

Greyhound, or an ethnography of lost souls

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Abstract

The Greyhound bus synthesizes mobility and stuckedness. In the play of travel and breakdown, I find a way to understand how the mobility of capital meets the stuckedness of people. In the process of being gutted by venture capitalists, the Greyhound company is an increasingly fragile place for travelers with few options to make their way through the United States. At the same time, the instability of this travel option makes it a voyeuristic portal into wandering souls. I draw from my experiences riding the Greyhound to understand how a soul wanders and waits, searching for home and finding itself free and alone.

“Well, I’ve been working on becoming what I am
In this bus terminal bathroom
And these days I dream like I live
Off trash and scammed Greyhound passes”
~Wingnut Dishwashers Union, Free and Alone

“Who me?”

Yes, miss... may we ask why you chose GREYHOUND for your trip?
“Because it’s the friendly way to travel—that’s why I always go Greyhound! Aboard a SuperCoach, you meet so many interesting, neighborly people... everybody seems to have a good time.”
~1951 Greyhound Bus Advertisement

I’d like to write an ethnography of lost souls. I’d have to trace the line of my soul’s wandering. I’d need a method that flees and then gets stuck, that dwells in the anonymous flight of strangers, conspirators, and degenerates. I’d refuse to distinguish the three. I’d get stuck in the muck of their intermingling, the same that clings to my soul.

I’ve been working on becoming what I am. August 2024, unable to rent a car because I lost my wallet, phone, and keys over the course of the summer, I reluctantly book a trip on the Greyhound. I’d told myself I would never take the Greyhound again. With my thirtieth birthday in a week, I’m breaking my promise, failing to make it out of my twenties without another disorienting voyage.



FIGURE 1 Charcoal drawing by the author.

The previous trips had been during terrible times in my life. Moments of disconnection from the love I thought I held. Breakups, fallouts with friends, a resigned return to my Mom's after 2 weeks of couch surfing—the trip to the Greyhound stop at Port Authority in Manhattan always felt like an acknowledgement of my inability to hold my idea of my life together. I would ride the subway to the bus terminal, smelling of mismanaged plans and overbearing emotionality. The anonymity, a reprieve from the interlaced mistakes and loves I was unraveling from.

2 a.m., at the Richmond, Virginia Greyhound bus terminal, I dwell in the ruins of the United States' first intercity bus system (Figure 1). The company's streamlined terminal, now a cluster of gray tiles, fluorescent lights, an abandoned restaurant, and neglected help desk (Wrenick, 2007). The uncomfortable metal benches house 30 bewildered riders searching for a new route after a bus cancellation, 40 half-asleep travelers, and a handful of jittery junkies crashing from their most recent high.

In the terminal, I wander between conversations with other travelers, reproachful thoughts, existential ennui, and pragmatic confusion over how I will make it home. I am depressed, but lucid, hopeful that the wandering of my soul through empathy and reflection might free me from this feeling of being stuck.

And so I came to this method that lurches forward.

The Greyhound has historically been a vital mode of transportation for working class and Black Americans, even as it complied with segregation laws throughout the 1930s, 40s, and 50s (Jackson, 1984, 85–86). Following the 1946 Supreme Court case *Morgan v. Virginia*, segregation of interstate bus lines was found unconstitutional under the interstate commerce clause of the Constitution (Wells, 2021, 10–11). The Supreme Court maintained that segregation of local bus lines was still at the discretion of state lawmakers, resulting in the forced relocation of Black riders to the less comfortable back axle seats by belligerent bus drivers, aggressive white riders, and local police in southern states. In instances where

seats were oversold, Black passengers were required to stand in the aisle, “or just told to take the next bus, which might not arrive for hours” (Wells, 2021, 10).

After integration in 1961, Greyhound responded to the extensive Black migration from the South to the North through targeted advertising in Black media, the creation of new bus routes to cities with high Black population growth, and the employment of Black workers as bus drivers and terminal employees (Jackson, 1984, 110–112). The increase in Black ridership did not result in the improvement of travel conditions as delays, breakdowns, and unsafe terminals remained constant throughout the company's history (Wellington, 2010).

The promise of racial inclusion within the Greyhound company was infused with the same disappointment (Taylor, 2019). Greyhound bus drivers and terminal employees have long criticized the Company's predatory working conditions. Workers undertook a strike in 16 states in 1937, a wildcat strike from Jacksonville, Florida to Lexington, Kentucky in 1950, a 2-month long strike in 1983 that resulted in the killing of one striking driver by a replacement worker, and a 38-month long strike from 1990 to 1993 in which another driver was killed by a replacement worker (Associated Press, 1983; Crane, 1990; Jackson, 1984; Wellington, 2010). Each time the Greyhound Company tried to render them stuck in low paying wages and exploitative jobs, workers walked away from the bus.

As a white, middle-class academic, my perspective dwells in the wake of the promise and punishment of the Greyhound. I inherit the Greyhound as a racialized and classed infrastructure, an ambivalent chunk of metal and concrete that churns through riders with few other options.

On the hard metal bench of the Richmond terminal, I wait for the same 8 a.m. connection, the *very same* bus as every other passenger. We share a melancholy in our waiting; a creative, almost spiritual feeling that helps us navigate the uncertain pathways of this necessary but failing infrastructure. My method reflects on this melancholy as a feeling entangled with the racialized and classed history of the Greyhound.

2:30 a.m., Orlando is confused by our predicament. We are strangers sharing in the disorientation of a missed connecting bus. Our previous bus's driver had pulled over for an hour to clean up some combination of fluids a baby had spewed onto a bus seat, triggering a chain of events that left us stranded in the Richmond terminal. With the next bus to Raleigh not until 8 a.m. and little interest from Greyhound in remedying our predicament, we resign to waiting. I offer some Jolly Ranchers to the middle-aged Black woman sitting next to me who grabs more than I'd anticipated. I decide to forgive her after she mentions she is on her way to a funeral.

Orlando takes one or two and offers me a Tollhouse cookie in return. He is a Puerto Rican man in his mid-60s in good shape, but unsure how to navigate the Greyhound helpline. He is transferred only to be put on hold, only to be disconnected, a cycle of defeats that frustrates him, yet he refuses to unload on the next unhelpful customer service agent. He switches between reassuring his nearby girlfriend in Spanish and asking me for advice on how to reconstruct his trip to Charleston, South Carolina.

I ask Orlando why he decided to take the Greyhound. “I thought it would be a fun adventure,” he remarks, the hollowed out excitement reverberating in the hangerlike bus terminal.

With our belongings strewn between us and our eyes scanning for unsavory characters, I gather Orlando enjoys wandering. After his father died and left him some money, he moved from the Lower East Side of Manhattan to Puerto Rico to pursue a zen life. In his late 50s, the movement of his soul followed the path of return to his homeland. He lived with his dog on a hillside, enjoying a solitude that contrasted with his youth spent chasing women. “Growing up with sisters, I always did well with the ladies,” he brags to me. I try to connect with him, sharing that I'd lived in the East Village from

2020 to 2022, but realize my mid-20s experiences of going to protests and organizing noise shows didn't resonate with his nuyorican (the term for New Yorkers of Puerto Rican descent) experience. The bars, headshops, and boutiques of the modern East Village, populated by a gaggle of yuppies, NYU students, and stealthily wealthy burnouts, had terraformed the neighborhood.

We both sought adventure, but in different ways. He'd struck up a telephone romance with a friend of a friend, their long chats breaking up the reflective tempo of his hillside dwelling. When he returned to New York to visit family, he had thought a shared trip down south on the Greyhound would bring him closer to his paramour. Not talkative, but also nonplussed by the experience, she sits a couple seats from us as we talk deeper into the night.

In the terminal, I am stuck in my sadness, hoping a conversation might help me move forward.

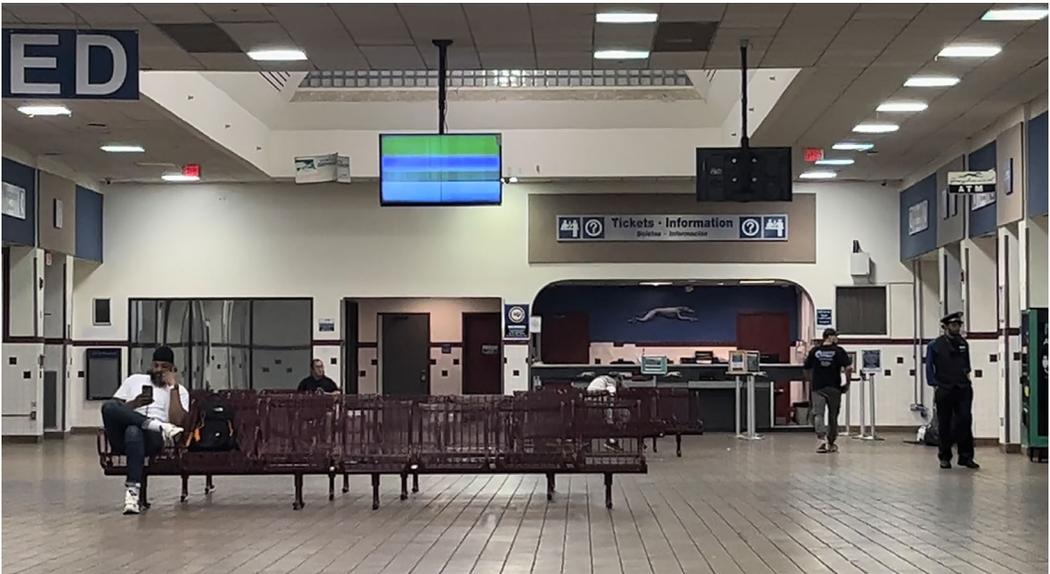
I don't tell Orlando why I'm riding the Greyhound.

Maybe I am bored by my own melancholy. Traveling down to spend my 30th birthday with my Mom feels like a blessing and a compromise. I appreciate my Mom's enthusiasm for celebrating with me, but I resent my own inability to imagine a fulfilling birthday for myself in New York. That summer had been defined by bouncing around from noise shows to raves to readings, trying to find some comfort of community between hazy conversations and harsh sounds.

My medication and meditation could only go so far in redirecting my lost soul. My Mom told me to uncover the creativity of melancholy, to appreciate the spiritual underpinnings of sadness. A spiritual approach to sadness "foregrounds matters of faith and hope as relevant to the experience of being stuck," suggesting psychic, spiritual, biological, and physical causes of and treatments for depression (Cvetkovich, 2012, 102).

Still, the Greyhound terminal is a strange church. And I am a reluctant convert.

4:51 a.m., I stare up at the broken television. It glitches through attempts to display the day's itinerary across its spiderwebbed fractures (Video 1). The green, blue, and red pixels bleed out beneath the fluorescents and cylindrical fixtures that filled the arched room. The Greyhound is not fun.



VIDEO 1 Video by the author. Video content can be viewed at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/anh.70083>.

The bus and the terminals all feel vaguely unsafe. The gray-brown tile is a color primed to absorb dirt, blood, and shit. The urinals are roped off, holding a backwashed slush of suspect contents. Exhausted, I make an easy mark, but it is hard to think that anyone here has enough direction to hit a lick. The danger lies more in our collective vulnerability. We are exposed to each other as fleshy, insecure, unstable bodies, reliant on the Greyhound to arrive to make any progress toward who we are.

In the early morning haze, Orlando offers some sage advice. “Build that relationship with yourself,” he stresses, “you have to be able to ask yourself the questions you need to grow.” On the hillside in Puerto Rico, he was alone for the first time in his life, a luxury afforded only by his inheritance.

I feel he's right. The lesson resonates with my own struggles with friends and lovers, moments where I'd defined myself too much by relationships, losing that connection to myself in the euphoria of possibility that others bring. A cruel but kind joke where I am reminded that my smelly solitude in the Greyhound station is what I need.

When you're stuck in the Greyhound terminal, you have to ask yourself how you got into this situation. There is usually a series of mistakes that precede the moment of being fucked over by the Greyhound that almost make you feel worthy of being fucked over, as if your poor decision-making is being rewarded. I want to be worthy of the Greyhound.

5:20 a.m., the tweaker couple is having a hard time. They are shaking and crying, fighting and hugging—*vibrating* in that way amphetamine addicts do when forced to wander through open space. There is a frenetic energy that's collapsing in on itself. They use their too-big white t-shirts to wipe away their tears.

The Greyhound experience is inescapable from voyeurism. The terminal and the bus are public stages. Misfortune and difficulty play out in such proximity to others. Everyone's been awake too long, mixing together in this dingy dystopia.

Orlando and his girlfriend board a bus around 6 a.m., deciding to take the earlier trip back to New York rather than to wait for the 8 a.m. heading south. I walk outside the terminal and watch the peach sunrise (Figure 2). As the colors gush from the sky, enlivening this marred stretch of pavement slinking in the shadows of a minor league baseball stadium, I am struck by how the bus terminal is surrounded by newbuild, gentrifier-style condos.

Were the wave of yuppies drawn to the opportunity to gawk at the Greyhound riders?

Were they, like me, trying to reconstruct some sense of self against the image of ragged travelers?

I discover the reality is more banal. In 2021, Greyhound was bought by the German company, Flix. Three dozen of the stations, including the Richmond stop, were sold to a different company, Twenty Lake Holding, a subsidiary of the investment firm Alden Global Capital, who, like many hedge funds, saw a profit to be made in gutting a corporation for its most valuable parts, namely real estate (Horsley, 2024; see also Business Week, 1969). Local news reports plans to demolish the Richmond station and build 650 additional rental properties (Platania, 2023). Access to affordable travel lost to the movement of capital.

Inside, I stare at the hound. He runs through the air. Body extended to the maximum distance. Stretch the speed. When I sit in the terminal of discarded people, the hound mocks me. His grace and agility, a reminder of my stuckedness. The Greyhound will always break down, run late, lack a driver, refuse to transport you in the manner you paid them too much money to do.

But it is also the possibility of flight. The option to hop on the Greyhound to escape life's difficulties. The Greyhound offers the dream of speed, even if breaking free from the dog track is impossible.



FIGURE 2 Photograph by the author.

The Greyhound teaches complacency. Accept that the bus will break down, accept that the driver will not show up to work, accept that you have missed your connection and will need to wait 8 h—accept your stuckedness. I wonder if this is being worthy of the Greyhound, but I fear that this is internalizing a disciplining morality, of being acclimated to the collar and leash, of embracing the dog track as freedom. As anthropologist Ghassan Hage demurs: “Even when the bus does not come, even when people are feeling stuck in a queue that is not moving, they heroically keep on queuing. And this is self-reproducing: the more one waits and invests in waiting, the more reluctant one is to stop waiting” (2009, 8).

1:00 p.m., at an eastern North Carolina Greyhound terminal, a woman is crying and screaming. She is disoriented, unsure of when the transfer bus to Wilmington, North Carolina will arrive. Sitting in the waiting area, I glance over, a mixture of curiosity and boredom turning my attention to the unfolding scene. The woman's shrieks grow, not taking on the tone of a disgruntled customer, but more of a frightened and confused child. It becomes clear that the woman has some sort of mental disability. She clutches her Bible in a vain attempt to restore order to the Greyhound schedule, now 2 h delayed and with no updates on the status of our transfer bus.

The Greyhound employee finally snaps, yelling at the woman as loud as she can, demanding she take her seat and remain silent. For my fellow voyeurs, the moment shatters the phantasmic window containing the “interesting, neighborly people” we watch for entertainment. The brutal reality

of this woman being berated by an overworked employee, a public disciplining for not adequately enduring her stuckness.

Still, Greyhound workers are stuck. This employee is another in a line of Black Greyhound workers called to tasks beyond their jobs, given little support from the Greyhound company, trying to make sense of how to get people to their destinations.

Both the woman and the worker cry out in pain, trying to escape being stuck in different ways.

After another hour, the Greyhound employee announces that she will be calling Uber XLs to cart us the 2 h to Wilmington. The bus is broken and there is no chance of repairing it that day. She points toward me, a middle-aged woman, two thirty-somethings, and the woman with her Bible, and says we will be taking the minivan pulling up outside. The anonymity of gawking broken, I prepare myself for an uncomfortable ride. I chat with the middle-aged woman who just dropped her child off at NC State for the semester. We watch the woman with her Bible select the passenger seat, open her Bible, and sit silently. The warm guilt creeps across my face, but I decide that reflecting on my ableism could wait until I have gotten more than 2 h of sleep.

When the conversation dies out with the woman, I turn to the man in his mid-30s. I'd been eavesdropping on his conversation with the other woman. I couldn't tell if they knew each other or just had the familiarity of people used to difficult living. The woman is concerned about her dog. She had been living in her car in a Walmart parking lot with her pet and was arrested. She doesn't know who she is returning to. But she hopes to find her dog stuck on the flattened concrete.

I notice the two thirty-somethings are wearing hospital bracelets, the circular rings of institutionalization and criminalization not yet removed from their wrists. I chat with the man about music, but that quickly turns to talking about drinking. He lives a melancholic life on the coast. Struggling to stay away from the bottle, getting himself into trouble, playing guitar wasted. I try to sympathize, mentioning friends who successfully beat their addictions. He seems hopeful, but uncertain. We don't dwell on his bracelet, but pain and exhaustion cling to his words.

In the car, we all share an unspoken ache. I must have left New York 16 h earlier; my body and mind are collapsing from the trip. I'm trying to make sense of my story in theirs, to be empathetic and voyeuristic. Sore bodies and fragile emotions stuffed into a long car ride. We wander home.

Is my ethnography of lost souls about wandering or waiting?

A soul wanders. It departs from its connection to life. This connection may be strained. Life's purpose, relationships with others, morality—all lines of flight a wandering soul might navigate. In this detour, a soul's connection to life may be threatened by vice, indulgence, pain, or neglect. The biblical idea of lost souls imagines a stray sheep having left the shepherd's flock. A loss is an opportunity to return.

But I wonder if the wandering lost soul valorizes a strange morality. If the lost soul is celebrated for enduring its journey and returning to the flock, do we forget why it wandered off in the first place? In exile, a lost soul is free and alone. But exile itself is always a matter of governments and capital.

A soul waits. It craves the return of life. A soul's belief that the joy, creativity, and passion that life imparts will regenerate once life finds its way back. A lost soul *is* purgatory—*depression*—waiting for the return of good times.

2 p.m. 2 years earlier, at the Greyhound terminal in Richmond, I wait for my return bus to New York City. The driver wandered off, abandoning the bus and its passengers until a new driver could be found. A bus without a driver; passengers without a path—lost souls.

After multiple hours, a gruff but precise veteran takes the hound's leash. He immediately barks over the intercom that there will be no drug use, no talking on the phone, no disruptions. He will happily pull the bus over and eject any errant passengers. He stresses his time in the military and that he plans

to maintain the precise rush of the bus. The only stops are when he decides to pull off on the side of the highway to smoke a cigarette.

On that silent, 8 h bus ride, what is my relationship to the other riders? The distinction between empathy and voyeurism collapses when we join together as passengers on the Greyhound. In the silence summoned by the driver, I hear my Mom's advice to accept the spirit of my melancholy as a passenger, a companion, a guide.

Each conversation, every heartbreak, all the moments of being stuck—*together*—trace our soul's journey, lost in waiting or present in loss. Each bus is “actually *the very same bus*” locked in “a daily eternal return” that appears “to the passengers as a fragment (an insignificant one) of their destiny” (Sartre, 2004, 259). Does a soul wait or wander? A question of destiny.

Destiny entangles us in the waiting and wandering of others. It is the mobility we gain from each flight taken, each greyhound escaping the dog track, each conversation after the bus has broken down.

On that silent, 8 h bus ride, I write a poem (Figures 3 and 4).

Waiting and wandering, I return home, free and alone.

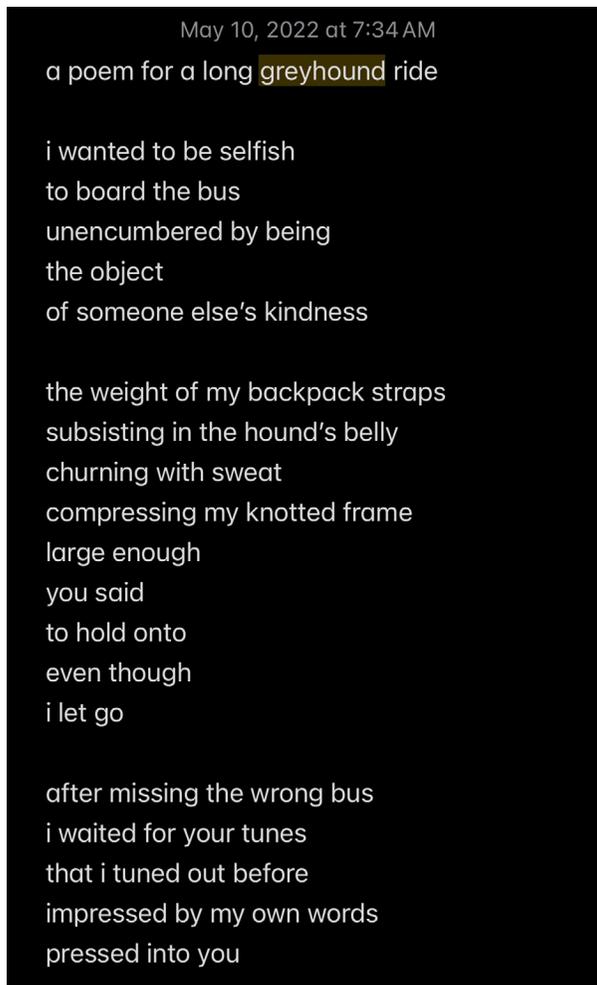


FIGURE 3 Screenshot by the author.

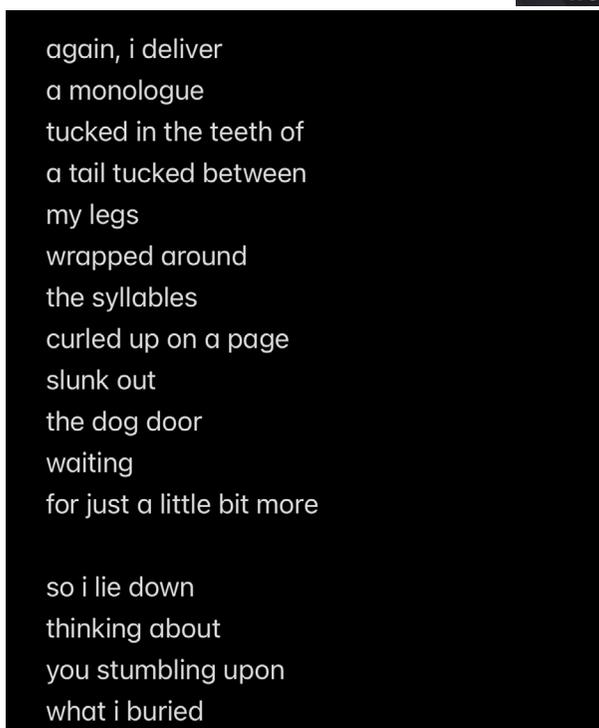


FIGURE 4 Screenshot by the author.

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