

Stop the Bus and Pray for Me

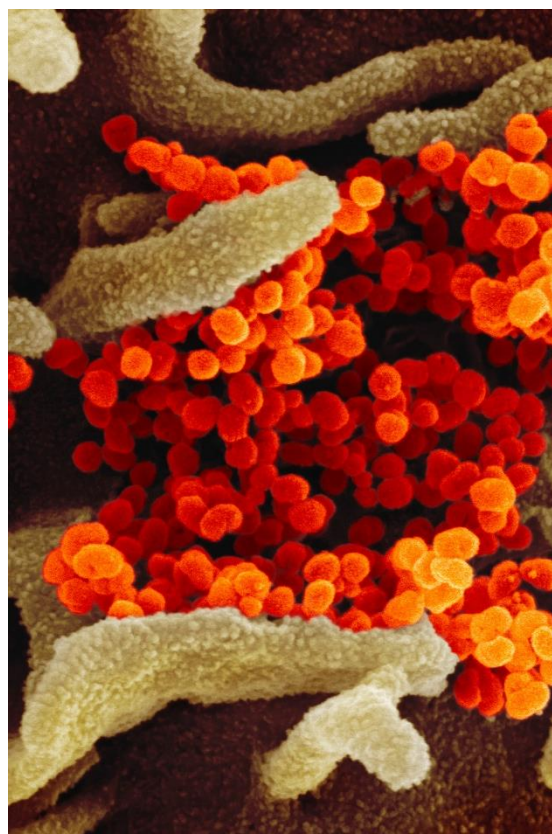
By Lianda Burrows

The human organism sheds over fifty million dead skin cells per day. This is roughly four kilograms per year. At this rate, it would take between ten and fifteen years to shed the weight of an entire human woman, depending on her size of course.

Viral shedding is a different phenomenon. The similarity really begins and ends at implied expulsion—from where and to where, and through what medium, differs. A shedding virus might refer to the movement of a cell between parts of the body, or from a body into the environment. The latter is the only real point of interest here—the movement of something from inside us and out into the world. A cold virus might incubate for three to four days and be shed chiefly at the outset of the symptomatic period. In contrast, SARS-CoV-2 sheds infective particles for seventeen days, but there are reported instances of shedding for up to seventy days. Shedding begins before we are symptomatic but peaks, typically, during the first four to six days of symptoms.

Why do some people shed more, or for longer?

How have we managed to shed viruses so effectively but not more intractable problems, like ideology, or an entire human being?



There may yet be a time in which human beings casually jettison not merely cells, or viral progeny, but entire civilisations.

It is 2021, and as though the present isn't demanding enough, Jane considers alternate versions of herself and the extent of their unhappiness. These are no ordinary hypothetical selves, or even doppelgangers, but in fact entire, living human beings formed in her wake.

Unbeknownst to Jane, the phenomenon of

viral shedding had metamorphosed, at some point between the first and billionth case of SARS-CoV-2, into a form of reproductive shedding. It would be incredulous to suggest that Jane had relieved herself of entire civilisations or their accoutrement—urban infrastructure, perhaps some subterranean railway lines—but she had borne human beings. Not children but human women, only women, unfolding around her. But maybe a railway line would be next. It is, more or less, just another kind of human limb.

In the midst of clarion calls regarding declining fertility and reduced sperm counts and failed IVF cycles, new human beings were now constantly emerging, unnoticed. No one was childless as much as oblivious to their creations.

Jane sits outside a public library on a square patch of bright, manicured lawn. The sun saturates each blade of grass in verdant. She squints and idly flips through a copy of a book prescribed for a subject on contemporary race relations. A key text in the history wars, *Why Weren't We Told? A Personal Search for the Truth about Our History* (1999) explores the untold truths of frontier violence. It opens with a description of flying into Townville, by way of London, Tasmania, Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane. The author, Henry Reynolds, mentions going North—but he had to fly south first, then North. You can't fly directly to Townsville from London—even if you wanted to. Such is the disconnection of the region from the rest of the world. Reynolds' history was a kind of call-to-

arms to the people of the far-north to rewrite their homeland. As a thirty-something-year-old white woman in Australia in 2021, Jane assumes it's not her homeland, whichever way you slice it, so she'd never try to re-write it. That said, she'd never try to re-write England either.

But what she might try to re-write is an edition of this book published far into the future, let's say 2521. She could write the book and encase it in a concrete frustum. The subject at hand would not so much concern enduring colonial legacies, but the changing face of human reproduction. Her mind pored over potential titles. *Why Weren't We Told—that the virgin Mary was from the future and bore Jesus from dead skin cells?* It's something the people would want to know. *Why Weren't We Told We Were Mothers? A Personal Search for the Truth about Our Bodies.* The answer is always a variation on the same theme: because they didn't know; because they didn't want us to know; because they didn't want them to know.

Truthfully, she knew as much—or as little—about the science and technology of reproduction as she knew about intersectional histories, but she was living through something. She'd never know what it was to belong to the land, but she could speak to skin cells. Not as an expert, mind you, but as someone who's got them and is losing them. That seemed like enough, to her, in that moment, to warrant a transcription of history. Maybe repeated lockdowns had given her the confidence that being in society had so steadily revoked.

Jane saw signs of destruction everywhere. Tiny sea snails fossilised in rock. Dead rabbits on the road. Plumes of smoke shrouding entire cities. Why would we evolve like this, if not for imminent collapse?

At some point she came to believe that she was re-creating herself in each moment, and that when she lingered in one place or another, an entire human being would emerge. It was difficult to parse the fabrications from the future. Some of it was true. But how much? It was hard to tell. She considered her women not so much children, but alternates, versions of herself existing along different axes, shooting out from some separate locus in time and space. She never caught sight of them, but presumed they only took form once she left. And how would she recognise them should she ever return? By then they would have retreated into crowds, mere reiterations of nameless faces.

The driving force of this—her narrative, that is, the stories we tell ourselves, and through which we are constituted—was a call-to-arms to herself: to return home and to steady herself into a stable singular being. If she could designate the single point at which the stories she told herself became fabrications she would be doing better than most people.

Jane looked around her. She had a lot of words for misery and complexity and almost none for what was good in the world. The bright square patch of grass in front of her was just that—bright, square. Her sadness, however, was

a manifold form. Cirrocumulus, high in the atmosphere with multiple sites of grey reluctance, it sat poised to one day drown her. But joy? The feeling of being at home?

In Melbourne, the air is cold. The terrain is sometimes green. If Jane was an explorer sailing up from Van Diemen's Land, this is how she would depict it:

^_
^^_
__^COVID-19^^^_
_^_books_^_^^_
^AFL^^_
^Indigenous massacres^^--^^-^_

But this was just a history, a formal fiction we call causality.

A few weeks after Jane had opened Reynold's book, he gave a keynote lecture, broadcast across a range of sites via Zoom. Jane watched from her local campus. A man introduced Reynolds, a woman introduced the man. Strangely, there was nothing else to introduce the woman. No goat to announce her arrival, no donkey pontificating on the legacy of cultural institutions and their contemporary jeopardy. Fifty years or so prior, at some point during second wave feminism, crowds of conservative, idle men had demanded: "Where will it end?" Presumably, it ends before goats stand for government preselection or introduce university bureaucrats.

Jane wonders if the officials chosen to

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introduce Reynolds knew that he originally flew from London, through Tasmania, past Melbourne and Sydney through Brisbane and then into Townsville. She wonders, too, if they knew she had alternate selves at each destination.

The emergence of life from dead cells required more than light and air. There was a science to it, but Jane was not a scientist. She instead looked for philosophical potency and assumed that *it* was the deciding factor. London for banal misery, Brisbane for wanting a better life—at least if you were born in central Queensland. The women she bore were shaped by their location, as much as they were shaped by Jane's DNA billowing out from under her as she walked.

Jane's thoughts were interrupted by the appearance of another nameless woman who had been watching the same live stream from Melbourne. Her face briefly flickered across the larger panel of projected faces, little portals of misery. She looked familiar.

Whether this woman was her creation or not, she had no special insight into her inner life. She could barely make out the workings of her own mind. During the presentation it dawned on her, following the release of zero cases and the end of Melbourne's lockdown, that she was happy only because she saw other people who she cared

about feeling happy. Following zero cases the next day, her sadness had solidified.

When Reynolds spoke, she focused in on his short-sleeved shirt. Wasn't he in Tasmania? Isn't he cold? Why did she feel so sad? Was it the stirring of new anxieties about open spaces and crowds gathering? The lack of crowds during lockdown had been a reprieve and the prospect of facing them again filled her with fresh anxiety. Maybe it was the prospect of having to participate in social functions again and subject herself to asinine commentary on fluctuations in appearance and health, as though they were synonymous. But more than anything, she felt lonely in a new way. The sadness she had shared with an entire state for three months was suddenly her own again. Despite two days of zero cases, she was quietly devastated.

The unprecedented understanding she was afforded of sadness or frustration left as quickly as it arrived. Random tears or bouts of panic no longer seemed in keeping with the order of things. But truthfully, she was never particularly sad about the lockdown. She only felt sadness about the closure of borders and frustration from being stranded from various things she deemed important: relationships, work, the ability to leave wherever she was. The sadness she felt was just the same sadness she'd been feeling for about

twenty years, which was probably organic, but often felt philosophical. As she grew older she suspected the philosophical justifications came later.

For the past three months she had felt less alone in her sadness and anxiety than she had ever felt before. And for the past two days, following a cavalcade of donut and beer emojis, that sense of companionship eroded. She saw friends smiling and holding beers. Two donut emojis, adjacent, like eyes. She is happy for them. She is happy that their sadness and anxiety was temporary and had a fixed locus. But she is also reminded that her sadness was never their sadness at all. Her anxieties were never their anxieties. The sense of community she had built for herself was a fabrication. Perhaps she merely sought to re-create it.

There is a woman Jane left in London who chain smokes. She has a cough that grows worse, but slowly. She works at the local petrol station, and each time she says “hello” and “sure” and the cash registers juts out and she pushes it back in and it pings she wonders if this is the sum of all parts. She says “have a nice day” but what she wants to say, apropos of nothing, is: “hey lady, why should my hard work pay off when the hard work of millions goes unrewarded on a daily basis?” She is no believer in meritocracy. One might say, she is no believer at all.

But Jane knew none of this. All she could see was an enclosed human being. There was no way to recognise it as her own. Is this what it is like to

create a life? To turn around one day and have it unknown to you?

There is another woman in Sydney, Emily, who Jane had shed while suffering from glandular fever in a Newtown share house.

Emily sat at a communal coffee table reading about an Australian empress stabbed by Luigi Yucheny in 1898. Though confounding that she knew so little about her own country, she assumed she had simply misremembered. She was later confounded again by this assumption.

When police found Yucheny he still had the murder weapon—an industrial file which had been ground down to a stiletto point. He told police he couldn’t afford a knife. She makes a note in the margins: death capital. She continued to believe Australia had empresses until her first year out of university.

On a date with a man she considered beyond her in every conceivable way, she announced—in a bid to impress him—that an Australian empress was killed by a Russian at the turn of the twentieth century. “Death capital”, she offered, as punctuation. They continued to date for six months before he announced that he wasn’t looking for anything serious. Crestfallen, she wondered why she’d never asked what he wanted—or, even more radically, what he meaningfully had to offer her.

Several years later, a third woman—Violet—appeared on an acreage just outside of Brisbane. She was well into her thirties now and had been out of work since her first child. She thinks of her

husband, often away, but is interrupted by their baby crying. There is love, but there's bitterness, too. Resentment builds slowly over the years, sets up a tent, and pops out a camp chair. Domestic suffocation sees Instagram use skyrocket. She recently read a post from some provincial feminist icon, saying:

“To my twenty-five year old self,

Everything will be okay. You will achieve your dreams, and so much more.”

The woman is about her age, she guesses. Although Violet felt momentarily pleased for this stranger, she was left wondering what gross errors she had made in her own life that led her to such different conclusions. If she was going to write a letter to her twenty-five-year-old self, it would read very differently.

Violet reads the same story about the Austrian empress, but all she can think is that she can't imagine being that witty or sardonic if the police had sprung her with a murder weapon. She can only picture herself running into the police station, arms waving about wildly, like in that novel by Malouf, emerging from the desert, declaring that she did it all. She was reading between the lines. She's tired of talking to children.

Violet looks past her computer screen and out into the paddock beyond her fence line. Cows meander in from the day. Hills dot the horizon. A red glow begins to ascend in the darkening sky.

Two thousand, five hundred, and twenty-one kilometres away, Jane packed up her things to

leave the auditorium. The crowd was dispersing. She pictured particles trailing each person as they left the building. They weren't here long enough, she thought. No children will be born here, not like this. These aren't mine. She pondered sitting longer, enticed by the possibility of securing company, however abstruse, but according to her calculations it took at least four years in one space to bear an entire human woman. Of course, she could leave for food and supplies, but not for more than a few hours a day. Any longer and the gestation period was compromised. She had time to delay leaving the auditorium, but not that kind of time. It was all conjecture, of course. She had no real idea how she was manifesting life. She was simply observing events and inferring connections.

She swung her bag onto her shoulder and walked across the lecture theatre to the door. Jane looked back to survey the room.

As she walked across the campus grounds and through tides of strangers, she imagined leaving her own cells behind. She looked back again briefly, with regret. She can't collect them all. She can't make them all mean something.

“Some of us,” she offered to them in a whisper, “some of us are just filler. But sometimes it is better. Better than the weight of having to do something.”

The bus pulled up as she neared the stop. She made a gesture towards jogging, out of politeness. Once she sat down, finally relieved of the weight of herself, a woman approached her to complain

about the immigrants delaying the schedule. Jane combusted internally. I've just sat down. I'm tired. Everything feels heavy. Go away.

“What? Like the English?” she queried. The stranger moved closer and sat down.

“No, the Muslims. They stop the bus to pray. And they don't know where they're going.”

Jane looked behind her and down the aisle of the bus—mostly women, perched on either side. She turned back to the woman and told her that no one is stopping the bus to pray. She stood up to leave.

“No one knows where they're going. But so what if they are? So what if they are stopping the bus to pray? We should hope they are praying for us.”

Jane looked again at the women behind her.

Image: “[Novel Coronavirus SARS-CoV-2](#)” (CC BY 2.0) by [NIAID](#)