

Please Remain Seated Until the Bus Comes to a Complete Stop

By Maria Derynioski

*First place: Narrative, Reflective, Expository, or Personal Writing (UNIV 111/112)*

An hour past sunrise on a July morning, the summer after I graduated high school, I was on a bus. I was hungover, and wearing the clothes that I had slept in, and my hair stunk of stale bonfire. I had just issued a goodbye, a hard one. I said a lot of goodbyes that summer, but none other had felt as final. I had said *guten morgen* to the bus driver out of instinct as I boarded and showed him my ticket, and I'd avoided looking at maybe five other passengers on the bus with me. Tears had somehow perched themselves in my waterline, and I hoped the sunlight coming through the window didn't reflect them. The bus had dropped me at that particular stop the previous day, just past noon, with the sun beating down above us, and I remember closing my eyes and tilting my chin up, letting the sun make my cheeks and eyelids and the tip of my nose hot as I waited for the bus.

Upon boarding that afternoon, I had deliberately chosen a seat that gave me the best view of a certain row of houses sitting on the edge of a clearing, visible just as the bus went down the big hill, and I'd thought to myself that soon the bus will stop, soon the doors will open, soon my feet will hit the pavement, and I... *I'll* be at one of those houses. But the next morning, I sat on the bus on a seat near the back, deliberately chosen so I wouldn't see the clearing, or the row of houses as the bus chugged up the hill to my town, my home, my own bed. As the bus passed the point where I knew the houses would be in full view, I understood what it meant to have metaphorical eyes in the back of my head, knowing exactly how the view looks, knowing what it means, knowing what it could stir within me. God forbid my eyes land on it. Everything that

morning felt sensitive- I was particularly tuned into the world around me, and it felt like everything struck some kind of nerve. I was grateful for the silence of the handful of other passengers; I never needed it like I did then. The bus rumbled to life and pulled away from the stop at 6:28, as scheduled, an especially timely reminder that everything is on a schedule, regardless of whether you can keep up with it or not. Buses, as I've learned, do not wait for the emotionally tender.

Despite all the times that I have stewed in overly dramatic tumult on a bus ride, I have always treasured the experience of taking public transport by myself. I can't help but feel romantic about such a mundane thing. Making a journey, even just to go to a different grocery store because the one closest to me doesn't have any scallions, has never not felt like something to enjoy every moment of. It has given me time to look out a window and do nothing else. For much of my life, I held a permanent tension in every muscle, permanently worried about if I was doing the right thing or if I should be doing anything at all or if I'll be late or get off at the wrong place. Even still, on occasion, there's a restless instinct that lingers in the back of my head and refuses to be curbed. Public transit counteracted that anxiety in a drastic way, just by the nature of its being. I could be more anxious about a bus or train being late than anyone had ever been, and it wouldn't change a thing. It taught me true patience, patience that was between me and myself. Once I'm seated, my only real responsibilities are to sit quietly in my seat, present my ticket when asked, and be courteous to other passengers.

None of this is to say that I take transport exclusively alone, but I must admit that I would almost always take transport somewhere by myself than with someone else. I have never felt comfortable talking above a whisper on a bus or a train, and often wonder if my traveling companions have ever noticed this, or are put off by it. Someone close to me is the kind of

person who adores the train but would do anything to get out of taking the bus. On the few occasions she and I took the bus together, I was unnaturally tense and nervous about all of the things the bus could be judged for: the rumbling, the hard turns, the quick stops. It was like being caught listening to bad music that I unabashedly loved- *You like this? You're enjoying this experience? You get something out of this?* In the moments after stepping off the bus, I always braced myself for the snarky comments about how it smelled, or how many people were on it, or the hard turns the driver made. The comments never came- either my companion didn't notice, as I assumed she did, or she kept them to herself. I could never complain either way.

In every city I visited, and I have now visited quite a few, the public transportation systems were equally exciting to me as some of the sights – a certain feeling came over me to take an S-Bahn in Berlin and see the Old West gradually turn into the New East, to see the buildings take on a greyer palette and become a little grittier, more brutal, visual reminders of why they were so. And maybe it was just watching Bridget Jones every Christmas since I was thirteen, but I never felt as chic as I did rushing onto the tube in London to make a dinner reservation in Kensington. And taking the bus up the hill to the castle in Bratislava gave me my first real view of a city that represented the Slovak piece of my identity that I didn't know anything about yet. More special to me, though, was the transit I took in my daily life, sometimes six days of the week. Over time, I stopped checking the schedule obsessively. I knew when the train was coming. I knew that one of the trains was always a minute late. I knew that on the train I took into the city on Thursdays, the one that came at 9:44 (which meant that I aimed to leave my house at 9:30, but could leave as late as 9:34 to make sure I made it across the tracks before the pedestrian gate closed) there would be an older woman with a shopping trolley at the front of the tracks, and I always waited near the middle. We never spoke to each other, or even sat near

each other, but one Thursday morning she was gone, and I was surprised that my immediate reaction was sadness. I doubt she ever thought about me, but then again, being privy to the thoughts of others is the most special and forbidden treat that I am so rarely granted access to.

This revelation I had about my affinity for public transit presented a yin and yang in which I was freely permitted to observe the people around me, a connection to the outside world I desperately needed. It was especially vital at a time when social interactions were extremely limited, and I spoke to the same rotation of people every day. I was always curious about my fellow passengers and the lives they'd lead after getting off the train. It fascinated me to ponder why they were on this train on this train line at this stop at this time of day on this day of the week and so on. The crushing flip side of this was that being present around others in this way demanded that *I* be opened up to the same speculation by strangers. I have no way of ever knowing if others thought about me the way I sometimes did about them. Did I look scared? Or upset? Did they think my outfit was ugly? Did my hair look like I hadn't brushed it? Did I look like I was going somewhere interesting? Did I look interesting?

I think sometimes about how things would be different if I'd just driven home that morning in July. I think about how I would've sat in complete solace and silence, only able to focus on the spin of the wheels and the shift of the gears, aware of everything in my control, and how disastrous it could be to lose that control. Taking the bus humbled me, I think. The other passengers didn't know what I was experiencing, and it didn't matter. Not in a rude or malicious way- just in the way that the gossip of the schoolchildren would never have any bearing over me. I didn't know the names of their favorite and least favorite classmates, who they wanted to see that weekend, who they didn't. I didn't have the faintest clue where the man in the suit was headed, and I never would. To me, public transit put my wallowing in perspective. My issues

were independent of everyone else's. An obvious conclusion, but looking up at the sky to reaffirm that it is indeed blue doesn't hurt. On every trip I take, I see an exercise in what it means for humans to be in harmony with one another, to mind the space belonging to another, to extend empathy to those we see, regardless of how temporary the time is. We live in our own solitudes in the presence of others, and public transit is a microcosm of that particular part of the human experience. All of us are headed somewhere – we may make a plan, we may bring others along, we may miss out the first time because of factors beyond our control. What you do, which direction you go in after the doors open and your feet hit the pavement, that's completely up to you. But for now? Take a seat with the rest of us. Enjoy the ride.

Author bio:

**Maria Derynioski** was a fourth-year student at VCU majoring in art history at the time of publication. “Please Remain Seated Until the Bus Comes to a Complete Stop” was composed for Kim Zicafoose’s UNIV112 course in fall 2021.