

## Get the bus

Three don't come along all at once, we're never late, we're never early. We never stop, we pause but we don't stop. It's cheaper that way, most repairs can be completed without stopping - dangerous but better than the alternative.

You could automate this, but what's the point? A job's a job. There are so few about, that even one that involves hanging off the back of a moving bus isn't something you can turn down.

There's something stuck around the back driver's-side wheel, wait for a nice straight bit of road and get out there. I strain from a sweaty chrome handle, one foot jammed against a vent and I can see something flap round. Like some filthy brown bird, it wheezes and waits for its chance then coils and springs round again. I've got to catch it before it disappears and dislodge it, set its carcass free.

I grab, miss, grab, miss. It's getting wound more and more round the axle. If we have to stop, lose time, then we'll be late and lateness isn't an option.

Stretching, last chance, push harder away from the bus, swing almost.

Got it.

And then we hit a bump, or hole, and I do swing, dashed against the flank. But I don't let go. I can feel my wrist burn, pulling against my weight, hang on, grip and bend, hold on, pull. My

greenflash swipes the side, struggling for a ledge, a screw, anything to help support myself. The driver has noticed and slowed, a little, but we can't stop. We do. A fare stage, the bus shakes as the engine idles and I'm able to use the wheel for support.

Back into the top deck I lay across a seat, my wrist is both numb and painfully sensitive to movement. I'm suddenly cold and I pull up the blanket I'm holding, it's baked in grime, stained and hairy. It's what I pulled out from the wheel, an oily coat, for the moment it'll do. I'm exhausted.

When I wake, about an hour later judging by the circuit, we're in Witton and I'm desperate for the toilet. We normally shit into a cardboard box and chuck them off at a superloo, but to piss it's quicker and easier to wait until we're on a quiet road and do it out of the top window. Down by the River Tame there's nothing but closed industrial units slowly reclaimed by scrubby weeds, no-one whose complaints would be listened to lives here. It's awkward but I'm well practised in holding myself in the right position to do this, piss inside the bus and, well, it'll be even grottier than it is.

From the outside the buses look okay, presentable even. The dirty cream of the top two decks is so dusty looking that grime doesn't show. The lowest deck is kept spotless, the upper passenger deck not so much. The top deck where we sleep and rest is a mess, one bed, some seats, and just anything we've managed to salvage from outside houses. On recycling day, if we're lucky, we'll be passing through Bournville or Harboune just as the good stuff is put out. Electricals are no good, but maybe there'll be a mattress or clothes, or best of all books. Books are unusual, mainly

the result of a house clearance when some old hoarder has died. I doubt there have been any printed for years.

But peeing hurts. And there's blood. Shit, I'm going to have to get off.

A circuit takes two hours 45 minutes to do the 26 miles, if i get off I'll have that long to get back on again before the driver swap. We normally do once round, then one rest, then another at the wheel, then four off and back round again. We never get off because there's nowhere to go that might not result in us not getting back on. If we don't talk to control when it's our shift a new driver will be employed by the time the bus reaches Acock's Green garage. And we'd be off, without even the fare to get — where? The bus is our home.

We don't get off, unless you had an iphone and a connection you might miss the bus. Another one isn't any good, one bus won't catch another, I don't have an iphone. Or a watch. We have to rely on our internal circuit, I can count our timetable in my head. Even asleep, lulled by the engine I can feel it; Perry Barr, Handsworth, Bearwood, Harborne, Selly Oak, Bournville, Cotteridge, King's Heath, Acock's Green, Swan Island, Fox & Goose, Six Ways Erdington, Perry Barr, Handsworth, Bearwood...

That's what I can rely on, there's an asda in Perry Barr where I can see a doctor, I can get off and count the stops, the 'burbs, in my head and get back within the circuit. The other drivers will cover for me, make up some maintenance I'm doing out of CCTV, outside. A hole in the roof?

It's cold, so I wear the coat. I get off. Perry Barr. Past the old railway station, I can see the asda. It glows almost in the early evening gloom, hundreds, thousands of cars wait and tick and shine their headlights behind the superstore. The bus will be in Witton by now, the place where it

scrapes the underside of a rusting bridge, flecks of claret scraped onto the roof, deep tracks of the past on the relentless present. That's where the hole comes from, they'll tell the garage. That's why I'm not on camera.

Stockland Green. I lean against the handle of the escalator, the doctor is right at the back of the store. What you need most always is. I can't be distracted, maybe if I'm not that badly injured, if it doesn't cost that much I can buy something. Past the fruit, fruit would be nice. Erdington.

There's a queue, it's okay, I can wait. Queue to be seen, queue to get in, queue to get on, ring the bell, queue to get off. Five people ahead, I clutch my stomach, hands inside the old coat. I can feel the pressure building, I'm hoping that it's just bruised. Some nurofed and strapping and I'll be back at the stop waiting way before I need to be.

Fox & Goose.

"I fell, slipped." Can't mention that it's an injury from work, the law states that the company should treat me. But there'd be something in the small print, a term or condition I couldn't read or understand. An excuse to replace me. "I'm in pain, it's probably just bruising. My stomach and my wrist."

A seat, which is good and my gut is really hurting. We're passing the Swan Island, I can feel the curves, the slight lean as we turn on and off. The brakes, slowing and I'm gently leaned forward, which hurts more. Concentrate, Swan Island, no traffic now, a constant speed I can relate to. The bus fills up, no the waiting area fills up. The pained and ill stare at a screen, I don't want to — if I drift off I'll lose track of the timetable. How long can I wait? Two fare stages it took me to get here, I'll have to leave by Dudley Road, treated or not treated.

Acock's Green. It's so full now, the Green. Green, it was, or at least I can remember grass. Then people started to camp out on the island, on the rec, tents from argos. It would have been an adventure, but it was because there were no houses. If you couldn't work then you couldn't afford a house, so people protested — scrawled banners on bedsheets hung on railings and shrubs. There was no-one to read them, councillors would only respond to emails or blogs. If you're living in a tent on a road island in Acock's Green you don't email, you don't get post, you make the best you can — the island was quite a good camp, protected and convenient for public transport. You could move freely. There's a sharp turn, a sharp pain, I grasp my belly tighter and doing so hurt my wrist more. My wrist is now swelling up and purple. I was born round here, we lived in a high-rise squat that used to be an office block above the argos and the post office. I would watch the buses go past from the top window. You felt you could see the curvature of the earth.

King's Heath. There were camps here too, but they were cleared. Powers enacted to deal with graffiti and public drunkenness gave the police enough rope to shovel the poor over constituency borders. The parks were made good again. Prosperity came to all that could afford it, fuel from plants was plentiful, from wind farms and from solar panels. Living became cheap for the rich and life became cheap also. Move them on, somebody else's problem.

Cotteridge. My number is called, I can barely stand. I ride each movement of the bus, and each one sends throbs of pain. I need to piss again. Bournville, Selly Oak, the factory is closed, the purple paint remains, the university is gone. Universities went bust, they grew and grew and built flats for hoardes of students, but when the crash came there weren't enough. I've lived in some of the old halls, thin walls, dirty corridors, cheap plumbing. Often there would be a toilet

almost next to your bed, private, but the inevitable backwash would leave the floor coated in a film of disease. The small shop, selling crap in blue plastic bags meant you paid more for worse food. Not a good place, the bus is better. The bus pulls in. I get up.

Harborne, rich. Where the rich live, gated off with security, so much power they plug everything in. They're always on, but they need watching, they're not safe. Security, that's not a bad job. The rich either drive or pretentiously take the bus, they sit downstairs, complaining about the smell, the noise, that the stop is too far for them. But the bus is the only way you can get to where you need to be, it keeps going. Cars gridlock and jostle, but the bus keeps going. Round and round.

Bearwood. The doctor binds my hand, but he's wanting to examine the spreading blackness around my middle more carefully. Course it fucking hurts there. Handsworth. I have to leave. I swing upright, I brush past the doctor and start to make for the exit. Handsworth. Handsworth Wood. No time to wait for the escalator, I start to climb it, stepping isn't easy but I'll make it.

I stumble. The coat is stuck, sucked and trapped in the side of the moving stairs. I pull, I yank. I need to hold my stomach or I can't stand. We reach the top, still stuck I can't even tear it free. The escalator stops. Jammed, or has someone pressed the alarm? I can't talk, can't explain, I have to leave the coat and get to the stop.

Perry Barr. It's waiting, as is tradition, by the church. Shift change, for it used to be the nearest stop to the old garage. When buses stopped there had to be somewhere for them to go, there were garages all over the place. Perry Barr. I need to get across the road, but there is a constant stream of cars. I wait for it to clear, but it won't. Revising down to smaller and smaller gaps, eventually I have to go. Run. It's more a stumble, clutching, flapping, leaning forward.

My trailing leg is swiped by a car, they pause. Have they hit something? It's just an old tramp, they keep going. I do make the pavement, all I can see is the pavement, grey, blurring. Look up. See the brake light dim. Faster. Calling, reaching, can't, the gut hurts too much.

I've missed it and pretend I wasn't running, there'll be another one along. Except there won't.