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 third and final thread are Julia Prendergast, Allison Browning, Hayley Singer, Emilie Collyer, SJ Finn, Katelin Farnsworth, Jo Langdon, Bel Monypenny, and Ainslee Meredith. 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.

Cut the angle

By Julia Prendergast

She is a hearer of night-time things. She notes his footsteps on the hallway floorboards, lays quietly, wide-eyed, blinking in the darkness. There is shushing and rustling, banging—a stumbling body knocking a chair against the desk, at least that's what it sounds like... She waits a couple of minutes, shuffles to the hallway, listening to them.

If it wasn't for, y'know, would you be here? he asks.

Would YOU? she says.

Sssh...

A giggle tapers to a whimper. *It's like the world is closing in on itself,* she says.

She envies them—too young to know (really know) the clusterfuck of backwards-thinking-time.

In the morning, she folds washing, taking time with pleats and edges, collars, the symmetry of each pile. She checks her phone, swears, collects her bag and keys, late now for training.

Cut the angle. Gloves up. You're dropping your right. Dance around—stay on your toes. Where's the follow through? Concentrate. Land the punch BEYOND the target. Punch THROUGH. Cut-the-Angle. Swing from your hips—THERE it is...

She arrives home, spent but still edgy. His bedroom door is ajar. She pokes her head in—eager sunlight falls on his fleshy bottom lip. A young woman sleeps beside him. They lay side-by-side like soldiers. Her toffee skin glistens symmetrically in the sunshine-slats of early light. The doona is draped across the strawberry-flesh of her nipple. She is quite lovely.

Keep your guard up, he says, over and again. In the old world it felt necessary—this relentless mantra of self-protection—now it pummels. Who cares if she drops her guard? The things she coveted are falling away into a groundless yesterday. It's all so... fast. What will remorse look like after this slippage—if before is no longer recognisable? How could it have seemed so impossible we might live this—erasure of time... amplifying questions about whether or not—just in case—just in case, *what?* Memories dance around, near and far—she can't grasp them—corkscrew fingers at her hip bone, jagged breathing at her collarbone. It doesn't matter except that it matters—skin memories, skin thinking, twisting time.

She showers, leaves the house a second time, drives the 10 minutes to another house and knocks on the door, hair dripping, water running down her spine. Later, draping the doona across his nipple, she says: *If it wasn't for, y'know, would you be here?*

I live here, he says.

You know what I mean. This ending-feeling. The duck and weave.

Bruise

By Allison Browning

It's not magic the way it happens, a mouth at a neck in the dark, the touching, not raw passion the way it once was. But it is loving. *Is it okay if I* ... Two decades ago El knew this body, but the thicket of pubic hair is now gone. The smoothness of epilated legs is foreign. She reaches down, reading Nik's stubbled face in the low light. *Are you okay,* she asks?

Beyond Nik's bedroom, the kitchen is a scramble of dirty dishes, empty glasses, carnations in a coral-toned vase. Remnants of Malaysian rice paper wraps sit on chopping boards, ingredients hunted down from outer Perth suburbs to make the dish just so.

You still guide me into you the way you used to, Nik says.
I don't remember that being a thing I did—your memory's better than mine.

El had driven to Nik's in the car borrowed from her sister, a rose she'd cut from her mother's garden balanced in a Hungry Jacks cup half-filled with water in the centre console in an attempt to keep it from wilting in the summer heat boring through the windows. When she arrived, she told Nik—a now older version of Nik—to close their eyes and, grinning, they did.

Hold out your hands. She placed the rose on their palms. *It's my turn this time*, she said.

Years before, El had taken home and dried the rose Nik brought to their first date. Him in a red check flanny, Napalm Death t-shirt, tight black jeans and army boots. His prickly exterior deflecting the gentleness she would come to know.

Nik hovers above her, sheets bunched at silken calves, face apologetic, *I wish I could be more for you right now.*

Hands at their waist, El manoeuvrers Nik beneath her, sits astride, the way she used to, pinning their arms down. Still, the pair watch each other. *I'm not quite sure of what to do*, she says.

Months ago, his name on the screen was backlit by white light, a name she'd known only in handwritten form on cards and letters, before the internet, before emails. He had looked her up online. He'd written. She'd done well for herself. He was glad ... He owed her an apology, a truth. She mouthed the words to digest them.

A mouth at a neck can become a bruise, the same way a boy telling a girl he doesn't love her any more can. A Bruise can form even when the reason for it wasn't real.

In the morning Nik cranes their head to examine the mark on her neck, tracing the tip of a polished nail over the discolouration, and they both laugh at how teen they still are.

You could come stay with me, she says. *We don't have to do the sexing stuff.* El walks, naked, past the kitchen to the guest room where the fresh linen sheets are untouched. She takes her makeup bag from her duffel, and heads back to Nik's en suite. At the basin, with Nik beside her, she washes her face. *We're matching*, she says, pointing to her makeup bag beside Nik's.

At the airport, by the metal detector, a team of football players in jerseys gather, waiting for their carry-on to come through the scanner.

Excuse me sir. The woman in uniform, metal detector in hand, looks at Nik. *Do you know what team?*

Nik shakes their head.

El places a hand on Nik's shoulder. *Sorry,* she whispers. *I hate it when people assume.*

They sit at the only cafe in the terminal. Nik reaches a hand out across the table and El rests her own on top.

Last night ... was it hard for you?

Nik shakes their head. *You?* A boarding announcement drowns the space.

No. I thought ... maybe it was a sentimental thing, like you were forcing yourself—I mean, maybe doing it because—I wasn't.

Nik pauses. *I wanted to.*

By the boarding gate, duffel bag by her feet, El presses her mouth to Nik's neck. *I'm going to kiss you,* Nik says, *and you're going to board and I'm going to go and we're not going to turn around.*

She nods.

On the plane her phone vibrates and she glances at the screen. *You looked back.*

The end of Cilla Brown

by Hayley Singer

Today, from the west, the cold wind comes. A Sunday. Anna Lee shuts her eyes. Repeats her meditation: *Your life is a shelter. Much depends on your mental attitude. If you do not keep her busy, the child will get restless just before dinner.* Anna Lee rises. Down the hall. Into the kitchen. There. The baby's in her Bumbo floor seat.

Anna Lee approaches. Beyond the certainties of food, sleep, shelter and love what more could be known of a baby's desires? Of course Anna Lee worries about this. Really, with the child being so small ... around those islands of certainty there are rising seas of uncertainty. Anna feels hot in the face. When uncertainty heats up it expands. This is what she knows to be true. Thermal expansion. About half of the sea level rise over the past 25 years is attributable to warmer oceans simply occupying more space ... that is the same as uncertainty. When uncertainty levels rise as rapidly as they have been (as in the case of Anna Lee), even a small increase can have devastating effects on the child who will (surely), in turn, develop adaptation measures to cope with the long-term prospects of higher uncertainty levels, often at considerable cost.

Anna Lee takes the baby out of the Bumbo.

If the child were in need, she wouldn't be for long.

Anna Lee pecks the child on the head.

Peck peck.

The child goes stiff.

Peck peck.

Lauren Lee tries to laugh.

She wants to say, "I look down at you and I see my life."

But the child's cries suddenly echo out between the walls.

Anna Lee's entire body groans.

Just then Joshua appears, like out of nowhere.

"Listen. What's the matter with you?
Can't you get anything done without bringing on her moaning?
Anyway, didn't anyone tell you not to take her out of the thing when she's quiet?"
He storms over, takes the child.
"And it's not even dinnertime yet."
He rounds a corner. Down the hall. Disappears.

Anna Lee isn't crying, but she can't stop. Closes her eyes. Enters the evening dark. Where's the meditation? *Listen. One step at a time. You're walking down a steep and watery track.* She isn't crying, but the house isn't standing still, and she's stepping down this watery track, or is it the hallway?, and now she *is* crying and Joshua's up ahead of her, rounding all the corners, in and out of rooms, jiggling the baby. Anna Lee's following (arms out, big sad face) and he's talking about the silence from before, the Nice 'n' Quiet, "and now it's broken." A thousand dirty pieces. "And all I ever want is just like sixteen seconds of silence." But all he can hear are the roars from the baby. Just lots of roars slipping inside ever more roars.

The Sunday silence

By Emilie Collyer

This morning the trees were louder.

Gaze up from the
battered wooden sun-seat,

(remember carrying that all the way
home—picked it up from Josephine—
through back streets—light but awkward—
it took two—end to end—quiet procession)

those leaves are jostling! The tree
shaking its money-maker,

like watching a fire
or a sleeping baby, energy circling in

on itself, over and over, mesmerising
meditation, holding the air

(how many hours sitting—book in hand—
sandwich on plate—tea in cup—too bright
morning light—but that slow linger crawl—
in the afternoon—face in shade—legs in sun).

Bird song and sirens, surely
an indie pop star somewhere

is already writing this song,
doesn't everyone comment—

Are there more sirens or am I just
hearing them more because the traffic is gone?

Around here, birds seem alert,
agitation or celebration—

The humans have chilled the fuck out
for a bit.

Sunday silence of childhood,
chewing gum hours,

pre-week jitter stasis, Monday
horizon, when things must be done.

Now this bleeds into day-after-day,
all held taut, slide-scale of calamity,

(white paint has flaked over years—
slats broken—still, get the green cushions from the laundry—
sit in the half-sun half-shade—watch
afternoon fall into twilight)

world labouring through dark
towards an unknown dawn.

The Monday mental

By SJ Finn

At least crossing the road is easier
other than the bike, thin against the morning
coming down the hill at breakneck speed,

(Swabs in hand, two good elbows and a fob
—I get through the door—heartbeat racing
—smiling stilled—pass one another to
the edges of the office)

will you breathe please. Really, there's
a calm in the street you can take in

(bend to breaking point and snap-back—
a moment's peace, a wide berth,
—is this what the psychoanalysts call *the real*?)

looking down a lot at white running shoes,
when there's flow there's flow, only fight and spit
will mean having to hold

(how was the night?—caught in
drafts—someone didn't believe anything
applied to them—base-grade—101—the
cleaner arrives—he has serenity in him—I
drink it in)

Contamination you ask:

I just want them to start testing everyone. We
deserve that, to be tested, to be tested, to be tested.

Do you know how a heart transmits
these days?—

In muscle form. It can outrun the best of
warriors if it has good blood—a stock of good
good blood

What are you doing here, Adam?

(I'm telling everyone: *Just ask the*
welfare. They'll give you a motel room
—three weeks of bliss—no questions asked)

Go home then. Go home.
Like a song sung, a daggy folkdance we did
in a former life, a century ago
catching a partner to swing about and tap a toe.

I look out over the road—it's not quite confusion.
Bemusement has a more rounded sound.

Channels

By Katelin Farnsworth

Monday: Bush—green, grey, pink, red—walking, tiptoeing.

Go go.

Empty.

It's normally empty. Wattle, the colour of custard—(custard, plastic spoons, bright yellow bowls, Christmas that sizzles)—flits down. stretch out my arms, look for the emptiness that always was. A man with dark hair scuttles past. *Quick, if we don't make eye contact, it never happened.*

Tuesday: Sanitiser in a bright blue bottle. Alcohol wipes, nicked from work when this was all a bit of a joke.

Wednesday: Laughter that rings out like a school bell.

Footy season, over. We are premiers. Why not?

We won our last (first, only) game. Winning, golden, sunlight. Kookaburras in the tree, somewhere—all of it, somewhere.

Thursday: Take the bike from the shed. Silver handle bars glisten. Not really silver, though, never is. Crunch bark between my pale fingers (remember Crunchies, wrapper like treasure, supermarket aisle looming).

Friday: Zoom zoom. Morning meeting playing, kettle whirs.

Quotas.

KPI's.

4 million sales—sails?

Float away. Where to?

Saturday: Hold still. Bake a cake. *Everyone* bakes.

Forgot to add the egg.

Animal rights. Meat is murder.

Put the cake tin down. Didn't like cake anyway. Well, maybe a little bit.

Sunday: Prepare for Monday. Organisation matters. Plans, outlines, go figure.

Monday: Bush—green, grey, pink, red—walking, tiptoeing.

Go go. Come back. Turn around. No, not that way. Which way?

Portals

By Jo Langdon

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.

Arundhati Roy

i.

This longing
for later, for knowing what
next, what possible shape

of an after— Bright hours we walk;
my daughter's small
hands gesture

to the baby
swings, bucket seats

on metal chains
she'd like to lick, test
mouth-first.

I don't usually mind
the not knowing (intimate
as anything

this immediate
& abstract—) All those summer

mornings
we checked screens
for smoke, fine

particles of ash
& I'm not sure

what

before opening
windows, setting out
into the air; everything

filtered through
impossibly small lungs

then; today
recall how I am ready
to imagine her

another world
in this.

ii.

All of it somewhere
else & here at once—strange
luxury of forgetting

briefly, heart's new
heft & altitude, all the body's
homes for worry. Mustard

& yolk
colours of leaves
in autumn branches
now & underfoot / others

dark as stout
then pink
& red as carnations (the wattle
in Eastern Park already
months gone—)

Baby says *bump*, *bump*
in time to the pram wheels' lift & drop
over gravel: cockatoos,

corellas, cormorants
fill space with the bats, wingspans &
voices vast. Then a magpie in the grass

& as a verb for what she does
with Easter foil. Fuchsia clouds at dusk
& witching hour to *Goodnight Moon*—

'goodnight noises
everywhere'.

Later, to read
& remember:
it is definitely more than a virus.

Portals

By Bel Monypenny

1. Before

My oasis from the crazy world is a wind-ravaged room at the top of the house. It's noisy. Precarious. To spend time here feels like clinging on by your fingernails, but I'm well used to that—family life is mad. Up here, the rest of the world ceases to exist. It is blown from beneath me and I'm cocooned by the cacophony. The wind slaps itself against the windows, thrashes at the walls, but I am at my desk. Alone. Focussed by the howling rage outside. Inside, the stillness expands and engulfs me whole.

2. After

The days begin with infinite possibility. Preposterous reinventions. 'We could go for a bike ride! All of us! Together!' We're sceptical at first. Then we taste freedom. Adventures unbounded by time and obligations. We've never walked so deep into our neighbourhood, and learn it all over again. We see our neighbours, emerging like moles from the deep, squinting. We see detail in gardens. Fruit trees emerge from the generic green. Especially those that overhang fences. We notice parks with chestnuts, vacant blocks with walnut trees. We fill our pockets and quietly take note of where to find food if it comes to that.

The days are long. We pack sandwiches and drive into the deserted town. Park down a side street and wander for hours along the river with no destination, just meandering under autumn skies. Deeply romanced by the peace and simplicity.

Then I drop the car key as we're crossing the bridge. It lands in the middle of the river. We look at each other. Blinking. A strange calm passes between us. Then I nod and strip off in the cold, in front of other walkers, slide down the muddy bank and wade in. I retrieve the key, scramble out, and only then have vague, far-away thoughts of eels. Duck shit. Polluted run-off. But the youngest holds up her hands and declares me, 'Hero of the keys!' and I squelch back to the car, smiling. I find a towel. We go home.

3. Now

Apparently, it's time to emerge.

On not seeing the meteor shower on the morning of 6 May, 2020
By Ainslee Meredith

A celestial event to wake up for, said the news reports: an annual event, yes, but who wouldn't choose to be graced by a meteor shower? Itchy in a shrunken life, I chose grace. H agreed to join me outside at 4.30am; F asked us to please close the gate quietly.

I'd begun to see how interiorly I'd been living, before and after; how I'd considered time and beauty and glory only as they related to the minutiae of my own life, not the dust of comets. Or, with a little less stress on the sublime (putting the Keats back on the shelf, having recorded 'Bright Star' with my iPhone's voice recorder, and sent the audio file to my girlfriend), then with more attention to spare for the world, its naturalism and novelty ... which is to say, in its human mediation. Due to accompany the fall of the debris of the *Eta Aquariid* in the eastern sky was a comet named the Comet SWAN. Named, not as I first assumed, for the location of its 'discovery' in Swan Hill, Victoria, but for the name of the camera on board NASA's Sun-orbiting SOHO satellite spacecraft used to capture the images of the comet viewed by the man in Swan Hill. Solar Wind Anisotropies. Bring binoculars. Put the moon, if it's still out, behind your hand or a tree.

Bare-eyed in coats and boots, we walked to a nearby reserve in search of darkness amid the cocoon of street lights. As we walked, I told H about the time an ex of mine had a temporary job handing out free solar eclipse sunglasses at Flinders Street Station, obviously promo collateral for someone or something. People weren't interested. I don't know who thought that the general disinclination of commuters to accept something they don't need shoved into their hand by workers barely out of their teens and clearly desperate for a commission would be changed by a solar eclipse, even a total one. He fled. Now I forget if he jettisoned the glasses or brought them all home.

The hill on the side of the reserve, a good choice in theory, gave us a perfect view of what I'd forgotten lay to our east: the city and its corona of light. Safe, wasteful, and in our way! I thought of my friend C in the hills, sure to be sleeping now even though she was in the best possible position to see what I couldn't see. We span around, gazing at the western sky just in case, which was as inky blue, as full of porphyrin, as anyone could want.