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## **[The Navidad Incident: The Downfall of Matías Guili](http://wordswithoutborders.org/article/the-navidad-incident)** **[incident](http://wordswithoutborders.org/article/the-navidad-incident)**

The Navidad Incident *takes place in the fictional South Sea island republic of Navidad. The novel opens as a delegation of Japanese war veterans pays an official visit to the ex-World War II colony, only to see the Japanese flag burst into flames. The following day, the tour bus, and its passengers, simply vanish.*

### BUS REPORT 1

At 6:00 A.M., lowest ebb tide, a bus was sighted crossing the lagoon between Gaspar and Baltasár islands, sending ripples across the surface. The yellow and green vehicle careened this way and that, racing gaily over the crystal blue shallows. The first rays of the morning sun over the low central hills of Baltasár glinted off the windows as the bus took to the water out past the airport bearing northeast, skimmed the tip of Tsutomu Point, then disappeared in the direction of Colonia.

### BUS REPORT 2

As the afternoon Southwest Airlines charter departed with 113 passengers on board, including 99 returning tourists from the previous week's charter, a bus was sighted taking off directly behind their Boeing 737. The bus moved down the runway at the same speed as the plane, nosed up at exactly the exact angle, and rose skyward in similar style. It was like a child playing airport.

For some reason, no one in the control tower saw this development as dangerous. It wasn't until both the bus and the 737 had disappeared into the clouds that it occurred to anyone that even by sheer determination a bus without wings should not be able to get airborne. The traffic control crew contacted Regional Airspace Authority in Guam, though of course they balked at reporting a flying bus. Instead they reported a near miss between a Boeing jetliner and a small craft. The radar in Guam, however, picked up only the passenger plane, which was flying on course; their reading was that there had been no accident. The Southwest Airlines jet itself likewise called in "no sign of any aircraft in the area." The small craft had submitted no flight plan and by now was probably off in some other quadrant.

One week later, when the next Southwest Airlines Boeing 737 arrived with another 122 tourists, the off-chance hope that the bus might also return failed to materialize.

### BUS REPORT 3

A fisherman set out by canoe from the village of Uu, and paddled through a southern break in Sagulli Reef to the outer coral slopes and the open sea, where big fish are to be had. Only, this day he had no luck. From morning low tide until afternoon, he didn't see a fish worth the name. Some days are like that. He was about to call it quits and head home, when a large something cut across his field of vision—a very big *cabrilla*. Stealthily, he dived after it; the fish didn't notice it was being chased. *Cabrilla* are none too bright, but curious, which makes them easy to catch. The fisherman was closing in from behind when suddenly the fish darted off. He wanted to give it one last try, but ran out of breath, so he had to surface and hope he wouldn't lose his quarry by the time he dived again. He found the fish calmly feeding on the coral in the distance. Slowly, he swam toward it, this time coming right up on the fish; he pulled the rubber sling on his harpoon gun and let fly. The point pierced it straight through.

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That's when he felt he was being watched. Strange things do happen in the sea, he remembers thinking, as he turned around to look—and there behind him was a bus, and peering out the windows were old men! Their faces looked yellow underwater. The passengers waved at him, pointing at the fish skewered on his harpoon, and even clapped their hands applauding his achievement. The yellow and green stripes on the bus seemed to dance in the rippling coral sea light, yet inside it was apparently dry. Perhaps the chassis was waterproofed? He smiled through his diving mask and waved back at the old men, then went up for air. But when he ducked his head under to have another look, the bus was nowhere in sight. He deposited his fish in the canoe, and dived in again, but no bus. Only when he went home to his village and told his mates did he learn it was the missing bus.

#### BUS REPORT 4

Sunday morning, Santa María Cathedral in Baltasar City, a bus attended first Mass at 7:00 A.M. As parishioners took their seats and the priest approached the altar, the bus was already there, at the end of a pew far to the back. Throughout the service it sat quietly with its engine off, so despite its size, only those people sitting in the same row and the priest and acolyte who faced the congregation even noticed it. According to testimony from those seated nearby, during the hymns and litany two voices came from inside, probably the driver and young Foreign Office staffer assigned to accompany the veterans group. A former choirmaster went on record as saying that one sang at a high tenor pitch, the other bass.

When the collection basket was passed around, witnesses saw an arm reach out from the driver's seat and contribute a substantial number of banknotes. However, when the time came to take Communion the bus did not rise. Most probably it—or they—felt unworthy to partake of the sacrament. Later, this puzzled people: on the one hand, if there were any sinful people on board it had to be the Japanese ex-soldiers, not the two locals duty-bound to drive and assist them, though they too presumably felt guilty consorting with wrongdoers. The subject of these most un-Catholic venalities was much debated among the faithful of the capital.

Once Mass was over, as if to avoid any questions, the bus slipped outside, as unobtrusively as it came. The backing maneuver was a feat of consummate skill. People ran after it, but all they saw were the taillights rounding a bend in the road. Others ambling about the Cathedral lawn infused with righteous grace after Mass saw the bus leave, but for some reason didn't think of giving chase by car.

Another rather more secular question people later asked themselves: what exactly were those Japanese doing all through Mass? And the answer was, quite obviously, they must have been sleeping. So the only two good Catholics on board, the driver and the Foreign Office aide, probably had conspired to take the bus to church, even though the sinful forty-seven inside slept right through the angelic hymns of praise.

#### BUS REPORT 5

Naafa Village in the mid-afternoon. The villagers were stretched out on their sleeping mats at home or lazing in the shade of palm trees or secretly sharing someone else's bed. Right at the peak of the afternoon heat, a bus strolled into the local general store. The shopkeeper was dozing in the back room when he heard someone calling, and hobbled out to find a bus waiting at the counter.

"Sure is hot," said the bus.

"Yeah, mighty hot," said the shopkeeper. "I's jus' napping."

"Sorry to wake you. Some folks asked me to buy some things."

"Like what, f'rinstance?"

"Well," said the bus, glancing at a shopping list, "twenty bottles of Coke, ten bottles of Fanta Orange and three of Fanta Grape, plus five Dr Peppers and eleven Sprites."

"Tall order," said the shopkeeper. He hurried to round up the required items, but came up short: only seven Cokes and four Sprites were chilled. So he did what any self-respecting shopkeeper does. He headed off to the stockroom for the missing number of bottles and mixed them in with the rest, warm or not. The bus didn't seem to notice. The shopkeeper took ages ringing up the drinks, but the bus just waited patiently, handed over the money, loaded all the bottles, and drove off in a cloud of blue exhaust. The shopkeeper then returned to his nap.

The next day around the same time, the bus reappeared.

"More soda pop?" asked the shopkeeper.

"No, come to return the empties," said the bus, lining up the bottles on the counter.

Again the shopkeeper took ages calculating the deposit before paying out a grand total of \$2.45, whereupon the bus collected its refund and left.

#### BUS REPORT 6

That year, the village of Placia, a thirty-minute walk from Colonia, was plagued by a curious disease. Those afflicted would wander through the village, each via a fixed arbitrary path; some, known as "express" cases, moved at a faster clip than the others and went straight from one end of the village to the other without stopping; still others went back and forth to Colonia once a day. Obviously contagious, though no pathogen was ever isolated, the disease gave those afflicted a somehow "squared-off," "boxlike" appearance with bright, gleaming eyes, hence the malady came to be known (reasonably enough) as "busitis." Aside from running around and not working, however, there seemed to be no other noticeable symptoms or harmful side effects. And since most families typically had one or two slackers who never worked anyway, people may have talked, but no one took it very seriously. Moreover, the epidemic was very brief; according to the regional health authorities, the worst of it died down after only three weeks, and ten days later the last remaining case had completely recovered with no visible aftereffects.

Nonetheless, other reports claimed that even years later, certain of those afflicted still developed bright "headlight" eyes after dark. Likewise, rumor had it that several mothers who became pregnant during the epidemic gave birth to babies with ever-so-slightly "angular," "blockish" features. Husbands in Placia are not normally known to be jealous, so the children were accepted and raised with love, though inevitably some of the womenfolk continued to whisper about that "sexy bus."

#### FINAL BUS REPORT

Foreign visitors to the islands are often surprised to learn that more than a mere means of transportation, buses are so highly regarded here they almost seem to be objects of worship. The bus network links the capital to most other towns and villages, even extending to settlements with only a few houses. As a result, citizens enjoy an admirable degree of mobility for such a small country, a fact which forms the basis of certain customs.

When an infant is born, after its first bath and suckling at its mother's breast, its very next experience is a bus ride. The child's maternal grandparents (and the mother as well if her postpartum recovery is quick) typically board at the nearest bus stop with the swaddled babe in arms. The mother's husband and brothers and sisters see them all off, and they ride to the end of the line and back. The routes are not especially long, so the trip takes thirty minutes to an hour at most, just long enough to answer their prayers for many safe returns. With this "first bus," the child becomes a "full-fare" member of the family who, it is hoped, will grow up strong as a bus.

It is also not unusual for people with ailments to ride buses for their salutary effect. All buses in the country are equipped with a special sick berth for this purpose. Something like a stretcher suspended in hammock fashion, the bed cushions hard shocks on the roughest roads, while the pulsing of the engine is widely believed by the island folk to have curative powers. Navidadians hold that bus vibrations can work wonders. Most sick people who ride around for one or two days will show signs of improvement; some who had to be carried on board will even get off on their

own two feet.

Unknowing foreigners may take alarm at the sight of moribund passengers on buses here. This is not because persons in the throes of death choose to ride buses as a last-ditch panacea, but rather that bus travel is regarded as the first leg of a peaceful journey to the next world and even beyond to rebirth—a custom that is known as the “last bus rite.”

Today, thanks to tales told by tourists and cultural anthropologists’ research, the relationship between health and bus-riding discovered in Navidad has come to the attention of other countries, so we may expect to see similar bus beliefs spreading overseas. We hear that “first bus” practices have already taken hold in certain regions of the Philippines, while recent reports tell of similar trends just now beginning in the southern islands of the Japanese archipelago. Healthy bus, healthy body.

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## Natsuki Ikezawa

**Natsuki Ikezawa** is a novelist, poet, essayist, and translator of modern Greek poetry. Born in 1945, he is regarded as one of the best serious writers in Japan. Ikezawa studied physics as a young man before moving to Greece, where he lived for three years before returning to Japan. He published his first novel at the age of 39, and has gone on to write several more. Among his honors are the Tanizaki-Junichiro Prize, the Mainichi Prize and the Yomiuri Prize.

### Translated from Japanese by Alfred Birnbaum

**Alfred Birnbaum** was born in the U.S. in 1955 and raised in Japan from age five. He studied at Waseda University, Tokyo, under a Japanese Ministry of Education scholarship, and has been a freelance literary and cultural translator since 1980. His translations include Haruki Murakami’s *Wild Sheep Chase*, *Hardboiled Wonderland*, *The End of the World*, and other works; Miyabe Miyuki’s *All She Was Worth*; and Natsuki Ikezawa’s *A Burden of Flowers*. He also compiled the short story anthology *Monkey Brain Sushi: New Tastes in Japanese Fiction*.