

*Ali Whitelock***the town itself, let us admit, is ugly***

lunch time. day 347. i slice my fish thin, fry it in crisco. it comes out a little dry though perfectly edible. i do not take a photo do not post it on instagram i have never baked my own sourdough bread. the man who drives the grocery truck will bring new fish in three days along with the kleen-o-pine, hand sanitiser, toilet rolls—assuming there is no current reenactment of culloden in aisle nine. in the old days we rubbed newspaper together to make it soft, hung the fragile sheets on a nail poking out of the toilet wall. when we came out of the toilet, mum's bend over so i can read the headlines never grew old. but who has newspaper at home these days? an ipad streaming the news in h.d. cannot be used for anything other than reading the news in h.d. now mum's stuck in scotland while i'm in australia and qantas regret to announce there are no available flights at this time please check back again later. mum says she's worried we won't meet again. i tell her of course we'll meet again now spotify's bombarding me with vera lynn. in japan they sold more copies of the plague in one month than the past thirty one years combined, i mean who'd want to read a book about a plague during an actual plague? when my copy arrived i masked up, sanitised the package, peeled off the final frontier in its plastic defence. to be honest i found the story slower than the meserve glacier, duller than the last flicker of the imaginary candle i refuse to hold to it — am i even allowed to say that? few of us dare to be honest these days because, you know, cancel culture. i got one third the way through camus' open quotes close-quotes masterpiece & tossed it aside in favour of the crown on netflix which i always said i'd never watch but you get so bored. i liked season three better than season four. i ended up feeling sorry for charles. i only mention the fish now because in the old days i ate so little you see. in the slow moving coup of this new-normal it's my head that head rumbles with hunger while my days blacken like sliced avocado oxidising on the chopping board of my existence & cravings i cannot satisfy stagger like my drunk father through the deserted streets in the deprived council estate of my mind. but it is not all doom & gloom. for example, my dietary intake of animal protein has increased exponentially. it is an achievement of sorts. if the vaccine under delivers there is comfort in knowing i may end this life with increased muscle mass, less brittle nails—perhaps even the thick luscious hair of my dreams.

*from Albert Camus' *The Plague*.

**in
the
event
of
a
lack
of
oxygen.**

HOLD the earth in your hands / be careful—she is hot / talk
to her tenderly the way you might your mother at the end of
her days / honour her / place her somewhere she might rest/
perhaps the mantle piece between your bone-china swallow
mid-flight & your fake brass barometer the shape of a ship's
wheel that will not steer us out of the storm we are in /
despite her dishevelment, tell her how lovely she looks /
offer her tea / a scone / horlicks if it still exists / slip her
feet into soft slippers / massage her shoulders rounded
from the burden you have placed on them / cradle her in
your arms /

now go to the mountains / yes, *go* / facetime will not suffice /
tell them you are sorry / return with no selfies—this is not the
time / now go to the rivers / listen to them / let them tell you
their stories / do not interrupt with your lies about your
recycling / like you are not guilty of slipping glass jars
& clean cardboard into the wrong bin / now get down on
your knees & beg their forgiveness / do not worry their
banks are no longer muddy your levis will stay dry /

understand in the event of a lack of oxygen no yellow
masks will drop from the sky / remove your stilettos /
leave all your personal belongings behind / tip toe
past earth's bed / leave a note under her pillow / apologise
profusely / tell her you'd drunk too much / that you weren't
in your right mind / that you didn't realise just how much
you'd loved her till she was gone / speak when she speaks to
you / if your shame will allow it make eye contact / answer
her questions with an honesty that will feel alien to you:

yes we had ample opportunity / yes money was more
important than water & air / yes we're tired of our empty
promises too / yes coal yes carbon yes methane yes
plastic / yes dollars yes pounds yes euros yes yen / yes
vegan yes sweat shops yes you warned us no we didn't
listen / yes we saw the signs / yes we ignored them /
yes the bees are in default / yes the banks are foreclosing
their hives / yes we should have planted more lavender
more rosemary more bottle brush / yes flooding yes fire
yes species extinction / yes we should have been kinder /
yes we should have stopped to think before we fucked her /
yes we should have pulled out sooner / yes oral

contraceptives yes STDs / yes we should have used a
condom / yes we are sorry / yes look at this mess now.

Ali Whitelock is a Scottish poet and writer living on the south coast of Sydney. Her latest poetry collection, *‘the lactic acid in the calves of your despair’* is published by Wakefield Press, Adelaide. Her debut collection *‘and my heart crumples like a coke can’* (also Wakefield Press) has a forthcoming (2021) UK edition by Polygon, UK. Her memoir *‘Poking seaweed with a stick and running away from the smell’* (Wakefield Press & Polygon) was launched at Sydney Writers Festival to critical acclaim. Ali has read at festivals and events around the world including The Edinburgh International Book Festival (2019) and The Edinburgh Fringe (2018 & 2019).