

# SCRIVENS

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and Esk Writers

**Summer 2021**



## Buses

City buses are red. Country buses are green. But lately, I have seen another bus. This one is black. You will have seen it too, trundling along the tree-lined roads, through the small towns and villages of East Lothian. I find myself wondering about the people who get on that bus. Do they ever get off again? I have never seen that bus stopping anywhere. Not until tonight.

I am walking towards the bus stop when the bus coasts to a halt. The doors judder open and a figure appears – an old woman struggling with an oversized shopping trolley.

The doors to the bus slam shut, the engine roars into life and the bus disappears into the distance, leaving the bent figure of the little old woman toppling to the ground as the trolley tilts to one side.

I step forward, unwilling to get too close but unable to walk away and leave her lying on the pavement.

‘Thank you, pet.’ She rights herself, clinging to my hand as she clammers to her feet. ‘It’s very good of you to see me home.’ She tugs the cart towards the tree lined path down the side of the Community Centre. ‘This way is shorter’.

Her arm is tucked into mine. I have no choice but to follow.

‘I bet you’d like to know what’s in this bag, wouldn’t you?’

I smile and nod, though I have no idea why she would think I had any interest in her shopping. Something about her claw-like grip sets the hair prickling on the back of my neck and I resist the urge to hurry my steps towards the comforting glow of the street lights shining at the end of the path.

Our progress is agonisingly slow. One small step at a time, until finally it stops altogether. She tilts her head to peer up at me.

‘You’ve been a great help, lassie. I think you deserve to see inside ma bag, don’t you?’

I try to pull away, but it’s no use. Already she is zipping back the cover. Against my will, I find myself looking down. The old woman, the path, the trees all disappear. Darkness reaches up to engulf me.

As my vision clears, I see rows of seats and feel vibration beneath my feet. Shadowy figures turn towards me. I try to close my eyes but my muscles refuse to obey. I do not know who or what they are. I only know that it is my turn to travel on the black bus.

**Annemarie Allan**

## The Month of May

Hands on the clock points towards May,

tiny brass wheels, tick – tocking

their precision engineered path

through time. The alarm set.

A locomotive moving under pressure,

the furious movement of rods

and pistons,

the roar of the firebox,

the hot angry hiss of escaping steam.

The clock chimes, the points change

highlights different paths for

different parts in the month of May.

**Kenny Gilchrist**

## The Mystery Bus

In the furthest corner of the oldest shed a black bus lay quite forgotten. Paint so grimy, roof daubed by countless pigeons, it had lain untouched for years.

Suddenly it was moved to pride of place, cleaned from head to toe, new covers replacing tatty old ones. Passengers jostled, conductors shouted, guides told stories. Managers looked at it admiringly.

Seeing that it had increased so much in honour, the bus began to glory in its reputation. It began to try to be clever, to give itself airs. The bus began to speak, and began to talk nonsense. It gave orders and made judgements about everything: This was really not so..... and that one was a fool, and from the other will come no good... All just listened to it, open-mouthed, though it talked such nonsense as was painful to hear.

But people have, unfortunately, this flaw: that they will marvel at a mystery tour bus, no matter what it says.

But was the bus long considered clever and respected? And was it long pampered?

Only as long as passengers wanted its tours. Then it was returned to the furthest corner of the oldest shed and not a word more said about it.

*Martin White*

## Shed

A figure is slumped over a tool bench. Flies are buzzing around the pool of darkening liquid that spills from the bench to the floor and trickles towards the shed door. There is a gap in the neatly arranged row of tools that hangs on the wall.

The woman finishes pegging out her washing and goes back into the house. She scours the inside of the washing machine and scrubs down the work surfaces. She glances at the kitchen clock and goes upstairs to her bedroom. She puts on a brightly coloured cotton dress. She applies her lipstick and puts on her shoes. She knocks over the bottle of bright red nail varnish and rubs hard at the spots she has spilt on her hands.

The doorbell rings.

“Oh, come in. Mabel. I was just going to put the kettle on. Would you go and give Kevin a shout. He’s been in the shed all day as usual. I’ve been out so he probably didn’t bother with lunch.”

The next-door neighbour puts her offering down on the kitchen table.

“I’ve brought you a cake to try. It’s a new recipe.”

As Mabel goes out of the door a fly zooms in. The woman waits for the cry of horror. The fly settles on the dark red icing of the beetroot cake.

*Lorna Dixon Duffy*

## Umbrella Thief

The rain it raineth on the just

And upon the unjust fella,

But more upon the just because

The unjust hath the just’s umbrella.

So runs the ancient ditty, and usually that is the case, but not always. I well remember once when, complete with my briefcase and folding umbrella, I accepted a lift into Edinburgh with a colleague who was dropping off his car in the Gorgie area. I started to walk the remaining mile into the centre but the rain clouds were gathering so I jumped on a bus. At the West End I alighted and had just started walking along Princes Street when large drops appeared and it started raining in earnest. That was when I found I’d left my umbrella on the bus.

I had to look respectable and dry for the meeting I was to attend and was just beginning to panic what I noticed the bus I had been on moving slowly in the traffic queue beside me. I ran over and signalled to the driver but he just pointed to the next bus stop. I tried to explain by pointing to the back of the bus that I’d left something on it but he seemed not to recognise me as a previous passenger and pointed more determinedly to the next bus stop. I grew frustrated with his misunderstanding and moved round to stand right in front of his bus so that he could not move while still gesticulating to convey my predicament. He then grudgingly opened the door so I jumped on and explained. He then simply pointed towards the back with no comment so I went to my previous seat to retrieve my umbrella.

A large lady with bulging shopping bags was in the seat but she kindly got up and helped me search and then an oldish man with a moustache who had been sitting behind joined in and even a skinny teenager shivering in his loose tee shirt and jeans. My umbrella, a rather good one actually with stronger struts than normal and a polished wooden handle, was nowhere to be found.

‘Someone’s taken a fancy to it ducky,’ she volunteered.

I searched the faces of those around for any signs of unease or guilt but to no avail. However I noticed several folk had cases or polythene bags which could accommodate my umbrella with ease. By now the bus had reached Waverley railway station where I had to alight and as I prepared to venture forth into the pouring rain I glanced back. They were all sitting there, totally inscrutable and above all dry; in fact the teenager’s T-shirt had Super Dry emblazoned on the front. But I knew one of them was in fact a common thief. Was it Mrs shopping bags or Colonial Moustache or skinny Keven or some innocent looking passenger a few seats away? Whoever it was I hoped on first use the struts would spring out into a tangled web and rip it apart.

It was over a week later that I met the colleague who had given me the lift.

‘I’ve been looking out for you,’ he said, ‘you left your umbrella in my car; do you want it back?’

I cringed and thought; I’ve been here before, got the wrong end of the stick and misconstrued the kindly human race or at least that part of it on the Number 66 bus that day. Perhaps the old ditty needs updating:

The rain it raineth on the wise  
And also on forgetful fellas,  
But less upon the wiser guys  
As they know where they leave umbrellas.

**Keith Cornwall**

## Perceptions

‘Oh Dammit...the munch bunch are here’. Harry had mis-timed his trip to the garden centre. The car park was full, and he had difficulty finding a space, annoyed at the sloppy parking, some cars

slewed across two spaces, and trolleys not returned to their bays.

The discount lunches were an attraction to the pensioners, but Harry viewed their presence with scorn. Did they not realise that this was a garden centre, not a lunch-club-cum-day-centre.

He used to enjoy his trips to this place. Not that he was a great gardener, in fact his wife asked him whether he was off to buy more Australian bulbs, a reference to him planting daffodils upside down one year, but he liked browsing...often not even buying anything, just enjoying the atmosphere... the feeling of escape.

The centre had been a tranquil place...a few greenhouses... the little showroom stocked with various seeds, bulbs, plants and gardening equipment. The windows open and opportunist robins darting in and around the various tables, encouraged by staff who had placed trays of seed out for them.

Harry especially enjoyed the small display of garden sheds, loving the smell of new wood and envying the joinery skills of whoever had constructed them. Now his little oasis had been taken over by a large gardening corporation and re-developed, being described by Harry as now having a corporate identity crisis.

Staff all cloned – green overalls and matching fleeces, the ‘have a nice day’ Americanism at the checkouts. No longer one showroom but several large departments necessitating a marathon trek through the clothing outlets, fancy glass-wear and ornaments, scented candles...expensive cushions and pictures, jewellery, confectionery...all to be traversed before reaching the gardening section.

Oh – and not forgetting the large restaurant, special pensioner discount vouchers being offered for meals hence the flurry of lunchtime ‘oldies’. He chuckled to himself – mindful of the saying – tae see ourselves as others see us, and wondered whether the hungry hoards heading towards their lunch club saw him in the same light.

‘Scuse me son...can ye tell me if this can be planted outside?’

Harry had been standing at a display of houseplants and turned to face his inquisitor, secretly tickled to have been called ‘son’. The woman looked elderly but probably was not much older than Harry. She

was clutching a pot containing a plant he recognised from its orange petals and black centre. He felt some answer was required.

'Oh aye m'dear, that's a black-eyed Susan but mind – it'll only flower 'til Autumn.'

She looked disappointed and replaced the little plant on the stand. 'Och – that's no much good. Ye see, I want something tae plant as a memorial tae ma Tommy. He passed away a couple o' weeks ago and ah need a marker for him.'

Harry was uncomfortable with the woman's statement. He never knew what to say to anyone recently bereaved, generally leaving that sort of thing to his wife.

'Oh – I'm so sorry to hear that,' he heard himself say, 'but I'm sure you'll find something appropriate here.' He tried to move to another display but she followed, still talking.

'Aye' – she sighed – 'Ah loved him to pieces ye ken, but sometimes ah dinnae think he felt the same.' Her voice was quite matter of fact, as though discussing the weather. 'He liked his night life ye ken...and ah kent he was chasin the ladies...but he made up for it...aye bringing me a wee present back and ah couldnae be angry wi him.'

Harry was shocked at this revelation...this stranger sharing such an intimate confidence with him. How could she turn a blind eye to such abuse he wondered? Embarrassed now and not wanting to continue the conversation he attempted to walk away as she hunted through the display of plants for a suitable alternative.

'How about this one then son?'

Still no escape, he turned to see her clutching a large-spiked green and white Hosta.

'Well, it's certainly dramatic' he replied, 'and it can go outside but the slugs will eat it alive unless you know how to deal with them'. Harry was speaking from experience, his own hostas lasting only one summer despite every conceivable deterrent being used.

'Och...ah canny be bothered wi' aw that, ah just want something ah can stick in the ground and leave.' she said, sighing and shrugging her shoulders as she replaced the plant.

Harry needed an exit strategy. 'Well I'm sure you'll find something suitable; this place sells everything now. Take your time. I'll leave you to wander round.'

The woman scarcely noticed his departure as he hurried off, relieved to have escaped her attention and returning to his task of locating his bag of daffodil bulbs.

'Hiya son.' The woman's voice could be heard across the department. He cringed, feeling slightly irritated and wishing she would go away. He felt he was being stalked and wondered whether he was a victim of the local eccentric as she hurried towards him.

'Ye were right son...Ah wandered around and found the very thing.' She held a colourful plastic robin perched on a stick. 'It's just right for him. He was a wee bugger, but he was my wee bugger and I know he would just love this.'

As she neared the checkout the woman opened her purse and insisted that he looked at a crumpled photograph of Tommy.

Harry gazed at the picture of her now deceased companion, a black and white tomcat and chuckled . . .almost with relief that he had not been privy to the story of a habitual philanderer.

Paying for her item and purse still open, the woman turned to Harry and pressed 50p into his hand, whispering - 'Here'ye are son...Ye'll no get much pay in this place and ye've been a real help'.

As she left, Harry stood at the checkout...still amused, but also puzzled, wondering why on earth the woman had been so insistent in consulting him about her choice of memorial...and why the tip?

Then realisation dawned as he gazed at the garden centre assistants, their corporate uniforms a warning to him that his green fleece should be avoided on his next visit to the centre.

'Well...did you not get the bulbs?' His wife noticed his arrival home empty handed.

'No, I got distracted because I was chatted-up by a woman who paid me for my company and said I'd been a great help. I'll go back tomorrow for them. You never know...she might be there again.'

Harry's wife turned to him, eyebrows raised quizzically. 'In that case, just to make sure you don't get distracted again, I think I'll come with you. Oh...and by the way...I've got some vouchers for the restaurant so we can go for our lunch!'

*Jean Stirling*

**Covid 19 Poem**

I wanted to wish you a Happy New Year  
 but just couldn't utter the words,  
 The way things are going these days we can see  
 the only ones happy are birds,  
 No planes to contend with or even fly by  
 No loud bangs or smoke or lines in the sky

The birds get fed by the people locked in  
 Who would have known it's created a din,  
 Some families gather in and others fall out,  
 Disagreements confound and the louder ones shout.

Although 2021 is a brand new year,  
 There is so much negativity, unknowing and fear,  
 The country is leaving to stand on its own,  
 But is it the right decision, who could have known?

The economy is shot and the people are weary,  
 So many breaking house rules making others feel leery,  
 This virus pandemic and lorries abound,  
 All stuck down in Folkestone or other exits around.

The exit with Brexit is suddenly real  
 And I'm told that it's rubbish a really bad deal  
 So what can we do except try not to scream,  
 It must be a nightmare, for it is not a dream!

So take a moment could it be a good year?  
 There's too much uncertainty and not enough cheer.  
 It'll take a strong person to make it seem nice,  
 Could you take the challenge, say in a thrice,

Three thoughts to consider then take it from there,  
 Too many connotations to start would be where?  
 So now we must follow rules and have to stay home,  
 Happy New Year you're not free to roam!

The days merge together and this makes us say,  
 Is it Tuesday or Thursday or Sunday today?  
 The virtual world is now taking over,  
 Forget smell the coffee let's feel the clover,

Of the land around us and beneath our feet,  
 Socially distancing of course, until we can meet,  
 o once again have a smile and a hug,  
 But in the meantime we just have to shrug,

I'm told the pandemic has made people more kind,  
 Towards folk they never spoke to,  
 is it all in the mind?

With thoughts that abound and ideas that flourish,  
 As there's nothing else in our minds to nourish.

We just need to think better days will soon follow,  
 And the last twelve months will sink into a hollow,  
 The grief and the pain, the unrelenting bad news  
 Can be changed for the better so just have a snooze.

Dream on of beaches with sun, sand and sea,  
 Of quiet forests with the scents and feel free,  
 Or any other thoughts that are relaxing for you,  
 This time of troubles will one day pass through.

***Moira Galbraith***

**Easy Goes**

A pilgrim age:  
 Get to the moon  
 and (maybe) back,  
 with Elon Musk;  
 it's all the rage,  
 hot air balloon  
 to Auchnashellack,  
 since you ask;  
 or, off the page  
 to Brigadoon  
 for kailyard crack  
 from dawn to dusk –  
 but while you're on it  
 shut this sonnet.

***Jock Stein***