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 first thread are Miles Vertigan, Nicola Redhouse, Jo Case, Angus Keech, Ruby Todd, Louise Swinn, Dani Netherclift, Eleanor Elliot Thomas, and Shane Strange. 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.

Horses

By Miles Vertigan

So we were all just standing around in this beautiful lush meadow here swishing our tails and tossing our manes and munching on grass and minding our own business when someone said *we're gonna have to make some serious changes around here to survive but whatever you do don't frighten the horses* and **WOOMPF!!** here we all are...

Horse

By Nicola Redhouse

You are feeling a little horse.
It has become common to feel tiny matter everywhere now.
You do not touch your face, even in the shower,
or at the post office (you bring your own pen).
When you buy milk you orchestrate events
according to a dream you had as a child:
jump and hover in the air for seconds;
hold your breath; don't touch the handles,
contactless pay; don't look them in the eye
(eyeballs are the most dangerous, the most leaky).
Think magically;
exit safely.
But you *are* feeling a little horse.
It must be all the screaming. You have never screamed so much.
The children look in your throat for a tail,
hope to pull it out.
You are all so close now
all the time
you only have to open your mouth.
In the garden.
When you sleep.
When you are working.
Now you seem to be in the garden sleeping working
morningnoonnight.
The borders have come down.
The borders have gone up.
[You are there.] [I am here.]
There is a tooth lost but
the closures mean no tooth-for-money transaction
so the little horse gallops in, uses bitcoin.
The little horse lives everywhere now.
The future is the place it lives the wildest,
machine hooves, oil slicks on tendons:
all those clichés of horse musculature
(probably erroneous; you know there are portly horses).

You've only been up close to a horse once outside of these times
and you were scared of the way you could make it move.
But this one is only a horse you *feel*, and it is little,
and it will be living wild in eleven weeks, thirty weeks
fifty weeks, some say eighty-five weeks.
One problem that arises with the little horse is the bones,
which slip out easily at 2 am:
structure-dissolution hour.
In the first weeks you try to prevent it:
You shine your phone light on it under the doona
and use glue and paddle pop sticks
toothpicks forks chopsticks straws pencils
pens cocktail-stirrers pipe-cleaners and
one particularly desperate night
you resort to raw carrot, julienned,
which pleases the little horse to no end.
Around the six-week mark you realise
it is not a skeletal matter:
time itself has collapsed.
2 am is everywhere.
There is nothing you can do but keep
the little horse in your pocket,
where it will, yes, buck and kick,
and wait.

Hackles

By Jo Case

It's a golden-blue afternoon, and the paddocks in the North Adelaide parklands are lined with couples in exercise wear. A ponytailed woman stands at the fence, laughing and stroking the horse's head nudging at her shoulder, ignoring the sign: DON'T PAT THE HORSES. THEY BITE.

I hover between the bench where a man drinks takeaway coffee and the dirt track that stretches behind the closed playground and past the oval, where two teenagers sit cross-legged, a brown glass bottle on the grass between them.

I've been outside once in the past week. Avoiding people is exhausting these days; monitoring the spaces between us.

A couple lingers near me at the fence, gazing at the lavender hills. When I step forward to take their place, I realise that I, too, just want to stand here.

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In bed, while my husband sleeps beside me, I read *Weather*, by Jenny Offill, a hyperanxious novel in fragments. The narrator worries over climate change and the election of Trump, but it feels like she's meditating on now.

> He says it feels the way it does just before [war] starts. It's a weird thing, but you learn to pick up on it. Even while everybody's convincing themselves it's going to be okay, it's there in the air somehow. The whole thing is more physical than mental, he tells me.
>
> Like hackles? The way a dog's hackles go up? Yes, he says.

***

A bee stings my toe while I'm watering the garden, and within a day, my whole foot has swollen. It itches and burns; it keeps me awake for a week.

***

I am cocooned in a blanket on the couch when I hear shouting outside, above the snappy dialogue of *The Good Place*.

'GET DOWN ON THE GROUND! GET ON THE GROUND, NOW!'

I call Luke away from the home office, where he's working an evening shift.

We stand at the open door to the courtyard and look at the wall behind the citrus trees. It seems our neighbour is being arrested.

***

James Bond always seems to be on Foxtel. Luke watches it instead of the sport that has been cancelled. I lay beside him on the couch and read a forthcoming novel about Adelaide paramedics, each chapter framed around a medical emergency. In one story, a character's foot becomes infected and his toes come off in his sock.

'What if that happens to me?' I ask, waving my bee-stung foot, slathered in Manuka honey and wrapped in bandages.

Luke looks at me and laughs, and then I do too, because I am (mostly) joking.

2020: THE BACTERIA INSIDE. THE VIRUS OUT THERE.

Three infections. Three hospitals. Three countries.

By Angus Keech

Salmonellosis—Düsseldorf—Evangelisches Krankenhaus—January 21

'Sprecken nicht gut Deutsche. English, bitte?'

The lexicon of Crohn's disease, bacterial overgrowths and intestinal symptoms stump Google translate.

After forms and process and forms about process, I walk across a granite foyer, hand in a pink slip and wait in a cobalt holding area. A man coughs uncontrollably. I shift seats.

The treatment area is green—mossy tiles, bright olive doors and (surprisingly short) teal mattress. My feet dangle over while they put me on a drip.

The distracted nurse doesn't quite get the cannula in properly and I have to prop it up with tape so the fluid continues to flow. A trickle of blood crusts under my elbow.

The doctor is young, casual. These antibiotics should sort you out in five days, he says, flicking off the rubber gloves, almost slingshotting them into the bin.

Clostridium Difficile—London—St Thomas' Hospital—February 12–18

The antibiotics for the salmonella work, but then cause a different overgrowth in my gut. I skip the green tiles and call my doctor in England. I fly over that night.

I'm moved into a separate room once they find I'm 'infectious'. The nurses and doctors have to gown-and-glove every time they enter, even to drop off a cuppa tea. I start meeting them at the door.

The Caribbean handler takes me for my abdomen X-Ray. COVID is still in early stages.

'Yah we got a fewadem.' He says.

'There's about twelve on up an isolated floor.' He points above him as the elevator synchronously dings open.

My girlfriend flies from Germany and we spend Valentine's Day eating a Pret a Manger brownie bar overlooking the Thames and the London Eye from my room's generous window.

The double-decker tourist buses still shuttle back and forth across Westminster Bridge.

The sun shines on the day I can leave. On the rooftop opposite, two office workers prop up a phone to lip-synch and perform choreography. They do four takes until they're satisfied.

Aeromonas Hydrophila—Melbourne—The Alfred—April 17–22

We make an abrupt pivot and head back home to Australia. We quarantine, we work remotely, we say 'gut morgen' at our 8pm Zoom calls, but I get worse.

The Alfred is surprisingly quiet. No elective surgeries and the previsions made for the surge that never came leaves an eerie hollowness in the halls and rooms.

There's less beeping and commotion generally, but the tea cart isn't as efficient—it doesn't reach me the first two days.

The IV antibiotics work surprisingly quickly, and I'm glad to stabilise. The comforts of Australia and the ease of familiarity probably help as well.

You also don't have to pay for TV in Australian hospitals. Masterchef is on. Poh forgets to make her chilli sauce, which is such a shame, because it's the thing that really ties the whole dish together.

Side-notes, 2020

By Ruby Todd

The psychic astrologer I follow explains in February that the virus will be serious beyond China. She says its arrival conforms to old celestial patterns that are now repeating. She says we are in the same node cycle as the Great Plague and the Spanish Flu. The north and south nodes move together, revisiting the same position in the sky every nineteen years, wheeling backwards through the constellations and, supposedly, carrying us backwards through time, as if time were a river in which the past still flows, moving and alive, alongside the present and the future.

Walking my dog, I begin to engage in a kind of long-distance line dance with strangers, many of them also walking dogs. A kind of etiquette develops: it's polite to make the first move, to anticipate the other's passage from yards ahead. If there's not time and space to shift within adequate margins, you have to hold your breath, like a shallow diver.

In April, my cousin has a baby girl. No one but her husband is allowed to visit. In the photo she sends, the baby stares out with a wizened expression, from beneath the oversized white beret my mother knitted, like a regal chef.

With my online students I discuss the different ends to which myth has been put to use—as entertainment, as sociocultural conditioning, as a means to explain how it is we have come to be here, experiencing life on Earth. We are all in isolation at home. We have debates about how to read the figure of Medusa in various versions of the Perseus myth. To many of us, she seems the true hero of the story, a fierce-minded woman banished, made monstrous. I am used to isolation outside of pandemics, but my jaundiced face in the videoconferencing thumbnail looks stricken.

My husband and I find a walk, along a local river, that reveals itself to us one day while driving. We have walked along the river before, but not this section, which offers long stretches of pastoral fantasy just minutes from home. A primitive part of me that I can't discount suspects that this section of the river, with its dirt track that opens onto meadows and dense scrub, is in fact a new creation, only appearing to have always been there. The light fades swiftly now, and I always want to walk further. I watch the moon, wavering on the water, and the furious clockwork legs of our little dog. I notice the huge angular buildings, all along the far side of the river, that maximise their own views, while caring nothing for their impact on the vista from beyond their rooms. On one side of the track, a life-sized marble statue of a woman with a kangaroo looks out, a reproduction of a stolen original that has never been found. I watch her in the dark.

A spiritual teacher I find curious, who claims to be the avatar of the Divine Mother on Earth and who has a truly restful stare, provides answers to the fraught questions posed by her followers. Things are okay, she says. Change will come. Whatever will happen, will happen. I find these answers unconvincing.

I notice teddies and rainbows in windows, chalk hopscotch grids on paths. The aviary sound of the primary school opposite our house grows quiet, but the air is clear.

Notes from Soda

By Louise Swinn

On today's walk she told me the numbers and she cried again. I know I'm being selfish but there's something existential about the particular angst I feel when she pulls me away from Cookie and Coco. There are others I don't care so much about but I miss Cookie with her particular smell, that honeysuckle from her fence and the large kibble Simon buys her. And Coco with her little whimpers, and her hair now properly in her eyes. But I have to just hang back.

And it's not forever but it feels like forever—it was yesterday and it will be tomorrow. The numbers are huge, and each one is a life—this is what she says. And we're lucky in Australia, so far—that's what she says: *so far*. I know what she means: *be careful*.

I am the recipient of more treats. And that's not flattening curves, which she comments on. But she doesn't hear me commenting on her extra doughnut and the silent spoons of peanut butter consumed with her eyes closed like they don't count.

It's too quiet and I know she's missing people so I sit on her and the distraction of me saves her. I'm a godsend. She's lucky to have me.

I will miss having her around all the time. When things go back. I'll miss that. I've become used to her being in our bedroom all day sighing into the computer and talking to colleagues wearing leggings and her uggs like they don't know—they're all doing it, for sure.

When things go back to the way they were I'll miss the sense that she and I are properly simpatico, and like this is the way things are always supposed to be. She believes she has this big other life and important things to be doing and items to check off her list but what I hope this time teaches her is that nothing is as important as just slowing down, us going for our long walks, maybe we stop at Jerry Joys for a coffee, I have a sniff, we move on, together, a team, her and me against the world.

There's too much aspiration, trying, bettering, too much achieving. She is more than the job she does. I hope she knows that. If nothing else, I hope this time shows her that. In the months and years to come, I hope she remembers. I want to go back to how it was, sure, but I also want some of this to stay, just a bit, her and me, with fewer distractions. The quiet when she wraps her leg gently around my tail when she's truly tired. That's all we need.

Time after time

By Dani Netherclift

We yearn for deep winter green, the colour of the bush where my family comes from. The dogs love to run through those paddocks dotted yellow with black-hearted daisies. They stop to sniff at every clump of story and intrigue, though they are as easily satisfied with the football field behind our house. On Saturdays at this time of year we could always hear the cacophony of cheers and car horns when a goal was kicked. You don't notice the absence of sound until you do, and only then does it seem terribly quiet.

You cannot go back to before.

The KT Boundary is a thin ribbon of charred sediment preserved deep in the skin of the Earth, a boundary between the Cretaceous and Tertiary periods of deep history, marking time before / time after. It is a black signalling that ancient catastrophe of fire and raining tektites followed by a night lasting almost two years. The end of one world and the beginning of another. The demise of dinosaurs edged out space for the possibility of mammals. In black and white it reads as mere expedience, a reasonable degree of turn-taking.

In the early days, my body carried this time in the same way that it has carried other griefs, with a constriction across the upper torso and the inability to get drunk.

Since she could talk, my daughter has been telling me about the time before she was born, when she lived with her great great great great grandmothers'—they loved her before I did, she says, matter of factly.

On my table is a Victorian urn that belonged to my grandmother. I searched its provenance on the internet. I know where in England it was made and approximately when, but there is no remaining source to tell me what caused the crack where the handle joins the body. I trace my finger lightly across the memory as I arrange yellow flowers.

Before this, I used to mark the page in my writing notebook with a postcard of Parisian rooftops that my friend Heidi sent to me from that city, but lately I have added a photo of my father standing in a paddock in his last days. Perhaps it was taken on the morning of the day that he drowned. In the picture, the sun is shining, my father holds a hose, and a black Labrador leaps into the flow of water streaming from it. Both my father and the dog are smiling.

Cryogenic freezing

By Eleanor Elliot Thomas

My older daughter asked me, early on, what the world will be like on the other side of all this. I didn't want to tell her that there might not be another side to all this. If no vaccine is found, these temporary restrictions we are all living under could become the ordinary conditions of life. Or, more likely, the restrictions will be lifted regardless, and we will just learn to accept our mortality, like people used to, back before hygiene, antibiotics and cryogenic freezing.

I didn't say this. Instead, I said: *I don't know. I really have no idea.*

She did not seem reassured.

The virus has been contained, at least temporarily, and restrictions have begun to lift, but there is no vaccine. There won't be one this year. I find myself longing for the certainty of the law. Now I can legally take the children to visit my parents, but should I? What if we bring the plague? What if they get sick because of us?

'No cuddling grandma,' I say to my younger child before we leave.

She looks at me with her grandmother's eyes.

'If I cuddle her she will *die,'* she says, thrilled.

She's only three, so she doesn't really know about death. The other day she exploded into the kitchen, a mouse clutched in her fist.

'He is dead!' she exclaimed.

I hopped around shrieking: *'Put it down! Put it down!'*

She gently laid the mouse on the kitchen bench.

'*NOT THERE!'*

'He is just sleeping,' she said, inspecting the rodent's sweet, lifeless face.

When lockdown began, I was surprised at how easy it was to forgo our usual lifestyle. I couldn't believe that all these things—shopping, traffic, school, office work, cafes, freedom—things that I had thought were inevitable aspects of modern life, as immutable as the sun, were in fact quite easily disposed of.

I didn't miss any of them. Were there other things I could perhaps get by pretty well without? Democracy? Monogamy? Gluten? *Impossible*, I thought, automatically. But of course I was wrong. People go without these things all the time.

Sometimes I think life has been too easy on me. It has left me soft, unprepared. I don't know how to suffer. I don't know any more about death than the three-year-old.

I suppose I'll learn eventually.

The smoke does not set the fire

By Shane Strange

Three times, my son
has welcomed death.
Twice,
by his own hand.

What does he see
there—
in death's
unknowable land?

No architecture
of disease,
but something darker.
Not a something—a no-
thing—the cessation
of things.

I too have known this spell,
have felt its pull,
like smoke
drawn through a chimney,
into the night.

People say:
'The smoke does not set the fire'.
But do the father's embers
ignite in the son?

Though embers
and smoke and fire,
are not what I meant.

But rather, can we bare
the beautiful,
with ease and intent?