

A stylized illustration of a young girl with reddish-brown hair, freckles, and closed eyes, blowing a dandelion seed head. The background is a textured blue sky with several other dandelion seeds floating in the air. The girl is wearing a white shirt with a green collar.

*Dandelion Wishes*  
*Short Stories*

*Lucy E. Marcus*



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# Dandelion Wishes

Lucy E. Marcus

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# Dandelion

You may not believe this, but I was once a very tall woman. Six foot one, at my tallest, when just about once a day, someone would look up at my head and ask me if I played basketball. “Nope,” I’d tell them. And if I liked their face, I’d tell them how I broke both pinkie fingers catching a ball in the third grade and never stepped on a court thereafter. I’d hold up my crooked fingers, see here, and that put an end to that. But no one’s asked me about playing basketball in a while. I’ve shrunk a bit, my pants sag, and my hair, which used to add a foot or two and made my six feet stretch to seven – my hair’s nearly gone now, not golden like it always was, but white as a big fluff of cloud, and too brittle for braids or buns. Tie it together, it’ll break apart, just like me and my poor, crooked pinkies. But who cares about my height? Soon I’ll be six feet under. That’s what I’d say, if anyone asked how tall I am, which they wouldn’t anyhow, ever since I’ve lost my inches.

Of course, there are ways to feel tall, even if you’re lacking in the vertical direction. I felt it, not too long ago, walking to Campbell Court for the 55 bus to Kroger on a weekday morning, minding my own business as usual. I was crossing South Jefferson, reciting my grocery list, cat food, comet, lemons, cream, when I stopped dead in my tracks, one foot lifted in the air. I removed my glasses and rubbed the lenses with my sleeve, then put them back on my head just like they do in cartoons when they can’t believe their eyes. No, I couldn’t believe what I saw below my foot: tiny cars, red and brown and blue, broken to pieces right in the middle of the street. You see, it looked to be a miniature car pile-up, with dime-sized bent steering wheels and specks of glass shards and everything. Looking down at my sandaled feet, for the wildest half a second, I felt taller than ever before, tall as a certified giant.

Like all good things, it only lasted a moment before a loud truck honked at me, along with a serious-looking traffic guard tapping my elbow. I must’ve been frozen as a statue in the middle of the street and the light had changed on me. I started to lift my heavy foot and move out of the way, but right then a white truck the size of a baby pigeon crashed apart by my big toe, missing me by a centimeter, sending its eighteen wheels scurrying like ants into

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the gutter. After the little wheels settled, the guard took me by the elbow and guided me back to the curb. He said, “Stay here,” like I was some senile old dog, and this time I stayed, because sometimes I feel like an old dog and all I want is permission to stay put and do absolutely nothing.

Yes, I stayed there blinking in the morning sunshine and watched that traffic guard with his iron-pressed shirt search through his trunk and return with a shiny roll of yellow caution tape. I watched as he took his sweet time rolling out the tape, tying it to a parking meter and a trash bin dragged into the road, making a triangle around the miniature crash. Just as he finished, another something flew down, something small as a paperclip, and I bent my neck way back, looking for where it all came from. My little brother would’ve said it’s a sign from above, a sign to quit cars, but that’s only because he hates cars – he was in a crash himself decades ago, and now he has his own electric wheel chair that I swear could go as fast as a car if he put enough gas in it.

Well, I couldn’t believe a sign from above would land at my feet, of all places, since I don’t even drive a car myself, and I’d stopped looking for such signs years ago. I figured some standard investigation was in order, with witness accounts and preventative measures to stop whatever else might come falling. Instead, that guard stayed busy sticking his head through the window of another truck, telling the driver to go around the caution tape.

“Excuse me,” I called to him, quitting my dog day quiet. But he ignored me, choosing instead to stick his head into another car behind that truck, and by then a whole line of cars were waiting in the heat, a true traffic jam, as if this were a real crash and not a miniature one.

“Excuse me,” I said again. That’s when I felt another tap on my shoulder and turned to find a teenage boy with brown freckles on his nose, whose face I knew, but not his name. “What’s the matter, lady?” he asked me, wearing his usual extra-large red headphones.

I knew this boy because he rode the same bus as I did, and when I turned to him, I noticed the other 55 bus regulars gathering behind me on the sidewalk, looking to see what all the fuss was about, acting like a big family as they always did, telling jokes and inviting each other to backyard parties and ignoring me. And I’ll



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admit that I, too, ignored them, ever since they called me some mean old nicknames, “grumpy granny” and worse behind my back, all because I told that teenage boy one single time to lower his darn music, which I could hear as clear as day, even through his headphones. I hadn’t even minded the music so much as I minded the thought of his poor eardrums, about to burst beneath the weight of all that sound.

No, they really didn’t know me an inch back then. If they did, they’d know I’m no grandma, just a big sister and a cat mama and a cousin, too. And I’m not grumpy, either, just wanting a little peace and quiet sometimes, and really, I wouldn’t have minded if they invited me to their barbecues or told me about their bosses or gardens and maybe I would’ve even had some good advice.

Well, the freckled boy must’ve had his headphones on mute that afternoon since he was talking to me, asking me again about the caution tape and broken vehicles at its center. If it was any other day, I would’ve ignored him, because one piece of advice I’ve learned to follow is that it’s really no use trying to change someone’s mind. But right then, I was tired of feeling see-through and ignored by that busy-body traffic guard, so I turned to the boy and said, “Look there.” I pointed at the little smashed-up cars in the road. “I think these vehicles fell from somewhere above.” The tallest building nearby was the golden Wells Fargo tower across the way, and that’s where we both looked next. The boy took a few steps back and pulled his headphones from his ears to rest on his neck. “Yes, ma’am,” he said, and nodded.

I smiled because he never before called me ‘ma’am,’ only ‘lady,’ or worse.

The boy motioned behind him and his other two friends came by his side wearing the exact same giant headphones. All three stared up to where I pointed. Then a mother in a flowered headscarf who’d never once talked to me before, rolled her stroller by my side and said hello. I told her what I’d seen and she lifted her chubby baby boy from his seat, and said, “We have to do something about that.”

I nodded, eyeing that baby’s chubby thighs, soft and sweet as fresh dough, and stood a little bit in front of the baby in case another something came flying.

“Might be someone on the roof,” a construction worker

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said, tugging at the wide armholes of his orange vest. He'd only started riding the bus a few months before, and each day that orange vest became a little browner. "A penny can accelerate like a comet from that height."

"Comet," I repeated, because that was on my list of groceries.

"Yes ma'am," the mother said, and the crowd of us stood with our necks craned way back and together we saw it: a flash of flesh, a little arm dangling something from a window about halfway up and opened just a sliver. The arm's color was hidden by the morning sun's shadows, but its size was clear: small as a child's. A moment later the little arm retreated and there was nothing but a dot that grew bigger and bigger in the sky. The boys hollered and so did I as I shielded my head with my pocketbook and watched the object, another truck, crash onto a waiting car's windshield, sending a thousand snaking lines through its glass, before it bounced and broke into pieces, metal wheels glinting, not a single one inside the caution-taped triangle.

All of us on the sidewalk shouted and the cars honked along with us. The construction worker lifted his hard hat from his head and put it on the cooing baby's, where it fell nearly to that little button nose. The traffic guard pulled his head from another car window and walked over to the driver with his broken windshield cursing up a storm and us witnesses all talking at once, and then he turned on his boot heels to cross the street and enter the Wells Fargo lobby.

"Ooooo," said one of the teenagers. "That boy's in trouble!"

"Or girl," said a suited man standing next to me. I recognized this man and his thick, curly eyebrows, but not his daughter, who wore her hair in blue barrettes. The man was the only one like me who didn't talk to the others on the bus, he'd just sit behind his opened Roanoke Times, only his creased forehead and raised eyebrows visible. I waved at his little girl, who hid behind her daddy's pant leg, as the small crowd chattered away.

"A real hazard."

"That kid's in for a whooping."

"Hush now."

"Never knew those windows opened."

"They shouldn't."

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“Takes gumption.”

“Someone could be killed.”

“Imagine, walking to work and struck dead by a toy.”

“I’d be madder than a wet hen.”

“Bless your heart.”

“Could’ve been one of us.”

“Aren’t we a lucky bunch.”

I wanted to add something, but I didn’t know what to say. And I didn’t want to become grumpy granny again, so I kept my mouth shut and thought of the little child up high in the office building. I thought of me, so long ago, a little child myself. After I broke my pinkie fingers, my mama didn’t let me play outside for a whole summer. She thought I’d heal faster indoors. I had my own and my baby brother’s toys all to myself, but dolls and trucks and army men are only so much fun when you’ve got no one to play with. I had to make my own fun. I played with the others outside, only they didn’t know it. I’d go to the attic, crack open a single, rusty window, and send little arm men down four stories, with my kerchiefs fastened as parachutes. I’d watch them float through the maple branches and over the heads of the porch sitters and street strollers. That was something. Being up there and sending those army men flying, even with my stay-inside-rule and my broken fingers, I felt big and tall and mighty. I thought that might be what the little child was doing, trying to feel mighty tall in that grown-up business building.

Of course, I would’ve given up my parachute games in a minute just to play outside. All the other summers my brother and I would make up imaginary games with leaves and sticks and flowers in Highland Park or sometimes on the edges of the Evergreen Cemetery. The yellow dandelions were young women and the buds were the babies. The fluffy ones were white-afroed grandmas. Entire colonies grew between sidewalk squares and in overgrown ditches, endless dolls and cities. We made a toybox out of the whole earth, and every spring and summer that toybox grew and grew. And I grew too. I grew taller and taller, then shorter again, and forgot all about that earthy toybox. I had stopped seeing dandelions as anything but weeds to pull or fallen leaves as anything but clutter to rake. That is, until that very morning, waiting for the 55 bus, squinting up in a dreamy way at that little

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arm. Yes, the child was back again, an arm squeezed through the sliver of opened window above.

“Look!” said the teenagers, and I lifted out of my memories and followed another dot that grew bigger and purple in the sky, showing a human shape, fabric limbs and yarn hair flapping in the wind – a doll! – and landed softly on top of the piled toy trucks, its body limp and smudged with dirt. The little girl in her neat blue barrettes slipped away from her father’s grasp, ran to the road, and lifted the doll from the sidewalk, brushing tangled blue hair from its spotted cheeks.

Her father was quick to pull the dirty thing away from his daughter and gave her a light smack on the hand. “Don’t you see the caution tape?” he scolded. “A car could run you over.”

The little girl watched her father return the doll, facedown, to the pile of discarded toys, and I watched the girl’s shoulders shrink.

Now, as I’ve said before, I prefer to mind my own business. But something about these little children reminded me of my little self, all alone and with no one to play with, and so I did something I hadn’t done in decades: I looked around the edges of the sidewalk and found, to my relief, a scanty patch of dandelions. I walked over and knelt to pick two perfect puffs.

“Here, child,” I said, handing the girl one. “Make a wish.”

She took the dandelion from my hand and held it to the sun. I did the same with mine. That’s when our bus arrived, making a wide path to avoid the caution tape. I followed the group to the station, holding my dandelion high by the stem.

On the bus, the air conditioning blasted, and I cupped my palms around my puff, trying not to lose a single blossom, keeping it whole until I could think of my wish. I closed my eyes and tried to think, but I was interrupted – the teenagers had climbed aboard and were leaning over my shoulder to open the windows behind me, taking turns sticking their big heads outside, looking up at the Wells Fargo tower.

“Hey!” I said, sounding grumpier than I meant to, and the boy over my shoulder just said, “See?”

I turned to look out the opened window, as did the rest of us who’d been gathered by the sidewalk, craning our necks to watch and see what that little child might make fly next.

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We waited and waited as the bus rolled ahead, but the authorities must've intruded by then because we didn't see anything at all. That's when a gust of wind from the opened windows blew my dandelion's puff away from the stem, sending white fluff flying all over the other passengers, my wish wasted. I was sad for just a moment until the chubby baby gave the sweetest sneeze you ever heard, and the construction worker copied him with a loud achoo, and then all the passengers began to laugh and sneeze and laugh, and the little girl blew her own puff at the rest of us, and I began to laugh too.

Every day thereafter I searched for some perfect puffs on my way to the bus and that's how it started, them calling me Dandelion. Yes, Dandelion's a nickname I don't mind so much. But you know who did mind? That poor bus driver, Mr. Sharp. From the very first day we were sneezing and chuckling up a storm, he minded. He stepped on the brakes extra hard, turned his stiff neck towards the back, and shouted at us to cut it out, sounding grumpier than I ever could. The rest of us settled down together, making wishes in the quiet of the bus, and I can't say for a fact, but I do believe on that very first day, we all wished for that little child. Wished for some mercy in the Wells Fargo tower high up above, because really no one was hurt at all, only a car window, and that can be surely fixed.

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## Girl in the Wells Fargo Tower

Look, Princess Freckles, don't be afraid. See? It's not scary cause I'm holding you. You can jump up and down on this window ledge and you won't fall cause I got you. See? Here, let me fix your hair. Why do you let your hair get so tangled, Freckles? It's not good to have tangled hair cause then Momma will have to snip out the knots and you'll be all uneven and I hate to tell you this, but your hair won't grow back. There, that's better, now you can practice your gymnastics on this balance beam with nice loose hair. Look down there, Freckles, that bus, that big blue and white one, that's a whale, see, and the people are minnows. The whale's hungry and eats up all the minnows, and then he goes to the bathroom along the way, he never holds it cause a whale doesn't have a room for that sort of business. No toilet is big enough for a whale, so a whale's not potty trained. Yup, a whale can go to the bathroom anywhere he likes. See there, Mr. Whale's got lots of minnows to eat up, all of them waiting on a little square plate. Those minnows are hungry, too. Here, let me fix you some food, little minnows. Eat this car, it's a very good snack. Delicious. It's vegetables. Good for growing big and strong like the whale. See, Freckles? They go to the vegetables cause they're hungry. Yum yum yum. These cars fit through the window here, take these cars. Soon the whale will come and eat them up. And then you want to know what eats the whale? Nothing eats the whale, Princess Freckles, cause the whale is the biggest fish in the sea. Here, minnows, eat more snacks. Yum yum yum. Come, Freckles, look at all those minnows. Those lined up there are other fishes that can't eat the minnows cause they're on diets like Daddy. They don't want to be big like the whale or else they won't fit in their pants and they'll have to buy new pants and pants are very expensive. Another whale is coming, look. All those other fishes'll have to move out the way for that big whale. See? Look closer. Now let's show them just one flip, just one for the whole ocean to see. One more for the big show, for the whale and all the minnows. Don't be afraid, they won't hurt you, they just want to see you do one little flip. One... two...now! Go, Freckles! Fly!

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## Little Bits of Heaven

Georgia peeled her sticky thighs from her plastic chair and kicked the skinny legs of her best friend Janet's school desk on a hot Tuesday morning in May. Janet always stretched a story by a mile and group time was almost through.

"You missed it," Janet said again. "It was the coolest thing that's ever happened, ever, ever, on the bus."

Georgia hit Janet's desk with her pencil. "Just tell me already"

"Alright," Janet said. "But you really had to be there."

"Fine," Georgia said, watching Mrs. Baker scratch long, crooked sentences onto the chalk board.

Janet leaned in close and whispered: "We heard some knocking on the roof, and it got louder and louder, and then Mr. Joe pulled the bus over and walked to the back and reached up with his big arms, and guess what?"

"What?" Georgia gritted her teeth as Mrs. Baker put down the chalk and pressed her hands against her skirt, leaving two ghostly prints.

"Okay folks," Mrs. Baker called out. "Let's turn our attention to the board."

Janet leaned in and smiled, "The emergency exit goes right up to heaven."

"No way," Georgia said. "If there's a door to heaven, I'd know about it by now."

"Right up through the roof of the bus," Janet continued, "and there was a ray of light, too, just like in the movies."

"I'm telling you," Georgia said. "I'd know."

"Quiet, Georgia," Mrs. Baker said now. Mrs. Baker seemed to have a special set of ears that only heard Georgia's voice, never Janet's. She had it out for Georgia, and Georgia had it out for Mrs. Baker, with her scratched up leather loafers, tan stockings too dark for her skin, and her classroom always smelling sour, like orange-flavored hand sanitizer. Georgia loved to hate on Mrs. Baker, and she could never understand why her favorite and most handsome bus driver, Mr. Joe Baker, would choose her, of all people, to marry.

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She knew Mrs. Baker said bad things about her to Joe, and that was why nowadays he didn't like to joke around with Georgia or Janet anymore.

Even worse, just yesterday morning, a Monday, Mrs. Baker sent Georgia to the principal's office for the third time that year. It happened after she announced to the class that Nina Brown lost her fight with sickness that weekend and went off to heaven. After she said those words, there was a long, horrible silence, which Georgia felt the need to interrupt: "That means she gets to skip the spelling quiz?" She'd spoken in what she thought was a whisper that only Janet could hear, but the whole class had laughed or gasped or both.

"Quiet!" Mrs. Baker had yelled, red-faced, before she pointed her chalk at Georgia's nose and sent her to the principal's office.

"You better go home early," Principal Adams had told Georgia, reordering the little painted turtles on his desk. "Colleen sure did love that little girl Nina." He sighed when he spoke, he wasn't even angry, and Georgia left feeling worse than all the times he'd given her a good, mean earful.

Ms. Drake, the office secretary, lived down the street from Georgia and offered to take her home. The sweet woman was half-blind and half-deaf, but that didn't stop her from chatting the whole drive. Georgia counted the little black birds on the telephone wires as Ms. Drake spoke herself hoarse, all about Jesus and the good Lord and the place above where Nina was flying around with her newborn angel wings. She kept talking, even as Georgia unbuckled her seatbelt and ran from the car to the living room couch. That's where Georgia was, home watching boring afternoon cartoons while the most exciting thing, supposedly, happened all year. Of course, it had to be the one day she was sent home early.

Georgia investigated Janet's account of The Great Emergency Exit Door Opening during recess that Tuesday. Under the hot metal slide, she questioned Stuart Maynard, a short, buck-toothed boy who rode their same bus route and couldn't lie worth a penny.



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“And it’s heaven you saw?” Georgia asked.

He shrugged. “That’s what some of them said. It was too bright for me to look straight at.”

“Please,” Georgia said, and rolled her eyes. “They’re lying.”

Georgia watched the clock all afternoon, excited for her bus ride home, where Mr. Joe would be waiting in the driver’s seat. When the final bell rang, she scooped up her bookbag, ran ahead of the others and climbed the bus steps two at a time.

“Hey, Mr. Joe,” Georgia said, out of breath. “Did you miss me yesterday?”

“Colleen told me you’ve been giving her trouble.”

“Not today I didn’t, I was good today. Very, very good.”

“Now that makes me happy,” Mr. Joe said. He smiled at Georgia with his pearly white teeth and tapped the wide wheel with his index fingers. “Keep me happy and go find your seat.”

Georgia stepped to the side as her classmates boarded the bus and spoke over Mr. Joe’s wide shoulder, “Please, please, won’t you open the emergency exit for us today?”

“Sit down, Georgia,” Mr. Joe said, waving his hand at her.

“Please, Mr. Joe, I won’t tell a soul and I won’t ever ask again.”

“No tree branches stuck up there today,” he said. “No need to meddle with it again. Now take your seat. That’s the last time I’ll say it.” He shot her a frown in the rearview mirror.

Georgia hated to be mean to Mr. Joe, but she had no words to say in return, so she stuck out her tongue and slunk back to her seat, next to a smirking Janet.

“You’re all lying,” Georgia said. “I don’t believe a word.”

“Suit yourself,” Janet said, admiring her berry blue fingernails. Janet was always lucky. She had three older sisters who played with her like their favorite doll and painted her nails the colors of the rainbow, fingers and toes both. Georgia only had her little brother Riley, who still sucked his own wrinkly thumb when he thought no one was looking. Janet didn’t even seem to mind that Georgia wouldn’t believe her story, and that’s how Georgia knew she was telling the truth.

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Georgia had never been great friends with that little girl Nina. For one thing, she was Mrs. Baker's favorite. She sat right in the front, and never turned around when Georgia would tap her shoulder to ask for a pencil or a hair band. Nina simply stared forward, ignoring Georgia's tapping finger as though she didn't feel anything but a soft breeze across her back. Georgia couldn't just stop tapping, she couldn't just pretend to be the breeze of nothing Nina wanted her to be, so she'd tap harder, and talk louder - "Hey Nina, I'm talking to you!" - and that would always get Mrs. Baker's attention, with her special Georgia-only ears.

Then one day Nina didn't come to school. One day turned to a week, and a week became four, and except for the times Mrs. Baker passed around Get-Well cards for them to sign with big fat markers, Georgia forgot about Nina. Nina's empty seat in front of her became a foot rest when no one was looking, or a place to sort her keychains and candies. So when Mrs. Baker had made that announcement on Monday, if Georgia was honest about it, she wasn't all that sad at first.

But on Tuesday night, tucked beneath the cool sheets of her bed, Georgia couldn't stop thinking of the bus's portal to heaven, and Ms. Drake's words about Nina with her angel wings. She couldn't stop imagining the moment little Nina took her last breath - did she know it was her last? Did it hurt? Ms. Drake said Nina was now up in heaven feeling no pain at all, but Georgia wondered if that's only what Ms. Drake wanted to believe because of all the pain Nina must've felt before she was taken. "You must never speak ill of the dead," Ms. Drake had told her. You want them to stay happy up there, don't you? Those angels are watching us as we speak."

As Georgia watched the blur of her bedroom ceiling fan, she wondered if Nina was looking down at her, mad about that stupid spelling quiz joke, sending bad things her way. She blinked away the frightening image, but then in the silence and the clicking fan, Georgia almost felt worse at the thought of Nina ignoring her, forever and ever, like the nothing breeze on her angel-winged shoulder.

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Wednesday morning was dark as evening, and clouds overhead sent a warm drizzle puddling the sidewalk by the bus stop. All the springtime bushes and trees drooped heavy with rain water and seemed to be shaking their leafy heads at Georgia in the wind. Still thinking of Nina as she waited, Georgia didn't step back when the bus arrived and coated her white canvas sneakers with a spray of gray gutter water.

"Let me ask you something," Georgia said after taking her usual window seat next to Janet.

"You don't look so good," Janet said, and poked Georgia in the cheek.

Georgia turned to the window, where the rain made a pitter-patter against the glass, and the cool vent air dried her damp skin and sent shivers down her back. "What did you see when you looked up at heaven?" Georgia asked.

"So you believe me now?" Janet smirked, and reached past Georgia to draw a squiggle in the window fog.

"I'll believe you when I see it," Georgia said, and opened her English book. They would be having the spelling quiz that morning and Georgia had forgotten to study.

Although Georgia hadn't been invited to Nina's birthday pool party in the beginning of the school year, she was invited to Nina's memorial service. The whole fifth grade class was invited by permission slip, distributed on Thursday morning.

When they returned from recess, a man in a tight gray suit sat in the teacher's rolling chair. "Today we have a special guest visitor from the funeral home," Mrs. Baker explained, taking a seat in the back of the room. Georgia watched the white strip of the man's narrow ankle beneath his cropped suit pants. He held a large brown teddy bear on his lap and spoke in a nasally voice, "This here is a 'Comfort Bear' to cuddle when you're feeling low." The man passed the bear around the room. "He has a special power to understand why you're sad." When the bear reached Georgia, she smelled something like pickles on its matted fur. Otherwise, it looked just like a regular bear to her.

Georgia was happy to find Mr. Joe in his usual spot on the

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bus that afternoon. “What happens when you die, Mr. Joe?” she asked him.

“Only the dead can tell,” Joe said, then eyed her through the rearview mirror. He spoke softly, “Now why are you always so full of questions? Don’t you have enough in that head after a day with Colleen?”

Georgia sighed. She wished to go home and wash the pickled smell from her hands and then to cuddle her regular bears, which she kept hidden beneath her bed ever since Janet donated her stuffed animals to the Goodwill on Melrose. But she didn’t like the way Mr. Joe was looking at her now, with something sorry on his face.

“One more question,” Georgia said. She wanted to ask if he believed in heaven, but instead she asked her usual question, which had become something itchy as a mosquito bite: “Could you please open the emergency exit?”

“Go to your seat, young lady,” he said, shaking his head. “It’s called emergency exit for a reason. Show me the emergency.”

“An emergency,” she repeated absently, watching the hanging traffic light blink yellow and rock in the breeze.

“Go to your seat, Georgia. And don’t get any ideas.”

For the first time that week, Georgia had none. “Okay, okay,” she said, and did as she was told. In the bottom of her bookbag she found the butterscotch candies from her grandfather’s house she’d intended to give Mr. Joe. She unwrapped three and chewed them all at once so that her teeth stuck together, and she couldn’t even talk back when Janet started bragging about her A+ on the spelling quiz.

That night after dinner, Georgia remembered to hand the permission slip to her mother, who sighed twice in a row. “Come on,” she said, taking Georgia’s hand. “We’ve got to fix you something decent to wear.”

It was too late to go shopping, so they went instead to Georgia’s cousin’s house down the street to borrow a too-big black skirt, which her mother tightened with safety pins. She found Georgia a navy shirt to wear on top, too hot, even in the nighttime,

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but Georgia didn't complain. Angel wings were probably hotter, and heavier too.

The next morning, only half of the students showed up to school. The others would be meeting them at the funeral home with their parents. The small class read a book about all the different ideas of where you go when you die. Some pages showed people turning into trees, others had shooting stars, there was a ladder going all the way into the clouds, there were angels in heaven, and one even showed a person being born again as an itty-bitty frog.

After the guidance counselor left, the students piled onto the bus to find Mr. Joe behind the wheel. He wore a black button-down beneath his yellow traffic vest, and a solemn expression on his face. Janet wore a long black dress and her ginger hair tied in a pony tail so tight that her eyes seemed to squint a little and she looked very serious indeed.

The day was cloudless, hot, and dusty with pollen. Too sunny for a funeral, Georgia thought, but she didn't say as much as she walked behind Janet into the funeral home and waited in a line before a big white book on a pedestal. The room smelled of pickles and roses and Georgia covered her nose with the back of her hand as she waited her turn. She saw, on the other end of the long room ahead, a cherry wooden box on a table.

"Everything alright, Georgia?" Mrs. Baker said, placing a hand on her shoulder.

She nodded, too tired for any trouble, and wrote her note in the book: Sorry if I annoyd u in class, Nina. Every1 misses u a LOT. She wanted to add, Is heaven as good as they say? But she felt her teacher breathing over her shoulder and put the pen down.

Mrs. Baker then guided Georgia into the main room, past Stuart, who was standing by Mr. Joe and clutching the Comfort Bear, his reddened face streaked with tears. Georgia took a seat next to Janet, who whispered, "Stuart's not even sad for Nina, he's just a cry baby." She paused to roll her eyes. "He saw a magic show once and now he's just afraid they cut off her legs."

"Well, it is a small casket," Georgia said, turning back to

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give Stuart a sympathetic glance. But he was pressing his snotty nose into the brown bear's belly and didn't see her. Soon, she guessed, his mother would be showing up with her big leather purse and a juice box just for him.

In the main room, everyone began to line up and walk past the coffin. Before their class joined, Mrs. Baker whispered to each of them, "This part is optional, remember."

Georgia was afraid to walk up to that wooden box, but everyone else continued on, and she didn't want to be left alone. One of her skirt's safety pins had come undone and scratched against her back with each step she took behind Janet, who was clutching the front of her dress with both hands as they approached the casket. All was quiet except for whispers, the squeaking of rubber soles, and an occasional snuffle and sob.

"You can go ahead," Janet whispered, and shuffled behind Georgia. Before she could look away, Georgia was in front of Nina, no angel wings, no halo, just resting there with blush on her cheeks and pink gloss on her small lips, sealed shut. Georgia turned quickly and walked back by the door, her heart beating in her ears as she tried, without luck, to fix the opened safety pin.

Only Janet and Georgia would take the bus home. Their classmates all had their parents come to pick them up from the cemetery. When Mrs. Baker boarded the bus behind them, Mr. Joe handed her a blue kerchief from his pocket. Georgia looked up and saw the black flakes of Mrs. Baker's makeup beneath her puffy eyes and for the first time, she felt sad for the teacher she'd always loved to hate.

Janet and Georgia waited in their usual seats in the back of the bus for what felt like a very long time as Mr. and Mrs. Baker spoke, leaned close, foreheads nearly touching. In her seat, Georgia tried to shake away the image of Nina in the casket and searched the brick wall outside the window for caterpillars or shiny beetles, but then she looked away from that too, frightened by the thought of those same bugs crawling over Nina's pink cheeks. In the front of the bus, she saw Mrs. Baker wiping her eyes and smiling at something Mr. Joe was saying to her, his wide palm cupping her

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chin.

In another moment, the bus engine shook awake, quivering their seats, and Mrs. Baker joined Georgia and Janet in the back with a slight smile on her face. “We’re taking a detour,” she said, and the bus lurched forward.

“Where?” Georgia and Janet both asked.

“No questions, unless you want to go straight home,” Mrs. Baker said, but without any anger in her voice. She pulled out a compact mirror from her purse and dabbed at her eyes with the crumpled kerchief.

No one spoke as they drove down the dusty, tree-lined road and then made a wide turn in front of a gas station, where Mrs. Baker stepped out and returned minutes later with a shopping bag.

“Close your eyes now, please,” Mrs. Baker said. They did, Janet squeezing Georgia’s hand as the bus rolled forward, backed up, continued on, then turned a few times, along with Georgia’s stomach. When they finally stopped, the brakes released a high-pitched sigh, and the two girls’ palms were damp with sweat.

“Now then take two slow steps. No peeking,” Mrs. Baker said, guiding them forward. Georgia heard a soft squeak and a latch above and then felt something soft and warm on her face.

“Lift your chins,” Mrs. Baker said.

Georgia did, feeling sunlight on her forehead.

“Now open your eyes.”

She squinted her eyes to the square of light above as flower petals rained down onto her face. All she could see was pink and sunlight and the buttery warmth on her cheeks and eyelids. She breathed in the smell of freshly washed aprons, and a hint of wet lawn mower grass beneath nearby magnolia petals, overripe and peeling apart in the sky. Mr. Joe must have driven right beneath a wall of flower trees. There was a tangle of branches and green leaves waving down at them, the green and pink and yellow so bright against the dark thoughts of the funeral, and so alive in the breeze. Georgia felt her cheeks dampen and her breath catch, and she closed her eyes again to find the imprint of the portal, still bright and pink and warm against her wet eyelids. She wiped at her eyes with the sleeve of her navy shirt, until the fabric became stretched

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and damp.

On the short ride home, Janet and Georgia sat giggling side by side, trying not to spill their pineapple sodas, trading different colors of the M&M candies that Mrs. Baker pulled out from her shopping bag.

“You want the greens, Mr. Joe?” Georgia shouted to the front.

“Excuse me, sweetheart, but I bought those candies and I’ll be taking those greens,” Mrs. Baker said, and Joe winked at them through the rearview mirror. When Mrs. Baker walked away to share with her husband, Janet took a swig of soda and leaned forward.

“Did you see Nina?” she whispered, before exhaling a soft burp.

“Uh huh,” Georgia nodded, knowing right away that it was Nina in the flower tree she was talking about, not the one in the casket. She squeezed Janet’s still-damp hand. Yes, she’d seen her, a glint of a white tennis sneaker in the pink and the sun, she saw her, and she could still see her, if she closed her eyes against the sun-filled window. “Did you?” Georgia asked.

Janet nodded, then leaned her cheek onto Georgia’s shoulder. They stayed quiet for the rest of the ride, as Georgia thought of Nina and ladders and the warmth above.

So lost was Georgia in her thoughts that she jumped when Mr. Joe called her name and she barely said a word goodbye as she ran down the bus steps, over the slate stone walkway and through her kitchen’s screen door. She walked into the living room where she found her little brother Riley sucking his thumb, as usual, feet curled beneath his thighs, watching animal cartoons. At the commercial, her brother turned to her and reached a saliva-sticky hand to her curls.

“Hey!” Georgia said, and yanked her head away. In his hand was a small pink petal, soft and creased as worn velvet.

“What’s this?” he asked, sniffing the petal.

Georgia ran to the bathroom mirror down the hall and examined her head, dappled with pink and yellow pollen. Her mother would make her wash it all away that night, but Georgia



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wanted to keep it for as long as she could. She patted her hair gently and walked back to her brother, who was holding the fallen petal to the lightbulb above.

“That’s a little bit of heaven,” Georgia said through her gap-toothed smile, stretching her neck long as she took a seat next to him.

Riley turned to her and laughed. “It’s a flower, Gia. Here, smell.” He reached out his palm and Georgia took his hand and folded it closed, resting her big hand over his little fist.

“No sir, Riley, I’m telling you,” Georgia said, eyes on a little frog dancing across the television screen. “That there’s what heaven smells like. A little bit of heaven. You better believe it.”

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## Love Story as Told by the 61 Bus

The following is a very poorly transcribed love story, as are all stories written in one's second tongue. But how fitting, as you will soon see, since this story is only a love story after a certain brave soul ventured to learn a new language himself. But before I tell you about this man, let me proclaim my apologies for any strange idiosyncrasies – Bus Speak™, you might call it – as I have scrutinized all sorts of creatures and learned so many tongues (chipmunk, motorcycle, mockingbird, ant – to name a few in rising order of difficulty), that I can say here with certainty: the human tongue is by far the most challenging. With all the needs for utility built into my metal skull, there is such a human desire to describe what may otherwise be absolutely without value, and in which, paradoxically, lies the entirety of meaning.

But of course, back to the subject at hand, and our slightly depressed object, a human of sixty-seven years, quite youthful in the face after a clean shave but far from sparkling new, with his sagging jowls and worn appendages. Two scars, for instance, from the elbows to the knuckles of both middle fingers, full of zigzags and little streams off the main rivers of toughened tissue, the evidence of a car accident decades prior that, in addition to the elaborate wounds, transformed this man into a creature of wheels, just like me. Yes, like me, though this man had but two large and two tiny wheels, which would roll in almost perfect unison (when oiled with regularity) onto my landing every morning, and rise the requisite four feet in order to park by the large window in my head, so close to my mind that I could hear all of his ardent thoughts, which, of course, compelled me to share this very poorly written love story in the first place. It is only natural for one creature of wheels to cart a certain accountability for another.

Yes, this man sat by my head each and every day of the week, rolling on his own stabilized two and my working eight sets of wheels around Southwest Roanoke. And what does he do all day but watch, admiring as I do, the cherry blossom branches brushing against my windows, or the purple shadows of a fallstreak cloud behind a setting sun, or the entwined clasp of young, ringless hands

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belonging to carelessly lovestruck teens. Let me only interject here one last time to say, as a creature of wide windows, there are limits to the admiration of what exists beyond reach of one's wipers, before it can all become, like the splattered bugs in the corner of my eyes, painfully irritating.

Unsurprising, then, that our lonely traveler wished to remedy such irritation with his search for a companion. You see, this man had few proximate friends, and only a sister for family – another regular rider known by the name of Dandelion, who knew her own propensity for chatter and rode a slightly inconvenient route to Kroger every other morning to give her brother his peace. As of late, however, our man wished to sacrifice his peace for romance. Every human who climbed my four steps or wheeled themselves onto my landing, he examined with a discerning eye, imagining the thoughts inside of heads, imagining daily habits and diets and in some surprising and scintillating moments, imagining undergarments.

There was only one human our subject imagined even after she passed his seat. Yes, the one who I will call our second brave soul. Let me borrow here and there from my subject's thoughts, as his mind is better apt at describing the object of his affections. Her hair, coal black with three thick streaks of gray woven into one braid, wide as a baguette, swinging back and forth against her shoulder blades as she ran for the bus – running, always a few minutes late, and fumbling with her pass as she climbed the stairs, her braid still ticking like a pendulum, as though keeping its own pleasant time. And her eyes, shrouded by thick lenses, which changed from dark to light after several minutes inside, or from light to dark when she chose to stare through my windows and into the blazing sun. Only sometimes, in a cloudy moment, could our wheeled subject see two gray eyes, blinking incessantly, as though to hasten the magic of those transitioning lenses. And beneath the eyes, a Roman nose, and beneath the nose, an upturned mouth – upturned not in joy or happiness but simply in the shaping of her lips on her face so that even when staring at the most unfortunate sights outside my windows, there appeared to be a look of complete tranquility.

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Yes, our man of wheels imagined this woman after she took her seat, and after she walked away, and before she even came aboard, he imagined her. He imagined some of the most peculiar scenes – his own scarred hands braiding those heavy locks or hammering a nail into a wood-paneled wall in order to hang a framed family photograph, or simply the woman, alone, as she raked up leaves from her front yard, and sang her favorite songs over the morning calls of a nearby hooded warbler.

But our subject's daydreams were flawed: the songs he imagined were the ones he loved – “Always be Mine” and “Yes, Sir, That's My Baby” – which, he discovered soon thereafter, she would never have sung, for when he one day turned his chair in her direction and smiled his heavy smile at her light one, she returned with one word: “Hola.”

Our subject stuttered, “Hola,” in return, like a practiced parrot.

“¿Que paso?” she asked.

And with this, our subject shut his mouth, lifted his muscled shoulders to his ears and shrugged, surrendering to his fear of the great gap between intent and outcome, and all that evades translation. Furthermore, frustration: our subject once knew two languages, but the wrong two – at home, his mother and grandmother would speak Russian, but only when they didn't wish for him to understand, and that was forty years ago, and now he was the driver of a single, English-speaking tongue.

For two weeks, our subject said not another word to his crush, who continued to smile in his direction every weekday morning, despite his silence. Disheartened, I resisted observation for several days, until one afternoon, when from within the man's irresponsive repose, I heard something unusually quiet and unmistakably new. New, crooked and shy words that at first made no sense at all, until they made all the sense, for they were the very phrases tattooed inside my body; he was reading my bilingual signs. He was learning Spanish. Soon enough, new words joined the others, simple and silly phrases. Soy de Roanoke. Me gusta comer.

Weeks passed and the woman lost her courage, having received no returning smile from the man three days in a row

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- so busy he was with his Spanish studies, speaking into his headphones, his pen moving frantically along to the recordings. ¿A ti te gusta café con leche? ¿Cómo estás? he asked, silently. With each unanswered question, I held my breath and wished for a tongue. Don't give up, I begged the woman. But of course, I could not speak, only listen.

After a fourth week of Spanish lessons, the man grew courageous. He'd learned to count to twenty and the months of the year, the days of the week, the colors, and all the breakfast foods in the Western hemisphere. He tapped his pen on his worn-out notepad, wrote out a friendly note in Spanish, and waited for the woman to climb aboard. He gazed out of my window with something like hope, so delicate in his sweaty palms, that I could hardly look. I nearly missed her stop that day, and when I did stop, I was eight feet past the normal spot. When the woman breathlessly boarded my steps, her braid swung with extra force. She pulled a clump of tissues from her purse, wiped the sweat from her forehead, leaned against my metal pole and closed her tired eyes.

The man, discouraged by her distracted disposition, slipped his pad into his pocket and looked out of my window instead. Another day, he decided. Another day, another day - this became his mantra, as each day the woman passed without much of a glance, except until after she took her seat behind him and out of his view.

Discouraged again, I tried to ignore the man's wanting thoughts and focus only on the road ahead of me. Which, on a stormy August day, became very difficult. I was rolling down Brambleton with windshield wipers swishing madly over my dripping eyes and the rain came down so heavily that I didn't see a great crater in the street until I was too close to swerve out of the way. In and out of the pothole we bounced and when I landed on the other side, rattled but intact, I checked on my passengers and witnessed a miraculous occurrence - the bump had forced the man's pad from his pocket and onto the aisle, and the woman, being the kind soul she was, bent over to pick it up. She glanced at its pages and smiled at the familiar words. "¿Habla Español?" she asked, to which the man nodded. "Estoy aprendiendo," he said.

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I'm learning. Thereafter began the Spanish lessons, the flirtatious exchanges of innocent phrases, the vocabularies expanding alongside familiarities, and for me, an exhilarating show.

Finally, on a warm fall morning, the man had the courage to do what he hadn't done since grade school. He passed his crush a note. And, I'm proud to say, he borrowed a line from my own skin, a plagiarism I will gladly forgive:

¿Quires ir a RND conmigo? Do you want go to RND with me?

Jale para señalar. Pull to signal

A Wasena. At Wasena.

The man passed the note by way of an eager girl and her babysitter, and then watched through my rearview mirror, with a thumping heart, as the woman unfolded and read his words, then smiled at the back of his head with all her teeth. In this moment he was overcome by a brief bout of regret and panic – was she laughing at him? Had he written complete gibberish? He waited, passed 8th Street, over the river, over the Greenway, until they approached the penultimate stop at Winona. My doors opened to release one passenger, then continued on as he closed his eyes in a prolonged blink and counted backwards from ten – nueve, ocho, siete, seis, cinco – he opened them to my mirror and found his crush's hand rising to the yellow wiring – DING! Stop requested. He rejoiced, albeit silently, and unlocked the wheels of his chair to meet his coffee date at the front.

Now, you'd be mistaken to think I hadn't known this woman's feelings all along. I knew. I knew how she admired the exact part, combed an inch to the left, of our man's salted honey hair. And I can now share that she'd always been a very prim and punctual person until the moment she spotted her crush, after which she spent extra time each morning, reweaving her braid and fixing her outfits just so. For the first time after years of widowhood, she found herself seeking a desirable appearance for this one fellow passenger. That Friday would be the first of many coffee dates, dinner dates, and bus dates, a budding romance sparked on my own rolling wheels.

Yes, of course, I knew; I am indiscriminate in my eavesdropping of thoughts. I may be limited in vocabulary and

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syntax, but I have learned something or two about storytelling after all these listening years. I've witnessed the delight in uncertainty, the held breath of suspense. Would our wheeled friend have his sweet heart broken, his love unrequited, and his remaining days spent without a caring companion by his side? No, no, you'd be wrong again. You see, irresponsible as I may be, I was there, and now you know it too; this love story has left one without a mate. Me, I am that mate-less one. No longer privy to the colorful thoughts of the man and the woman who choose, as of late, to neglect my rides and stroll on the sidewalk, spotted only through my smudged peripheries in the blue mountain shadows.

If you look closer, here, you might find another love note in this story. An unfinished tale, for you, my reader: If you return even an ounce of my affection, then please hold up a single arm and *jale para señalar*.

Don't worry, I'm not holding my brakes. I see every passenger cradling something: a baby or flashing screen or bag of overripe peaches or their own calloused palms. As much as the mother wishes for her baby to cradle her in return, that little child is holding his own pacifier. And those peaches carry a family of miniscule ants; even the cell phone passes its own coded messages, awaiting delivery elsewhere. No, what you cradle doesn't return the favor. For now, it's me holding all of you, not the other way around. There's someone else holding me. Someone or something I can't quite see - below the pavement, seeping up through potholes and sidewalk cracks. I know it's there, or else how would I move? Somehow, shrouded by this humid air, I am carried too.

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## These Buses

These buses are nosy creatures. They eavesdrop all day long. They know about the little girl Janet's crush on bucktoothed Stuart. They know about the caramel candies Mr. Weaver unwraps, slowly to quiet the crinkling, even after his third filling came loose from the sticky chewing. They know about the coma old man Marco woke from one March afternoon, the one he tells all the people who sit by his side. "Four years," he says to his neighbors, "Four years I was gone to some faraway place and then one day I came right back. And not in the morning, either. I didn't open my eyes until the mid-afternoon. And want to know something?" Marco's neighbors always nod, and the bus walls lean in and listen. "I'll tell you, it did me good, those years of rest." The buses sigh. Some rest would be nice, they think. They only get a few hours each night in a big, buzzing lot, brightened by the white glow of the Mill Mountain Star.

During the day, they witness the outside, too. They see Franco Field's new red bicycle, seat set low, so he can ride slowly down Brambleton by the bus's big windows, for all to see that fresh ruby shine. They see Melinda Blue's new crocodile tattoo on her elbow, waving at her boyfriend as he rides aboard to work, the jaws opening and closing, opening and closing, before she turns for her morning jog on the Greenway. They see the pot holes and the flower pots and The Pawn Shop's glinting gold. They see the Fair View cemetery and the road raccoons and the fresh painted mural of pink blossoms towering over budding buttercups that perk up through the cracked cement below. They see the miniscule curlicues falling to Main Barbershop's checkered floor, and the grains of espresso whistling in a steam bath at Little Green Hive, and Batwoman and Spiderman flying in endless circles around the display wheel at B&D comics.

The buses are good secret keepers, but not by choice. They try to speak. Their engines grumble and their gears groan, but no words come through, only hot exhaust breath and burping beeps. If only they could speak the words their city could hear, if only they could clear those gasoline gullets, they'd say, *Keep us company.*



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They'd tap their seats and smile. *Make us heavy with bodies and chatter. Share your puns and riddles and your worst and best days. Tell us your gasping, cheesy, ridiculous stories. Tell us and take your sweet time, too. We've got hours, years, and all the minutes to spare. We're here, we'll wait, we're listening.*

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## Artist's Statement

Thank you to the bus drivers who move us through the city every day, heatwave or downpour or snowstorm. And to the riders whose stories have moved me. To the man in the army jacket, who wrote by my side in his leather journal all the way from the VA Hospital to Campbell Court. To Mrs. Grace, who shared pictures of her seven grandkids on a rainy April day. To the little girl in blue barrettes, who watched with hands pressed to the window as JM Lamb's "Wishes" rode by on a passing bus. I'm grateful, always, for the wisdom and generosity of Jordan Humphrey and Amy Tomasso. And finally, a huge thank you to the City of Roanoke Arts Commission, RIDE Solutions, and Valley Metro for this opportunity.

## About the Writer

Lucy Marcus is a recent graduate of the Hollins University MFA program in Creative Writing. Her essays and stories have appeared in journals such as Kestrel, New Reader Magazine, and 805 Art + Lit.

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## 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](http://RIDESolutions.org/artbybus)

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## About RIDE Solutions

Ride Solutions provides alternative transportation options – ridesharing (carpooling and vanpooling), biking, public transit, walking, and guaranteed ride home services – to residents living within the greater New River and Roanoke Valleys and Region 2000 regions of southwestern Virginia. Through our free services we partner with citizens and businesses to connect them with commuting options – beyond the single-occupancy vehicle – to access work and school.

## Our Mission

Ride Solutions is a Transportation Demand Management (TDM) Agency – a program dedicated to expanding the efficiency and life of the roadway network and reducing the environmental impacts – air pollution – of vehicle emissions. By helping to promote and connect individuals and businesses partners to transportation options TDM agencies (RIDE Solutions) help to reduce traffic on local roads and improve air quality (link to our community or benefits section) by reducing the impacts of vehicle emissions. Fewer cars on the road during the busy rush hours of the day can also mean safer roads. Through incentive programs, education, and encouragement RIDE Solutions connections people to transportation options.



# RIDE Solutions

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Connecting the Region's Commuters  
[ridesolutions.org](http://ridesolutions.org)



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**ARTS COMMISSION**

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Years  
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**PUBLIC**  
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