Summer 2020–21

The life worth fighting for

Melbourne writers on COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, and our struggling arts, media and university sectors

Photography: The impact of COVID-19 restrictions on public housing residents

Five Filipina leaders calling out President Duterte

Facing the Middle East crisis

Letter to Kylie Moore-Gilbert

Poetic prose by Ambelin Kwaymullina and poetry by Slac
PEN Melbourne respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work, the Boon Wurrung and Woi Wurrung peoples of the Kulin Nation. We pay respect to Elders past and present. We acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, their cultures and their unbroken and ongoing connection to land and community. We recognise that sovereignty of this land was never ceded.
Journal

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Journal

The Aboriginal Tent Embassy, Canberra, 2017. Photo: Di Cousens

Black Lives (still) Matter
In Australia, 2020 began with devastating bushfires, followed by a global pandemic, local lockdowns and economic hardship for many. For some, it has meant finding new ways to work, or not being able to work at all. For others, all energy has gone into trying to reunite with loved ones.

The year also revealed countless stories of bravery and purpose, from the writers who continue to write, to the advocates for justice who speak up despite increasingly difficult circumstances. As new co-editors of the *PEN Melbourne Journal*, we are honoured to bring you some of their stories.

To introduce ourselves: Isabel is a writer and editor who recently moved to central Victoria after living between Jakarta, London and Melbourne, working across social justice issues. By the time you read this she will have just given birth to her first child. Brea is an editor, project coordinator and songwriter who lives in Melbourne with her two young children.

In these pages you’ll find an update on the some of the critical cases of imprisoned writers around the world, including the recent release of Iran’s Narges Mohammadi. Author Ambelin Kwaymullina writes about saviourism in her piece ‘Behaviours’. Sophie McNeill reminds us not to look away from human rights violations in the Middle East.

COVID-19 has had a deep impact on creative expression, livelihoods and entire industries. Three Melbourne-based writers – Ben Eltham, Claire G. Coleman and Ronnie Scott – share their experience of lockdown, set against broader issues of an evaporating arts economy, harsh cutbacks to our media and university sectors, and the strength of the Black Lives Matter movement. Photographer Bri Hammond shares stories about the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on residents of two public housing estates.

Melba Marginson and her daughter Ana Rosa Marginson report on the courageous women that Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte has tried to silence, while poet Slac shares his poem *Heto ang panulat* in Filipino, translated into English by Eunice Andrada.

It’s the second anniversary of Kylie Moore-Gilbert’s unjust imprisonment in Iran. Academic and writer Maria Tumarkin marks the moment with a letter that we hope will reach Kylie.

Our thanks to previous editor Stephanie Holt and designer Lynn Smailes for their years of fine work. We’re grateful to Chris McKenzie for entrusting us to take the helm. We have been awed by the dedication and passion of the PEN Melbourne community and have learnt so much while curating this issue. We hope that you connect with, contemplate and feel motivated by these pieces.
Belarusian journalist Svetlana Alexievich wrote these words to fellow journalist and activist Lydia Cacho, from Mexico, in November 2019. PEN’s messages of support let writers at risk know they are not alone. Now Alexievich herself is again threatened in Belarus for speaking her mind to the corrupt leadership. Increasingly, tyrannical authorities are creating upheaval and terror, and writers – who are on the front line and who bear witness – all too often become targets of persecution. PEN commits to solidarity with those who bravely speak truth in the public interest.

It’s impossible to write about 2020 without acknowledging the ongoing struggles that COVID-19 has wreaked on people’s lives. Few will be untouched by the serious consequences of the virus - the lonely deaths of loved ones, the terrible effects on mental health, the loss of livelihoods, and educational and domestic upheavals. The restrictions that governed our social and working lives were necessary, but for many have proved unbearable.

As we might expect, autocratic governments and regimes are using the current pandemic as an opportunity to silence their critics and exploit the crisis to serve their political ends. When writers reveal injustice and are silenced by the powerful, we all lose. When writers are imprisoned, threatened and murdered, we lose those voices. In his book *Other Colours*, Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk says, ‘When another writer in another house is not free, no writer is free.’ His words speak directly to PEN’s advocacy for persecuted writers and is a powerful motivation for those of us living with privilege.

Writers have been hit hard by the lockdowns and yet, as always, we look to them for insightful responses, to illuminate our darkness. Journalists are working to keep exchanges of knowledge and information flowing freely, opposing misinformation and exposing fake news. And through fiction and poetry, we enter the lives of others and we leave enriched. We experience and see life afresh and are less alone. In our isolation, the words, ideas and dreams of others create a connective tissue between ourselves and the wider world.

PEN Melbourne is grateful to the contributors to this journal who responded generously with their considered writings. This endeavor would not have succeeded without the professional and big-hearted volunteer team working under the pressures inherent in these pandemic days: Co-editors Brea Acton and Isabel Dunstan, Editorial Adviser Kelly Chandler, and Designer Liam Neal.

Thank you to all PEN Melbourne members for your ongoing support. In the words of the late Ronald Harwood, former PEN International president: ‘Our differences are our strength: our different languages, cultures and literatures are our strength.’

**Christine McKenzie**
President, PEN Melbourne

Photo: Di Cousens
Writers in Prison

Josephine Scicluna presents an update on the critical situations of writers we have advocated for in 2020 through the Rapid Action Network (see page 25).

Cuba

Cuban poet, lawyer and journalist Roberto de Jesús Quiñones Haces has been released from Guantanamo Bay prison after serving a year for disobedience and resistance. Between January and August 2019, there were reportedly 1818 arbitrary detentions of writers, artists, journalists, human rights defenders and other government critics in Cuba.

China

Blogger and human rights activist Liu Yanli was handed a four-year prison sentence on 31 January 2019 for her social media posts criticising China's leadership. She wrote, ‘I’m just an ordinary citizen, I’m not a party member. I use common sense to express my opinions, but now I’m facing a guilty verdict. I don’t think this is in line with the party’s slogan “serve the people”’.

Azerbaijan

Journalist and lawyer Elchin Mammad was arrested in March as a criminal suspect following the publication of a critical report on human rights abuses in Azerbaijan. His health has deteriorated, increasing his risk for COVID-19, which is rife in prisons. He was to be released on 30 June, but remains in detention.

Zimbabwe

‘Writing a pain body and also reading such a body are acts of resistance and triumph,’ writes Zimbabwean author Tsitsi Dangarembga. She was arrested in July (later released on bail) for peacefully protesting against corruption. Her latest novel This Mournable Body has been shortlisted for the 2020 Booker Prize.

Honduras

Cesario Alejandro Félix Padilla Figueroa is a journalist, student leader and founding member of PEN Honduras. In 2017 he was convicted of usurpation during university protests. His sentence was recorded in audio but not transcribed or sent to him for three years, making it impossible for him to appeal.

Vietnam

Vietnamese author, journalist and activist Pham Doan Trang is facing up to 20 years in prison on anti-state’ charges. Trang is a recipient of the 2019 Reporters Without Borders Prize and the 2017 Homo Homini Award for her literature promoting human rights in Vietnam.
Iran

Iranian writer and lawyer **Nasrin Sotoudeh** is one year into a 38-year sentence for defending victims of human rights abuses. She began a hunger strike on 11 August to protest against the dire prison conditions with COVID-19. On 26 September she ended her hunger strike due to grave ill health. In a joint statement, 16 United Nations leaders have denounced her imprisonment in as ‘unfathomable’. Poet and lawyer **Sedigeh Vasmaghi** is one of only a few women to teach Islamic law in Iran. In August, she was sentenced to one year in prison for criticising police brutality over the deaths of hundreds of protestors. This adds to an existing five-year term she has served since 2017. Vasmaghi said, ‘I find human dignity in freedom. I will not censor myself and will not allow my freedom to be trampled on.’

**Narges Mohammadi is free**

**Jackie Mansourian** celebrates the release of this courageous Iranian human rights activist.

- 2011: Mohammadi was sentenced to six years’ jail as spokesperson for the Defenders of Human Rights Centre, which represents political prisoners, women and minorities.
- 2015: she was sentenced to a further 16 years, in part for establishing an organisation that campaigned for the abolition of the death penalty.
- 2019: she organised protests in Evin prison against the killings of hundreds of protestors demonstrating against gas price rises.
- 2020: she was sentenced to an additional five years and 74 lashes, for running educational classes and organising peaceful protests against abuse by prison guards.

As I began to write this reflection, the news of Narges Mohammadi’s release from Zanjan prison in Iran reached my inbox. I was sceptical at first. I did not trust that this was possible in Iran. Then I felt an overwhelming rush of hope and relief for Narges’ health and safety.

In July, PEN International issued a Rapid Action Network case for Narges. As I read her case notes to prepare for our campaign, I felt a deep sense of urgency to demand her release.

Narges had been in prison for more than 10 years and there were grave concerns about her diminishing health as COVID–19 spread through Iranian prisons. In April, 100,0000 prisoners were released to contain the spread of the virus. Narges was not one of them, despite chronic health conditions.

I have written cards of solidarity to Narges over the years, based on brief notes of her circumstances. But her more complete case notes stunned me. They were a testament to her courage and tenacity, her care and staunch advocacy for some of the most vulnerable Iranian men and women – and all at such deep personal cost.

‘Why, Narges?’ I asked rhetorically as each of her actions compounded her sentencing and worsened the State’s treatment of her – from denying her calls to her sons and husband in exile in France, to banishing her to an even more remote prison.

Why, Narges? Maybe it is an answer that in my safety and privilege I will never fully understand. What is clear, as I learn from her and other Iranian women writers in prison, is that their courage must translate into a responsibility to work for their freedom.

Narges, I wonder where your courage and voice for others will urge you now you are free? Here in Melbourne, we will follow. We will write to you and we will write to those who seek to punish you. We will call for your freedom as you relentlessly call for the freedom of others.

*Josephine Scicluna and Jackie Mansourian are the Co-convenors for PEN Melbourne’s Writers in Prison program.*

Australians overseas

Writer and activist **Yang Hengjun** has been held by Chinese authorities on espionage charges for more than 19 months without trial. He says he has been interrogated more than 300 times. ‘I am innocent and will fight to the end … I will never confess to something I haven’t done.’ Academic **Kylie Moore-Gilbert** has been imprisoned in Iran since 2018, sentenced to 10 years for espionage. She says, ‘I am not a spy. I have never been a spy and I have no interest to work for a spying organisation in any country.’ Moore-Gilbert was recently moved to Iran’s worst prison, Qarchak. The court hearings to extradite Wikileaks founder **Julian Assange** to the United States ended on 1 October. He faces a potential lifetime sentence.
Behaviours

Ambelin Kwaymullina

There are four sets
towards Indigenous peoples
at least
three are common
the fourth set
are emerging behaviours
for a changing world

First
are the people who talk
about their love
for Indigenous peoples
their commitment
to social justice
but who never
take any action

Do-nothing people
will waste the time
sap the energy
of anyone seeking change
through endless conversations
that lead nowhere
But they won’t actively oppose
justice
they may even
give a little money
a little support
provided
it doesn’t inconvenience them
too greatly
and they are assured
their contribution will be acknowledged

This means
do-nothing behaviours
are less toxic

than the next set
The behaviours
of saviourism

Saviours
have come to rescue Indigenous peoples
but they have no true interest
in decolonisation
because if Indigenous peoples
were no longer excluded
there would be nothing
for savours to do
no one to save

Any ethical advocate
should seek
to make themselves redundant
Saviours work
to make themselves indispensable
They will only support Indigenous peoples
only capacity build
to the extent
that it doesn’t threaten
their position

Saviours
work according to feelings
not standards
according to ideology
not evidence
They can speak
in superficial ways
of settler-colonialism
but cannot meaningfully
interrogate the ways
it informs their existence
and behaviour
Doing so
runs the danger
of identifying their own complicity
and savours
are deeply invested
in their identities
as ‘good Settlers’

Saviours
cannot yield space
They like to be centre stage
claiming responsibility
for any Indigenous success
expecting Indigenous peoples
to be grateful
for being saved
by a Settler
from the structures
behaviours
attitudes
that Settlers create
sustain
benefit from

The third set of behaviours
is the discoverers
who enact modern-day versions
of discovery doctrine
under which territory belonged
not to those who lived there
but to the first Christian Western European nation
to ‘discover’
someone else’s land

Discoverers
behave as if Indigenous worlds
only have meaning
only exist
when known to
and misappropriated by
a Settler
They talk a lot
about Indigenous peoples
or rather
they talk about the part
that Indigenous peoples have played
in their own life journey

Discoverers
tell Indigenous stories
Ancestor stories
resistance stories

life stories
without informed permission
without benefits-sharing
taking ownership
of Indigenous knowledges

Discoverers
treat Indigenous lives
cultures
histories
joy and pain
as their source material
or their lightbulb moment

The fourth set of behaviours
belong to the genuine allies
of Indigenous peoples
the change-makers

Change-makers
inform themselves
act according to standards
actively look for bias
especially within themselves
and having found it
do something about it

Change-makers
step off stages
out of spotlights
support Indigenous peoples
to enter the places
from which we’ve been excluded
support Indigenous peoples
to realise our aspirations
but without claiming credit
for Indigenous success
because change-makers know
it does not belong to them

Change-makers understand
that colonisers occupy space
and decolonisers yield it

Ambelin Kwaymullina belongs to the Palyku people of
the eastern Pilbara region of Western Australia. She is a
writer, illustrator and law academic who works across a
range of genres including YA, science fiction, verse and
non-fiction. ‘Behaviours’ is reproduced here from her book Living on Stolen Land.
We can’t look the other way

The lives of countless civilians and their families have been torn apart by war and human rights violations in the Middle East, writes Sophie McNeill.

I arrived in Jerusalem as the ABC’s new Middle East correspondent in 2015 to find the region aflame, with millions of families enduring horrific levels of fear and suffering.

Over the next three years I filmed starving toddlers dying in Yemen, and recorded doctors begging me over the phone for help as their hospitals were bombed in Aleppo. I interviewed families who wept on the outskirts of Mosul as they described how ISIS used them as human shields during coalition bombardments. I met distraught children in Gaza whose parents had died after they were prevented from receiving cancer treatment outside the strip, because Israeli authorities wouldn’t give them permission to cross the border.

The steady stream of human rights abuses, mostly perpetrated by state actors upon civilians, was hard to comprehend – what had our world become?

I’d become a journalist because I believed that by telling truths, showing people what was going on, collecting the testimonies and putting them on your screens, I could effect change. But now I was haunted daily by the lack of cut-through when reporting these stories – it felt like screaming into an abyss.

As the evidence built up and the world looked the other way, I began to fear the deeper repercussions of what this all meant. Our excuses had run out. This wasn’t Rwanda or the last few months of the Sri Lankan civil war. There was no ‘Oh, if only we had known’.

It was all there. War crime after war crime, live on our timelines.

Thanks to social media, we knew everything our governments had always known – who was being killed, where, how, by whom. But it made no difference. If anything, I fear it made us turn inwards, insular. It’s a terrifying place out there and the proof of that was right in our hands.

So what does it mean to now know, and yet still nothing has changed?

My greatest fear is that we have proven we are ambivalent to slaughter. World leaders – democratically elected and authoritarian dictators alike – understand exactly what they can get away with. In the absence of any serious deterrence and accountability, they are liberated from any pressure to rein in their abusive and at times murderous ways.

When I try to encapsulate how useless I felt as someone whose job it was to ‘tell the truth’, the notion of moral injury comes to mind. Syracuse University defines moral injury as the ‘damage done to the soul of the individual.’ It is the injury done to a person’s conscience or moral compass by perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations. For those of us who trusted in the system, there is an overwhelming sense of betrayal as we witness a collapse in the order of things that we had always believed in, while feeling utterly powerless to stop it.
When I looked back at Australia and saw more people protesting about what time bars closed in Sydney, rather than the slaughter of Syrian or Yemeni kids, I was filled with frustration. Now having spent a few more years back at home, I am more sympathetic to how removed we feel from what happens ‘over there’ and the misplaced belief that we can afford to look the other way, because ultimately it won’t affect us, our lives or those we love.

But it will.

That’s what happens when all the rules are broken. The system is eroded and while we might not realise it now, we do and will need it in the years to come.

It’s increasingly clear that the rise of authoritarian rule and the climate emergency will be the greatest threats to peace on our planet, and for our children. So how will we win these monumental battles when our leaders have already squandered their moral standing? When facts and evidence are ‘debatable’ and easily dismissed, ‘truth’ is subjective, and our governments pick and choose when the rules apply?

In these COVID–19 days we often talk nostalgically about things ‘going back to normal’ but that’s not enough. Normal was not okay. This is a unique moment for us to grasp, so we can change things for the better.

We must emerge from the pandemic with a fierce commitment to the importance of international institutions and upholding the global rule of law. We need to urgently lobby our leaders to end their hypocrisy and double standards, and commit to supporting human rights and international law, no matter who the perpetrator is.

But real change in this fight takes self-sacrifice. Unless we’re willing to sacrifice our own time, energy and money to work together to make this world a more peaceful and liveable place, we should accept that not only will things not change, but that they’ll get worse. We cannot afford to wait any longer.

For me, telling stories is no longer enough. I’ve recently joined Human Rights Watch as their inaugural Australia Researcher, to research and advocate to our state and federal governments to prioritise human rights in all their policies. I’m not saying that journalism isn’t important. It’s just that I personally couldn’t keep doing that work. I no longer believe that just telling the public is enough. It is time to take action myself.

Now I’m faced with a new, long-term goal – how to change our culture and that of our leaders to prioritise human rights, so next time we see war crimes on the news, we don’t look the other way.

Please join me in the fight.

Sophie McNeill is the Australia Researcher for Human Rights Watch. Her recent book about her time in the Middle East as an ABC correspondent is called We Can’t Say We Didn’t Know.

My greatest fear is that we have proven we are ambivalent to slaughter.
Melbourne writers in lockdown

Melbourne has endured one of the longest COVID-19 lockdowns in the world. We’ve witnessed crippling cuts to the media and university sectors. The arts and entertainment industries came to a standstill, leaving the arts community struggling. And the Black Lives Matter movement surged.

Writers Ben Eltham, Claire G. Coleman and Ronnie Scott describe personal challenges and unexpected gains, and reflect on some of the critical moments of 2020.

Will there be anything left?

Ben Eltham

The pandemic in Melbourne: the winter months seemed to pass in a blur. Short days of rain or slanted sunshine passed quickly to long nights padding around a quiet house. A short walk or a takeaway coffee were the most my partner and I could look forward to. Our hands started to chafe with sanitiser. My two-year-old learnt the word ‘mask’. Little impositions seemed magnified. Friends and family outside our five-kilometre radius might as well have been in Queensland. A night-time walk, once a favourite way to wind down, became a casualty of curfew.

The days were for Zooms. Video conferencing haunted my dreams. With my partner also working, we had Zooms in the spare room, Zooms on the kitchen table, my school-aged daughter on Zoom cackling in laughter with her friends.

As the days darkened, so did the prospects for my industry – or industries, as it turned out. I’ve mainly worked in three sectors in my career: the arts, the media, and universities. All have struggled in the pandemic. Culture and the arts were among the first hit, and hardest. Theatres, festivals and galleries have closed, and they haven’t reopened. Scores of my friends in the industry were thrown out of work. Will there be anything left when we’re finally allowed to reopen?

The pandemic also hammered higher education, which had built a booming business model on the unsteady foundation of international student revenues. My university announced
It’s curious how time can drag and rush by simultaneously. January 2020 feels like years ago, not months. At the same time all the locked-down days merged and blended together; not so much rushing by, but instead, like bushfire smoke, disappearing. One would have expected writers to thrive in this pandemic lockdown moment, to embrace the solitude of our careers and the fact that most writers are introverts. ‘This is your moment, writer introverts,’ I can hear the world say. I wish it were that simple.

To my shock, my workload increased. The closed-down arts industry sought more text, more recordings, more virtual and remote appearances. All the appearances that earn less than a written piece, but also require disproportionately less work, disappeared. To put it simply, earning $100 from the written word takes many times more effort than to earn the same $100 talking on a stage.

What also hurts is that, to me, the cancelled public appearances were the major emotional reward for my labour. It was in Melbourne that we experienced the most merciless second wave on the continent, and it is here that anti-lockdown protests popped up like mushrooms after rain. People protesting for their right to be selfish, to harm others so they could have a haircut or show their naked faces. I would not be surprised to discover if some of those same protestors, risking all our lives, were the people railing against the Black Lives Matter rallies.

In the USA, where COVID-19 has perhaps hit hardest, Black Lives Matter is the real moment. As Carvell Wallace pointed out on Twitter on 31 May, the police have ceased to keep the peace and are now counter-protestors; protesting for their right to destroy black lives. I personally wonder if it was COVID-19 that has...
As I write this, my home city of Melbourne is easing out of its second, tougher lockdown – and entering a phase of the COVID-19 pandemic that promises to be as strange and unpredictable as the previous ones. On the one hand, I sat in a park yesterday for the first time since March, having passed the winter in my one-bedder with no balcony or outdoor area. On the other hand, I’ve also grown weirdly accustomed to my captivity, and wary of the impulse to take advantage of this freedom.

This equivocal thinking has characterised the pandemic so far, which has sometimes been catastrophic, and just as often ... murky. My debut novel was published in Australia in April. Within a month, a dozen events in three states were cancelled.

Maybe that’s because the people impacted disproportionately by police brutality (people of colour) are not the people claiming COVID-19 is a hoax. It is not a desire for freedom that is driving the anti-mask, anti-lockdown cohort: it is selfishness and a belief in a bizarre conspiracy theory that COVID-19 is a hoax or was engineered so that mysterious ‘bad actors’ within governments can take control of society.

I would like to return to book touring. I would love my friends with new books to have the opportunity to promote them. I miss the art world, galleries and events, dearly, yet I would not even consider protesting against COVID-19 lockdown and masks. The reasonable, civil reaction to lockdown and mandated masks is not to protest but to do whatever you can to defeat the virus, to stay home and to wear a mask when you must go outside.

Most importantly, Black Lives still Matter, police brutality still exists, even during a global pandemic. It’s time to realise that sometimes the life worth fighting for is not one’s own.

Claire G. Coleman is a Noongar woman whose family has belonged to the south coast of Western Australia since long before history started being recorded. She writes fiction, essays and poetry and in 2016 she won the black&write! Writing Fellowship for her novel Terra Nullius.

A quiet time

Ronnie Scott

As I write this, my home city of Melbourne is easing out of its second, tougher lockdown – and entering a phase of the COVID-19 pandemic that promises to be as strange and unpredictable as the previous ones. On the one hand, I sat in a park yesterday for the first time since March, having passed the winter in my one-bedder with no balcony or outdoor area. On the other hand, I’ve also grown weirdly accustomed to my captivity, and wary of the impulse to take advantage of this freedom.

This is what we think of as the literary fiction ecology, but one that is closely connected with other sectors, like media, all of which went into simultaneous freefall. Twice I was commissioned to write about my novel for a newspaper section that folded before the deadline. Another writer friend lost $10,000 in work linked to her debut – critical when books themselves don’t pay much.

Some of these opportunities have been scraped back through local, state and federal quick-response funding and digital initiatives. But the damage done to the writing industry has only begun to be felt. Writing was already a wildly challenging career whose resources are distributed unevenly. COVID-19 has called attention to this, exposed the value of writing and reading, and made us think about how writers can build sustainable careers. At the same time, it has weakened existing institutions, like universities and arts organisations.

We need all levels of infrastructure to be working – university presses like Giramondo, vibrant niche festivals like the National Young Writers’ Festival, second-hand bookstores like Brown & Bunting – because literary lives are strange and long rather than Boolean or linear. It should be okay to write a book that doesn’t sell any copies. It should be okay to make work in literary journals, digital spaces, and through performance. The book shouldn’t have to be the centre of a literary practice at all. But who has time to mentor younger writers outside of institutions when no one is making money from the most mainstream parts of their craft? Who has time to experiment and find new ways of working?

If nothing else, this is a quiet time, a time to think about the bonds between writers and their communities. But it’s not really what literary production needs – which is money, vaccines, and resources.

Ronnie Scott is a lecturer in Writing and Publishing at RMIT University. The Adversary is his first novel.
Photographer Bri Hammond spoke to residents in two inner-city public housing estates to capture life with COVID-19 restrictions.

When it all started back in March, I spent a couple of days worrying about jobs being cancelled, then I started to see it as an opportunity to work on projects I don’t normally have time for. I developed my isolation stories project almost immediately, photographing and interviewing people in quarantine.

The Belgium Avenue Neighbourhood House contacted me to develop this series with residents from two public housing estates, supported by Yarra City Council. I didn’t know what to expect and had naive preconceptions about what their homes would look like, and who would be living in them.

I met some beautiful people, many with an overwhelmingly positive outlook on life. Everyone has unique challenges with the pandemic – from a non-English speaking mother trying to home school her kids, to a man separated from his children in rural Victoria. I want to introduce Melbourne to some of these wonderful people, contributing a human element to the narrative that’s largely missing in media coverage about coronavirus and public housing.

The second lockdown has been vastly different. The photographic industry was shut down. Photography was no longer a permitted reason to leave home, even if I safely photographed people through their windows or shot products alone in my studio. Being able to share these stories has been therapeutic for me, and others too. Someone emailed me: ‘Everyone has a different situation within their bubble ... different worries and anxieties. It is lovely to tap into other bubbles, to remind us that we are not alone in ours.’ I’m really missing tapping into those bubbles.
Lisa

I’ve been in Melbourne for 18 years. I’m originally from Adelaide. When I was 20, I went to the Gold Coast for about seven years – that was great. Then I came down here and there’s been a bit of trouble, it’s hard to get work. I’m on the pension and it’s hard, but you get by. I live by myself, I’ve got my own place. I go to the Neighbourhood House when I can, when I remember. Sometimes they do bacon and eggs. The lockdown has been hectic, it’s pretty weird and bizarre. I don’t mind keeping self-distanced, but outside it’s like a ghost town.

Hanh Bui

I came from Vietnam to Australia in 1991, for a family reunion. Some of my children had moved to Australia as teenagers. When I first arrived, I wasn’t working. My daughter was five and had a disability, so I spent my whole time taking care of her and my children. I looked after her until she was 23 years old, when she died. It’s taken me a long time to not feel stressed about it. It really affected me and my mental health. Time flies so fast, it’s already been 12 years since it happened. My life hasn’t changed much during COVID–19. I take care of my husband who is sick. We have a carer come once a week. She helps us with shopping too.

Nga

I came to Australia as a refugee from Vietnam. After my family and I crossed the border from Vietnam to Thailand we spent seven months in a refugee camp before we finally came to Australia by boat in 1982. The lockdown period has reminded me of the hardships I faced when I first came to Australia. My daughters have advised me to stay at home and not go out. I’ve felt a bit lonely because I can’t go to the Neighbourhood House to join the music activities, but I try to keep healthy and think positively.
Yith, Kate and Sally

Yith: I came to Australia in 2004 for marriage. I live here with my husband and two children. When I first came it was hard because of the winter! I couldn’t do anything and the language barrier was really challenging for me. I’m from Cambodia, but I also speak Vietnamese. I learnt in Australia, from going shopping and meeting people. Now I speak Vietnamese fluently.

COVID-19 has affected my family a lot. The lockdown and home-schooling has been really stressful as I don’t have good English skills. I go outside once a week or once a fortnight to buy food.

Kate: We’ve got our own computer and we write some things to our friends. We don’t really miss school!

Sally: It’s been fun being home. We jump everywhere.

Luis

I came to Australia from Mexico in 2006 because my first child was born here. I separated from my partner five years ago but we are still friends and I see my kids often. After we broke up, I was pretty much homeless. Someone told me there was a squatting community where I could live so I went there and found some good friends, like family. Squatting was good, but tough. I got this apartment a year ago, so I’m happy.

Up until February I was working on the Metro Tunnel, welding and making structures. It was a very good job. When coronavirus hit they said there’s no more work.

I haven’t seen my kids for two and a half months – they went to Warrnambool to get away from the virus. I wish I could be with my kids, we have so much fun. As long as they’re happy and safe, it makes me feel okay. I am using the time to be creative, keeping myself busy.
Jian Y Zhang

I’ve lived here for nearly 20 years. My brother lives next door. We came here together from China in 1988. When I arrived in Australia I worked at a shoe factory and a restaurant. I’m living in this house because I’m sick. I’ve got diabetes and I can’t sleep, so I had to stop working. I have been staying home to stay safe from coronavirus. I like singing, so I sing at home, and I rest. The Chinese community here is very good. I go to church in Richmond every weekend. It’s closed at the moment due to coronavirus, but it will reopen. Now I only stay home.

Bassi

I’m 16 and still at school, but it’s all online at the moment. I’m terrible at art and music but I’m good at PE [physical education]. I’ve stopped doing any sports right now but I want to get back into it. I’m in Year 11 at school so it’s an important year, that’s why it’s even harder doing it online. I haven’t been very good at not seeing my friends. I went through one patch where I was a bit alone. For about two weeks I didn’t go out, and then I was like, nah, I give up. I just want to hang out with people again.

Bri Hammond is a photographer based in Melbourne. Her work has been featured in The Design Files, frankie, Peppermint, Smith Journal, Matters Journal and Oh Comely.
Despite Filipino President Duterte’s attempts to silence his critics, these five women have stood up to tyranny, putting their lives and careers on the line, write Melba Marginson and Ana Rosa Marginson.

Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte’s misogyny is well documented. His speeches are littered with profanities, his favourite is ‘putang–ina mo’ (son of a bitch). His brand of diplomacy is distinctly chauvinistic, as seen when he kissed a woman on the lips during a press conference in South Korea in 2018. During the last three years of his leadership, his attitude towards women has manifested beyond hurtful words and into the systematic, targeted incarceration of the female journalists, politicians and social justice advocates who challenge him.

Duterte has actively promoted violence against women. He commanded his troops to shoot at women’s genitals. He makes rape jokes – telling soldiers in Marawi that they are permitted to rape ‘up to three women’ in martial law areas. Worst of all, he joked about an Australian missionary woman who was raped and then killed by prison inmates while he was Mayor of Davao City, publicly wishing he could have been first. Commenting last year on Davao’s high incidence of rape, he explained it away: ‘As long as there are many beautiful women, there will be more rape cases.’

He has an especially low regard for women’s capacity to lead. He dismissed the role of female leaders by vowing never to appoint a woman chief justice to the Supreme Court. He made insulting comments against the capability of women in the police force. He called Vice President Leni Robredo ‘incompetent’ without reason, simply saying, ‘I don’t think she can ever be ready to govern a country.’

He has often told his supporters that he loves women but his record shows he only approves of those who conform to his ideas of ‘appropriate’ female behaviour. Ultimately, his hate or ‘love’ is dependent on how much power they wield in relation to him. The women he hates most, like the five leaders on the next page, are those who dare to have agency. He hates highly accomplished women who have demonstrated competence and skills that make him feel inferior. Duterte is so obsessed with these women that he has done everything in his power to destroy them, short only of killing them.

Strong enough

It’s good I was targeted, because I’m strong enough to take the target.

Maria Ressa, August 2020
Maria Ressa

Journalist

Journalist Maria Ressa is a crusading editor who founded the popular online news site Rappler in 2012. Rappler’s news coverage has put a spotlight on Duterte’s corrupt policies and his government’s war on drugs. Ressa also spearheaded the exposé of trolling on social media and actively waged war against fake news, both of which the Duterte camp is noted for.

Ressa’s leadership and her subsequent popularity on the international stage angered Duterte so much that he openly made her and Rappler the main target of his attacks on press freedom. He had Ressa arrested many times on various trumped-up charges, with the latest and most hard-hitting being his government’s move to revoke Rappler’s licence on the grounds that the site is foreign-owned. Ressa has been found guilty of violating the Philippines’ controversial cyber libel law and faces a minimum of six months, and a maximum of seven years, in prison if her appeal is not successful.

Maria Lourdes Sereno

Chief Justice

Chief Justice Maria Lourdes Sereno served as de facto Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the Philippines from 2012 until her removal in 2018. As Chief Justice, Sereno openly opposed President Duterte’s executive actions, such as the war on drugs, declaration of martial law, and permission for the Marcos family to bury former President Ferdinand Marcos in a cemetery reserved for national heroes. The Supreme Court removed her from office over a quo warranto (by what authority) petition, rendering her appointment as Chief Justice null and void. Legal experts regard the removal of Sereno as politically motivated and unconstitutional.

Leila de Lima

Senator

Senator Leila de Lima was arrested and charged without bail in February 2017 for being linked to the drug trade during her stint as Justice Secretary. She has not yet been sentenced and is not eligible for bail. The evidence against her consists of the testimony of prison inmates, police officers and former prison officials – all people easily swayed by the President.

Senator de Lima has gained international recognition and awards for her campaign against extrajudicial killings in the Philippines, social inequality, and government corruption, and for peace in Mindanao, climate change, social justice, and foreign policy. The European Parliament, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and other institutions have declared her a ‘prisoner of conscience’.

Photo: Bullit Marquez/AP

Photo: Pierre Bisaillon

Photo: Wikimedia Commons
Leni Robredo

Vice-President

Leni Robredo is the incumbent Vice-President of the Philippines, yet President Duterte has taken every opportunity to stop her from carrying out her official duties. Duterte earlier said that he did not want to appoint Robredo to a cabinet position due to his unfamiliarity with her, and his friendship with Senator Bongbong Marcos, the son of former dictator Ferdinand Marcos. The senator lost his campaign for Vice-President to Robredo during the 2016 election.

Since taking office, Robredo has been a constant victim of online abuse and fake news articles from Duterte supporters. In July 2018, Robredo formally accepted the role as leader of the opposition, unifying numerous parties in the House of Representatives and the Senate.

***

Risa Hontiveros

Senator

Senator Risa Hontiveros has criticised the Duterte administration since she was elected to the Senate in 2016. She strongly opposed Duterte’s war on drugs, martial law declarations, Lumad school bombing orders, and attacks against women, LGBTIQ people and indigenous groups. In the Senate, she is the main opposition to China’s intrusions, and exploitation in the West Philippine Sea and Benham Rise.

Duterte has allegedly lined up Hontiveros for charges that would lead to her incarceration. This started in 2018 when Hontiveros took under her protection three witnesses of the killing of Kian Loyd delos Santos, a victim of Duterte’s drug war. Then Secretary Vitaliano Aguirre II was caught texting a member of Volunteers Against Crime and Corruption to fast track charges against Hontiveros for ‘kidnapping’ the children.

***

VERA Files is one of Facebook’s three fact-checking partners in the Philippines. VERA Files has found that it is Duterte and his allies who benefit most from online political disinformation against their critics. Leni Robredo is the most common subject of negative coverage with at least 27 fake, false or misleading reports. Risa Hontiveros follows with 14 reports.

Although misogyny has always been present in Filipino society, the Philippines has a long history of women’s engagement in politics. Unlike many developed Western nations, it has benefited from a high number of women in positions of political power for decades. The 2020 Global Gender Gap Index ranked the Philippines 16 out of 153 countries, the highest among Asian countries, and higher than Australia, which ranked 44. This index revealed that women in the Philippines occupy 29 per cent of legislative seats, own 32 per cent of firms, and two thirds of Filipino professionals and technical workers are women. Additionally, the Philippines is ranked as one of world’s best in advancement of women to leadership roles.

Duterte’s personal misogyny is evident and well documented, but the cases of Ressa, de Lima, Sereno, Robredo and Hontiveros are part of a continuing pattern that demonstrates a concerted effort to exclude women from positions of power. His mistreatment of women and use of false charges to eliminate them politically sets a dangerous precedent, both for his own government and for the future of politics in the Philippines. For a country with a fraught political history, the blatant removal of any woman with the agency and bravery to criticise the President’s actions demonstrates the gendered slant of Duterte’s corrupt political apparatus.

Melba Marginson was born in the Philippines and has been a champion of women’s rights, diversity and multiculturalism for more than 40 years. Her daughter Ana Rosa Marginson is a historian with degrees from the University of London and Leiden University. Her research is motivated by a commitment to understanding the impact of the colonial past on the modern world.
Heto ang panulat.
Isulat.
Imulat mo ang iyong mga mata.
Buksan ang tainga.
Pakiramdaman ang paligid.
Isulat mo.

Kagabi ay isang lalaki nanaman ang itinumba sa bangketa ng dalawang tao na di umano'y sakay ng isang motorsiklo.
Natagpuan nakahandusay, naliligo sa sariling dugo.
Nakita mo ba?

Ang dagang nasagasaan sa kalsada?
Biglaang tumawid, ngunit hindi kinaya ng maliliit na paa, naabutan pa'rin ng humaharurot na sasakyan.
Nagulungan.
Nakita mo ba?

Limang minuto mula sa aming bahay,
Doon sa may Divisoria,
Isang tao ang biglang bumagsak sa cemento ang katawan.
Tumagas ang dugo mula sa kanyang ulo at tagiliran.
Mabilis ang mga pangyayari,
Pulis nanaman ang may kasalanan.

Walang nagtangkang lumapit.
Walang nagtangkang tumulong.

Dumating ang mga sundalo at pinalibutan ang bangkay.
Nakita mo ba?
Nakatambak pa'rin ang basura sa kalsada.
Ilang araw nang hindi dumaraan ang truck na naghahakot sa mga nakatambak.
Umaalingasaw.
Bumabaliktad ang sikmura ng kung sinuman ang mapapadaan.
Nilalangaw.
Inuuod.

Pag niligpit naman ay may bakas pa'rin ng tagas ng basa, amoy, at kapit ng mga nabulok na basura.
Bakas.
Nakita mo ba?

Heto ang panulat.
Isulat.
Imulat ang iyong mga mata.
Makinig at makiramdam.
Itala mo ang katotohanan,
Pulang magsulat ng mga kathang-isip.
Itala mo ang mga pangamba,
Baka hindi ka naman talaga nag-iisa.
Ilagay ang sarili sa mga sapatos at tsinelas
na naivan ng mga tumakbo,
Nadapa sa pagkatakot.
Paulit-ulit na lumaban,
Pero ngayon ay balewala na,
Hindi pupuwisde ang manlaboran.

Baka hindi lang tayo ang pilit binubulag
ng mga pangako na ilang beses na dinairesiklo.

Pinapalibutan tayo ng takot.
Na dati-rati naman ay tayo lamang ang may kagagawang sa isipan,
mg kuwentong aswang.
Ngayon ay sila na ang nagahahain nito sa hapagkainan.
Tayo ang kanilang panlalaman tyan.
Pilit na na nilalamon ng buo.
Pinapaslang ang mga nasa ibaba at laylayan,
Mga nakakapit sa patalim.

Kilala mo ba si Marcos?
Isa sa mga pinakamatinding naging pangulo,
Sadyang isang tuco,
Kasing galing ng mga mandurukot,
Na nagpapanggap na mahikero.

Heto ang panulat.
Isulat.
Imulat mo ang iyong mga mata.
Buksan ang tainga.
Pakiramdaman ang paligid.
Isulat mo.

Kilala mo ba si Duterte?
Nagpapanggap na matalino,
Harap-harapang nagnanakaw ng buhay,
Hindi na kailangan ng mahika,
Hindi na rin kailangan mandukot.
Hindi na din kailangan maging matalino,
Unti mo ang mga tao ay manhang-mangha,
Sa harap-harapang paggawa sa kanila na maging tanga. TANGA!

Heto ang panulat,
Sige, itala mo ang totoo.
Bigyan ng hustisya ang katotohanan at kasaysayan.
Ilista mo ang magagandang bagay na nakikita mo,
Mayroon pa ba?
Dama mo pa ba ang kalayaang ilang beses
sa magkakaihang siglo at dekadang ipinaglaban nila?

Kilala mo pa ba ang mga taong nasa loob ng pera?
Hindi ba dapat sila ay magsilbing palala?
Pero ilang dekada na rin, Itay!
Ilang taon na tayo na may kinakailangan ng mga aso, Itay!
Hanggang kailan mo kami papaslangin ni inay, Itay?
Uulit-ulitio mo pa rin ba, Itay?
Lahat na kami ay namamatay, Itay!

Ilang beses nga ba umuulit ang kasaysayan?
Sa daming beses na umuulit ito,
Bakit wala pa rin may alam paano pigilan?
Bakit ang kasamaan ay patuloy na nanaig sa kabutihan?
O bulag na kaming lahat sa dami ng kadiliman sa aming harap?

Kilala mo ba si Marcos?
Isa sa mga pinakamatining pangulo,
Sadyang isang tuco,
Kasing galing ng mga mandurukot,
Na nagpapanggap na mahikero.

Pinalibutan tayo ng takot.
Na dati-rati naman ay lamang ang may kagagawang sa isipan,
Mga kuwentong aswang.
Ngayon ay sila na ang nagahahain nito sa hapagkainan.
Tayo ang kanilang panlalaman tyan.
Pilit na na nilalamon ng buo.
Pinalaslang ang mga nasa ibaba at laylayan,
Mga nakakapit sa patalim.

Kilala mo ba si Duterte?
Nagpapanggap na matalino,
Harap-harapang nagnanakaw ng buhay,
Hindi na kailangan ng mahika,
Hindi na rin kailangan mandukot.
Hindi na din kailangan maging matalino,
Unti mo ang mga tao ay manhang-mangha,
Sa harap-harapang paggawa sa kanila na maging tanga. TANGA!

Kilala mo ba si Marcos?
Isa sa mga pinakamatining pangulo,
Sadyang isang tuco,
Kasing galing ng mga mandurukot,
Na nagpapanggap na mahikero.

Heto ang panulat.
Isulat.
Imulat mo ang iyong mga mata.
Buksan ang tainga.
Pakiramdaman ang paligid.
Isulat mo.

Hihintayin pa ba natin na dumami pa muli ang mga bayani?
Pero kailan nga ba natin puputulin ang patalim?
Kailan bubuksan ang ilaw, para hawiin ang bumabalot na dilim?
Kailan natin imumulat ang mata, bubuksan ang tainga,
papakiramdamman ang paligid,
Isusulat ang pangalan na karapat-dapat maging pangulo?

Kilala mo ba si Marcos?
Isa sa mga pinakamatining pangulo,
Sadyang isang tuco,
Kasing galing ng mga mandurukot,
Na nagpapanggap na mahikero.

Heto ang panulat.
Isulat.
Imulat mo ang iyong mga mata.
Buksan ang tainga.
Pakiramdaman ang paligid.
Isulat mo.

Slac is a Filipinx poet and political science graduate from De La Salle University in Manila. He founded White Wall Poetry in 2015, a performance poetry collective aiming to elevate Filipino spoken word. He is a proud and loud trans-man and trans advocate. His first solo chapbook, Of Shadows and Broken Mirrors, is a poetry collection highlighting stories about trans and queer adversities and mental health. Heto ang panulat is written in Filipino.
Here is the pen
(Heto ang panulat)

Slac // English translation Eunice Andradal

Here is the pen.
Write.
Open your eyes.
Listen.
Feel what is around you.
Write it.

Last night in the street, yet another man
was killed by two men who allegedly
rode away on a motorcycle.
His body was found sprawled on the pavement,
bathing in his own blood.
Did you see?

The rat ran over in the street?
The one that suddenly crossed, its feet too small to escape
the thundering traffic.
Ran over.
Did you see?

Five minutes away from our house,
over in Divisoria,
a body drops to the cement.
Blood spilling from his head, his side.
It happened too quickly.
The police were behind it.
No one dared to come near.
No one dared to help.

The soldiers arrived and surrounded the corpse.
Did you see?
Piles of garbage line the streets.
For days, the truck hasn’t come by to haul away our trash.
It festers.
People walk by. Their stomachs curdle.
Flies buzz around the street.
Worms slither.
And when they do take the trash,
you can still see the stains of dampened rot,
still catch the scent of putrid waste.
The stains.
Did you see?

Here is the pen.
Write.
Open your eyes.
Listen and feel.
Write down the truth,
before it’s written by the ones who are better at erasing.
The ones who are better at writing fiction.

Write down your fears,
Maybe you’re not alone.
Put yourself in shoes left behind by those who ran.
Tripped in their fear.
Fought again and again.
But it’s no use now.
It’s no use fighting anymore.

Do you know Marcos?
One of the cleverest presidents,
As clever as thieves,
Who pretend to be magicians.

Do you know Duterte?
He pretends to be clever,
He will show you how he steals lives,
He doesn’t need magic,
He doesn’t need to pick pockets.
He doesn’t need to be clever,
The people are in awe
of the obvious ways they are made for fools. FOOLS!

Will you do it again and again, Father?
We are all dying, Father!

Will history repeat itself?
With all these repetitions,
Why doesn’t anyone know how to stop it?
Why does evil trump good?
Or has the darkness blinded us all?
Maybe it’s not just us blinded by
promises that have been recycled.

We are surrounded by fear.
Not too long ago, we made up these tales,
these stories of vampires.
Now it’s the vampires who tell these stories over dinner.
We fill their bellies.
They swallow us whole.
They kill those below,
Who hang onto the edge of the blade.

Here is the pen.
Write.
Open your eyes.
Listen.
Feel what is around you.
Write it.

Will we wait for the martyrs to pile up?
When will we shatter their blade?
When will we turn on the light to fight the darkness?
When will we open our eyes, listen, feel what is around us,
and write the name of someone worthy of becoming
our president?

When will we do it? When will we do it?

We need to leave Father, Mother!
We need to leave Father, Mother!

Translator Eunice Andrada is a Filipina poet and educator based in Sydney. Her debut poetry collection Flood Damages won the 2018 Anne Elder Award and was shortlisted for the 2019 Victorian Premier's Literary Award and the 2019 Mary Gilmore Award.
Maria Tumarkin writes to fellow University of Melbourne academic Kylie Moore-Gilbert, who has been imprisoned in Iran for more than two years.

Dear Kylie, my warmest hello to you.

I am a stranger to you but you are no stranger to me. I read about you, think about you, hope furiously that those people in our country quietly entrusted with your fate won’t, can’t, sleep at night until you’re home. Which is to say, I remember you, as do so many people in Australia. If we ever get to speak once you’re home – and I believe with all my might that you’ll be home soon – I hope to ask what sustained you through this time. Did the feeling of being remembered help? Did you, do you, have this feeling of being remembered? So many people in Australia, the UK and elsewhere in the world refuse to put you out of their mind. They follow whatever bits of information about your circumstances make their way into the media, they do everything they can to hold accountable – through scrutiny and advocacy – those whose job it is to ensure your safe return.

When I think about our shared place of work – The University of Melbourne, where I teach creative writing – I know it’s a broken place until your safety is certain. Our vice-chancellor (or whoever) issues yet another wooden statement of concern – VCs do what VCs do, but underneath there are real people who worry ceaselessly about your wellbeing. An honourable institution is, at its best, not a self-legitimating bureaucracy but a living contract to not forget its people and its values, no matter what. And a nation worthy of its name is also a living contract of this very kind (which is why whatever can be said about nation-states, I still believe in them).

I am a first-generation Australian. I came to this country as a teenager. I love Australia, which means I also feel shame and rage when this country fails to do what is right and necessary.

I recognise that you’re a person of immense moral courage. I think no one should be asked to be courageous for so long. Two years. In ancient Greece, courage was the first virtue – not the most important, but the most fundamental – because it allowed other virtues to survive. We don’t remind ourselves enough that the word ‘courage’ comes from Latin cor, meaning heart. Please take care of your heart, dear Kylie.

Nobody of course can know what it’s like to be in your skin, and here comes COVID-19 on top of everything else. But we close our eyes and try to imagine the contours of your daily life. For the most part though, our eyes are wide open and looking to those who must find a way to bring you home.

Thank you for reading this letter from a stranger, Kylie. I am a stranger to you, but please know that you’re no stranger to me.

Maria Tumarkin
September 2020

Maria Tumarkin writes books, essays, reviews, and pieces for performance and radio. She is the author of four books of ideas. The latest, Axiomatic (Brave Books), won the 2018 Melbourne Prize for Literature’s Best Writing Award. Maria is a recipient of the 2020 Windham Campbell Prize in the non-fiction category.
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- Literature knows no frontiers and must remain common currency among people in spite of political or international upheavals.

- In all circumstances, and particularly in time of war, works of art, the patrimony of humanity at large, should be left untouched by national or political passion.

- Members of PEN should at all times use what influence they have in favour of good understanding and mutual respect between nations and people; they pledge themselves to do their utmost to dispel all hatreds and to champion the ideal of one humanity living in peace and equality in one world.

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