At the Bus Station

SUMMARY

When you get to the bus station, loosen or take off your necktie so that you don't get choked to death. As you jostle to climb aboard the bus, undo the buttons on your shirt and coat so that they don't fall off. As you struggle to board, pull your shoelaces tight; otherwise, as the crowd drags you up onto the bus, your shoes might fall off when you're in midair. Pull your belt tight, too, so that your clothes don't come off in the scuffle at the door. Take off your eyeglasses and grab hold of someone till you're on board. As you go up the steps, ignore the sounds people are making, and remember that the words you and others say mean nothing till you've made it on board.

THEMES

CIVILITY, INCIVILITY, AND VIOLENCE

"At the Bus Station" is framed as a set of instructions for boarding a bus amid a jostling, rambunctious crowd. In careful detail, the poem tells passengers how to avoid choking on their own neckwear, losing buttons from their clothing, or losing that clothing itself. Most unsettlingly, the speaker claims that, during the scramble, "human sounds" are to be ignored and "words [will] lose meaning." Despite its comic undertones, then, the poem depicts normal rules of human behavior falling by the wayside during a mundane event. In the process, it illustrates how fragile those rules are in the first place, suggesting that even in sophisticated urban societies, violence lurks just below the surface of everyday life.

The poem instructs the reader to prepare for a seemingly trivial activity—boarding a bus—as if it were a serious "battle." For example, the speaker instructs the reader on how to avoid "strangulation" during the "fight," using terms that imply a potential life-or-death struggle. The speaker even warns that the "scrambling / at the door" can get so intense that fellow passengers might "haul[]" you into the air and pull your clothes off.

As the chaos unfolds, the poem suggests that ordinary rules of human behavior, and even the ordinary "meaning[s]" of "words," no longer apply. The speaker instructs the reader how "to avoid being undressed" in the melee, conjuring up a kind of mob scene where no one's safe and anything goes. The instruction to "hold tight to someone / until you are in the bus" suggests that, even in this every-man-for-himself atmosphere, people are still dependent on each other. But it also involves grabbing a random stranger and violating their personal space, so it's not exactly reassuring! Finally, the speaker tells the reader to "pay no attention to human sounds" and claims that "words" themselves "lose meaning / until you are inside the bus." Ominously, this wording suggests that you can ignore anyone (even if they're in pain) or say anything (even if it's hurtful) during the "battle."

Even allowing for comic hyperbole, the poem suggests that, at an ordinary moment in an ordinary city, compassion and civility can vanish. The reader/citizen may be at risk of losing necktie, glasses, jacket, shoes, and/or clothing itself—articles associated with sophistication, or just ordinary civilization.

Especially in the context of poetry (which places high value on the meaning of words), the idea that words can suddenly "lose meaning" is unnerving. It suggests that poetry, language, and human culture itself are fragile—that these markers of humanity can disappear even in minor conflicts (i.e., it doesn't even take a war or disaster). To put it another way, even minor human conflicts can quickly escalate into "battle[s]" without rules or boundaries.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

When you arrive ...
... to prevent strangulation.

Lines 1-5 establish the poem's conceit: it's a set of instructions for navigating a dangerous crowd at a bus station. Right away, the opening sentence strikes an ominous note. The speaker warns "you," the reader (imagined as a professionally dressed, likely male, figure), to loosen or remove your necktie so as "to prevent strangulation." Already it's clear that some form of violence regularly occurs in this setting.

The speaker doesn't make clear where this bus station is located, or where "you" or other passengers may be headed. By omitting these details, the poem makes its scenario seem more universal. "The Bus Station" could be just about *any* bus station, anywhere in the world, so the implied threat of violence is all the more unnerving. Likewise, it's not clear who this authoritative speaker is supposed to be—a local resident? Someone who's learned about this violence the hard way? All the reader knows is that the speaker has some familiarity with this setting.

These opening lines also start to establish the poem's form. "At the Bus Station" has no meter, but at first, it looks as if it might

feature some kind of rhyme scheme. Lines 2 and 5 make a full rhyme ("station"/"strangulation"), while lines 3 and 4 contain an identical rhyme ("tie"/"tie"). As the poem continues, however, this apparent formal rigor will loosen—possibly mirroring the way the reader is supposed to loosen their tie, shirt, etc. The poem will keep using identical rhymes here and there, but basically, it's free verse. It also uses heavy enjambment from the opening lines onward, creating a jerky, unpredictable rhythm that suits its tense, chaotic atmosphere.

LINES 6-10

During the fight ...
... losing the buttons.

Lines 6-10 start to depict the violence foreshadowed in the opening lines.

There will be a "fight / to board the bus," the speaker warns, so you, the reader, will need to "unfasten all [the] buttons / of [your] shirt and jacket" to keep them from flying off in the brawl. (The implication is that they're more likely to pop off—or are easier to tear off—a tightly fastened article of clothing than a loose one.) This brawl also explains the earlier advice to "prevent strangulation" by loosening "your tie." Once the crowd gets rowdy, it might accidentally (or purposely!) pull your necktie and choke you.

The word "buttons" appears at the end of line 8 and line 10, just as "tie" ended both line 3 and line 4. These repetitions make the poem's tone sound slightly stilted. Rather than casually saying, "Undo the buttons on your shirt and jacket so they don't fly off," the speaker instructs:

> unfasten all buttons
> of the shirt and jacket
> to avoid losing the buttons.

This formal-sounding speech adds to the speaker's air of detached authority. The speaker almost seems to be issuing official guidelines (as opposed to, say, advising a friend). Their calm detachment contrasts markedly—perhaps eerily—with the up-close-and-personal "fight" they're describing.

LINES 11-16

During the battle ...
... into the bus,

In lines 11-16, the trouble at the bus station escalates further. Now the "fight / to board the bus" is a full-scale "battle / to gain entry / to the bus." The speaker warns "you" (the reader/would-be passenger) to "tighten both shoelaces" before being "hauled / into the bus." In other words, even when you succeed in boarding, you won't be *climbing* those bus steps—the crowd will physically drag you up them!

Notice that this is the second sentence in a row that begins with the word "During":

> During the battle
> to gain entry
> to the bus,

This anaphora will continue: the next and final sentence will also begin with "During" (line 26), and "during" will also repeat, mid-sentence, at the start of line 21. These repetitions lend some structure to the speaker's free-flowing, increasingly complex instructions. The recurring "During" also highlights the fact that this boarding process is a feat of endurance! What would normally take a few seconds stretches out over a longer timeframe.

Meanwhile, the phrase "the bus" occurs twice in this passage. It has already occurred three times previously (in the title, line 2, and line 7), and it will pop up again two more times (lines 25 and 30). These repetitions mimic the crowd's fixation on the bus—the object of their collective struggle. As in the previous four lines ("board the bus [...] buttons [...] buttons"), alliterative /b/ words ("battle," "bus," "both," "bus") give this passage a punchy, percussive sound, evoking the violent jostling of the crowd.

LINES 17-22

you hang in ...
... at the door,

Lines 17-18 detail what will happen when "you," the would-be passenger, "are hauled" up into the bus:

> you hang in the air
> and the shoes may come off,

No wonder the speaker advised you to "tighten [your] shoelaces"! As the crowd drags you up the steps of the bus, your feet will be swept off the ground, and your dangling shoes might fall or be stolen.

Lines 19-22 then continue the sentence, which stretches all the way from line 11 to line 25 and gets grammatically messier as it goes along. The grammatical chaos, of course, mirrors the chaos of the crowd. The speaker warns that shoes aren't all "you" risk losing:

> tighten your belt
> to avoid being undressed
> during the scrambling
> at the door,

In other words, the crowd is so unruly that they might end up pantsing you. The solution, according to the speaker, is to "tighten" your belt along with your shoelaces.

Notice that virtually all the speaker's advice involves tightening, loosening, or removing clothing and accessories. The speaker does *not* suggest any kind of appeal to the crowd, such as

asking people to calm down or be patient. Instead, the speaker treats the crowd as a force you can't control, and that may not even be able to control itself. (Consider the passive voice in line 15: "you are hauled" by the crowd; the crowd doesn't purposefully haul you.) The best way to handle this turmoil, the speaker suggests, is to adjust what you're wearing as if gearing up for battle. In fact, the very threat of "being undressed"—losing your refined clothes, which seem to symbolize dignity and civility—evokes a disturbing, war-like scenario in which the normal rules of human conduct have broken down.

LINES 23-25

remove your spectacles ...
... in the bus.

Lines 23-25 urge "you" to make one last adjustment to your clothes/accessories as you fight your way through the crowd:

> remove your spectacles
> and hold tight to someone
> until you are in the bus.

On the literal level, the speaker means that "you" should take off your glasses so that they don't fall off and break in the commotion. But because glasses are symbolically associated with intellect, wisdom, clarity, refinement, etc., taking them off might represent a reversion to brute instinct (and/or a loss of judgment). In fact, lines 26-30 will imply that this crowd "battle" makes its participants act less "human."

The speaker also advises "hold[ing] tight to someone"—presumably, for balance—as you push toward the door. On the one hand, this detail seems to illustrate some human interdependency amid all the conflict. Even in an "every man for himself" situation, the poem suggests, people still have to lean on each other sometimes. On the other hand, grabbing onto a stranger is most likely a violation of personal boundaries (the "someone" might not want you holding onto them!). In that way, it's another illustration of civility breaking down.

LINES 26-30

During the climb ...
... inside the bus.

Lines 26-30 close the poem on an unsettling note. The speaker suggests that not only social etiquette but communication itself will break down in the bus-stop battle:

> During the climb
> pay no attention to human sounds,
> also bear in mind
> words lose meaning
> until you are inside the bus.

In these instructions, the speaker sounds colder and more detached than ever. "Pay no attention to human sounds" seems to imply that "you" should remain indifferent to those around you—even if they're crying out in pain, anger, fear, etc. (Notice how, in contrast with the poem's detailed visual imagery, the speaker doesn't even bother to describe these "sounds" in detail.) "Words lose meaning" might mean that people in a public brawl lose the ability to communicate coherently; meaningful exchanges dissolve into inarticulate shouting. More cynically, the speaker might be suggesting that you can say anything you want, no matter how hurtful, in such a scenario, because all social rules have disintegrated. "Until you are inside the bus"—that is, until you've gotten what you want and settled down—anything goes.

By the end, then, the battle to board the bus seems to symbolize a total breakdown in social order. Although it's a comic scenario in some ways (the prospect of the crowd "undress[ing]" you as you "hang in the air" sounds like slapstick), it also carries the disturbing suggestion that even trivial human conflicts can erupt into violence. Even distinguished-looking commuters can suddenly find themselves in a knock-down, drag-out "battle," as if the threat of war is always lurking behind normal civilian life.

SYMBOLS

CLOTHING/ACCESSORIES

The poem mentions a number of clothes and accessories: "tie," "shirt and jacket," "shoes," "belt," and "spectacles." These items evoke professional attire, which is supposed to be a marker of dignity and respectability. Clothing itself is a marker of human culture (people wear it; animals don't). In the poem, then, clothes and accessories symbolize the dignity, respectability, and civility that are endangered or lost in the scuffle to board the bus.

The speaker repeatedly warns that this bus-stop "battle" may result in the loss of clothing. The jostling crowd might tear off your shoes, pants, etc. These images tie in with the warning that "words lose meaning / until you are inside the bus." Amid this kind of scuffle, the speaker suggests, people can lose what separates them from other animals: civilized etiquette, articulate speech, compassion for "human sounds" of distress, etc. Basically, people can lose their humanity when they're part of an unruly crowd.

Even the buttons of the clothes are symbolic. Buttons hold clothes together, and they sometimes feature in metaphors of restraint (e.g., "buttoned up," meaning inhibited). Thus, the speaker's instruction to "unfasten all buttons" hints that this crowd battle will be a free-for-all. As "you" participate, you'll have to loosen some of your normal inhibitions, and you'll be

lucky not to "los[e] the buttons" (lose your restraint, dignity, humanity, etc.) altogether.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-5:** "pull down your tie / or remove the tie / to prevent strangulation."
- **Lines 8-10:** "unfasten all buttons / of the shirt and jacket / to avoid losing the buttons."
- **Line 14:** "tighten both shoelaces"
- **Lines 18-20:** "and the shoes may come off, / tighten your belt / to avoid being undressed"
- **Line 23:** "remove your spectacles"

THE BUS

Although the poem never explains where this bus has stopped or where it's headed, the passengers are willing to fight fiercely to board it. It seems to be a *vehicle* for their desires or aspirations, representing some opportunity they want to "gain entry / to" and avoid missing out on.

It's worth noting that buses are often used by commuters (and the "you" in the poem is wearing professional attire: jacket, tie, etc.). Some of these passengers may be scrambling to get to work on time, so that they don't risk losing money, professional opportunities, etc. Symbolically, then, the bus is linked with the daily rat race—and the battle to board it seems to illustrate how the rat race can make people's behavior less "human" (line 27).

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 6-30

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

The poem repeats a number of important words and phrases, including "tie," "buttons," "tight"/"tighten," and "the bus." Notice that the first three of these involve tying, fastening, or tightening. Clearly, there's a running theme here!

The speaker first instructs the reader to *loosen* or *unfasten* their necktie, shirt, and jacket, so as to avoid losing buttons or getting strangled. Then the speaker instructs the reader to *tighten* their shoelaces, belt, and grip on "someone" in order to keep their balance and avoid losing entire articles of clothing. These repetitions help underline how chaotic the crowd is: it can both crush "you" and tear things away from you. In order to navigate the chaos, you have to hold tight and stay loose at the same time.

Repetition also makes the speaker's tone sound a bit mechanical, as in the phrase "pull down your tie / or remove the tie." A more casual way of saying this would be, "pull down or remove your tie." The stilted repetition adds to the speaker's air of dry authority, making the poem sound more like formal instructions than informal advice.

Finally, the constant repetition of "the bus" turns the bus into an object of intense focus. The phrase appears seven times in the poem, counting the title. The result is that the poem itself seems to mimic the crowd's fixation; the speaker is as relentless in *saying* "the bus" as the passengers are in boarding it.

(The repetition of "During" at the start of lines 6, 11, and 26 takes the form of anaphora, discussed as a separate device in this guide.)

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "the bus"
- **Line 3:** "tie"
- **Line 4:** "tie"
- **Line 6:** "During"
- **Line 7:** "the bus"
- **Line 8:** "buttons"
- **Line 10:** "buttons"
- **Line 11:** "During"
- **Line 13:** "the bus"
- **Line 14:** "tighten"
- **Line 16:** "the bus"
- **Line 19:** "tighten"
- **Line 21:** "during"
- **Line 24:** "tight"
- **Line 25:** "the bus"
- **Line 26:** "During"
- **Line 30:** "the bus"

ANAPHORA

As part of its frequent repetition of words and phrases, the poem uses the special form of repetition called anaphora. Its last three sentences—spanning 25 of its 30 lines—all begin with the word "During." The same word also appears at the start of line 21 (though in the middle rather than the beginning of a sentence).

This repetition adds a bit of structure to a poem that's otherwise fairly chaotic (both in terms of its content and its form: jaggedly enjambed free verse). It's a poem of instruction, so anaphora gives the sense that the speaker is instructing "you" in a clear, logical fashion—however startling the actual advice may be.

Finally, the repetition of the word "During," specifically, seems to stretch out the timeframe of this bus-station "battle." What would normally be a five-second activity—boarding a bus—becomes a prolonged struggle that "you" and other passengers are *en*during. As a result, there's little suggestion of *progress*; even the final line ("until you are inside the bus")

doesn't describe actually reaching the goal.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "During"
- **Line 11:** "During"
- **Line 26:** "During"

ALLITERATION

The poem makes heavy use of alliteration, especially /b/ alliteration. Lines 7-20 contain no fewer than 10 /b/ words: "board," "bus" (three times), "buttons" (twice), "battle," "both," "belt," and "being." The other lines of the poem contain some, too, although they're not clustered as densely: "bus" (line 2), "bus" (line 25), "bear" (line 28), and "bus" again (line 30).

All this /b/ alliteration gives the poem a rough, percussive, cacophonous sound, mimicking the violence of the "battle" to board the bus. As those hard consonants rain down—*boom, boom, boom*—readers can practically hear the crowd jostling and "scrambling." There's also a bit of /h/ alliteration in lines 15 and 17: "when you are hauled / into the bus, / you hang in the air." Again, the repetition of sounds underscores the intensity of the action.

As mentioned elsewhere, the poem's frequent repetition of "bus" mimics the passengers' singular focus on boarding the bus. The high number of other /b/ words could be seen as echoing and supporting that effect; in other words, alliteration helps make the already prominent word "bus" even *more* prominent.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "board," "bus"
- **Line 8:** "buttons"
- **Line 10:** "buttons"
- **Line 11:** "battle"
- **Line 13:** "bus"
- **Line 14:** "both"
- **Line 15:** "hauled"
- **Line 16:** "bus"
- **Line 17:** "hang"
- **Line 19:** "belt"
- **Line 20:** "being"

ENJAMBMENT

The poem is heavily enjambed throughout; only 9 of its 30 lines are end-stopped. In fact, in a few instances, the poem drops line-ending punctuation where it would normally appear. Commas might normally fall at the ends of lines 2, 14, and 16, but the poet chooses to omit them, making the poem look even *more* enjambed.

Why might the poet have made these choices? For one thing, enjambment breaks up the flow of the narrative, giving the poem a jagged, unpredictable rhythm. This effect helps evoke the disorder of the crowd scene and allows the reader to pause over details for a moment as they rush by. Heavy enjambment also makes the lines of the stanza look narrow or squeezed, perhaps mimicking the tight crush of the crowd and/or the speaker's instructions to "tighten" one's belt and shoelaces.

In some cases, enjambment draws attention to important words, usually when they fall just before the line break. For example, it emphasizes that boarding the bus requires a "fight" (line 6), a "battle" (line 11), and a lot of "scrambling" (line 21). It stresses the verbs "hauled" (line 15) and "climb" (line 26), making them sound more effortful and intense. It even makes the words "hang in the air" seem to hang in midair for a moment before the next line completes the phrase!

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "arrive / at"
- **Lines 2-3:** "station / pull"
- **Lines 3-4:** "tie / or"
- **Lines 4-5:** "tie / to"
- **Lines 6-7:** "fight / to"
- **Lines 8-9:** "buttons / of"
- **Lines 9-10:** "jacket / to"
- **Lines 11-12:** "battle / to"
- **Lines 12-13:** "entry / to"
- **Lines 14-15:** "shoelaces / for"
- **Lines 15-16:** "hauled / into"
- **Lines 17-18:** "air / and"
- **Lines 19-20:** "belt / to"
- **Lines 20-21:** "undressed / during"
- **Lines 21-22:** "scrambling / at"
- **Lines 23-24:** "spectacles / and"
- **Lines 24-25:** "someone / until"
- **Lines 26-27:** "climb / pay"
- **Lines 28-29:** "mind / words"
- **Lines 29-30:** "meaning / until"

IMAGERY

The poem presents startling, chaotic, even violent imagery in a restrained, matter-of-fact tone. It's as if the speaker is trying to describe a dramatic scene with as little drama as possible. This unexpected contrast heightens the power of the imagery, as the wildest elements of the "battle" at the bus stop are left to the reader's imagination.

Most of the poem's imagery is visual. Take lines 15-25, for example—and take a moment to think about what they're really saying:

> for, when you are hauled
> into the bus,
> you hang in the air

and the shoes may come off,
tighten your belt
to avoid being undressed
during the scrambling
at the door,
remove your spectacles
and hold tight to someone
until you are in the bus.

This is a crowd so frenzied that it will physically sweep "you" off your feet and "haul[]" you up the steps of the bus! It's an outlandish, almost cartoonish image, but the speaker describes it with calm restraint—an approach that somehow makes it more unsettling.

One might expect that the poem would contain more sound imagery, since this "battle" is undoubtedly noisy. But here, too, the speaker chooses restraint, even understatement. The only real reference to sound is an instruction to ignore it: "pay no attention to human sounds" (line 27). By not describing the crowd noise in any detail, the speaker seems to be following their own advice. The reader's imagination has to fill in the gap: these "human sounds" are probably cries of pain, distress, anger, fear, etc. With disturbing calm, the speaker implies that "you" have to put these cries—and any resulting compassion you might feel—out of mind in order to achieve your goal of boarding the bus.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-27

VOCABULARY

Strangulation (Lines 4-5) - Constriction (choking/squeezing) of the neck, hindering blood flow to the brain and potentially causing asphyxiation.

Hauled (Lines 15-16) - Dragged, hoisted, or carried roughly.

Scrambling (Lines 21-22) - Scuffling, jostling, etc.

Spectacles (Line 23) - Eyeglasses.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem consists of a single long stanza. It's written in free verse, meaning that it doesn't follow a meter or rhyme scheme. However, it does feature sporadic identical rhyme, as several words appear more than once at the ends of lines ("tie" and "buttons" appear twice, while "bus" appears five times).

These formal features serve the poem in several ways. The unbroken stanza causes the poem to unfold in one long rush, mirroring the unfolding chaos of the scene it's describing. Likewise, the lack of rigid meter and rhyme aligns with the messiness of the crowd scene, as well as the humble setting (a bus station) and the speaker's fairly plain, direct speech. It would be harder to convincingly depict this kind of turmoil using neat, regular, rhyming lines!

At the same time, the repetition of key words and phrases provides a hint of order within the general disorder. In particular, the repeated emphasis on "the bus" (which ends the poem's last two sentences as well as five of its lines) highlights the *cause* of all this turmoil—which is also the object of the crowd's singular focus.

METER

As a free verse poem, "At the Bus Station" doesn't contain a meter (or a rhyme scheme). It unfolds organically and conversationally, over the course of a single long stanza, in lines ranging from three to nine syllables.

This style fits the poem's description of a messy, chaotic scene. A poem with a regular, even rhythm wouldn't capture the chaos nearly as well! Even the relatively short lines seem to mirror the tight squeeze "you" encounter at the bus station; it's as if the language struggles to move forward, like the crowd struggling to board the bus. The narrow lines also pair well with the instructions to "tighten" your shoelaces and belt (lines 14 and 19).

RHYME SCHEME

"At the Bus Station" is a free verse poem, so it has no rhyme scheme. However, it contains one stray end rhyme ("station"/"strangulation" in lines 2 and 5), and it frequently repeats line-ending words. Lines 3 and 4 both end with "tie," lines 8 and 10 end with "buttons," and lines 7, 13, 16, 25, and 30 all end with "bus." Repetition of words at the ends of lines is sometimes called identical rhyme.

This effect isn't consistent enough to make "At the Bus Station" sound like a rhymed poem, but it's clearly important to the poem's form. The repetition of "bus," in particular, helps illustrate the passengers' obsessive focus on getting aboard the vehicle. The inconsistent repetitions, which at least *hint* at rhyme, also reflect the disorder of the scene while suggesting a struggle to achieve some pattern or order. (After all, the unruly passengers are trying to squeeze into a small container.)

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker addresses "you," the reader, with an air of authority, telling you how to navigate a rough-and-tumble crowd "at the bus station." However, it's not clear exactly who this authority figure is. A stand-in for the poet? A savvy local resident? A travel guide of some sort? Regardless, their advice seems informed by experience. The specificity of their

instructions suggests that they know this station well and have been through this wild experience before. Their language is generally plainspoken and direct, but it has a slight formality (for example, it avoids contractions, using "you are" rather than "you're") that matches their authoritative tone.

In a way, the speaker's ambiguous identity seems to suit the ambiguous situation they're describing. "You," the reader, don't know *who* this is advice is coming from any more than you know *where* this station is or *why* it's so chaotic. You just get thrown into the mix, so to speak, and have to trust that the speaker knows what they're talking about. The fact that the speaker's voice, like the poem's setting, is generic also suggests that this chaotic crowd activity could happen pretty much anywhere.

SETTING

The poem's title specifies its setting: a bus station. As the speaker's instructions to "you" make clear, this is a very crowded station, where just "board[ing] the bus" requires a "fight" with the crowd. The "scrambling" might get so intense, in fact, that the ordinary boundaries of civility might break down completely. The speaker warns that your "shoes may come off," that you might be "undressed" (have clothes torn off your body), and that you even risk "strangulation" with your own necktie.

Notably, the poem doesn't specify a geographical location. The crowd of passengers seems large, so the setting is probably a town or city, but otherwise, this could be any bus station in the world. The implication is that civility can break down anywhere, at any time; violence always lurks below the surface of human life, even among dignified commuters in "jacket[s]," "tie[s]," "spectacles," etc.

At the same time, the poem's details resemble a scene in Chingono's short story "The Commuter" (*Not Another Day*, 2006), which describes a "huge scrambling fight" at a bus station. That story is set in Chingono's native Zimbabwe and features commuters to Harare (the Zimbabwean capital), so the author may have imagined the poem, too, as taking place close to home.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Julius Chingono's "At the Bus Station" appears in the 2011 collection *Together: Stories and Poems*, a collaborative volume of fiction and poetry that also features work by poet and novelist John Eppel. The book was published the year Chingono died at age 65, after a career as one of the most distinguished Zimbabwean authors of his era.

Chingono wrote short stories, a novel, and a play as well as poetry. One of his stories, called "The Commuter" (from the 2006 collection *Not Another Day*, 2006), contains a scene closely resembling the one described in "At the Bus Station." Notice the similar details (highlighted):

> I **arrived at the bus stop** [...] It was a huge **scrambling fight** as people tried **to board the mini-buses**. There was the semblance of a queue but very few people recognised its purpose. [...] I found myself inside a red vehicle. How I managed I'm not sure. But **my feet didn't touch the ground** until I was inside. It was a daily routine. Work actually began at the bus stop. I had become adept even if I **lost shirt buttons** in the process.

The two works were written within a decade of each other, so the overlap probably isn't a coincidence. The "fight" in the story involves commuters to Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe, at a bus station forty miles away. Although the setting of "At the Bus Station" is never named, it may have been inspired by a similar location.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The poem contains no direct historical references, and no details that narrow it down to a specific period (although it clearly takes place sometime after the early 20th century, when commuting via motor bus became common).

As mentioned above, the poem's language overlaps with one of Chingono's stories, "The Commuter," also written during the last phase of his career. The story provides a wealth of descriptive detail about the bus station itself, as well as the commuter town of Norton, Zimbabwe, where the station is located. It also offers some political and historical context about the area, as in these sentences:

> Norton had become a dormitory to Harare's workforce. Although the [bus] journey was expensive, most companies had shut down in our little town that once held so much promise. In addition, Harare had a housing shortage.

It's notable, however, that the poem *omits* any context of this kind. It generalizes its setting so that its events might be taking place anywhere in the world. This approach makes the poem's scenario more universal, almost parable-like—an illustration of the way violence can erupt anywhere people are found.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Video of the Poet — Watch a clip of Julius Chingono discussing how he got started as a writer.

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihr9aPejsqI)

- Remembering Chingono — A fellow writer's reminiscence about the poet and his legacy. (https://www.thezimbabwean.co/2011/01/obituary-on-the-road-with-the-julius-chingono/)
- The Poet's Obituary — Read a 2011 obituary for Chingono, featuring "At the Bus Station." (http://bookslive.co.za/blog/2011/01/05/julius-chingono-renowned-zimbabwean-poet-1946-2011/)
- The Poet's Life and Career — Read a retrospective on Chingono in the Zimbabwean newspaper The Herald. (https://www.herald.co.zw/lest-we-forget-chingono/)
- More on the Poet's Legacy — Read a feature on Chingono at Poetry International. (https://www.poetryinternational.org/pi/int_article/18795/Vale-Julius-Chingono/en/tile)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Allen, Austin. "*At the Bus Station*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 6 Apr 2022. Web. 11 Apr 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Allen, Austin. "*At the Bus Station*." LitCharts LLC, April 6, 2022. Retrieved April 11, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/julius-chingono/at-the-bus-station.