

Anthology 2021: Easyrider

Sharp turns, bumpy backstreets and unexpected diversions, bus journeys are very appropriate metaphors for life. We might make some new friends along the way, might come across some strange ones too. We're essentially just plodding on until we reach our final destination hoping we get there safely having not embarrassed ourselves too badly en route.

It's life-affirming to realise people from all walks of life - whether they live in a housing estate or a million-pound-plus mansion - share an intimate space when riding on a bus, sometimes sitting next to each other, shoulder to shoulder, as they are transported from their homes to the hairdressers or from work to the supermarket. So much happens over a short period of time: a dispute with the driver, a brawl breaking out at the back, falling in and out of love with a crush. Around every corner, the landscape changes.

This bus-themed brief was no easy feat but this anthology has talent in abundance. These perceptive pieces are full of flair and heart and leave you aching for more. My advice: savour every story. Congratulations to the winners and all the contributors and good luck to every passenger out there on this journey called life. You got this.



Ashley Hickson-Lovence is a writer from Hackney, London currently based in Norwich, where he is completing a PhD in Creative and Critical writing at The University of East Anglia. His debut novel, *The 392*, follows a bus on its journey from Hoxton to Highbury. The events of the journey unfold through a cast of charismatic characters coming from very different worlds. This stunning, explosive novel brings to life discussions about identity, race, sexuality, faith and family – and more.

“Two truths, one lie?”

It was one of those summer days where everything sticks — shirt to skin, skin to seat. Even the bus seemed to sweat under the heavy gaze of late afternoon sun, windows dripping with condensation, as it lumbered out the school gates.

Two girls, one with red hair and the other blonde, huddled together at the back of the crowded bus. The redhead grinned at her friend, “OK you first.”

They had played this game since year 7. It felt like forever since those first bus rides, in their regulation skirts with knotted stomachs and backpacks that could curve spines.

Same people, same bus, but everything different.

Backpacks had been replaced with equally uniform handbags and skirts rolled high in a proclamation of womanhood. Gone were the days of sitting upfront with kids and social pariahs, now they had finally earned that back seat status. The back of the bus was reserved for the most popular in school, the VIP lounge with a zero-tolerance backpack policy.

“Let’s see...” The blonde feigned deep thought.

One, I’m a Libra.

Two, I love you.

Three, peanuts are my favourite food.

They laughed. A life-long nut allergy put her lie in plain view. “You never play properly,” the redhead said. “It’s supposed to be hard to guess!”

It was only after the blonde had peeled herself from their seat and stepped off the bus for the last time that the redhead noticed the Snickers wrapper, discarded in her place.

Nobody notices me tucked away, nestled between the tired fabrics of threadbare seats. I don't know where I'm going. I feel almost empty, discarded from life. More people board, a lady with greying hair heads towards me. Instantly I feel her disgust as she casts her gaze sweepingly in my direction. I can feel the accusation in her eyes; my presence offends her. She chooses somewhere else to sit. The bus lurches forward and I go with it, falling the few feet to the floor. The damage is superficial, just minor dents.

The lady hasn't noticed, I cannot pick myself up though, so I lay staring upwards focusing on the gum stuck to the underside of the seats. Does it feel as forgotten as me? The motion of the bus is constant, and I begin to move as it does, listening to the hubbub of life carrying on above me, I pass unnoticed. Again, the bus stops, but I have built momentum and come crashing down the central aisle towards the doors.

I'm spinning so fast; everything is a blur of colour. I fly through the doors as they open, passing by the unsuspecting queue, hurtling towards the floor. I hit the concrete hard crumpling inwards and feel the last of myself leaking out covering the pavement.

The lady from earlier glancing out the window notices a drink can on the pavement. Scoffing about littering she turns to notice the can on the seat she spotted earlier has now gone.

It's difficult to keep cool at my local bus stop; the same people wait for the 77 with the same bad attitudes. Hands in their pockets, smoking hot breath against the frosty dark morning, counting down until a warm bus rescues them from unnecessary chit-chat. It's always like that at 5 a.m. on weekdays.

Hiss.

The turquoise 77 arrives. Shoulder to shoulder, packed with other bodies. The driver has lost count of passenger capacity; we all have to eat and pay the bills. I get on, squeezing through, feeling the motion...

Thud.

We stumble forward. The taste of Lynx at the back of my throat makes my stomach churn. I hear women prattle, until their time is served, and fresh air awaits beyond swinging metal doors. Others kissing their lips, looking at me with dark sleepy eyes, ready to kick off at any sign of confrontation. They wouldn't mean it - they're half awake, coffee the only drug to disguise sleep. On this bus they think they are dominating the social hierarchy, able bodies, sitting in the priority seats. Their looks, intimidatingly sharp.

I am not intimidated. Not one bit.

“Can you move over, mate?” I say, louder than Freddie Mercury sings in my ears. This bus gives them temporary comfort, but anywhere else I am on top.

“I was ‘ere first, duck.” His ethanol-stained words spill from the night before.

It's tough to keep cool on board this mechanical snake.

I decide to let it slide.

Just once.

She stepped onto the bus. The steps always seemed to be a little higher, a little steeper, a little more effort required as each year of her life passed. She nodded at the driver. His large hands gripped the large steering wheel as he briefly nodded and looked away.

Her head turned to the bus, crowded. She tutted and sucked in her breath, her chest tightening. It was always the same. How could a simple journey be so daunting day in and day out?

She saw an empty seat, inviting. She sat down and pushed her shopping bags beneath the chair. She put her handbag on her lap, instinctively wrapping her arms around it. The bus roared away, the hum of the engine drowning out the noise around her.

The next stop. As the engine whirred to a soft purr, the doors swung open. The noise that was so deafening stopped. The passengers gently rocked in rhythm with the vibrations of the bus and waited like an audience in the theatre waiting for the curtain to rise. Anticipation.

He stepped on, a long trench coat, unusual for this time of year, she thought. A statement piece rather than necessity? He paid the driver with a collection of coins then tipped his hat. He walked towards her, slowly, powerfully. She knew what was coming. Every journey, day in, day out.

Clutching her bag tighter, feeling that tightness in her chest now burning. Frustration? Anger?

“Stand” commanded the man.

“No” replied Rosa.

Student Winner
Let the Waters Under the Sky Be Gathered to One Place
Lucy Grace

Through the smeared bus window Charlotte watched rolling zoetrope hedges. Abandoned cars squatted like flightless insects on the roadside, doors open, tyres flat, interiors missing along with pieces from under the bonnet; pipes and tubes. People took what they could, now. She shifted in her seat. The bus swerved around a bundle in the road and Ben's thigh pressed against hers. She moved away but he slid further across the cracked vinyl into the gap she made. They had left the city with the sunrise. The ends of her hair stuck wetly to the glass.

“Move up.”

Charlotte spoke curtly. She didn't need to be kind. Ben wasn't even her real brother, she only had to tolerate him. She pushed back, reclaiming her seat and part of his.

“You're shoving me off,” Ben complained, but not so anyone could hear. Her temple cooled on the pane. She watched telegraph wires riding up and down between tall poles, measuring distance. After what might have been another hour, she slept.

The bus lurched over a ramp, front axle, back axle. Swimming up from a dream Charlotte was minded of driving over a body. The thin man at the front spoke.

“We're here. We get one go, don't fuck it up. Okay?”

She ran her thickened tongue over furred teeth. Animals died first; couldn't regulate their thirst. Did fish drink, she wondered. How could they not?

“Do you think this'll work out?”

Charlotte looked away through the dirty glass. It was midsummer's day.

Student Shortlisted Entry
More than One Normal
Abigail King

I got onto the bus, taking my usual seat at the back of the bus. A woman followed me on, and sat down next to me, taking off her hat to reveal 2 horns. At the next stop, we were joined by a man with a tail, and a woman with the ears of a hare. At the next stop, a woman with blue skin gets onto the bus. Everyone stops taking to look at her. The driver tells her she can't get on the bus, and she looks confused.

“I have blue skin,” she says, peering at each passenger in turn, her eyes landing on my yellow eyes.

“But you have no wings. If you want to get on the bus, you must explain why you are without wings,” replies the bus driver.

“My mother cut them off when I was born,” was the woman's excuse. “It was in her annoyance at me be being born with blue skin and wings.”

“Our wings start grow when we reach 12, so you must be lying, and my guess is you've painted your skin. Sit right behind me, and don't think of doing anything stupid” commanded the bus driver.

As she sat down on the seat as instructed, she disappeared from the bus, immediately transported to the cells, at the centre of our secret city. She already knew too much, and we must find out how. She could have told other humans about us, and we need to keep our secrecy.

7.14 a.m.

I am running. I must run.

7.16 bus?

7.21 tram?

Bus or tram? The tram is quicker; the bus is quieter. I keep running.

It's raining. The bus is coming. I keep running.

Bus it is.

I keep running, arm out. The bus stops. I step on.

Where's my card? Left pocket, no right. Got it, swipe. "Morning".

Up or down?

Seven people downstairs. Nobody I know.

Nine steps up. Two passengers; a workman and a schoolgirl. Nobody I know.

Sit left, or right?

Left, I can see the river.

Open the window or leave it closed? Open. Give it a pull.

Reflected in the window the man looks annoyed. I should have left it shut.

Do not annoy him.

Phone or book? Phone.

Emails or news? Emails.

You know the news. You know what you have done. You have already run.

Rain through the window as the bus picks up speed. My face and bag are wet.

Bag on the seat or floor? Floor.

Two stops until town. Station or Square? Walk or run? It's still raining.

Square. Last stop. More time to decide.

7.44. Arrive

The man goes past, gives a final glare. Going downstairs last, I hand my bag to the driver. She smiles in her mirror encouragingly. I hear myself say, "Someone's left this upstairs"

She looks at the bag and stares at me, "There's blood on this bag".

Turning questioningly, she starts opening the bag.

It's still raining.

Stay or Run?

My phone battery has died, and my music cuts out.

-next stop will be Coldharbour La-

Oh – shit – lucky

But. Oh. Um. Okay.

Slightly embarrassing. I can't stand up. It's my stop but I'm not getting up

And. Oh. Yep. Not happened.

While this is my stop and I have to go home to where my boyfr – it's OK – I'll get off at the next stop.

An old woman is slowly making her way down the aisle. There is still time. But. Whatever. It's not a big deal. I'll get off at the next stop instead.

The release sound of the doors shutting again.

And on we go.

Feel not great.

Five green things. That tree. That other tree. Can I use tree twice? This is supposed to help when I get into a panic, but I can't see five green things and

The next stop will –

Thing is. If I go home now, he'll have cooked and there won't be a good time to tell him. What if he's done a garlic bread too? Then it would be impossible.

This man is getting off so I could – but – oh, I can't. Still. I'll be late and make an excuse and won't have to talk to him tonight.

A lady with hair that smells like coconuts moves to the seat in front of me. I'll stay on until the end and then decide what to do. She has a green clip in hair.

Then a bin.

And a car.

“The next bus stop is closed. Please await instructions from your driver.”

“Yes, feathered announcer, you’ve parroted that cursed line for an hour... excuse me? Driver?”

“Hm?”

“When’s our next stop? I needed to get off at Archway three miles back.”

“You heard the announcement: next stop’s closed. We won’t be stopping again.”

“What’s the last stop on this route?”

“Elmfield. Just passed it. It became our next stop – closed.”

“A stop can be both next and last?”

“Sure. Tomorrow’s my birthday. Suppose a road accident butchers me in two days – ah, you just blanched on my monitor; relax, I’ll drive carefully – my next birthday will be my last.”

“...Seems obvious now, if morbid. ‘Your next x could be your last.’ My maths teachers never warned me $x =$ bus ride home from badminton, but that’s school for you, so exam-driven its lessons wax impractical... Happy Early Birthday, anyway.”

“Save your wishes – we’ll be doing thirty through sunrise.”

“How far away is sunrise?”

“Three hundred miles?”

“Just us two, no more stops... I only regret not bringing a birthday gift.”

“A teen’s pocket orphaned a pack of gum on the back seat earlier.”

“...This flattened mass?”

“I’m not fussy. Check the expiry date though.”

“At least it’s wrapped. Besides, we’ll need something to chew over for the next—how long?”

“Eternity, engine permitting.”

“Should be enough time to get acquainted. Call me... Hera. Hope you like spearmint.

Staff Winner
In the Beginning
Helen McElroy

On the bus home after work, I drifted. Staring through the window, barely registering the subtle shifts between sodium and neon lights; the rhythm of the slow, uphill grind, hydraulic groans, starts and stops a pranayama allowing my consciousness to wander away from the 58's planned route. Unhooking my mind from now to then.

A desert convoy through the dark. The engine's reassuring drone a low register, the air-con a higher hiss and the quiet of the deepest hours of night blanketing us.

I knew it was coming. Could feel the static stripping along my skin, taste the jitters and joy as from the faintest glimmer of, what...something... on the flat eastern horizon. Through the tiniest hint of a grey gauze, crept life, nourishment, Ra.

In those shooting golden moments fire roared its way into being, transforming dark nothing into ochre, shadow-streaked earth and azure sky, alighting us safely on the shore of the day.

I re-lived the birth of the world. Viscerally understanding why our ancestors worshipped this magnificence. Ra's chariot burning a path heavenward for mean humans to bask, work, to live illuminated.

The bus was silent as the tourists slept on through time and space. But I swear I heard the fanfare of ancient deities as I watched the sun kiss our world that morning. Just me and the bus-driver to bear witness, and his eyes were on the road.

I took my favourite seat for the last time on the number 26. Upstairs, second row back, right-hand side. It gave me uninterrupted views over fences and hedges. Into the lives of families on my journey. I always got this seat – it was no one's favourite, nondescript, there just for me.

I'll miss the families glimpsed every day. I saw snapshots of marriages, new babies, funerals as life played out in front of me. The tell-tale signs of balloons and cards lined up on window ledges, L plates removed from family cars. I celebrated the highs and the lows as if they were my own.

They were all I had once Helen passed away 15 years ago. I catch the bus on my days off, just to get out of the empty house and see familiar faces. Not that they knew who I am, I'd never met them. I was just a voyeur on a bus.

Tucked into my leather bag at my feet was a leaving card and a bottle of whiskey from my colleagues. I could only read the first couple of messages before I had to put it away for another, less emotional time. I didn't want to retire, but being a porter was a young man's game and at 75 I certainly wasn't that anymore. The retirement everyone said I should 'relish' and 'put my feet up' stretched out in front of me like a long, solitary road. Reaching out into the distance.

Staff Shortlisted Entry
The Sherwood Arrow
Diana Pasek-Atkinson

Ravel wouldn't be impressed. The stirring notes of his Bolero looping in my head ba-ba-ba-ba, du-du du-du-du-du, ba-ba-ba-ba since I'm in danger of doing a Torvill and Dean on the concourse. Adverse camber, understatement. I've rushed from John.E.Wrights. My marvelous mind offers, classical, operatic aria or stupid song lyric for every occasion.

It's The Ride of the Valkyries when I drive up the A614. Perfect for stress inducing Z-bends and hidden dips (can't help but ask "where?" every time, same goes for concealed entrance) I'm forced to pa-pa-pa-pa-PA-pa, pa-pa-pa-PA-pa more loudly for every idiot petrol head's reckless attempt to overtake in oncoming traffic. An unexpected exhaust issue means chauffer service today.

The Sherwood Arrow awaits me, though that sad snake of sullen faces suggested the black hole of buses had taken it. I have an enormous box of A0 sized foam board "I'm making an exhibition of myself boarding with board" I compose. Grasping the pole and my change I contemplate how long those satisfying sounds of cash in the kit that goes clunk will be heard.

Marketeers thanks for your marvellous misnomer. This bus route is neither straight nor direct (makes me quiver!) The meanderings begin at that sharp right round the White Post Island. Finally, a ding and disembarkation at my destination. Now I risk dicing with death, dumped on the wrong side of the road for Rufford.

I survived crossing the A614. The technician is delighted. I'd rather have paid for delivery.

Student Shortlisted Entry
The Final Journey
Faith Pring

The sky has never been darker, twisted and clouded in my eyes, blinding skies spreading over the hills. The familiar drum of the engine and the wheels does little to ease the sound of my beating heart pulsing in my ears, reminding me that I'm still here. As I lift my hand slowly off the armrest, I realise my hand is shaking, the goosebumps slowly rising, my eyes blurring. Am I really about to do this? I ask myself, but the validation comes quickly.

I return my gaze to the window, ignoring the concerned stares from the man in the seat opposite. He's wearing a full suit and tie, his brow furrowed. He would never understand, people like that never do. Can he not see how dark the sky is? Does he only see blue, or can he see the golden lights that twist into the dark of night, darkening until they blur into white. It's the end of the journey, my journey, and I'm walking towards the white like it's the only light left in the world.

My shaking hands don't concern me anymore. Where I'm heading, I needn't be afraid, no more concerned stares from oblivious passers-by. I close my eyes and relish the thumping as we pass over a familiar speed bump. I wait for the bus to drop back down and smile. I know this route all too well.

I'll ride this bus to the end of the line and then,

I'll jump.

Your first sentence was “One going Clifton, one going town”. You beamed, Grub, and we clapped and cheered and kissed you. For the next five months, we went to the swings at Queen’s Walk, and you would shout at passing buses.

“OH! IT’S THE GREEN BUS” and “IT’S A BIG BLUE ONE!”

You loved the double-deckers going to Clifton, you waved at the drivers and learned the number 48. You always needed to actually touch the stop. But it wasn’t the time for touching things. Or for riding buses. We made do with watching them, and with singing about their wheels going round and round while we played on the swings and you gradually learned to climb the ladder to the slide. We once heard you talking about the “double blue-one going Clifton” in your sleep.

Eventually the daffodils opened at the base of the Stop.

“Grub, you know the bus that goes to Clifton?”

“The blue one. Double one. 48.”

“Do you want to ride it?”

You went very quiet and searched my face with your little eyebrows lowered. You can look so earnest sometimes about the funniest things. But this was big for all of us.

You COULD NOT BELIEVE IT when the 48-bus stopped just because I raised my arm. The door opened and we all hesitated at the step. You clambered up, clutching my hand. You peered up and found the courage to say what we’d been rehearsing all morning - “One going Clifton please”.

Staff Winner
Trig Takeover
Allyn Richardson

The wheels on the bus went round and round but now they go bump (pause) bump (pause) bump. In the old days, before power shifted from the bowler and boater hatted men to the magical pointy hatted witches, life was a smooth circle (with the odd tangent) but it's all triangles nowadays. Equilateral, right-angled, scalene. Archimedes' Constant has finally yielded to Euclid's Isosceles and smooth bus journeys have become a perilous and slow thump, thump, thump on solid triangular tyres. None of the schoolkids on this bus understand curves anymore. They see pictures of Marilyn Monroe and look disgusted. They all want triangular legs and nose implants to get a sharp pointy look, and who can blame them given that their snub and hook-nosed grandparents have all been turned into toads and statues.

Of course, if you can ride a broomstick everything's just dandy but busriders hold on tight for fear of being tossed violently from their seat when the wheels come crashing down. I've never seen so many broken arms and bandaged heads. From the bus window I watch the coven, whizzing about up there, cackling and peering through blood shot eyes for traitors with a hankering for a smooth circle. That lady two seats up wearing round toed shoes rather than winklepickers must be poor or suicidal. A chap I know was toaded for six months for reading the 'Story of O'. But I guess it's not all bad. At least you can still buy Toblerone.

The bus crept north through huddles of darkness. Inside, he reached up and snapped on the light.

“Do you want to talk about it?” She shook her head.

“Your Mam wants to know how it went. Do you want to text her?”

He handed over the warm weight and watched as she tapped the oval buttons. Sliding her shoes off, she rubbed her toes and hunched into the glowing screen.

Slowing, scowling, her fingers stabbed. Mumbled words were bitten out: poem, bloody jeans...

He glanced down when the clicking grew unsteady and heard a wobbling breath. The heel of her hand scrubbed her eye socket and left a smudge on the sleeve. Her skin whitened as she thumbed the words away.

Careful, he lifted his arm up and over her. Her bent head settled against the familiar brownness of his coat and she spoke into the fabric.

“Some of them were wearing jeans, Dad. I was the only one in a suit.”

His eyes met those of his reflection and held them for a moment.

“It was all right until the last one. He asked me about a line in a poem, who the narrator was. We’d done it at school.” She sniffed.

“I gave him so many different ideas about who was talking and he waited. Didn’t say anything. Then he told me to keep going.”

She exhaled and he felt something leave her.

“I just ran out of things to say.”

Authors:



Lucy Champion is an aspiring writer, born and bred in Nottingham. This is the first time she has shared her creative writing publicly since the dark days of writing smutty Harry Potter fanfiction as a teenager. One day she hopes to achieve her ambition of writing a best-selling Young Adult novel. Until then you'll find her blogging about Nottingham over at www.luceinlockdown.com.



Nicole Chapman is a second year Applied Biomedical Science apprenticeship student and works full time in a histology laboratory at Peterborough City Hospital. In her spare time, she enjoys reading and playing dungeons and dragons. This is her first published work.



Justyna Cuglewska is a final year BA Marketing student, who enjoys writing about and delving into characters' personality. She plans to travel abroad and experience different cultures to inspire her writing in the future. Along with the WRAP Anthology: 'The Story of Us', this is her second publication.



Chardelle Farrell lives in Nottingham with her husband, her energetic 2-year-old daughter and equally lively Labrador. Despite being an avid reader, this is her first attempt at competitive writing and now certainly won't be her last



In 2020 **Lucy Grace** won the John Harwood Bosworth Creative Writing Bursary to study on the MA in Creative Writing at NTU. She writes short stories and quirky fiction, often with a near-future or speculative glimpse at ordinary people experiencing extra-ordinary events. Her words can be found in anthologies and online including Aesthetica, Bristol Short Story Prize, EllipsisZine, Reflex, Writers & Artists Short Story Prize and Mslexia. She was shortlisted for the Lucy Cavendish Debut Novel Award and in 2021 won the Blue Pencil Pitch Prize. She is on Twitter at @lgracewriter.



Abigail King is a forensic science student who also plays the trombone! She enjoys writing and reading in her free time, and particularly enjoys fantasy but is trying to read a bigger variety of genres.



Sue Keyworth is an Information Assistant, working in Boots Library. She has been at NTU for 26 years and enjoys reading historical fiction and biographies. This is the first time she has written a story since her school days.



Tara Lepore is a BSc Psychology student who previously worked as a journalist. She regularly writes creative fiction and is a lifelong journal writer. In 2014, her first play 'Fitting Room' was produced by Eastern Angles Theatre Company.



Zoe Marchewicz is a law student whose passion lies in the arts. She is a keen dancer and frequent writer of short stories and poetry. In her spare time, she enjoys designing and working on craft projects.



Although **Helen McElroy** has been reading what other people write for many years this is her first attempt at a short story. When not writing Helen enjoys dreaming up new cake recipes and imagining how to spend a major lottery win. She lives in Nottingham and is thrilled to be included in this anthology.



Lucy Murdock took a writing course during lockdown as a creative outlet as her tap dancing classes had been cancelled. She lives in Nottingham with her husband and daughter and loves reading, eating cake and drinking lots of tea, preferably all at the same time. This is her first publication.



Diana Pasek-Atkinson Diana is a displaced Northerner who arrived in Nottingham (too far from the sea) in the late 80s, graduating with a BA(Hons) Fine Art from NTU and starting her first business here in 1990. She subsequently pursued a largely self-employed career combining her love of business, creative and education fields. Fast forward a few decades and Diana's back at NTU, in the Enterprise Team, helping people start-up, grow and innovate in business. Colleagues have dubbed her the "resident wordsmith" for her way with words in materials and marketing. Diana has dabbled with writing since she was a child. Though her main creative practice is visual arts, words often feature within it.



Faith Pring is a journalism student with a keen interest in creative writing. When she's not working, she can be found reading and writing for pleasure, and watching an eclectic range of movies. This is her first published short story.



Chris Pryke-Hendy is a postgraduate Planning & Development student. He's not written anything since he had a rubbish poem turned down by a magazine as an undergraduate, so it's fair to say he feels encouraged to be printed here. This summer he hopes to take Leo on the open-top bus from Christchurch to Poole. He also hopes the wind doesn't change or he might get stuck writing in the third person.



Allyn Richardson enjoys writing short pieces of fiction and poetry, and composing amusing songs. He likes to spend his spare time a-wandering the North Pennines, singing lustily to astonished sheep.



Aisling Walters has been writing for a very long time but has only recently started sharing her stories. She lives in Nottingham with her husband and two sons, leads NTU's English PGCE course and enjoys making patchwork blankets using her Grandma's cardboard templates.