Thanks for listening. Oliver Driscoll from the Slow Canoe live journal and press here. In March, April, May and June of this year, twenty-seven writers, split into three threads of nine wrote short pieces, each of which responded, directly or indirectly to the work in the thread immediately prior to their own.

The writers were also responding, no doubt, in some way, to the global Covid-19 pandemic, which, in those months went from being new and difficult to conceptualise, to reconcile our lives with, to being deeply familiar, the very texture of our isolated days.

These pieces capture our collective and very real anxieties and uncertainties, but also those small moments of beauty and introspection, and even joy.

They are all, I suppose, and each in their own way, meditations on change.

The nine writers in this second thread are Miles Allison, Leah Muddle, Oliver Driscoll, Caitie Lawless, Antonia Pont, Jessica Au, Anna Thwaites, Emily Kiddell, and Charlotte Forfieh. They are read for this recording by Allison Browning and Angus Keech.

The music you heard at beginning of this recording and that you'll hear more of at the end is from James Kenyon's 'Motorbike Song, from his appropriately titled 2016 album, Imagine you are driving.

An enormous thank you to all of the contributing authors, as well as to Allison, Angus and James.

I hope you enjoy the readings.

Time and dread

By Miles Allinson

I remember reading something years ago, though I can't find it now, about the experience of 'Soviet Time'—languid, repetitive, homely, without hope—as compared to 'Time in The West', with its frantic novelties, its seriousness and ambition and anxious desires. The key images I remember (and maybe I have invented them) were: a small gathering in a dark, smoky, Soviet kitchen (a sense of boredom and dread and humour) with a lot of alcohol and not a lot of food, and, on the other hand, a busy city street, where people were rushing back and forth past bright shops.

I was reminded of this vaguely remembered and mostly probably imagined piece of writing the other day, while running along the Merri creek, beneath enormous transmission towers, through a stretch of regenerated industrial parkland between Thornbury and Coburg. I love this sliver of the world, not least because of the way it makes me think of the films of Andrei Tarkovsky, *Stalker* and *Solaris* in particular and, more particularly, the images in both those films of beautiful, muddy, alien, potentially polluted and slightly sordid super-natural bodies of water.

The creek was busier than normal that day and people were gathered in colourful little clumps along its edges, picnicking, walking dogs, flying kites etc. or simply sitting and enjoying the sun in the shining grass. It was all very ordinary and lovely, more ordinary and lovely than usual in fact (if that's possible—and because of that, somehow antiquated) except that, of course, there was a Global Pandemic, a looming World Recession and a Climate Emergency hanging over us all. I could not help but feel that we had entered, however briefly, under this regime of semi social-isolation, something akin to Soviet Time. For a moment it seemed (and who knows how long it will last) there was nothing to be done or achieved, except to experience as best we could, this languid, repetitive, (homely or unhomely) sense of time and dread.

Tarkovsky's *Solaris* opens with a long close-up of reeds moving mysteriously beneath the water. This is the hero's childhood home and perhaps he will never see it again, because soon he will leave Earth to investigate a dysfunctional space-station, which is orbiting the living, oceanic planet Solaris. Of course the crew have been driven mad. Of course the human mind breaks down in the presence of a sentient planet, whose behaviour and physical laws cannot be understood or even really conceived of. Solaris enters the minds of the astronauts and manifests fragments from their memories or dreams. The hero's dead wife returns, fresh as a daisy.

But what I remembered the other day while running through that afternoon light beside Merri Creek (with its heavy bluestone bridges and its peppercorn trees snagged with plastic) was the final scene of *Solaris*, when the hero finally does return home to Earth, to his childhood house in the country. We see again the reeds moving in the river according to their own mysterious logic. And yet it is not home at all, we realise. The camera pulls back, the house falls away into the distance. It is not even

the Earth we're looking at. It's just an island floating in the ocean of Solaris, an artificial reality, a dream of time conjured by an alien power.

Width enough for a teaspoon

By Leah Muddle

Suppose it is too soon to worry about Winter but—
I just love the sun. My small garden looks its absolute best
in the noon sun. The succulents have all grown big as dinosaurs. Today
they are still clutching their raindrops. Hanging out the washing feels, today,
like an act
that has worth
and
even meaning.
A big red Maxwell Williams bag hooks on a rusting planter.
Blue sheets drape over damp
scentless rosemary. (One has a huge tear that I'd forgotten about. Its hole gapes:
wonder, horror, wonder).
Two knits that went into the wash with tiny holes
have come out with
extravagant ones.

My garden is cuboid, high-walled and it does feel
like a pinpoint under clouds, under whatever
belts of atmosphere there are, under a satellite.
I am quite aware of the hinges upon which my visions swing, particularly when
it is like this, and
every thing
is magnificent
(and
every thing
is coloured and vivid).

My overdue letter to Melody will just be photographs, of all the things I have
mentioned, plus a bundle of knitting needles
balanced atop my small hoard of long-life milk, plus a calico bag that says
purebaby plus the thick tail of my cat, an electrical cord
plus a hand-drawn knitting pattern that ends
cast off at 10 stitches.

*

I've been thinking about how things would be if each day we had a death.
Sometimes you'd die in the afternoon, and sometimes you'd die just as you would sleep.
The next day you would be able to remember how it happened.
You'd shake yourself upon waking and think oh my god, the ******* got me again.
Some days it would be a laugh.
Today,
I feel shot by the sun.
It's a fine death.

Hopefully
By Oliver Driscoll

We came across the house, that was on a corner site, from the rear, the side that had been ripped away. I noticed there was still a dark green plastic laundry basket with what looked to be a blue and white striped curtain bundled within it at the top of a flight of stairs that was now hanging vertically. The window frames and doors from the remaining portion of house had been removed. A carved dark timber mantel piece was propped up against an outside wall, as though it had been salvaged and then abandoned. But while there was still a tall chain-link metal fence just within the old low yellow-painted timber fence, whatever machinery was being used to pull the house down to the ground was gone. I thought, it must have stopped along with everything else. There was an opening in the fence towards the front of the house and we walked in and stood in the yard. It was, I thought, an ugly house that would have been dark and cold inside, but, other than for the missing windows and doors, the front was intact. It was like looking at a person's face knowing that the back of the head was gone. In the entryway, on the tessellated terracotta tiles, there was a box of old telephones, and next to that there were picture frames stacked together, leaning against the brick wall. My partner flipped through the frames and within the first two were black and white photographs of the same woman holding a child. They looked as though they'd long ago been cut from a magazine. She pulled out the third, within which a series of Kanji characters ran vertically down heavy paper that was badly water damaged. Pointing to one of the characters, she said, this, I think, means roof or covering. She put the frame back behind the two photographs. On the far side of the house, a chimney stack embedded with river rocks had been pulled down, or had simply collapsed. I picked up a cold rock and thought, why would I want this. There was nothing here, I realised, that I wanted.

I'm in the room in which I sleep, which is not the room in which my partner sleeps. Without discussing it, we don't often make it known that we sleep in different rooms. If a friend visits, I make sure that the bed on which I sleep is made in such a way that looks permanent. I clear my bedside table of books. Outside, it's windy. I'm sitting crossways on the single bed as though it were a sofa, looking across the room, out through the window at the trees I planted between our building and the building next door. The trees are thrashing around in the wind. It's nice seeing them move slightly before the wind hits, but it's not nice seeing them then suddenly move and bend a great deal. In the wind, the new golden tips of the upper branches point towards our building and then the building next door, and then they hover in between with a new and elastic preparedness.

A bare wooden table

By Caitie Lawless

Open to any page and a character will be nodding. The sun is always mentioned here, right at the beginning. The stamen moves up and down, in and out. Bulbous, it sits, preened and poised, within. Swivel your neck to see out. I'm searching for an anomaly. I am waiting. But I'm expecting it at any moment. Everything has gotten slower. Or has it? I can't be sure anymore. I don't like this in between, this not yet. I don't like this un-concreted existing. Flotsam jetsam.

Every day the sunset blows my mind.

There it is. An opening. Lift yourself up.

A crack, a VHS tape labelled incorrectly, a book on the slave trade, a pin cushion, distorted vision. We all crawl together, we all crawl, are crawling. Wait here for me. Please. Sometimes I can hear a clock ticking. There was a flower press. That's what I told them anyway. Close my eyes and think of it. Quick. A short burst. A flash. The feeling of a colour. A bent neck, top lip, black hole.

I don't know what I'm looking for.

I'm counting on you, you know. That's what sets us apart from animals. It's the symbolism. I'm so tired. You already said that, at the beginning, a while ago. I've looked at these books for years. It's all the same, still. It's because you're lying with your feet to the sea. It's because you're lying with your back to the hills. With your face to the floor. With your arms up, above your head. With your eyes open. With your hair still wet, with your shoelaces untied, with your steak well done, with your front door open, your teeth unbrushed, with your unsweetened half-grapefruit-breasts, and with your tiny spoon, and with your dry tongue and your tendency to forgive everyone all of the time.

My favourite flowers are tulips.

A close-up of a hand on a bare wooden table. The moment the glass tips. The moment the glass tips.

Flashing Bay

By Antonia Pont

The trees at the moment seem to me especially verdant. Like someone who's come out of a bad relationship recently and starts to reveal their true face again. They're returned to the centre of their own beauty (or at least no one is shoving them out of it). While walking, I say to him that the dyad is diabolical. He misunderstands what I mean. Beside us the bay is flashing a kind of gold, slate light, in a wind that will exacerbate. I try to explain. Later we sit near the infinite pylons of that ghost jetty, stretching out to sea, contemplating parcours. I reveal more of my intolerance (my stern discernment) than I prefer to and regret it after. We note the potential of the vast concrete surface for roller sports, and I mention my electric-blues skates, his not having seen them yet. Still, this new topic can't seem to make up for the earlier lurch into critique. Critique always flirts with resentment. I recall myself—on a date the year before, holding a rare glass of wine in a densely crowded bar—saying boldly into the face of the man who won't be suitable, when he asks if I believe that I affirm, if I live in affirmation: *yes, I do*. He'd not managed to finish a doctorate on Nietzsche but does manage to risk a tram stop kiss. Our mouths become heavenly things, virtuosic, responsive, architecturally glorious. This fragment of being alive (despite the deafening unsuitableness) is, I'd say, exactly the stuff of affirmation. But other days, I'm equally done in by wondering what might be wrong with me. They say my astrological sign doesn't forgive. I'd say it's more that I won't come to terms with the hostilities upon which everyday closeness feeds and depends.

I'm reminded by Offill that 'diamond' and 'adamant' are etymologically linked. I think about how vulnerable I am when I cover it up with adamant. Vulnerable, sure—but still, on the surface and effectively, hostile. Marilyn just wanted diamonds because the history of gender is a hot mess. I think she was sideways singing at communism, too.

Waiting for my friend in the car park, I send his message to a work colleague by mistake. Out of context, it hints at sleazy. Through the windscreen, I watch four pelicans, flying in formation out towards the monstrous cranes of the docks. So crisp, they could be a film slowed down. (I'm watching fewer than anyone would believe.) Their wingbeats, too, make the air itself plastic, make it into something. We're suspended now in the somethingness of nothing—like flying. We're feeling the thick space (around our bodies, implicating us with others and their bodies) which we hadn't been clocking. This joy, that some people are talking about now—forgive me—I have it all the time.

Obligations

By Jessica Au

In the kitchen, I mix together yeast and water, sugar and water, and rice flour and water and let each of them sit. I think of how my mother has called, wanting me to go over and have dinner with her friends, how another friend has invited me to a weaving workshop, and how my best friend from childhood has called, wanting me to visit her and her two young children.

The recipe calls for a steamer, which I have, but then says that you should not use a springform tin to steam the mixture. I can't think of what I can use in this kitchen other than the springform tin, in which I've made many other cakes many other times. In the end, I decide that I'll use either a round glass dish or else folded baking paper, because this reminds me too of the way they used to line the bamboo steamers at the restaurants during *dim sum*.

I think about how, while I have said yes to all these things, which are all such nice invitations, I am actually always also hesitant. I am always actually hoping for a reason I can say no. I think about how at first, I thought this was because I was working too much. I thought that if I worked less, then I'd have more time, and so would be more generous with it. And yet, this hasn't turned out to be the case.

I know that I can move from simple task to simple task—reading, washing, cooking—and that I can lie on the bed, fall asleep and wake in the afternoon, thinking and noticing nothing in particular. That I can spend long minutes wandering about the apartment, tracing its perimeter, looking at the sunlight on the wood, at the small paintings we've bought over the years, or at the sheets on the line, just hung.

We would buy the cake at Chinese grocery stores, where all the good, cheap vegetables were, and where it was cut and wrapped in gladwrap. The taste is plain, and a little sweet. It is the kind of sweetness that does not linger, but evaporates, like the taste of good sake on a cold night.

I remember that recently, the only fight I've had with my mother was when our relatives came to stay, and I neither said no or never really said yes to joining them on their many outings to the city, to the Great Ocean Road or to watch the penguins come up out of the water.

When the cake is done, and after it has cooled, I take out a knife and brush it with oil before I make the first cut. Inside, it is a little condensed and not as spongy and aerated as I remember it. I wonder if I've left the water on too high. Still, it smells beautifully like sugar and rising steam. I wish I could find the right dish to serve it in, something white maybe, with a painted rim of inky brown or blue, like the colour some dogs have in their eyes. Outside, it is almost dark.

Things

By Anna Thwaites

I've been taking some not inconsiderable pride in the fact that, for the most part, I'm not overly attached to things—I mean, possessions or objects. I like a nice home—good light, nice furniture, colours that go together to make a pretty sort of still life and maybe act as prompts to me for what kind of person I might be. But when things break, I feel relieved. I get a nice buzzing feeling thinking the words 'It's just a thing.' And I like to smile at the stricken person who has broken my thing and say 'never mind' and for once—for once!—really mean it. Or if I broke it myself, I say 'oh' and then fetch the dustpan and brush, humming. I think in these moments that perhaps I could be quite a good and ethical person, with this lack of care for consumption and possession coming so naturally to me.

I find it difficult to buy things. They never seem worth the money. I have to stand in the shop and work at liking them enough to pay, try to attach little stories to them—what sort of person might love them, some detail in the curve or the colour that reminds me of something else that's nice. Rich blue colours always get me because they remind me of cornflowers and skies and seas, of course. Some flecked deep browns get me because they make me think of humble people living in the bush. But I do get sort of attached to particular pieces of cutlery and crockery. I buy them for a couple of dollars in op shops, and I think the fact that my affection for them is the only measure of their worth makes it feel serious. I like them to have a certain heft and curve that feels friendly or generous. Favourite cup, favourite fork, favourite plate with the mistake that looks like a heart. In share houses, I would hide my favourite fork under the other forks so that I could use it when it was my turn to cook and eat dinner. The mouthfuls were perfect on that fork. Now when I serve friends drinks at my flat, I feel torn about whether, as a good host, I should let someone else drink from my favourite glass, and I always get into pleading and bargaining with myself—what if they don't even like the vessel I like? Or even if they do, would they experience the same level of enjoyment I do, when my hand cups around its sweet roundness, and my lips close on its nice lip? It can really only last for a moment or two while I pick up and carry the drinks in—which one will I extend to him—but sometimes I linger in the kitchen for a minute, stuck.

Lessons

By Emily Kiddell

The boy turns his mother's wrist and frowns into the face of a gold watch that belonged to his great grandmother. 'Seventy o'clock,' he says. He peers closer. 'No,' he shakes his head, serious. 'It's seventy-hundred, five-million o'clock.' But he can't hold it and his face splits into its newly gappy smile. There is no way to know if the lesson is working.

Lately he has been asking to look at photos of himself. There is the one in the nursing home, his great grandmother cradles him in her bony lap. Her visiting family forms an arc around her chair. They are stripped down to t-shirts, their faces rosy in the heat. She wears a knitted blanket as a shawl. 'We couldn't go there now,' he says, pointing. The baby boy is a fleshy ball against the elder's birdlike body. 'How old was she?' he asks. Then: 'How old are you?' Then: 'How old is the oldest person?'

His mother looks up the answer on her phone. 'The oldest person is 117, but the oldest person ever was 122.'

He thinks about this, a small furrow in his brow. He flicks through more photos. He pauses on one of himself in a nappy: 'look at that little guy!'

His mother sticks a poster of a volcano on the pantry door. He laughs as she reads him the names for the different kinds of lava: *Aa* (ah-ah), *pahoehoe* (pa-hoy-hoy) flow, *pahoehoe* toe. He asks which countries have active volcanos and his face shows the atlas forming in his mind. He makes lava from a kit and sends red channels flowing over the bricks in the courtyard. At any given time, the floor becomes lava and the boy has to navigate new paths around the house to avoid it. He gets tired and makes booties out of kitchen foil so he can wade through its bubbling shallows.

One night, he wakes crying. 'I can't tell you', he says, his eyes wide. This fear is new.

'Did someone die in your dream?' his mother asks. 'Was it someone you know?'

'No,' he replies, and his face has grown long. 'It was a stranger. She slipped on her handbag and fell into the lava.'

The mother accidentally laughs at the detail of the handbag. She tries to hide this; she tells him lots of strange things happen in dreams. But a few days later, when he is playing, he is overcome with tears. He tells her he can't stop thinking about it. He cries so hard.

'Now,' he says, 'it feels like I can die so easily.'

They go out for some exercise. He insists on his roller skates. He spots a school friend across the street and yells and waves his arms madly. His friend calls out that he is not allowed to cross. The boy skates up and down a small section of the footpath showing his friend how he can jump. He is so pleased. He forgets to make room and people make wide disapproving detours around him.

Back at the house, they return to his lessons at the kitchen table. 'What day is it?' he asks.

'Tuesday. What time it is?' the mother says.

He turns to count the big hand and the small hand. He flings his body, ready to pronounce and knocks a mug onto the tiles. She sees him turning the floor into lava. In the diagrams she has shown him, the earth's crust looks so thin.

Eight Lessons; One Conclusion

By Charlotte Forfieh

1. In the UK, Black people are more than four times likely to die from Covid-19.

2. As many as thirty-five per cent of people infected by coronavirus have been people of colour.

3. Yet, people of colour represent thirteen per cent of the population.

4. While enforcing the coronavirus lockdown, Officers from the Metropolitan Police force were more than twice as likely to issue fines to Black people.

5. Black people made up thirty-one per cent of arrests for alleged breaches of Covid-19 lockdown rules.

6. Workers from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups have felt the hardest economic shocks because of the Covid-19 crisis.

7. More than twenty per cent of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic workers have lost their jobs.

8. Of the two-hundred frontline health and social care workers in England and Wales who are known to have died from Covid-19, more than six in 10 were from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds.

In conclusion

Washing our hands won't rid us of structural racism.