

Wrong Bus

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THE REASON HE'S on the wrong bus is sitting three seats in front of him. Her hair is tugged back quite harshly in a copper-coloured ponytail, except it hasn't been fully pulled through the loop, so that it is itself a loop: thick, with the ends sticking up in a Hiawatha feather-effect towards the top of her head. In the groove down the back of her neck, a loosely curled strand, a tendril. The temptation to lean right forward and blow at it, try to stir it, to watch the bounce of it, is very great. When she turns her head to look out of the window, he is presented with the profile which first claimed his attention, more Modigliani than Botticelli: long nose with a swoop to it, small silver-studded ear, fragile chin.

When we look at someone long and hard, perhaps we subtract a piece of that person. It could be the same with mere objects. Who knows—it may be that we steal a tiny facet of another dimension of the object or the person, in order to pack it away in our memory. Perhaps it might work in the very way that causes some to fear the camera: those people who think it will suck out their soul. The girl feels his stare. She feels it as theft, he can tell. With difficulty, he shifts his eyes away as she turns on him the back of her head.

The day before yesterday the wrong bus came by. He was standing at the stop waiting, none too patiently, for the right one, when another drew up. Exactly in front of him, as if deliberately manoeuvred into place, the girl's profile halted. He couldn't help but look. When she turned her head and met his eyes with her own, wide and just a little indignant; when her small full mouth gathered itself together in displeasure as she turned quickly away, then a sharp shaft of something red hot seemed to bury itself in his chest.

He didn't think of moving, almost forgot to breathe, until the bus pulled away. Then foolishly he chased along the pavement, at first beside,