In that owling susurrus  
A white noise blur  
In my clumsied restlessness  
A few loose pages rent  
Gusting down the road  
In obdurate branches, catch  
Wondering if  
By a kind, entangling osmosis  
What stray words are crossing in between

Beds are narrower on TV  
 People talk face to face  
 Unafraid of halitosis  
 Or other unfortunate intimacies  
 We populate our borrowed homes  
 With arbitrary things  
 To imbue ourselves with personality  
 And life's outré laugh-track semblances  
 Wearing masks to unpretend  
 How we see familiar faces  
 In the shapes of cups and clouds  
 But just these peculiar vacancies  
 Where strangeness starts  
 From your face  
 An ageless breath has carved  
 Another empty planet

# Jillian Durance

## **We have been here before**

### **Letters from times of isolation**

In late January 1919, the first cases of the Spanish Flu' appeared in Australia. Many soldiers were returning home from the war. In Korumburra, a hospital was set up in the Korumburra State School. Trained nurses were employed but much of the work was done by local women who volunteered. In an imagined letter Miss Nora Shapland of Shellcott's Road writes to her friend Miss Mabel Rainbow of Moyarra. Two of Nora's brothers died in the war:



25 March 2020

One hundred and one years later, in February 2020, the first cases of a new virus called COVID-19 began to appear in Australia. In March the state of Victoria went into its first lockdown and people could only leave their homes for a limited number of reasons. Those who lived alone were especially isolated. In Bena, South Gippsland, a few weeks later, an 8 year old girl named Elsie became concerned for her (more) elderly neighbour Libby, and placed a note in her letterbox:

Dear Libby,  
How are you?  
Hope you are enjoying the holidays.  
I am getting quite bored myself.  
What about you?  
Your a great neighbour!  
Thanks for keeping the town safe from the snakes.  
Have a great day!  
Elsie

25 April 2020

A month later, at nearby Moyarra, Jillian was wondering how to commemorate Anzac Day 'in iso' as everyone had begun to call it. A new tradition called 'At the Gate' was beginning to catch on. Afterwards, she decided to finish a letter she had begun writing to her grandfather who died in March 1980,:

Dear Grandpa,

It's just gone Anzac Day, 2020.

This year it was different. No marches, no ceremonies where hundreds of people gather. How much we have taken for granted. But somewhere out there some bright spark had the idea that Anzac Day was still on. You just had to stand at your front gate in the dawn and hold a candle. The idea took off everywhere. Something in our hearts just surged up and said 'yes'.

The day before, Glenise and I assembled all our poppies we had collected over the years and attached one to every letter box. (Perry from the RSL gave us some too.) People must have wondered how they got there. We saw no-one in our travels on the Inlet Road. The road has been quiet for weeks now.

Just before six, I stumbled out of bed, threw on my Goretex, grabbed the candle, lit it, put on my boots and walked down to the letterbox, guarding the flame with my palm cupped around it like a shield. I put it inside the 'can'. It went out. I raced back to the house for matches... it was not yet dawn.

I knew other people would have a service playing on their phone, but I wasn't sure how to do that. Wasn't sure at all of what to do, but as the moments went by, those familiar words came to me;

They shall not grow old as they who are left grow old.

I saw candles flickering far off at a neighbour's house.  
Age shall not weary them,









25 August 2020

Yet another month later, on 23 August, Mrs. Betty Wilson of Bena turns 100. She was born just after the end of the 'Spanish' influenza epidemic. Betty's family organises a party for her on Zoom. A great granddaughter dresses up as Her Majesty the Queen and reads the Queen's letter of congratulations. The front fence is festooned with balloons and a sign that reads: Betty is 100 today. A little girl called Isobel drives past and decides to send Betty a card that she makes herself: 'Dear Betty, I hope you are having a good 100th Birthday.'

Jillian asks Betty about her life. Like Isobel, she too must acknowledge this great achievement.

Dear Betty,

Thanks so much for talking to me and answering all those questions about your life. I could not get over the fact that until 1939, when you were 19, you lived without electricity. The countryside around Bena must have been very dark during our long winter nights. You said that you always kept a candle ready to light beside your bed in case anything scared you in the night. You told me about having to milk by hand four cows before school and again after school, no complaints, no regrets, it's just what you had to do in those days.

I loved the way you reassured me that as you get older there is less to fear. Yes, the pandemic is a frightening thing, you said, but these days we have the knowledge and the health system to deal with it all, so we shouldn't live in fear of it: just keep busy every day, doing what has to be done, helping others.

You reminded me that there have been other epidemics that South Gippslanders have had to deal with. In the 20's and 30's there were outbreaks of scarlet fever and polio. People had to isolate themselves inside their homes. Children of affected families had to quarantine and not go to school. Some people lived with the effects of polio for the rest of their lives. With polio, a vaccine was developed in the 1950's, so that we never had to worry about it again. You were positive the same would happen with COVID-19.

So It seems to me that we can cope with this by having faith in science and medicine, having something to do every day and keeping in touch with others. Isobel reached out to someone she didn't know and sent her a birthday greeting.

Thank you Betty for 'shining a light on the past', present and future - all at the same time.

Kindest regards,  
Jillian




The COVID-19 pandemic seems to be never ending. The relative freedom and ease of living we feel here in the South Gippsland hills seems to be denied to our loved ones in the city. The children have not been able to go to school for months.

Two friends, both grandmothers support one another with their regular text messages

**Text messages:**


**October 2020 between H and J, two friends**


**J.** Lots to deal with last week. A wee struggle but getting there.  
Just happy I have 3 returning to school this week. Have a beautiful book to lend you. Where the Crawdads Sing

**H.** Sounds good 

**J.** Much better today. Thanks for your concern. It's always when you think you are trundling along quite well that everything gets to you. My poor wonderful children. I just want to be with them, in their company a few hours... that's all.

**H.** I feel for you in this lockdown. I really hope Dan eases up a bit soon. The WHO have said it's a last resort. It's sensible but too tough in yr circumstances. You brought yr children up to be strong and sensible, so have faith and hang in there till you see them. Lots of hugs xx

**J.** Thanks my friend. I like to think I am tough!  
But there r days 

**H.** Thankfully you're human 

We in South Gippsland have been out of lockdown for a while, but we have lost track of our lives, and the pandemic seems to surge then die down again. Our folk in Melbourne are only just slowly getting out and about once more.

But what has happened here will not be forgotten. Libby has happy memories still of the kindness of her neighbours and the feast of pumpkin scones they 'shared' at her front gate. They grew the pumpkin and put it in her letter box. Libby cut it up and cooked it and baked the scones. She laid them out on a tablecloth set with her best plates and silverware. A feast to be remembered from the time of COVID-19:

Dear Libby,  
We hope you enjoy this pumpkin  
Have a great day ...  
From the Morris family.

We have heard it said  
'Been here before'  
When stricken down  
With drought and war -

What doesn't kill us now  
Will surely make us strong  
And little things from you and me  
Sustain our way along.

And as with flood, so too with fire,  
Pandemics spike our fears  
News reports and loneliness  
Will sometimes bring on tears

A note placed in the letter box  
A cake left at the door  
A message sent, a thought replied,  
A voice! and spirits soar -

Oh how we hunger for those hugs  
And 'normal' ways of doing things,  
But candles burning in the dawn  
Can shine a light and hearts will sing,

Those eyes that smile above the mask,  
A child's kind words, an elder's story, those  
Sunsets streaked with colour  
Will touch us just as surely -

Will always make us strong -  
Hold on, remembering:  
'Been here before', they say  
'Came through and will again.'

**A note to you our reader:**

These letters produced here are from both real and imagined people. Emalia's letter is written by Katrina Brandon of Moyarra. The rest have been 'collected' or written by Jillian Durance, her neighbour at Moyarra. Thanks to all those who shared their stories. Keep on coming through.

## Library song ©



USE QR  
TO LISTEN

## Abcd in the library Abcd in the library Abcd in the library

V1 Aimee's running round now, she's light on  
her toes  
She's always busy, there's not much she  
doesn't know  
But if you ask a question and she doesn't  
know the answer, She'll take a look  
She'll open a computer and search until she  
finds the book  
Then she'll place it in your hand, ain't life  
grand

## ABCD in the library ABCD in the library

V2       Someone had a thought and then wrote it down  
          dreamed a purple sky and an upside down town  
          Someone mapped the ocean, someone felt a poem,  
          come in on a breeze  
          someone filmed a kiss, and placed it in the library  
          You can hold it in your hand, ain't life grand

**ABCD in the library**  
**ABCD in the library**

BRIDGE

There's budlija and butterflies  
Playdough and babies cries  
How to build and sail a boat  
it's organised, into shelves and aisles  
You can find the remote

V3       Through the open door you can see,  
          All of the world and it's mysteries  
          You can wear your hat crooked, even wear it inside  
          And if you're sleeping rough, it's warm in there  
          In the library, you can be free

**ABCD in the library**  
**ABCD in the library**  
**ABCD in the library**  
**ABCD in the library**  
**ABCD in the library**  
**ABCD in the library**

# John Tebbutt

## Singing in a storm

COVID-19 is a quiet storm. It obliterates in silence. Many have lost loved ones while in isolation and, in a broader cultural context, it can seem like 2020 just did not happen. So many times, I have heard people talk about their plans – for travel, for projects, for catching up – only to say, a little further into the conversation: “Of course, that was last year.”

The pandemic has been particularly devastating for the cultural sector. The Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that more than half of all arts and recreation businesses had ceased trading by the end of March last year. Even with a revised JobKeeper program from July, artists and workers the creative industries found it hard to access payments unless they had formal arrangements in place, either ongoing employment – rare – or a company structure – not easy for a casual. On the ABC’s 7.30 Report Leigh Sales suggested to the Prime Minister that, in July 2020, the “sector contributes billions to the Australian economy and employs 600,000 people fewer than half of whom are eligible for JobKeeper”. Mr Morrison pointed to the increased JobSeeker payments in response.

At the same time the arts sector found itself in the middle of increasing concern over aerosol COVID particles. Soon, it wasn’t just who or what we touched. Not only should we wash and sanitise, avoid handshakes and hugs – COVID was in the very air we breathe. In May last year US health authorities reported that a choir practice led to a ‘superspread’ of 52 coronavirus cases in one town, including two deaths. A fine mist of virus particles emitted during singing, authorities believed, contributed to the spread. Soon similar reports came in from the Netherlands and Germany. The US journal, *Atlantic Monthly*, quipped that while making music has benefits, in a pandemic it is riskier than staying silent.

But what is silence to an artist? Can you sing in a storm?

After the news about the US choir ‘superspread’, singing and musical instructors Jane Coker and Tanya Nolan had to find new ways to raise their voices. While Jane and Tanya shared the 2020 experience at home in Dumbalk, South Gippsland – where they had moved from Brunswick nine years ago – it was international engagement that came to the fore. When singing was sidelined, Jane found that reconnecting with her worldwide network was invaluable. Workshops and meetings online led to a sharing of experiences and strategies in the changed conditions and were important for providing peer recognition and support.

Prior to the pandemic Jane and Tanya, had a whirl of professional and social engagements. Singing was Jane’s livelihood. She has a long history in community singing in Australia and the UK. Tanya ran weekly ukulele workshops in Meeniyan Hall – a community hall famous for hosting international performances. Jane and Tanya are in the Stony Six, a local acoustic group that played all over Gippsland and Jane also sang acapella in Acoustic Kitchen.

JobKeeper provided a financial lifeline for Jane and Tanya but their singing practice suffered. Community singing over zoom is not the same as gathering in a room. For Tanya, social singing is physical. In any case as Jane points out you can’t sing together online; technical delays in the audio mean that participants can only hear themselves and the leader, not the other singers. While workarounds were possible the multi-screen choir singing, that often appeared as a sign of ‘togetherness’ and solidarity throughout 2020, was an effect of editing and multitracking. More presentation than presence. Jane and Tanya’s singing groups were discontinued and now, a year later, members have developed new ways of living. Time for rehearsals and performances will need to be carved anew from other commitments.

Weathering the silence invoked by COVID-19 was exactly how Michael Pitts dealt with the pandemic-induced change to his art photography practice in 2020. Although he would have preferred to have been in his beloved northern deserts – where he travels with a portable darkroom – he found winter in South Gippsland bearable: “Weather’s what weather is” he tells me in his laconic manner. When I went to interview Michael, I found him waiting for a truck behind his Fish Creek home. He had put his former skills as a carpenter and project manager on warehouse builds to good use and was constructing a new studio.

Michael tells me he lived by wits and intuition in his life as a builder, but photography was always there. He sold his first picture at 19. Michael’s wet plate process photography is akin to weathering; chemical soaked silver crystalises on a glass plate before being exposed



to light in an antique box camera. It beautifully captures the stillness of the desert landscapes. I asked him when he knew he had a good shot but, he eschewed any sense of pre-empting the photograph. For his art practice ‘photographing’ – where collodion, the suspension of silver articles in a bath ether, alcohol, and other chemicals, produces light sensitive crystals – cannot be a conscious process except in the impulse to take the picture; like chemicals on a plate, consciousness shifts, and you know what you have only once the excitation settles.

For Michael the pandemic is just more turbulence to tide over. Michael credits the community around him for helping he and his partner, Tracey, weathering 2020 at home in Fish Creek. On their last desert trip in 2018, a car accident laid them up. Neighbours, known and anonymous rallied, leaving food and supplying good cheer as they recovered through the following year. When 2020 came they were still not sure if they were ready for the road again. COVID-19 settled that question.

Michael made a decision a long time ago not to be bothered with government money, so JobKeeper was never a question for him. While over the year he saw the ebb and flow of customers dry up, time has offered him the chance to put up his new studio, a long-term goal, and to indulge interest in bespoke picture framing.

Down the road, shelter in the storm was also important for sculptor, Andrew McPherson. Andrew’s Ride the Wild Goat Gallery combines his workshop, which is very much in the public eye. His workspace adjacent to the gallery invites you to call out and connect. But in the pandemic Andrew has learnt to enjoy the quiet. The pandemic allowed time to take time; to sit back, not be so in front of everything and everyone. Andrew’s artist partner, Isabel, has drawn family to her in Gippsland. Lately her mother – an artist as well – joined them in Fish Creek and Andrew has been fixing up her new house. He’s reconnected with family on Isabel’s side and his own as his sons have helped him with the build.

At the same time, he has been creating his own place – a workshop that will allow him to move away from

being on public view. The pandemic has provided Andrew with the chance to work without being a spectacle and provided the opportunity to turn towards the more prosaic arts of making shelter. “I spent 12 years sculpting, learning how not to make things straight now I’m fitting windows, which really do need to be in straight”.

COVID-19, for Andrew, was another way to find out what you need to do. There was a terrific piece his gallery when I came to talk to Andrew, entitled ‘Essence of a swan’. As with all his work it involved found, salvaged or gifted material. This was a large, solid piece of wood. When he started working with it Andrew believed he was fashioning a dog; he scraped and chiselled the wood, but the dog never came into view. Slowly over years of working on the material he came to understand he wasn’t creating a canine but a waterfowl.

For Andrew physical material can have an essence – a song – that requires its due. Sometimes all an artist can do is take time to listen. “It’s not always the case” Andrew explains “sometimes it come quickly, a purer song; some take more grunt and are rough in the end, but still a thing in themselves”. While the pandemic has meant Andrew has put off sculpturing for building the call of the physical material is still there. It waits for him and it will, maybe, be all the more discernible in the quiet his newly built workspace.

Like Andrew, Tanya and Jane hope that emerging from the depths of the pandemic – even if danger remains – will lead to a rejuvenated practice. Tanya has been working on producing songs for sharing online, developing new skills with free audio production programs. Singing is beginning again. The Meeniyana Hall hosted the first of Jane’s classes recently and news is that the volunteer Lyrebird Arts Council will once again schedule touring acts for the community Hall in the town.

While the storm will rage, we still hear the creative chorus provided by artists’ practice.

## 'Witness' by Loch writers

### Witness

A drone flew overhead and the people on the footpath held their hands flat like visors, saluting at the sun as it stretched its rays down upon them. They knew that the drone was taking photos of their homes from up high. Their cottages and large backyards had now become desirable Victorian homes in the country, with enough land for raised vegie beds, a hand built pizza oven and a few designer chickens or ducks; a very attractive real estate offering for isolation-jaded city dwellers. The people could sell their homes for SO much more money than Pre-COVID-19. A little flicker of joy began in their sphincters and rose up to warm their intestines.

Tired of their plastic bones, the neighbourhood dogs barked at the plastic bird.

A van drew up unseen behind them. The man from Toll jumped out and looked briefly upwards at the drone. In his hand he held an iphone up about a foot in front of him and he used his peripheral vision to quickly scan the numbers on the fences. He was eager to get the job done, the last delivery of the day. His iphone was screening the first ever photos of Mars that the Perseverance Rover mission was capturing. The Toll delivery man was utterly gripped by the panorama of the Red Planet. Mars' Jazero Crater came in and out and in and out of view. The man from Toll identified his target address, trotted down the path and placed the Ikea parcel onto the doormat. He knocked with uneven, slow, distracted clunks on the front door.

The audio from his iphone said, "Beginning constant velocity." His whole body froze with excitement. The female voice from Nasa announced historically,

"Touchdown confirmed. The Perseverance has landed safely on the surface of Mars, ready to start seeking the signs of past life."

The man from Toll was so ecstatic that he forgot to hand over the parcel to the elderly woman who had just opened the door. Instead he pumped his fist into the air and shrieked like a Banshee as he danced his way back out to the footpath, jumped into the Transit and drove away.

The people watching the drone looked at him briefly, 'Another bloody person from Brunswick', one of them muttered and took no more notice.

It was a while since Joan had received a package. They were few and far between in the Golden Acres Care home, where she had lived since her husband had gone up to Heaven. Here, at her son's house, her old home and shop, they seemed to rain down from above in plentiful abundance. Ronnie was always taking deliveries, parcels packed with sweets for the sweet shop that joined the house; lollipops, fairy floss, crinkly

little rattly plastic bags filled with honeycomb, rocky road and aniseed rings. And there was Ronnie now, out on the footpath with the neighbours, a giant jelly snake hanging from his mouth and nestling its body between his man boobs as he too gazed upwards at the silly buzzing bird.

Joan was a lean and remarkably muscular old stick, though they told her her head was going. She had spent many hours wondering where it was going, whilst threading aniseed rings onto candy canes, a task that Ronnie gave her to occupy her for a while, as he unpacked new stock or served customers in the shop. The task reminded her of something, though she couldn't think what.

Joan often examined the muscles of her upper arm, giving them a good old poke, then winding the loose brown skin around them, as if to wrap them up for another day. Her days in the sweet shop were over but her taut muscles were a physical memory of all the boxes she had lugged to and fro, feeding the sugar addictions of the local community.

Joan lifted up the parcel from Ikea and took it into the kitchen and placed it on the table. She poked at the sellotape a little with a finger then stabbed it with a biro, releasing the cardboard from its smothering embrace. As she loosened the separate boxes inside, chrome objects began to appear, rather like the pieces of a Meccano set, and in the corner of one of the boxes was a small right angled implement with an extraordinary profile. She threw that away.

Joan caressed the simplest piece, a shiny rod with brackets at either end. It felt good, cold and smooth and somehow familiar. She looked up. There, amongst the tarnished saucepans and sieves with holes still caked with pasta, clinging on with butchers' hooks, was the same rod as the one she held in her hand.

"They should be together," she said out aloud. Things in pairs are always happier, she thought.

In 1982, Joan had had a new kitchen installed, one

with a stack of lovely wooden drawers for the tea towels, the plastic bags, silicone muffin trays, tin foil, cling wrap and baking paper, as well as a miscellaneous one for the general ephemera of life, like seed packets and rubber bands. Joan slowly pulled the drawers out from the stack, drawing each one a little further out than the one above, until she had a neat set of steps onto which she climbed briskly, landing on the kitchen bench top. Her Dr Scholls gripped the slightly pitted laminate easily.

Then, Joan reached out with one hand until her fingers grabbed the tarnished metal rod that was attached to the ceiling, her body a conduit between the ceiling rod and the new shiny one in her hand. As she did so, all her children appeared, sitting around the kitchen table below, shovelling parmesan from a tin onto Bolognese. She heard the sucking as they siphoned spaghetti into their mouths and she felt the warmth of their breath, their noise, their presence. Sports carnival wins, night terrors, periods, warts, chilblains and sinus infections flooded her cerebellum and she became so off balance that her body swung out over the tables like a pendulum. Instinctively the arm holding the new rod reached out until the bracket on the end of the rod snagged on the picture rail opposite. The memory inside Joan's muscles then transported one leg on top of the row of kitchen cabinets and the other over the open kitchen door, just as Ronnie came through it below.

"Mum?" He surveyed the kitchen for his mother, the chair where she usually sat was empty. Then he left, deciding that she must be in the garden.

Joan settled herself on top of the kitchen cabinets, her now-resting hand stroking the mat of dust that had formed up there, caressing a bouncy little rubber ball, a clip-on-koala, the instructions for the sandwich maker and a couple of champagne corks. In her heart she saw the day that Ronnie had married Edward, her relief at his happiness, her husband beside her for this new kind of ceremony. The child, Carly, that Ronnie had had with a woman, was standing beside him as he proclaimed his love for Edward. The dopamine coursed through

her body. Her eyes began to water and the vision faded.

In the very corner, where two walls met the ceiling, Joan spied a Daddy-Long-Legs propped up in very fine sheets of cobweb, a few smaller spiders of the same type suspended with their feet held together. They looked like those seeds that sail through the air when the wind blows, she thought. Her hand reached out to touch one but the hand became that of her daughter, Gail. Little Gail's tiny fingers plucked a seed off the stalk and brought it closer to her eyes to examine, then she cast it to the wind and chased it out of Joan's view. The veils of cobweb became hospital sheets and once again Joan saw that Gail was gone forever. For a moment Joan lost all vision entirely.

When she was back inside her body again, she found that she couldn't move at all. Something pink had her in its thrall. She tried to free herself from it, arching her back, her arms and legs no match for the pink quick sand that surrounded her.

At this moment Ronnie came into the kitchen again and looked down. "There you are Mum. I thought you said you didn't like Carli's beanbag." Joan reached her arm up to Ronnie and he held out his own, their hands clasping each other, as Ronnie pulled Joan up onto her feet. Joan wrapped her arms around the equator of him and squeezed hard.

The man from Toll had arrived home early that day. Now he lay with his 5 year old daughter on her single bed. They had watched countless YouTube videos together, watching the room full of cheering people at NASA, the initial launch of the Mars Rover billowing clouds of dust into the air and the almost hyper-real footage of the clawed creature landing on Mars. The man from Toll, had told his daughter about the billions of billions of stars in the Universe, the potential for planets not unlike our own, the minerals to be discovered and mined, the unimaginable, the inconceivable, the infinite.

His daughter was asleep, her head resting on her father's shoulder. The man from Toll kissed his daughter's forehead, got up and turned out the light.

## Witness

-  
I live my life, and I bear witness  
I witness a world built by men  
    for men  
Where every measure and quality and achievement  
centres on how men are  
    Or are trained to be  
    I succeed, the system helps me  
Yet the more I know myself, the less I see myself in  
what it means to be a man  
I am not reflective of what masculinity claims to be  
    Less and less each day  
I can pass the test though, play the role, fit in  
But I no longer wish to  
-  
I witness a world where women are property  
Weddings were business deals, designed to transfer  
assets  
That is our history, though it is not ancient  
The right to learn, to work, to vote, all new  
    Yet still not universal  
These rights I so unknowingly waste, flaunt  
    Assume are here for all

As I long for a fair world  
-  
I witness forces working to maintain a status quo of  
oppression and restraint  
While fighting to tear down hard won advancements  
towards equality  
    Advancements that are still not all that  
advanced  
Giving rights to girls and women everywhere  
    But not everywhere  
  
How have I contributed to this?  
Because I have, I have benefited, I am complicit  
    We all are  
-  
I witness a world where feminism is needed  
    feminism is needed  
I am a feminist  
Proud of the traits that some may call feminine  
    If gender is a binary, which it is not  
Year by year I own these parts of me  
Confused as to why in my youth I hid these qualities  
    Now I see a sickness  
That would make empathy embarrassing  
    I see a sickness  
That would make compassion uncool  
    The sickness is in man.  
-  
I have been sick  
And the cure is learning  
The cure is honesty  
The cure is listening  
Recognising the gift it is to hear someone's truth  
Changing how I see the world with each story  
Seeing the humanity in all people  
Seeing the soul of each woman and girl  
-  
I witness men made in mothers, disrespect the very  
bodies they're born from, grew within  
Speaking of people as objects, for their consumption  
    Their selfish use  
I witness men rule this world with iron fists - fists that  
first hurt those they claim to love  
    Men, whose presence is power,  
Men, whose eyes intimidate, stares violently

penetrating clothes and space and thoughts  
    We aim to own women, with our greedy eyes  
I have done this  
Looked too long at someone who did not invite my gaze  
I am ashamed  
And to every woman who ever felt my unwanted eyes  
upon them  
I am sorry  
I am truly sorry for making this world unsafe  
I am changing

-  
I witness men hunting in packs to find lonely women at  
night - women who now fear their body will soon not be  
theirs  
Even home may not be safe, statistically many of them  
are not  
Men listening, reading this, you must realize we pose  
threat, always, even if unintended  
Your intent is irrelevant  
Some men intend harm  
Women walking will be wary of your presence  
The world has taught her this  
To survive.

-  
Other men, maybe not you, but enough of us  
We are the reason this world is not safe  
    We are the reason this world is not safe  
We must stop saying “not all men”  
    Because too many men abuse, use, excuse  
We are the reason women hold keys in-between  
clenched fingers  
Navigating how to respond to unwanted cat calls -  
ignore, joke, smile - what reaction will ensure her  
safety?  
Men, using this unearned power to consume and discard  
the bodies of women whose soul they don't want, or see

-  
I witness imagined romance that is in fact abuse  
Protests ignored in the heat of one-sided passion  
I shouldn't have needed to hear a second No  
    But I did  
    Regret fills me  
Thinking my desire was more important than her body  
    Her freedom  
    Her safety

Uninvited hands on her body, her body that is not yours  
to touch without permission and consent  
Our hands  
My hands  
Your hands  
-  
I witness and I participate  
I am not separate  
We are doing this  
We are the problem  
Men.

## Witness

### COVID-19 A dog's point of view

My name is Hamish, I would consider my life with the Nobles comfortable, warm and happy, though maybe a bit short on snacks. And I would enjoy more than one meal a day. In return I do my best to behave.

I was born in Deception Bay, Queensland. Then at 10 weeks old I found myself living with Heather and Graham in Loch. I had 4 weeks of puppy school where I learnt to interact with other puppies and humans. Dog obedience training came next - I wasn't keen on that and displayed my objections about being asked to walk to heel. I caused so much disruption to the class that we were asked not to come back, and that was the end of group training for me - hurray! Heather's daughter came and lived with us for 3 months. She was my best friend and I followed her instructions when asked to sit, lie down and give a paw. I was never keen on giving up my ball though. My favourite times were going to the beach, swimming in the sea, visiting doggy parks and playing with other dogs and of course eating, sleeping and cuddles. I have a strong dislike for thunderstorms and being asked not to chase cats, kangaroos, birds and any other game. Also, I dislike been told to get off the couch.

Now, in 2020, I'm 12 years old and feeling it. I spend my days and nights sleeping rather than playing and I have become very stubborn about how far I walk and where. My hearing might not be so great, or do I just use that old excuse? I have also observed a few changes from the normal pattern in my home life and the things we do, which I wish to bring to this tale. Heather and Graham are normally very busy people doing whatever it is they do, which has meant I normally spend a percentage of the week at 'Sybil's doggy day care' where the snacks and treats are excellent and I have loads of space to lie around, and plenty of company including spending time with my darling Kelpie friend Gemma. This has been cut back to a very low level as 'H' and 'G' are home a lot more, especially G. I have also noticed a sharp decline in car trips with no holiday road trips, which I have always enjoyed - new smells, places to stay, lots to see. They tend now to only take me for short runs to my favourite beaches, where I have noticed a big decline in people and dogs. However, there are fortunately still plenty of fish and birds to chase and it is more peaceful. Partly also due to the weather, they are both sitting on my couch, and I either accept a smaller space or have to lie on the rug. When G's away I'm happy to share with H,

especially when she puts on animal action movies for me to bark at from my sitting position.

Then in July disaster struck. They decided to have people round who used nail guns and other noisy machinery to wreck my home. Voices were raised above normal as noisy arrangements happened, with dust everywhere. I wasn't allowed to wander in and out and the result? A new, smooth, tiled bathroom that doesn't appeal to me in any form but they spend a lot more time in it. As humans can't fly, Heather never got to Scotland for her six-week trip back home, and I never got to spend six weeks with Gemma. And they thought a new bathroom would help lift spirits! – honestly, it makes no sense.

It only gets worse. Humans now wear masks to hide their expressions and keep their distance from each other, as if they don't like each other. I get a lot less attention, pats and snacks. There have been no BBQ parties for me to sniff around and enjoy. The kids that would normally come up and ask to pat me in the park have vanished. Both H and G are sad at times and I can't fix it. But it is nice having them home more. This is all because of some very, very, strange thing call COVID-19. Please may it end and life get back to holidays and NO masks.

Woof. Woof . Hamish, Golden Retriever, aged 12

# Anne Taib

## Witness

The traditional owners called you a keeping place - Toolangi - 'the place of the tall trees'. White settlers renamed you Mountain Ash because your pale timber reminded them of a European hardwood of the same name, but you bear no connection to that world. You are an evergreen home to plants, insects, animals and birds entirely unique to this place, some harking back to the ancient time of Gondwana. Undisturbed, you have towered over this cool, wet land for millennia, like a sentinel, keeping watch over the forest understory. In the time before white settlement, you sometimes survived five hundred years untouched by the crack of lightning or the inferno of fire. You had no other natural enemies then.



Reaching one hundred metres and more, you grow quickly, straight as a die, to the heavens, while your roots burrow down deep into the rich, brown soil, establishing intricate exchanges of information from tree to tree. Your sturdy lower trunk is encased in rough bark while your ramrod upper trunk is mottled and smooth, interrupted only by ribbons of rusty, dead bark that billow downward, sometimes catching and carrying fire for kilometres through the air like tinder. Side by side you create a mighty cathedral of habitat, absorbing the carbon like no other forest species on earth and catching and purifying the water for all the peoples of the big cities and surrounding regions. Embroidered with a mantle of white flowers, glossy green leaves and woody, conical fruit, you are the very tallest flowering plants on the earth.

Today, yellow bellied gliders, endangered lead beater possums, wrens, boo book owls, rosellas, yellow-tailed black cockatoos and rare spot tailed quoll still inhabit your boughs and hollowed trunks. Wedge tailed eagles continue to nest in your high branches where they can find them, while tiny spotted tree frogs, lizards and snakes continue to seek shelter in the crevices of your rough bark. Even the indolent koala dines on your foliage, but rarely as a first choice – such heights to climb! And people too have long sought protection in your wide, hollowed trunks. Each year at the commencement of the cool season, before white settlement, you would witness Lowandjeri Bulluk families wending their way through the ferns on the rainforest floor to campsites near current day Korumburra and Poowong. There they would meet with neighbouring Yalloc Bulluk Bunurung people for social gatherings as well as important ceremonies. Precious cultural, practical and spiritual knowledge would be shared by elders under your protective shadow using the now lost languages that held your secrets. And old sepia photographs from the late 1800s tell us that your huge, fire-damaged tree trunks generously provided shelter even to those same early white settlers who had come to cut you down. But much has changed since then. You have observed the dwindling away and the devastation.

Victorian Government Botanist Sir Ferdinand Jakob Heinrich von Mueller, was the first to record your existence in English. In 1871 he coined the botanical name ‘Eucalyptus Regnans’ noting that you were ‘the loftiest tree in British territory’. And having identified you, claimed you and noted your regal nature, this new colony of settlers commenced to cut you down. The gold rush of the mid 1800s brought hundreds of fossickers into the South Gippsland high country forests where today we find the town of Leongatha. Eager to stake their claim of land at £1 per acre, they set about with crude axes and saws to cull the tall straight trees for timber and land. Witness accounts describe how the resounding crash of the forest giants would reverberate for miles, causing hardened workers deep in the bush to down tools in silent homage.

Within decades, whole forest ecosystems were cleared and tamed to make way for neat, rolling pastures that reminded settlers of home and accommodated their European animals. In 1861, the Acclimatisation Society of Victoria introduced European birds and plants to your environs to enliven the unfamiliar silence of these alien forests. Particularly mighty specimens were felled just to measure and record their length in the Guinness Book of Records. So wide is your ground level girth, that the 30 metre wide stumps of large felled trees could not be milled and still lie rotting, one hundred years after they were butchered for woodchip or newsprint or timber flooring. In 1970, when you were still felled by hand with cross-cut saws, axemen reported that the sound of air could be heard being sharply drawn into your wounds. They called this the sighs of the dying tree.

What else causes you to sigh from your vantage point today, oh giant Toolangi, now that you are cordoned into remnant forests? How difficult to be a keeping place for the living forest when daily, you see the silent, hidden creep of species loss and the steady collapse of ecosystems as your old tree cavities disappear. You see the ever encroaching settlement of humans who now prefer to walk on laminate, floating boards that mimic your natural timber

markings. You see the advancing dangers of climate change. Scientists say we have 50 years or so before the remaining high country forests die. How can we keep these vital places for the Victorians of the future? If only we had your ability to witness.

# Allana Young

## Witness



USE QR  
TO LISTEN

What does it mean to be on your own  
In a time of social unrest?  
As the pandemic rages; there's no turning pages  
Stuck on the page of the one.

So there's TV and radio  
There's texts and phone talk  
Social media; that's no support!  
You can hug the dog  
Walk in the garden



Well what is it that you witnessed?  
I'm on the stand, I'm trying to recall; I'm just not sure.  
I'm here aren't I; I'm trying to recall.  
It went so fast; I just don't remember.

Do you call yourself a witness?  
I'm not sure; I can't remember.  
That's my statement; what did I witness... I'm just not  
sure.  
Right now it blurs... I don't remember... I just don't  
remember.  
A witness to what... I'm recollecting... I'm not sure.  
I'm just a witness.

Do you swear on the truth?  
I'm just a witness.  
Do you swear to tell the truth?  
I... I'm just a witness.

Well what is it that you witnessed?  
I can't remember, I'm just a bystander.  
What I witnessed, I'm not sure.  
Can you swear on what you saw; was the person present?  
I can't remember... I'm not sure.  
I'm just a witness.

Well what is it that you witnessed; on the stand you have  
to remember?  
I'm trying to recall... I'm just not sure.  
I'm really... I'm just...  
I'm just a witness.  
And I don't remember.  
I'm just a witness.

## Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the West Gippsland Libraries, including Korumburra, Leongatha, Mirboo North and Foster, that so kindly hosted our writers. And to the writers who were so generous in their time and commitment to this project.

Writers in Libraries is delivered as part of Council's \$2M COVID-19 Community Support Package.

s writers i  
libraries  
in lib  
s writers  
libraries w  
in lib

Writers in Libraries



South Gippsland  
Shire Council