



IN TRANSIT

By Melanie Almeder



Cover Art

"In Transit"

Leah Thompson


Roanoke, VA

*Winner of 2014 Sidewalk Art Show Art of Mobility Award



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*Art by Bus
celebrates the
role public transit
plays in the every day
life of our community
by becoming a platform
to share the best of what
our community can create –
painting, literature, and music.
RIDE Solutions, the Greater Roanoke
Transit Company, and the City of Roanoke
Arts Commission partner to support artist
residency programs and other Art By Bus
initiatives.*



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RIDERS, #1

We are ordered.
Whether we meant to
be or not, we are
the acolytes of
squares and
clocks.

We did, after all,
wake to some alarm
singing beside
the oblong of our bed;
we left our
four walls. We left

our dreams in their state
of array and disarray
to circumnavigate
this distance. To try
to arrive in time.
We would have,

if we could have,
but cannot, lift off,
wingless as we are;
we have never
walked on water
or shown up somewhere

by wishing ourselves
there—but we are a driven,
busy species. O, dear sidewalk
after sidewalk, how
we have mastered
this earth.

And, in between our bursts
of industry, we mastered waiting.
We wait the way a sky
waits. We wait the way
a street waits. We wait
with our feet;
we wait with our faces.



RIDERS, #2

The bus is our temporary
church. The aisle.
The minimal pews.
And we, its people.
Steeple-less. Devotees,
today, of route number 65;
we stepped up into it

to find our place. Then we faced
forward. Or away.
We habituate
to the bus' sways,
remain mostly unfazed
by the occasional brakings;

when the stop arrives,
we head back out,
depending on the day,
into a spitting rain
or into a snow whose hems
have been blackened by exhaust;

or we step out, late day,
into the dust-spun light
and we go on
our other way,
toward work, toward the opening
doors of our homes.

ARS POETICA

“And we find ourselves, my beloved angel, on the itinerary” —Derrida

Every bus is a poem. Every one
of us: freighted. Ghost-inflected.
Belted. Distracted. Set apace.

Wheeling. A study in departures.
A will to progress. To progression.
A study in parallelisms: we,

in our seats; the streets arcing over
the tracks, that, all the livelong days
funeral process the mountains’

guttled bellies. The coal in its long,
exposed beds sometimes comes to rest.
And then, looking down from a bridge you see

the gradations of it. The history of
us is the need for one flame or another.
O, how we specify: Ingnite. Bituminous.

Sub-Bituminous. Anthracite.
We, the echolocations. Fickle Compasses.
There has always been a whiff of the invader

about our faces. See, there,
the river’s edge, that bag caught
on the crepe myrtles’ branch tips?

The wind is busy animating it
into a shirt with sleeves, unpeopled.
My friend, see, too, in that higher distance,

the ridgelines, against which
a bluing light insists on itself? Between us and there,
we and it, a greening infinite.

FORSYTHIA

Winter lapses radiantly, all sepal and calyx—
all yellow cupped, frail and certain,

and the first bees, though we cannot
see them, must be humming sticky-footed praise to this:

forsythia, the deranged, the already wept
and weeping shrubbery that seems

to want to leave itself. It has achieved
a messy ambition of thicket; it plunders

the property lines. Would redistrict the city
if it could, would take flight. Around the corner,

two blocks down, there's another forsythia, humbled
by the human will to tidy: it's clipped into a fray-less square,

a light-bearing box. But, O, old enough, roomy
enough you could peer into its tangled center

where, if you listened carefully, you'd hear
what veins honeyed by even the slimmest first light of spring sing.

GOD ARRIVED MESSILY LIT

(Roanoke Memorial Hospital)

I rode the wake
of morphine. So many
stuttering hands in a room—
were they the quickened schools of fish?

Hard to tell, the heart
was laboring hard.
Then they were
white birds flushed
from a roost by what
was surely coming.

Later, they settled back
into the branches
of the room's night,
quieted. Each an illuminated
sentinel, edged in
electric light. Later still,
at the cusp of that long night,

dawn rose in its slow yellow
tide over the Blue Ridge, pooled
into the damp streets and trees
of our city. Day woke me.

It was that simple: I got up
from the bed, cured enough

to sing again into this
unrepentant in-between,
this gorgeous wide-open mouth of being.

AT THE EDIBLE MUSEUM

At last, a museum in which you could lean close to an exhibition, rub your face on a frame edge, and, for a small fee, which she had already paid, visit the gift shop café to eat some art. Or part of the art. Which was all anyone—even the richest, who could afford the originals—ever achieved during a lunch hour, anyway.

An introvert by birth, Darlene happily drifts the hallway's white hush into the "What Remains of the French Painters" room. Her favorite. She lingers alongside the quiet way the oil paintings live. It is as if they were well fed for centuries and then time baked into an ancient fatigue. She skips the next room, "Contemporary Art"—it had a way of screaming like a late day playground. Trying to eat contemporary art was like trying to eat a large, live crayfish.

She heads to the gift shop. She can only afford a slice. It would still be a treat; even a poster piece left an aftertaste of the day the painting was made—a whisper on the tongue of the artist's consciousness.

And it was her birthday. She wanted to nibble at Van Gogh's fields, to chew through a few of those weeds from June, 1890, until she bit clear into a clutch of poppies, the red blood beauty of them.

After awhile, she'd return, to her cubicle, to her desk, with a sense of a day well lived, of herself as a well-purchased holiness.

RIDERS, #3

Mostly we just trusted
the bus. Gave into that half-dreamt
state of waiting. The mind
could be like a botched spackle job.
Or an unremarkable weather front,
a spring wind thick-fingering the trees.
Sometimes it was its own ambitious
geography. Sometimes it was all these
and it's own going forth:

a container ship against which
the Atlantic slopped messily.
Today, it's that persistent crooner,
Schoolboy poet brain,
trying to be an entire doo-wop
band of amore. It was okay

that he didn't have a thing
new in the world to say,
that all that came to his mind
was, "darling, you send me,"
or "unforgettable, that's what
you are. . . " If only he could sing
it in just such a way that she'd kiss him,
sweetly, and, if that doggerel internal rhyme
of certainty would keep, never leave.

VERNACULAR, #1:
THIS NECESSARY INVOCATION

Because four people said, “Bless You”
when I sneezed. “Bless you”
and “bless you” and “bless you” and “bless you”
until I thought, yes, bless me.

For Nyvellya, singer/songwriter/prophetess.
who stepped aboard the bus, armful of books,
eyelashes goddesses would envy.

For the father who sat, shifted his boy
from right to left hip, licked his thumb tip
to clean the crust from his son’s eyes.

There should be a poem for the exact
mathematics of his tenderness.

For the man who named his wheelchair “Breezy.”

For the woman who cried to herself
in constant, low whines I could not translate.

For the woman behind me at the ticket counter,
who said, “do I know you?” and when I said, “no,”
shook her head: “that’s the problem with people like you.

What you think you know. What you don’t.”
Sneezing again, I agreed. She quick-educated me,

“What adds up. What don’t. Think. Then count.”

TERRA INCOGNITA

(Route from the Goodwill to the Veterans Administration Hospital and Back Again)

We should add it up. Each church's promises.
Each forged miracle. Each flag. Even, as West Main

widens out into its shopping clutter, we should keep faith
in the count, especially the mundane: how many haircuts

in how many barber, beauty shops on just one average
Friday? How many scissors shearing?

Each car in every parking lot for a one-mile stretch.
Each piece of plastic on sale at the Big Lots, every trinket.

How many, the pills tendered at the CVS, their little bit-
sized ideologies of cure? Each anti-depressant, anti-psychotic,

each regulator of heartbeat? Because to count is to name.
To defibrillate. The amount of gas pumped at station after station?

We must tally the luck-for-sale, lottery tickets, hanging coiled,
names like, "Winner Takes All," "Beginners Luck," "Aces To 8's," . .

How many lunchtime drive-thru burgers sold, the cows
they once were—how many of them in their first field,

how many blackly articulated flies haloing their heads.
How many receipts? Because each count

is an incantation, could we trace the lineage of a shoe
back from this Wal-Mart in Dixie, to the woman's fingers

in some distant land who stitched it? Her name? Could we
count the road back to dirt beneath it, which holds

the bones of the first lost languages, the headstones of slaves?
It's late in the day, O, my country. If we persist, because each count

is a reckoning and a prophecy, O, how many days, until spring,
until the Bartlett trees rain their armistice parade confetti

on our day-to-day empire and anesthesia? How many
soldiers gone forth. How many ghosts.

VERNACULAR, #2:
A FOUND POEM

“You sick? Cold, cough, sore
throat--all that? Sounds like it.

O, Lordy. Probably got it
from someone on this bus. Melissa’s
always getting on the bus, sick—her
or Tammi. I am telling you.

Sometimes I just want to be going
straight home and tossing a bale of hay

to the yard. Yes, I do. Best cure
for the common cold is commonness.

Table Salt. Hot Water. Gargle,
then gargle. Then again. I know it takes

what it takes, day after day, I tell you
what. I have been thinking and

ninety percent of the time I just don’t care
what _____ does at work. I don’t

cuss him out. I could cuss him out.
But I don’t cuss _____ out. And I could

cuss. him. out. almost every day
for being late. I know it’s not easy

getting in or out of a city, though.
I know what can slow a man down,
traffic being the least of it.”

ARTIST STATEMENT

I remember exclaiming in my application for the Transit Residency what a luxury, what a dream job it would be to ride bus routes, observe the passing neighborhoods and streets, and write. But I began my residency with a sense that I was a fraud, because with the exception of the several times I stepped onto the SmartWay Connector in the pre-dawn hours, riding through the valleys, past the occasional windows lit by early risers, and arriving to the Amtrak Station, I had never taken public transportation in Roanoke. My first goal, then, was to ride the bus as much as possible, to ride every route.

I kept a notebook of observations and ideas triggered by these rides through our neighborhoods and posted four installments of selected notebook writings on the Writer By Bus Roanoke Facebook page. Public transportation is always about community, about a kind of “we.” It is always about how the landscapes we traverse are literal, figurative, and historical. How much time we spend in various states of departure, waiting, and navigation! And then we arrive to work, to home, to the grocery store, to the next point of transfer.

So, the poems here register that sense of a collective experience, even as the individuals I met inspired me, challenged me, corrected some of my ideas about what it means to navigate landscape and to be human. There are poems about history, about thinking, but also poems for specific

moments and objects: the spring forsythia bushes, a memory I had, triggered by passing by Roanoke



Memorial Hospital. Several poems are “found poems,” poems that lift directly from the voices I overheard and the language on signs and in stores. One poem is just imaginary—about a time in which a woman might arrive to a museum that not only allows you to touch the art, but to eat it.

I invited other riders and writers to join me riding and writing and to post their work on our facebook page. Writer friends in Roanoke participated, as did students from Roanoke College. Some of those who daily ride the bus delivered their writings into a drop box at Campbell.

Thank you to Ride Solutions, The Roanoke Arts Commission, and the Valley Metro for this wonderful experience. Thank you to the Pathways Program at Roanoke College for its support. Thank you to my students for their collaboration and inspiration. Thank you to friends who rode and posted their poems, to Erin Hunter for her music that day on the trolley. Especially to the people who ride the buses day in and day out, for whom this kind of transportation is not a luxury, but is a necessity, thank you. Anything worthy in these poems is dedicated to you.

Melanie Almeder



2015 ART BY BUS
In Partnership with
RIDE Solutions, the Roanoke Arts Commission, and Valley Metro
ridesolutions.org/artbybus