

# SYSTEM OF A CLOWN

*Mass transit journal*

*By Joel Lewis*

**“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 3<sup>rd</sup> 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-flops.

kkkkkkkkkk

POETRY MAKES

FINE DISTINCTIONS  
ABOUT THINGS  
THAT DON’T MATTER

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*YOSSUF LECYZZKI*

kkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk

**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



**“spike in the gas pumps”**

kkkkkkk

**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.”**

kkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk

**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.

kkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk



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

kkkkkkkkkkkk

**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.

kkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk

## **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



**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.

kkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk

**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.

kkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk

**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.

kkkkkkkkkkkk

**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??**

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**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 Reinhardt 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



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.

kkkkkkk

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

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

Girl: Fake-ass cold cuts.

Guy: ...damm!!

kkkkkkkkkkkk

### **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.

kkkkkkkkkk

**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?**

kkkkkkkkkk

**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 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue Station  
The “E” train just pulling in (!)

44 seconds,  
arrive  
at  
42<sup>nd</sup> 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.

kkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk

**3/7, 5:50, waiting at the M8 busstop, 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue and 9<sup>th</sup> 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 was  
... & with a movie crew  
following right behind him

kkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk

**3/13, 10:48pm, on the #1 downtown, at the 59<sup>th</sup> 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! "

kkkkkkkkk

**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!”

kkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk

**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.

kkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk

**3/11, 6:24pm, @ the 14<sup>th</sup> Street Station platform (uptown), 6<sup>th</sup> 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??*”**

kkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk

**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!**

**kkkkkk**

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

Ensnoced 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.

kkkkkkkkkk

**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. Tonelle Avenue bound cars empty , refill, depart while my wallet's contents get

abused by the ATV's crew. Oh to be  
a Chandler, a dowser, a finagler and boot it all

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

kkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk

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

A Spanish-speaking  
Mormon woman  
works this bus

kkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk

**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

kkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk

**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.

kkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk

**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.

kkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk

**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

'gin? "

-says she

cuum back

& 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.

kkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk

**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

