

Second Prize: Elisabeth Pillar (University of Nottingham), "Zoning Out"

The engine sputters to life and the bus pulls hastily out of the stop, teetering and tipping slightly, and for a moment I imagine it toppling and my body being flung like a rag doll from one side to the other and feel for a second, entirely unsafe in the thing I ride every day. But the feeling slips away with a blink and the reminder that I am still securely in the seat that I always sit in - at least most of the time - on the top deck, at the front on the left.

Tonight, the streets are wet from a day of slow downpour and the lights; red, green, white, amber, glitter through the steamed-up window and shine in brilliant raindrop spheres, each one a sequin on a black cloth.

I let my body ease into the seat, loosening its tired muscles. I think about tomorrow and run the times through my mind; if I've got work at 11.00, then I can wake up at 9.30, which gives me 8 hours to sleep and an hour to get ready and 30 minutes to cycle. I start to list all the things I need to do and then remembering I'd agreed to get drinks with Rhiannon in the evening, I begin to feel the tight ball in my chest begin to swell.

Time seems to be shrinking these days. Each hour can breeze by so easily and if you haven't done your best to fill it with something 'productive', and have instead spent it socializing or scrolling Tik-Tok or sleeping, then you find yourself feeling that ball grow bigger and your heart beating faster and your breath shortening.

The bus stops at a light and I watch a homeless man in the street, sitting with legs stuck out before him like an abandoned toy action figure that nobody wanted to play with. He stares at the road, motionless, seemingly unaware of the rain or of anything really. He's completely in his own world, and I suppose, up here, watching him through the obscured window, I'm completely in mine. Protected by this shield of metal and glass and in this seat - my seat - comfortably perched above the world, watching it all from afar.

Absent-mindedly, I catch eyes with the man smoking a straight outside the off-licence and recoil. I hadn't noticed he was there, staring at me. And as the bus pulls away, the picture of his leering smile imprints itself in my mind's eye, like when you look at a screen too long and upon closing your eyes are left with the inverse image, a grotesque twist of the real thing.

All the way home I can't shake the feeling of having been snatched down from my comfortable place, high up on the top deck, at the front, in the seat on the left - my seat - now on the street, on the floor, with the rain and the world and everything in plain sight.