

# 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.

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# Writers in Libraries







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#### \*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.

Acknowledgments

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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

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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

And life's outré laugh-track semblance.
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:

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#### 25 February 1919

My dear Mabel,

Thank you so much for the small parcel of fruit you left for me at the front gate. How I love those early apples of yours. And to think you brought them all the way into town in your father's automobile! At least the roads are not too bad at the moment. I am sharing the apples with my patients here at our 'hospital'. The fruit will no doubt speed their recovery, especially if I stew them first. The influenza takes away the appetite for food, for life even. Some of the patients need assistance with eating.

Your note expressed your concern that in volunteering to nurse those who have come down with the influenza I have put my own health - and life - in danger. Do not fear dear friend, I know that God is watching over me. This is something I have been called to do - just as my own brothers were called to fight for God, King and Country in the War, so recently over. It seems as as though another war is now upon us, a war against this terrible disease.

When Percy and Reg were away,, all I could do was to sit and wait for news, knit socks for the soldiers and write letters, but now with this awful epidemic I can play a much more useful role. And although two of the other volunteer nurses - Misses Dora and Myra Grant - have come down with a case of the flu, I am not afraid for myself and gladly take on the extra work.

Nurse Cox - who is in charge and Nurse Boland work so hard and have trained us volunteers well in the wearing of masks, strict hygiene and safe ministrations to our patients. We have been blessed with so many donations of soap and good clean linen. The people of Korumburra have been marvellous in their generosity.

Our poor Doctor Green has been so overworked in his caring of the patients, as well as in the organisation of inoculations, that he has come down with symptoms as well. Still, although this illness seems to afflict those of us who are young - even returned soldiers - poor souls, I have every faith in my own continuing health and safety.

Someone has to do this work and I am honoured to serve my country and fellow human beings in this way. I know my dear brothers would be proud of me, just as we were so proud of them. Sometimes it is one or another of their dear comrades I have the privilege of nursing here at Korumburra.

I just wish I could have been more assistance during the war, but both of us were still at school were we not? Doesn't that seem like such a long time ago? I think that you should now stay safe at home, dear Mabel, and not venture into town again. You are so much safer out there in your beautiful hills. Let us instead look forward to a picnic in the fern gully or a 'late' swim down at Inverloch. Would your dear father or brother motor us down to the beach? That I would dearly love.

Meanwhile I must get back to my charges and show them all your beautiful apples. I wish I had time to paint them...

Affectionately, Your dear friend, Nora Shapland 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

A month later, at nearby Moyarra, Jillian was wondering how to commemmorate 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,

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I was facing east and on the dark hill before me I knew the house behind the trees was once the home of Bill Irving MM, who fought with you on the Western Front in the Great War.

nor the years condemn

I thought of all the stories you told me when I was young, thought of the places you talked about: Villiers Bretonneux, Pozières, Ypres and Mont St.Quentin, all a hundred years ago and far away, but at this moment, all here, all real.

At the going down of the sun ...

As the first glimmer of light smudged the eastern sky, a bugle sounded, the cold air reverberated with the notes of the Last Post. It was Tim playing, up at Hairs Road. That ancient, familiar call. As though our commemoration had always been like this.

And in the morning ...

A brief silence.

We will remember them

Then the magpies broke into their reveille. And you were remembered, you were all remembered

Your grand-daughter, all these years later, Jillian

#### 25 May 2065

Forty-five years later a sixty-five year old grandmother living in South Gippsland, is concerned for her 16 year old grand-daughter living in the city. They are both living in lockdown due to a pandemic that is again affecting the whole world. She hopes her own experiences all those years ago in 2020 will assist her.

Dear my beautiful granddaughter Emalia,

I hope all is doing well at home and with school work. I also hope that you are staying safe in these uncertain times as it is crucial. Just want you to know that I have been here before, that the start of this pandemic is not the first during my lifetime so I can be some help in reassurance that everything is going to be alright. My first pandemic was coronavirus or COVID-19 and it first started in 2019 but well and truly affected everyone's lives in 2020.

This pandemic isn't that different to COVID but we still are going to have similar struggles and similar restrictions. One good thing this time round is that we are not so worried about the effects of climate change. We have made great strides in our use of alternative fuels.

Everyone I talked to about the virus in 2020, as well as my own experience, told me as long as you follow restrictions then your community will quickly decrease the whereabouts of the virus. Restrictions included during COVID were wearing a mask, staying 1.5 from other people and only going out if necessary.

Your mother has been updating me on how you have been doing so far and I would like to tell you that you are doing a wonderful job with what you have. During these times, finding a coping mechanism is important. Mine during COVID years was reliving my past memories through music and games, getting my work done for school, gardening, going for walks on my large property and working with my animals. I know you don't have these types of spaces as you live in the city as I used to live on a farm but

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continue to do what you love and you will be fine.

Also don't worry, your Pa and I are doing alright by ourselves. We have the memories of you, your cousins, aunts, uncles and parents to get us through isolation.

Love from Ma

#### 25 June 2020

Back in 2020 another grandmother is writing to reassure her ten year old grandson that the COVID-19 'BUG" is not going to kill her as he fears:

My darling Harry,

Your mum tells me that you are worried about me and Pops. Just wanted to say -and I am typing this, as I KNOW you cannot understand my writing — that we will be okay. You will be okay.

Although we are JUST in our 80s, we old folk are pretty tough. Remember how I told you once - way back last year when you were nine - that I grew up in London during the Second World War? It was during the Blitz when there were lots of bombing raids. We would be playing out in the street - there was nowhere else to play - and when the siren went off we just went into the underground shelter and hoped that we would not get bombed out this time.

It probably wasn't that funny, but you know we got bombed out three times altogether, we lost just about everything, but my Da would just laugh and look up and say 'You will have to try harder Mr. Hitler'. Missed me last time and missed me again! 'Mr. Hitler reallly had it in for him!

We would somehow find another place to live and though we had nothing, we had each other and we could still go to the library. You could just go there and read. It was the loveliest thing we could do because it was free and we were very poor. How I loved reading back then. Still do ,as you know. A book can take you into so many other worlds, can't it?

But even if you had money back then, you just couldn't get things. There was rationing you know and not like this year. Yes, we were in lockdown but we could still get food, there was nothing we couldn't get and when we couldn't go to the library I just changed to ebooks. I could still read . The library was a godsend.

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I am sending you another book to enjoy. It's called 'Dogman'. Try it, and don't pay too much attention to 'You tube'. It's making you too worried. Pops and I have never been better and don't plan to die any time soon,

Don't be afraid, dear Harry, just say to yourself, "WE KNOW HOW TO DEAL WITH THIS BUG". We survived the bombs and we will survive the bug. Pops and I will see you again when it is safe. Tell me what you think of that book, and we have every intention of catching up in the holidays, soon,

Much love, (hugs, but no sloppy kisses) Gran

#### 25 JULY 2020, a month later

A Strzelecki farmer sends his son in the city a birthday card for his 40th birthday. It says:

#### HAPPY BIRTHDAY SON, On your 40th birthday

Yes, Happy Birthday!. You will miss out on that big party that we were all planning for the day. Keep it for next year when we are out of lockdown and we are all vaccinated. (We wish)

I know you will think of something good to do with the family...a party on Zoom? Dress ups in the backyard? Indoor footy with balloons? July was never a good month for parties anyway. Remember the flood that washed out the footy game?

Then everyone getting bogged in the driveway when they came back to ours for the sausage rolls and cake? Then we got the tractor bogged getting them out? That was some tenth birthday and we remember it just like we will remember your 40th.

Just wanted to say too, that your mum and I are so proud of you and Lucy, for the way you have both knuckled down there in Melbourne, just got on with working from home with the two kids at your feet. Hard to imagine how you cope with your own work, the home schooling as well as the kinder year online. But you do and you never complain.

Wish we could help but we are Stage 3, and can't mix with you Stage 4 lockdowns. We like to think we brought you up to be resilient, what country kid doesn't know how to handle a yard full of dairy cows bellowing for their calves? But really, you've done it all yourselves! You have coped much better than we have with our freedoms up here in the country.

Just wanted to let you know, love you Son, Dad 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 grandaughter 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  $\equiv$ 

Back in the last century, a woman from Kongwak, is reading her own story of life in the early days of South Gippsland, the early days of 'European' settlement, that is. 'The Land of the Lyrebird' has just been published. Mrs. Euphemia Williams has just lived through a world war and a pandemic. While she was writing her story 3 years earlier, her sons were fighting in the 1st AIF in France. One of them was killed, another returned. Jillian imagines what she might be able to say to us in 2020, if she could:

My dear people,

It has been a long dark year, a year of grief, of loss, of dashed hopes, despair, but I see the beginnings of new shoots of grass in the ground, new buds on the trees, lambs frisking in the paddocks. Spring is coming, if not already here.

We seem to be well over the pandemic now, that dreaded disease that afflicted so much of the world, so much of our country, just when we were reeling from the scourge of that endless war.

I hope you can one day read my story in 'The Land of the Lyrebird' that has just been published. I was reluctant to write at first because I was not sure whether I had a story to tell, but looking back, I realise that the past holds lessons for those who are ready to listen and hear them.

During the influenza pandemic, we have had to keep to ourselves, just as we had once done in those early years of pioneering in the Great Forest of South Gippsland.

Most of all I remember the loneliness of the days I spent in the tiny log cabin my husband had built for me and the babies - in a clearing surrounded by tall trees. I remember the solitude and the fear of those long dark nights when he was late returning from market or a day spent clearing elsewhere on the selection.

Fear, because I never knew what was out there, a wild beast, a desperate man wanting to get in for food, for shelter, to do me and the little ones harm.

My imagination went wild with the fear. I startled at every sound: a spar cracking then thudding down in the forest, a koala bear or opossum screeching to the stars, a cry of a dingo closing in on its prey.

But then my husband would return and laugh at my fears. He taught me to load the gun - just-in case - he said, and then in the morning the daylight revealed such beauty in that great bush, the flowers and birds, that I forgot what had so terrified me in the night. And the sunsets in this country with its beautiful light, its closeness to the sea, I just gloried in those sunsets and felt at peace with my lot. Still, just glory in those sunsets ...

I am thinking of you all in these troubled times. We have seen much, experienced so much that has overwhelmed us all at times, but we have been here before and we came through,

Yours most sincerely,

Mrs Euphemia Williams, Ferndale, Kongwak ≡

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

#### **25 November 2020**

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.

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# And we came through

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.

# **Jenny Taylor**

Library song ©



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

grand

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

ABCD in the library ABCD in the library

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

## 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 multiscreen 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 pandemicinduced 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

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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 Meeniyan 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.

## **Melissa Austwick**

'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 picked 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

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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 Bolognaise. 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 Ronnnie 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.

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

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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.

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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  $% \left\{ 1\right\} =\left\{ 1\right$ 

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

#### 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

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

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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.

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# **Heather McCloy**

#### 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,

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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.

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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, vellow-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 crosscut 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

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 It's the wall that is talked to
The oneness of one
The family that cannot be near.
The coffee and tea chats
No longer here that
Open the feeling of one.

I witnessed the chaos
And the face offs
Of others facing the same;
Oh yeah!
I witnessed
I witnessed
On the one!

But I cannot be part of
That QAnon madness
Of anti-vaxxers
Or conspiracy crooks!
'Cause the beauty of oneness
In this time of pandemic
Is to read and to listen and learn!

The beauty of one In this time of pandemic Is to read, to listen and to learn!

(Coda)
So here is my song
A little song to my witness
The witness of one!

#### **Witness One**

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



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.

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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.

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