

N.P. van Wyk Louw Overheard on the Bus

A native comes and sits down next to me, not too close, not too far, with complete nonchalance. On the seat in front of me already sits another, neatly dressed; he got on with what is clearly a bottle in his hand, wrapped in newspaper but by no means concealed. The fellow that sits next to me is also very neatly clothed and has a little bit of a beard; he wears a dark red neckerchief with white dots.

The conductor comes along. The native next to me begins very slowly and calmly to get himself ready to pay: lifts his knee, draws his trouser leg high up, and displays a bright green sock neatly attached to a suspender. He works so unhurriedly that the conductor is already clipping the tickets of people down in front and only returns when he is finished with everyone else. My seat-mate is still busy: from out of the sock he has drawn a white handkerchief and this he folds open ceremoniously; inside are some banknotes: I see a five-pound note and a few pounds. He takes out one of the pounds, blows on it a couple of times, flicks it with his little finger, and then presents it.

"Why don't you spit on it?"

Silence.

"How far are you going?"

"Seepunt. Enkel." ["Sea Point. One way."]

I am astonished that he speaks Afrikaans.

"Haven't you got smaller?"

"Ek wil Seepunt toe gaan, en ek betaal." ["I want to go to Sea Point. And I'm paying."]

"You bl—kaffir . . ." mumbles the conductor, but surely he understands enough Afrikaans to know what Seepunt means.

Here is a holding of one's own, I think to myself; and suffering a little for it. Why did I prove a coward in the same situation and say Camps Bay instead of Kampsbaai?

The conductor slowly gives him his change, and he counts along with him, shilling for shilling.

He has nearly a pound in his hand, and the bus is already in Sea Point where he has to get off. When the conductor walks off, I hear the native: "Ek is 'n Vrystater en

ôrlaam." ["I am a Free Stater and an old hand."] That explains for me his holding his own. And from his speech I detect that he has had a little. And now he sees what the other one in front of us has in his hand.

"Haai, wat het jy daar?" ["Hey, what have you got there?"] And he nearly falls over onto the seat in front of him.

No answer.

"Komaan, waar klim jy af?" ["Come on, where are you getting off?"]

No answer.

"Wie's jy dan so danig?" ["Who do you think you are, then?"]

Very dignified: "I am English alone."

"Is dit brandewyn?" ["Is it brandy?"]

No answer.

"Kom jong, ek gee jou four-and-six vir die bottel wyn!" ["Come on, old chap, I'll give you four and six for the bottle of wine!"]

Silence.

"Vyf sjielings!" ["Five shillings!"]

Silence.

My friend is now pretty much lying on the other one's shoulder.

"Kyk, dis 'n handvol geld! Klim jy saam met my af." ["Look, it's a handful of money! Let's get off together."]

But the other one holds onto what he has. And now my Free Stater must also get off – this he *does* remember – staggering against two white women sitting closest to the aisle.

Translated by Mark Sanders – presented as an appendix to his article in this volume, "In die bus afgeluister": The Intellectual in the City".