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.
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


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’

gutted 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.
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 luncheon 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.
"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