

SYSTEM OF A CLOWN

Mass transit journal

“I can do anything!”

Tired of watching people
getting off to a “*bad start*”
or “**on the wrong foot,**” going
through the “wrong door”
or that paranoia-racked
scanning their day’s horoscope.

&, yes, folks, money is as external
as a 3rd eye or a second head. You know
it’s **there**, but you can’t mention it
except by talking around it.

& you might think: “*The corrupt madness of the individual!*”
when you spot me, salt & pepper goatee
full of last week’s White Castle leavings
& you are partially right.

My misguided psychogeography
of the vacant cement
that lines Castleton Avenue
leaves me at the mercy
of a dream of stinking feet
encased in flip-flop

POETRY MAKES

FINE DISTINCTIONS
ABOUT THINGS
THAT DON’T MATTER

YOSSUF LECYZZKI

1/14/06, 3:45pm, waiting for the #44 to the St. George ferry terminal

“Pyramid”: M.J.Q. (iPod) on the corner of Castleton & Bemont

lovely Presbyterian Church with Tiffany-era stained glass
salvaged from nearby Sailor's Snug Harbor

How can I write bedeviled by truants???

1/17, 2:44pm via New Jersey Transit Raritan Valley Line
(off-peak fare in effect)

Here on the Raritan Valley Line
stopping for passengers
in the perfect suburb of Fanwood
with me on board on the way down
to meet my brother to move
my father from assisted living
to next door's nursing home.

I open Thoreau's 1851 Journal:

“The Mileania Scanden
 & the button bush
 & the pickerel weed

are sere
 & flat
 with frost.

as the train pulls
into the Netherwood station.

1/18, 8:00am –On the S46 (towards West New Brighton)

bus slogs up to the Victory Boulevard stop
meat pies of all nations in a still-gated store window
columns of industrial rain on a Van Duzer Street awning
my butchered hesitations, my inhibited fantasies of power
as the bus climbs uphill

I look back

see oil tankers parked in the Narrows
waiting for the new money mantra called:
"spike in the gas pumps"

1/19, 4:15pm, On the S46—towards the Ferry Terminal

Moody bunch,
perhaps actual splinters
of consensus
occupy the seats

Art Blakey in my headset
rejecting ideal meaning in
favor of his particular line of inquiry:
"The Beat."

1/21, 6:30pm, On the #23 to Hoboken Terminal

I'm the only passenger
on a "limited service" bus
careening along Boulevard East.
Manhattan's cubic zirconium nightscape
as always on my left as I pass by
childhood's old preciencts.

"Hey! Make sure you throw that out!"
says the driver pointing at my White Castle sack
I shall attend to civility and to "the ecology"
but leave the NY POST on the seat
for another rider
who might also be surprised to learn
of Osama Bin Laden's love
of feta cheese.

1/23, 9:12pm, Leaving the Hoboken PATH station

Moon's swollen cheeks
pinned above
Citicorp Tower

1/23, 8:45am—At the Bay Street bus shelter, waiting for the S78 to Totenville.

Man: You know when the collection plate gets heavy at our church?

Woman: *At Xmas?*

M: Nah! When Stevie Wonder is in the house when he's visiting his daughter - **you know, the one he wrote "Isn't she lovely" for.** When he gets up and sings a gospel song, everyone throws in tens and twenties in the plate!"

W: How much do you throw in?

M: Same old two dollars I do every Sunday! Hell, he ain't singing any of his hits.

(Long Pause)

W: How many kids does Stevie Wonder have?

M: Lots! At least 7 from 4 different women. For a blindman he sure finds that hole all right!

1/23, 6:20pm M8 Crosstown—9th Street, 4th Avenue to 6th Avenue PATH

Weighed down by havarti
board the cross town bus
full of people talking
& who all seem to
know each other

“Free-lancing is **so**
brutal now!”

That tenacity of hardy old school East Villagers.
The lurching bus prompts
the woman next to me to
tell me: “New driver,
see how he drives?”
---- my sister mass transit connoisseur.

Bus stop right at PATH Station (perfect interface)
& just as I put my Quik-Card in the fare collector
the Hoboken train arrives (!)
A whole different class of folks down here
grimly playing with their
serious toys –Black Berries,
cellphone pixels, or just lopping-out
failed relations
from their PDAs

& what’s with the woman
whose head is buried deep in her hands....
Depressed?? Tired??
Time to clock out
as social worker
& walk out onto
Hudson Place

1/23, 8:43am– S44 @ Bement & Castleton

I decide to debark through

the back exit
then turn right for coffee
at Dick's Deli.

Ring signal bell
swing left making
my way back.

But there's a guy
puking into
the rear exit stairwell
(looks like his morning coffee)
a hoodie version
of a Roman gargoyle fountain.

Quickly, I swing about
& head up to the front door
knowing I'll be seeing
puke Angel Falls
in my head
all morning.

2/1, 7:18am – Fulton Street Lexington Avenue Line Station

“A great many injuries
in the Berlin subway
result from young people
riding on the subway cars
for sport.

In Hong Kong,
some older people
use the subway
to commit
some sort of
ritual suicide.

*They would get dressed up
in their traditional clothing
& step in front of a train*
said one researcher.

As a result of the study,
Hong Kong authorities
educate transit workers
to watch for elderly people
who are dressed up
and acting strangely.

In New York,
8 out of every ten victims
injured by a subway car
are men.”

(today's NY Times)

**2/23, 8:25am – Ferryboat Barberi to Whitehall Terminal
(passing Robbins Reef Light)**

Yesterday,
a 100-pound woman
ate 26 grilled cheese sandwiches in ten minutes
winning the World's Grilled Cheese Eating Championship.

Sonya Thompson won the \$8,000 prize
at the Times Square Planet Hollywood
but stated she was disappointed
in her performance:

“I Could Have Done Better!”

On the competitive eating circuit,
she's dubbed **Black Widow** because
the petite teen has defeated
so many of the morbidly obese men
who typically dominate
such contests.

Her world eating records include:

46 dozen oysters in ten minutes

11 lbs. of cheesecake in 9 minutes

48 chicken tacos in 11 minutes

37 hot dogs (including buns) in 12 minutes

& 56 hamburgers in 8 minutes.

Ms. Thomas passed up the additional prize
of a night at the nearby "W" Hotel
as she had to catch a train
to make her shift
at a Burger King
in her hometown
of Alexandria, VA

Source: Staten Island Advance

2/4, 5:12 pm "A" Train -42nd Street to Chambers Street

Last day of use on my
30-Day "Unlimited" Metro Card

I'd feel sad
but believing in objects
is deranged

here underneath Dick Cheney's America
where privacy has become illegible

2/4, 6:42pm WTC Terminal – PATH to NWK

small anxiety of waiting for a train to depart

(train leaves station)

A zoetrope
on the Jersey-bound side
just before Exchange Place
hawks dream cars

but not to worry comrade,
its not the fetish object
but the junk electric Lascaux
that hypnotizes me.

**2/4, 8:35pm – Downtown Loop shuttle van
NJPAC to NWK Penn Station
(I'm the only passenger)**

Driver: Whom did you see?
Passenger: A roots band from Quebec.

D: Where's that?
P: Canada.

D: Do they have Eskimos there?

P: They do in Canada, but you have to go to the Yukon or Nunavut.

(Silence as we drive down Raymond Blvd. towards Penn Station)

D: I always wanted to see how the Eskimos lived.

2/4, 8:45pm, PATH—NWK to WTC (@ the Harrison Station)

Guy gets on sits next to me & opens up a paperback copy of **OVERCOMING POVERTY**.

Sneak a peek: Chapter 1:

"You have to be in the right game!"

Out the windows
a long line of black
CSX tankers move
slowly through the freight yard
in the winter rain.

2/5, 2:00pm #165 Westwood to Hackensack (NJ)

(How I got here):

bus. (#S46 to St. George Terminal)

subway. (#1 to Chamber Street Station
switch to #3 Express to Times sq.)

back on a bus (see entry heading)

**AM I TRAVELLING TOO MUCH
AND NOT REALLY GETTING ANYWHERE??**

MAIN STREET, HACKENSACK

You can no longer tell the pigeons
from the off-river breeze. This twilight factory, streets
as convents, with one light bulb in an upstairs office
fracturing the black Ad Rheinhardt tableau
and though I can recognize the neighborhood
this Hackensack in Reagan's final year,
I can't be the t-shirt existentialist I once was
graphing the decline of the empty urban pocket.

The courthouse dome's gold glow mimics Washington's skull.
The Woolworth is universal F.W. Woolworth.
And that's a submarine, the S.S. Ling,
moored like a paperweight between the newsprint plant
and the Court Street Bridge.

This all goes into a collective call towards charged silence
that's only jalopies drifting through amber signals
and buses idling against the Transfer Station platform.
A thick goodbye to old Hackensack Saturdays
with farmer's swarming off up-county's
Susquehanna trains – those Wortendyke Dutch
& moody Paramus celery ranchers have left their progeny
a vast Mall to inhabit, those lives full-formed
from a violent media's left-over alphabet
of Brand Name Realism.

But you do know that, underneath it all, nothing sits
still, not even here on asphalt skin
gnawed by sharp-toothed time. Shake pocket change
to realize that oblivion seems miles
yet seconds from the security gates
binding the chilled storefronts.

Each curb a sinking world, each
cataract streetlamp brings up small practical dreams
that illuminates them quickly.

(circa 1988)

Twenty years
later and off
to probate my
mother's will, some
signatures and a slap
of official ink

"Is Prozy's Army & Navy open?"

-- Nope.

"What about Womrath's Books?"

-- Gone for years

"How about White Manna?"

**--Some people say Hackensack
should shut down if
"the Manna" closes**

(so says the probate clerk
as she takes my signature)

then off I go
down the 3pm desert
of Main Street, Hackensack,
old market town from
Bergen County's past life

of celery ranchers
turtle wranglers
& dairymen

So here I am in this littlest
of greasy spoons, munching
two Manna Burgers & an OK coffee

O hokey poets of New Jersey!

-- when you write again
of your coldwater origins
& obsess about the overwhelming chill
& boredom of death

I will try to counteract
your mewling melodramas
of the singular self
by revealing that the secret
to life is White Manna's
potato flour hamburger rolls the color
of Cheetos ---which contrasts nicely
with that oniony blotch
of Meat Patty X.

Check, please!

Now a last glance at the sluggish
Hackensack River
before heading off
to a State Street bus stop
walking as if I've stepped
in dogshit, passing
functional office buildings
neither sad or authentic.

I love the 165 Westwood's plunge across the Hackensack Meadows along the Bergen Turnpike. Its an old toll road that served as the mainstem for Bergen County's farmers bringing their produce to Manhattan markets. The road once terminated in Hoboken as the "Hackensack Plank Road" which still exists in Weehawken (sans planks) as the local's back road into the Lincoln Tunnel. When the 165 crosses the Hackensack at Little Ferry's Rt. 46 Bridge you can still see "Tracey's Nine Mile House" where Bergen Turnpike once crossed the river via a wooden drawbridge. Tracey's is built within an old stagecoach stop, it being "Nine Miles" from the waterfront of Lower Manhattan.

2/7, 3:45pm, at the bus stop, Bement & Castleton

Guy: What was **that** for lunch?

Girl: Fake-ass cold cuts.

Guy: ...damm!!

2/20, 8:00am, Ferryboat Molinaro to Saint George Terminal

Near the middle of the Upper Harbor a poem
of Claude McKay booms from the boat's
sporadic sound installation.

It's some actor declaiming in a well-bottom voice
like crackhead James Earl Jones
& quite unlike McKay's actual
light Caribbean lilt

Man on the opposite end of the upper deck

shouts: **SHUT THE FUCK UP!**
in the general directions of the speakers on this,
the eve before the opening
of the Scottish salmon fishing season.

2/25, 4:05pm, on the S46 to the ferry.

(A woman gets on. She looks at least 25)

Driver: HEY! That's a student pass!

Woman: SO??!!

D: You don't look like no student!

W: I'm in school!

D: What are you – **Super Senior?**

3/2 – 5:30pm, NJT 126 going down Washington Street (late winter snowstorm)

MAGIC MASS TRANSIT MOMENT!!

#44 to ferry

& just in time for 4:10

terminal doors closing

as I dash through

get off ferry

& down into South Ferry Station

the #1 just pulling in, then

departing immediately .

Switch at Chambers Street

The #2 waiting for the local (!)

Express to Penn Station

Rush to deposit hefty gift check
at the still-open Dreyfus bank

Then down corridor
to the 8th Avenue Station
The “E” train just pulling in (!)

44 seconds,
arrive
at
42nd Street, the “Port Authority”

buy a carnet of bus tickets
(& no problem with vending machine, either)

upstairs
to
Platform
204
(escalator working)

the
#126
waiting

leaving
30 seconds
after I board

& add to this:

No tunnel traffic (in snow even)

&

No Hoboken street traffic

---- rare, rare
like
planets
in
alignment

So rare
that you have to
write it down

even at the risk
of boring/perplexing
the car-driving
potential
readership.

**3/7, 5:50, waiting at the M8 busstop, 2nd Avenue and 9th Street
(with takeout Ukranian food from the Vesalka in a shopping bag)**

“HEY LOOK!”

said a voice
to no one
in particular

“IT’S

ADAM SANDLER

ON
A MOTORCYCLE!”

it sure is

... & with a movie crew
following right behind him

3/13, 10:48pm, on the #1 downtown, at the 59th Street Columbus Circle Station

(for the Yids)

erev (eve of) Purim
fresh back from hipster
Purim Spiel led
by writers from
the Daily Show
-- Shushan TV—

Now its old school Judaism's turn
earnest young Lubavitch men
lug boxes of hamantaschen
& a Scroll of Esther
off this crowded car
and up into the streets
of this shiny imperial city

3/16, on board the 7:30AM Ferryboat Barberi

(for the Gentiles/Catholic Division)

transit gods
in confluence

made this early
boat with
a little hustle
& seconds to go.

catching breath/settling in
grab the freebie Metro, news aimed
for the brain of the neo-blank generation

hmm, Sat Patrick's day tomorrow,
FRIDAY AND LENT (!)

NO bangers?
NO bad mouth-feel corned beef?!
Not to worry
....the Catholic Church
is granting dispensation
for New York City

(No mention of the outlying districts, though)

Flash memory of Kevin O'Reilly:

"Hey, Joel! Waddaya call an Irish
homosexual?"

"???????"

" A man who prefers women to
drinking!"

3/10, 3:50pm, S46 @ Bement & Castleton

get on the bus with plenty
of time to catch
the 4:10pm Ferry

& is that woman
in Rosa Parks car coat
standing up, reciting poetry (??)

Nope, she is
preaching & the tolerant
bus driver lets her
keep it up all along
undulating Castleton Ave
onto mainstem Victory Boulevard
& into St. George Terminal.

The mostly black passengers
take it in stride
telling the woman
“God Bless You”
as they debark.

She calls back:
“have a *blessed* day!”

3/10, 5:10pm, R Train, near Union Square Station

A trio of buskers enter my car,
start singing:

“*Down By The Riverside!*”

(& do I detect
a trend
of sorts?)

I squeeze to the left
as they busk
the car, accapella
mixing with
the Dolphy playlist
on my i-Pod.

3/11, 6:24pm, @ the 14th Street Station platform (uptown), 6th Avenue IND

(a young woman is talking to a young man, they seem to be a couple)

“You now
feel how
I feel
sometimes

-- *HOW IS IT??*”

3/26, 12:18pm, Raritan Valley Line, Hoboken to Bridgewater

the 17 minute sprint across
the Meadows devolved to
a halfhour of crawl and stall
until the train finally shuffles into Newark

“What’s up with the train?”

“Blame Amtrak”

sez the conductor
“They run these tracks!”

I start up an amiable conversation with a woman
wearing a Ringling Brothers jacket

“Yes, I am in the circus!”

She manages pyrotechnics
& takes clear pride in her job
“I know every fire marshall
in every North American city”

I tell her
my brother is a weekend
kids’ party clown.

“Oh, we closed down
our clown college
a few years ago.”

“Why,” I inquire.

“We were producing
too many clowns
for the needs
of this economy.”

*(No bigger threat
to bourgeoisie democracy
than the unemployed clown*

--- Antonio Gramsci)

Circus woman
is getting off at Bridgewater, too
-- visiting a younger sister
who is part of the rival
but smaller potatoes
Big Apple Circus
now decamped in tents
right outside the minor league park
that abuts this station

as we debark
a woman approaches me
up from the back of the car:
"My mother was in the circus, too!
--the Bulgarian State Circus
but she defected in Chicago in 1966
& joined the Clyde Beatty Circus
as a lion tamer!"

Man! **Circus People!**

3/21, 8:26am, S46 St. George to Bemont Ave.

Ensnorced in my favorite seat, that first
single seat (= more leg room) am dragged from
the normal drowse by the driver yelling to the back rows:

"HEY, YOU FORGOT TO PAY!"

& up surges an angry, cursing black guy

"I WAS JUST GETTING CHANGE, MOTHERFUCKER!"

& etc, etc, etc,

& so over the top a rant realize

this is a standard bus fare scam

& recognize that fuming, volatile response

from supermarket days when we'd catch

some blatant five-fingered discounter.

Fuming guy goes back to his seat
sputtering & cursing. But departure time has passed
& here we are, still at the platform -- the driver won't leave
until he gets his fare!

(It's a showdown of sorts.)

Then a plot twist....

A sharp-dressed business type black guy
gets up and pays fuming, scam guy's fare

.....except this enrages scam guy
even more!

“YOU GOAT-EATING, CURRY-LAPPING INDIAN MOTHERFUCKER!”
he screams (& screams) I didn't notice the anonymous driver's ethnicity (still don't)

& I feel like one of the faceless Los Angeleno ethnics
who cowed behind Sandra Bullock in “Speed”
-- I really didn't need this floor show

& ... what next??

“YOU JUST WAIT!” yells scamguy as the bus
finally departs & soon the S46 is full of passengers
as it climbs up Victory Boulevard, mad standing room
as safety net for the morning run.

3/27, 5:20, Exchange Place, Jersey City, Hudson-Bergen Light Rail Station

I always wipe my hands on the grass
but not here beneath the VERY
scary statute of the Katyn Forest martyrs

men with pliers mingle with back office staff
both equally cursing ticket machines that reject the dull
new legal tender. Tonnelle Avenue bound cars
empty , refill, depart while my wallet's contents get
abused by the ATV's crew. Oh to be
a chandler, a dowsler, a finagler and boot it all

& to focus on the water-moving action of woman
leaving work, zillion years North River the backdrop.

3/28, 8:30am, S46, St. George to Bement Avenue

A Spanish-speaking
Mormon woman
works this bus

3/31, 3:55pm, S46, along Castleton Avenue to ferry

Late afternoon bus
packed with
Port Richmond High School kids

(& no shot at
making
the 4:10 boat)

I push to the back
right by the rear exit door

up front
an argument breaks out:

*“You should learn
to control your kid!”*

*“WHO asked YOU
crack head!”*

*“YOU THINK I’M ON CRACK!
...well,
I used to be on Crack*

*& If I WERE on CRACK NOW
You wouldn’t be talking*

because

yo’ head would be
UP-MY-ASS!!

The rest of this bust-up
is drowned out
by high school kids
egging & cheering
the two women on

black vs. Hispanic

just like the schoolyards

kids keep pushing up front
hoping the TRASH talk
soon goes to BLOWS

(-- & why is this particular bus route
such a magnet for bad attitude---)

finally

the non-dust-up cools

to standoff

just as this jitney

makes the turn

onto Victory with

passengers

scrambling

to transfer

to South Shore buses

lined up

at Tompkinsville's

old village green

4/1, 4:45pm, Raritan Valley Line to Penn Station, Newark

Snake Hill

& Little Snake Hill

& the Senator Frank Lautenberg Transportation Center

out the window

& just a little bit further

The Great Kearney Trash Heap
mellowing into
a future state park
ready for use
in 48 years.

4/2, 9:15am, NJT 126 to PABT
(at the mouth of the Lincoln Tunnel, Jersey side)

*
"It's
the Hellenic Day
parade, today!"
*

blue/white
floats

lining
up

at an E-Z Pass
lane.

**4/3, 3:17, Metro-North, Harlem Division, GCT to North White Plains
(on the way to a *shiva* (condolence) call)**

Scottish week
at Grand Central

kilted lass at Inverness booth
nonplussed when I tell
of half-dozen trips to Pictland.

" dooyou plan ta
back `gin?"
--says she

cuum

& where is fierce Hugh MacDiarmid
on this literature table
laden with the novelistic equivalents
of haggis?

Ahh, for the tough astringent presence
of James Doohan,
'Scotty' of Star Trek

who dispelled rumors
of bad health

at his last Star Trek convention
by declaring

"If I had Alzheimer's

doncha think
I'd remember **that?**"

the actor, best known
for his role as the chief engineer
aboard the star ship *U.S.S. Enterprise*

died six months later
of complications
from that disease.

4/5, 7:16 am, NJT #181, to Hoboken Terminal

bus to the PATH pulls up
to my stop

two passengers
-- mother & child—
kiss the driver before debarking

An Aunt?
 A godmother?
Or are they just
happy to arrive safely?

At Observer Highway & Washington Street
in response to a question
the operator hands me
news of bold service changes
that will shake
the very foundation
of the Hudson County
bus universe!!!!

As I study route maps

and new bus numbers
the old numb feeling overwhelms:

with whom, I wonder, can I
talk to about these things ?

8.23.06
Ashfield, MA

