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TEXT prose

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Today is tomorrow

I love running but I'm sick of running. Between the meetings and to break the work, I run. I could stop doing it only I'm desperate for the after-feeling, like the old world is still possible. The feeling is full and then empty like things I don't want to draw attention to, here. Am I running to or from? Suddenly running feels empty. Full-empty. What does that even mean? The world is losing meaning.

In the first weeks of isolation I looked forward to the meetings. Now I hate them. I love-hate them, like running. In the virtual gatherings I see me as others see me, literally not figuratively. I see my (not virtual) background – the dressing table with the long mirror. In the mirror I see my bed. I see the bed in realtime if I look forward, beyond my screen, and I see it in the mirror-background, behind me. It looks like a scene I'm trying to write, a temporally shifty scene that's not working yet. It's a side effect of the virus. Dissolving time. Future past. Or past future. Is there a difference?

It's night-time. The energy picks up as the daylight fades, people emerge from their rooms as if something is going to happen, but it's only dinner and that was hours ago, now. I answer a few more emails, messages from across the seas where it's still yesterday. I'm taken with the idea of talking to yesterday, in realtime. I should go to sleep except I'm not tired – I'm not even slightly sleepy. I should have run twice day. I should have gone harder, faster, to and away from.

I stare at the lap-top screen. In my background two lamps flank the dressing table, one stained-glass, the other hand-painted pottery with a textured lampshade, like shifting tide-marks on the sand. I long for the sea but so what? People are dying. The base of the lamp has swirled markings in green and clay-yellow, painted swirls, and etchings in the swirls, like teeth marks. The teeth marks belong to another story, but the loss of meaning and the emptying of time blends stories. The lamp with the swirled markings looks like Ancient Greek pottery, like wind and teeth in paint and clay, like the Trojan women, wailing. When she gave it to me, she said: 'If I'd known it was a lamp, rather than a vase, I mightn't have given it to you so readily... See the hole,' she adds, 'for the cord?'. There is an old perfume bottle on the dressing table, too, also hers. The glass is textured, refracting lamplight, pinging amber.

At night-time, if I stare at the screen, it's like I'm in a meeting. I can see my background in the screen's reflection, just like my framed face, at the meetings. I join a meeting from the future to see if I'm right, to check if it really does look the same.

The host says: 'You're the only one in the meeting.'

'I know,' I say. 'I know.' I laugh but it's not really that funny.

Is the platform the host? I think so. I decide the platform is the host and I am the organiser. I wish the host would bring me another glass of champagne. I don't like the hallway at night.

I read my stories aloud, in this room, and now I'm talking to the host, who is a platform. If my children are awake, beyond the door, they will think I am the madwoman in the attic.

In the daytime I like the hallway. It's cluttered with things people have shifted out of their bedrooms. A small bin, painted wire – a large cushion with a frayed edge, split, duck down scattered like the soft feathers of dead ducks. I think the feathers should stay there until we have a vaccine – I spill a few more out. 'Why are you doing that?' he says.

Each day there are new things in the hallway – a school bag, defunct (I take it as a statement against home-schooling). I refrain from comment because I don't care and I don't want to discuss the pile – it's like a social experiment except the pandemic is real and it brings stuff out of people's bedroom and

into the hallway. He adds a kettle to the pile (it's a perfectly good kettle – he bought a new one and he is very pleased about it – he is not a buyer of unnecessary things). I think about it while the kettle boils. I wonder what it means, precisely.

Who is to say what is useful now and what's not? Or what means something? Or whether meaning is altogether necessary? I'm interested in the things in the hallway as individual objects but more so, collectively. I want to add a curve ball, something useful and meaning-heavy, but I'm too interested in observing. I don't want to interfere with what's happening in the hallway.

In effect I started it. I put two long, timber sitting benches there, from under my bed. I cleaned the wooden floorboards by hand with fig-scented spray. I needed my workspace to smell nice. I didn't bring the benches back because people started adding on, as if this were a thing, like a garage sale in our hallway.

Sometimes, at night, I walk from room to room and listen to their breathing. With some of them, I can get really close without invading their dreams, so close I can feel the vibrations of their breath, like when they were babies. I walk from room to room, collecting their breathing. I know how lucky I am to have breathing people in my house, a whole collection of breathing people, only at night-time their breathing seems louder than it really is. It's like I can hear it when I'm not close enough to hear it. It bothers me and so I get up close to their breathing to remind myself it's real. Later I stand in the hallway of unused things and I put their breathing together in my mind.

I go back to my desk because words make things meaningful – words collect objects as a composite picture that makes some kind of sense, even refracted sense is okay because of the work of association. Only today I can't make the words breathe and I feel that the hallway is without associations and, at the same time, over-laden. It's too much. I go back to the hallway and listen for things I shouldn't be able to hear. I wish I was a horse so I could stand here all night. I could sleep (not-sleep), standing in media res, among the things we're letting go of.

I should go to bed, it's late enough, after midnight. I open my calendar to check tomorrow for front-facing meetings. Twelve-thirty and four o'clock. 'Go to sleep you idiot,' I say, holding my arms, firmly and kindly, as if I'm someone else which, to be fair, I kind-of am.

In the beginning I made my bed for the meetings. Feigning order. I'm not a bed-maker. I've never really seen the point. Now I make the bed only sometimes. To some extent it depends on who's in the meeting. I'm not in the mood for meetings, anymore. Things have shifted. Meetings are so yesterday. I'll perk up tomorrow, no worries. I'll run first thing, wash my hair, put a fresh bra on – not this sweaty sports bra. I take a black lacy one, hang it over my chair, in readiness. It will make me feel better, I think. It's a champagne thought, black lace ridiculousness. In the night-time light, with the lamps and the candle, it's like I'm inside a kaleidoscope, colours pinging, hurtling towards me from multiple directions. I'm not seeing them so much as feeling them. It's true. I'm not making this up. It's not the champagne.

I respond to my friend from across the seas. 'I'll sort that out tomorrow,' I say. 'It's two am,' I add. 'Today is tomorrow. It's a good title for a short story...' I've barely pushed send and he comes back: 'OK. I love that title – who's gonna use it first?'

'We both are,' I say. 'Seriously. I'm going to have a crack at it tomorrow'. As I lay my head on the pillow, I remember today is tomorrow and that means I should have a crack at it now but, finally, I'm tired.

Today is tomorrow and I'm in a meeting. It's so annoying – being in meetings with yourself. In the dressing table mirror I can see my bed, because looking forward is looking back... I rarely make the bed now because time is for other things and it's night-time somewhere. If perchance I am one of those who will die, sooner rather than later, I want to spend my time doing things that feel like they have a point. Not bed-making. I don't want to see myself, anymore, in this stupid fucking meeting. I reach for the mouse, blank my image. I subscribe to the chat on the side, a conversation in writing. 'Connectivity issues,' I type. I think it's, perhaps, the truest thing I've written across this empty-full time, where today is tomorrow, a forwards-backwards yesterday, but for words.

Julia Prendergast's novel, The Earth Does Not Get Fat was published in 2018 (UWA Publishing: Australia). Julia's short stories feature in the most recent edition of Australian Short Stories (Pascoe Publishing). Other stories have been recognised and published: Lightship Anthology 2 (UK), Glimmer Train (US), TEXT (AU) Séan Ó Faoláin Competition (IE), Review of Australian Fiction, Australian Book Review

Elizabeth Jolley Prize, Josephine Ulrick Prize (AU). Julia's research has appeared in various publications including: New Writing (UK), TEXT (AU), Testimony Witness Authority: The Politics and Poetics of Experience (UK). Julia is a Senior lecturer in Writing and Literature at Swinburne University, Melbourne. She is Chair of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP), the peak academic body representing the discipline of Creative Writing in Australasia. Julia directed the Australian Short Story Festival, held for the first time in Melbourne, in 2019. She is an enthusiastic supporter of interdisciplinary, open and collaborative research practices.