

Anywhere You're Going

Poems



Meighan L. Sharp

Cover Art
“*We Are Stardust*”
Robin Poteet
Salem, VA

www.robinpoteet.com

*Winner of RIDE Solutions’ 2016 Art of Mobility Award
presented at the Sidewalk Art Show





Anywhere You're Going

Meighan L. Sharp

Contents

Campbell Court: March	1
Bus 62: Ode for a Dead Bird	2
Everyday	3
Bus 36: Vinton to Campbell Court	4
Bus 75: Anywhere You're Going	5
Instead of a Bus, On Fridays	6
Porch	7
Bus 92: Getting the News	8
Neighborhood Reprise	9
Ms. Forgiveness	10
Artist's Statement	11

Campbell Court: March

Inside the twilight
terminal, netting filters
dimming winter sky,

barrier to sparrows
coasting the diesel-scented
air between idling buses.

A jubilant girl
disguised by her blue walker
and gray hair (spiked

like feathers ruffled
with cold), tugs her red coat, waves
her knit cap, a beanie

she's hand-bedazzled with
L-O-V-E, each letter
a different color.

*That wind, that snow,
I tell you. She pulls out her phone.
You have a garden?*

Shows me a photo—
last summer's variegated
berries, joyous, heaped

on a scarred wood table.
*Ma'am, I say, as we shoulder
toward each other, I have
a square of dirt without a single plan.*

Bus 62: Ode for a Dead Bird

for the Highland Park Writing Club

We sit on the classroom floor at Highland Park—
talk about the *celebration of ordinary things*.
What's ordinary? I ask, and read them a poem
praising dirty sneakers. We can write
about our *shoes*? one kid asks. They start to name
everything they see: What about shelves?
The trashcan? Fences? What about *dirt*?

Think of the places you live, I say.
Think about where you play, wait
for the bus to school, those late April days
you sit on a hot sidewalk with friends.
Leyanna nods as if she gets it, says—
I'm gonna write about a dead bird.
Asks me—*how do you spell rabies?*

They get to work, gripping pencils and pens,
pulling the daily into the poetic, naming
streets, sidewalks, families, neighbors.
Monet praises *sweet Southeast*,
shadowed footprints left in the asphalt of her road.
Isabella sings the smell of Gainsboro's library books,
Brein praises his teeth. Ginny, trees and air.

And that bird? That dead bird? Leyanna stands
and tells us, *It was once alive*. We hush,
and that's her final word.

Everyday

on my way to the bus stop, I count steps
past the woods' landmarks: 519 to the plastic lawn chairs
hitched like uncertain friends to a rotting log,
the last dried bits of daffodils and forsythia giving up,
yellow to green against the chairs' mud-buried legs.

Everyday, early, I count half-marathoners, double dog walkers,
stretching cyclists, the city's sleepless wanderers.
I count car headlights dazzling over my back like exhaled
breaths, rising and receding, rushing to work or workouts
or home from the graveyard shift, the last remnants
of three a.m. coffee burning in the drivers' drowsy throats.

Everyday, I count six seats back, try to get a window,
not the space between windows,
count seven steps down the bus aisle, count people
on or not on the bus. Somebody says, Where's Tatum?
Where's Zion? Where's Miz Parker? Hey—
somebody says to the driver—you've had your meds today.
You're being nice. Quit it, someone else says, just quit.
And I wedge my left arm where glass meets metal, prop
my feet on the bar under the seats, try to make room
for my knees, and everyone quits it
in the dim not-quite sunrise, we all quit it for a moment,
watch the seep of pink across the mountains,
count the steps left in the day, count our breaths until
something like rest settles on us all.

Bus 36: Vinton to Campbell Court

A beautiful day, he says. *Don't you love these days?*
He slides himself carefully, a knee brace

on each leg, into the seat across from me.
Although he takes my hand, asks my name,

asks if I'm married [he shakes his head when I say
yes], his first love, he confides, is his cat. Today,

when he gets home, she'll nap against him in the sun.
Once, his home burned and his love was on oxygen

for two whole days. His entire monthly rent was less
than what he paid to save that cat. You must love her
a lot, I say. *I do*, he says.

[his eyes drift past
mine, out the window, as he thinks how she presses
against the door when she hears him with the key, words
unnecessary between them]

I really love that cat.

Bus 75: Anywhere You're Going

Oh, you've been on the bus for miles, for days. You nodded off somewhere near Melrose and startled back into this life (grocery bags between your feet, chin on your chest) when the driver asked gently, *Where you want to go? Regular stop?* and you thought, butter won't go bad, eggs'll be okay, you thought, maybe today the whole loop, the blink of cherry blossoms brushing the window for your attention, the spark-bright sky telling you to ride all day. Maybe you'll walk to Fair View, those loved and unloved dead speaking to you for the afternoon, their breakfasts and wars and children off to college, those children who struggled with tying their shoes, closing the lid of the toilet, grown now, maybe gone, but you could rest your hand on their names, pry bits of moss off their stones with your thumb. *Where do you want to go?* And you think, maybe Nana's house, when you were a kid, carrying your overnight clothes, your toothbrush in a brown paper bag between your feet, feeling grown, alone on the bus until she met you at her stop.

Oh, the bus is full, these people a densely woven net, their shoulders and legs and knotted thoughts holding you in place. A girl across the aisle touches your hand. You look at the driver, sense riders suspended in benevolent silence around you. You shift a little, get comfortable. *Anywhere*, you say, *anywhere you're going*.

Instead of a Bus, on Fridays

for my father

you'd hitch a ride out of town with a bedroll,
pocket knife, enough fishing line to catch
your supper, the knowledge that if you fell
apart before nightfall, only the nuthatch

or river would hear. My dear, you've passed
more than seventy years since you hid from a storm
out on the prairie, hail flattening tall grass,
a stone cave your refuge from lightning. Now porous

bones betray that leaping, running child—
these days, it's all *fracture* and *fall risk*; not even
trout tempts you to eat. In the exile
of eighty, nobody lets you pack up and leave.

Forgive me, you tell that kid, but listen,
the rain has stopped; you can still
hear the grass unbend, trying to make amends.

Porch

Milk bottles, elbow my knees, please—
here it is, the end of summer and we're all
falling apart, toes tripping over wasted
geraniums, birds beaking leftover seeds.

Rusty wrought-iron railings, please:
contain my misfit heart, trawling
for the dampened brush pile's blatant
spark, the charred arms of tree

limbs felled by the wind. We could
begin again at June, the porch swept
smooth each morning, the news
rolled neatly on the stoop. We could

begin again—before daylight's inept streaks
swing down our street, before we stretch
spiders' filaments with our faces—
while the dying are merely sleeping.

Bus 92: Getting the News

Two pigtailed girls, sister-friends whose feet won't reach the aisle,
fold their legs on the seats, nuzzle their heads into each other's shoulders,
and we can't help but watch them giggling and slapping hands,
making eye contact with us and turning away. Nobody wants them to stop
playing here at the back of the bus, this last day of March madness,
a day so windy the paper held by the guy in Carolina blue
flaps away as soon as he steps out the bus doors at the VA center.
When we ask, *why go to the trouble?* we mean, *it's just a paper, why bother*
gathering all those sections hooked on the barberry bushes when it's only
today's news, stashed by tomorrow in the recycling bin, but those two girls
press their faces against the bus window and watch the care he takes
fetching and folding each page, and those two girls knock on the glass,
give him a thumbs up when he succeeds and ambles toward the hospital,
the entire paper, folded like new, tucked under his arm.

Neighborhood Reprise

Across the leaf-greened street of an April evening, Mrs. Simmons emerges,
apple-cheeked apparition on her stoop. The itinerant lawn crew's arrived,

a long day's journey from someone's grub-laden, dandelioned grass patch.
Above the gas mower, leaf blower chorus, Mrs. S. takes a solo

we preen our ears to hear. She sings the shoulder-tight houses back
to four-squares and farmland, sweeps her hand to the forties and fifties,

and her tune carries past the double lot where families worked a garden
all summer, and the other lot—the one everyone called *burying ground*

and left alone, dirt trails worn through the brambles. She sings
a slate path set by her husband early one fall, sings porches and sidewalks,

lawn chairs and summers, sings pickup games in the street, children
married and gone, until the *guys who used to mow every lawn on the block*
pack up and leave and she stops singing and waves
every hushed one of us home.

Ms. Forgiveness

O that sap-fingered, oak-climbing girl
branch-balances in tree crowns to spyglass
her domain. She likes the old neighborhoods,

cracked sidewalks and clapboard, walkers
and cyclists swift over bridges—*on your left,*
on your left, the brushing air of fleeting touch.

She follows mail carriers and meter readers,
picks scraps from the recycling truck. Early mornings,
kids on buses press faces to windows, trust she's there,

crick their necks to find her, shadowed as a cat bird,
concealed among the leaves. When she catches their eyes,
nods, nine-year-olds straighten spines, breathe deep,

remember she'll come to them in late-life dreams,
banish their sleeplessness and frost.
You did fine, she'll say. *Not to worry, not to worry.*

You don't ride the bus? She's there for you, too—
teetering on fence rails, house eaves, dervish-spinning
through leaves. If you think you can't find her, just lean

against the oak's lowest branch.
Pick any tree. She'll sense your trembling
breath, rain acorns to wake you.

Artist's Statement

Late one afternoon in June, as I worked to finish this collection, storm clouds darkened the sky enough to trigger street lamps. As I stood on my front porch, lightning sparked over distant oaks, and my tenor-saxophone-lugging kid and his friend high-stepped it to our house, their arms flapping, the first swift waves of rain darkening the concrete sidewalks. Nearly two inches of rain fell in an hour.



Later, rusty water seeped through the ceiling in my basement. I was torn. Of course I had to deal with the water, but I was struggling with the form of one poem and didn't want to set it aside. The water felt otherwise.

When the rain stopped, I walked across the street and borrowed a neighbor who helped me to pull disintegrating drywall from the basement ceiling. He loaned us his trash can when ours was full. My kid and his friend rescued books, took out scraps and vacuumed, and then I fed them supper. We cleaned up some more and, in the end, laughed about the mess. What I originally thought of as an interruption turned out to be the whole point.

Buses, like neighborhoods, are full of small kindnesses: the woman who leaves her seat to help another woman carry her groceries to the bus; the man who pulls the stop cord from across the aisle when he realizes my tug hasn't registered; the college student who notices someone left her glasses at home and becomes the person who narrates landmarks passing outside the window so the other passenger recognizes her stop.

When I was chosen as Roanoke's 2016 Writer by Bus, I had visions of uninterrupted writing time as I rode every bus route in the city and narrated my experiences. While I did ride every route (and some more than once), I discovered that many people on the bus wanted to talk, and I felt self-conscious taking notes instead of listening. So, sometimes I'd write on the bus, but more often I'd comment on the weather, and then shut up. I met people. They shared their stories. Many poems in this collection emerged, directly or indirectly, from such bus stories.

The following poems represent only a small fraction of my community experiences while serving as Writer by Bus. I'm a visual thinker, so I posted photos of my travels on the Writer by Bus Facebook page. I handed out writing prompts on the bus and encouraged other riders to submit poems or stories to a box at the Campbell Court ticket window. During March and April, I formed an after-school writing group of kids in grades 2-5 at Highland Park. We worked on "place odes," and "Ode to a Dead Bird," relates a story from that group. I reached out to middle and high school students through the

City Scribe program, and shared several hands-on poetry exercises with the community this past spring during Scribe Fest.

For the opportunity to fuel my imagination as I experienced Roanoke by bus, I'm beyond grateful to the City of Roanoke Arts Commission, RIDE Solutions, and Valley Metro. For allowing me to work with students and hear their thoughts on the neighborhoods they call home, I appreciate the generosity of Dr. Mark Crumme and the students and staff of Highland Park Elementary School; Ciara Mulcahy and the City Scribe program; and Roanoke City Public Schools. I'm glad for my parents who, when I was young, gave me loose change and a bus schedule; my bike- and bus- commuting spouse, Scott Tate; and my son, Toby, who takes bus-window photos like nobody's business! Arts advocate Doug Jackson gave me valuable feedback on these poems and encouraged me to apply for the Writer by Bus program—thank you.

To the many Valley Metro riders who extended kindnesses and shared stories and allowed me to be a part of your community, these poems are for you.

About the Artist

Meighan L. Sharp grew up in the Seattle area and has since lived in Oregon, South Carolina, Kentucky, and Virginia. An educator at heart, Sharp currently serves as the co-director for the Hollins University summer creative writing program for high school students and volunteers for Roanoke City Public Schools. Sharp's work has been selected twice for inclusion in the annual *Best New Poets* anthology. Her writing also appears in numerous literary journals, including *Crazyhorse*, *Blackbird*, *The Florida Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *The Spoon River Poetry Review*, and elsewhere. She lives with her family in the Star City of the South.

About Art By Bus

The Art by Bus program seeks to show how our communities and citizens are connected through public transportation. A partnership between RIDE Solutions, Valley Metro, and the Roanoke Arts Commission, Art by Bus turns our bus system into a canvas for painting, a stage for music, and a space for literature in an effort to bring attention to the ways that transit improves the quality of life in the neighborhoods it serves. We hope to show that if you aren't taking the bus, you are missing something extraordinary.

To learn more about Art by Bus, including our Writer by Bus residency program and the Star Line Series of musical performances, visit: ridesolutions.org/artbybus



2016