



Sonder

Poems and Short Stories

Eva Lynch-Comer



J. C. STALLINGS

Let Your Mind Be Creative, 2022

Mixed Media, 36" by 24"

City of Roanoke Year of the Artist Self Portrait Call

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A Luna Moth

was stranded on an arm
 of the Mill Mountain star.
 I scooped her up,
 set her down on my thigh,
grabbed a pine needle and a string
 from a spider web,
 stitched up her hind wing.
She flapped, kicked her legs,
 sputtered and fell
onto the bridge of my nose
 her little body inflating then
 deflating.
She crawled across my cheek,
 took a sip from the hibiscus flower
 tucked inside my braids.
After a breath she tried again—
 this time she caught
 a current of air
lifted higher,
 higher, away.
 I pressed my forehead
 against the star's lights
wished for her safe flight.

Sonder

We are rocked back and forth,
the cobbled road waves beneath a ship.

The weather forecast rolls across the screen.

The bus sighs weight of another passenger entering.

A woman with bright pink hair whispers into her phone,
Can you hear me?

The bus whirs along Colonial Ave
so quickly I can only catch the bones of trees.

The crisp air brushes my face, beads of sweat
turn into salt on my skin.

You will come see me today right?
the pink lady asks, cradling her phone against her ear.

I stare at words circling the screen, so I don't miss my stop.

Branches scrape the bus windows, trying to sneak in.

Leaves sweep the glass, a tender afterthought.

A man with long dreadlocks bends over his phone.
I want to reach over pull the lint from his hair

but I do not know him, so I fold

my hands in my lap.

The Last Stop

The robotic voice on the speaker announces the names of the stops.

Now approaching Agape Street. There are three people on the bus. The lady with the blue dress sits in the middle. She holds a journal in her hand, pen poised above the paper. On the cover of her journal there is a woman with clouds in her afro and glitter in her eyes. The Blue Lady chews her pen and looks out the window.

In the front of the bus a lady wears a cheetah-print scarf. She holds a loaf of bread wrapped in a brown paper bag. It looks stale, yet she nibbles at it anyway, eyes staring straight ahead, wrapped in her thoughts. Once in a while she checks her phone, then sets it back down again.

In the back of the bus there is a man with tan pants holding a rolled up newspaper in his hand that he does not read, a cup of coffee at his feet, and a briefcase in the chair next to him. Somehow his coffee hasn't spilled yet during this bumpy bus ride.

Now approaching Philia Street. The robotic voice announces. Then it says, *It will be okay. You will write your book. Don't worry.*

The Blue Lady grips her journal with both hands. She makes eye contact with Cheetah Scarf Lady and Newspaper Man. The Blue Lady points to the black box where the voice came from and raises her eyebrows. Newspaper Man and Cheetah Scarf Lady shrug, so The Blue Lady clears her voice and says, *Well, thank you*, as that is the polite thing to do.

Then the voice addresses Cheetah Scarf Lady. *Your son misses you. Just call him. It will be okay.*

She blinks back tears, and replies, *Well, thank you*, her phone

glowing in her hands.

The Newspaper man looks up as it is his turn. *You will get the job. Don't worry, it will be okay,* the voice assures him.

The man rubs his eyes and says, *Well, thank you,* reaching for the handle of his briefcase.

They lean back in their seats, content now to ride to the last stop.

The Witch's Curse

I wear a dress of hyacinth petals
they rot on my body, sickly sweet.

The only words I can say are
Third Street Station.

I can read bus stops, but nothing else.

When the *Roanoke Times*

lays open on the seats

I stare at the scribbles

hoping one day

I will understand.

I have wheels instead of toes.

If I stop moving

I will melt into asphalt
and evaporate.

Gasoline gushes through my veins,

bus routes are tattooed on my skin,

my body a jumble of numbers.

I can never sit in the bus only stand.

If people squeeze my nose, I honk.

They pull my ears, the bus stops,
grip my shoulders

so they will not fall.

I had a dream I gobbled up a bus

made of gingerbread,

the crumbs writhing

under my tongue.

I coughed up smoke
for weeks.

One day,

I will

stand still,

bare feet anchored to the ground,

the earth on my soles,

nowhere to go

nowhere to be

but here

now



Yemaya

“It felt like Sojourner Truth was on one side pushing me down, and Harriet Tubman was on the other side of me pushing me down. I couldn’t get up.” -Claudette Colvin¹

Roanoke, 1955

I drop my coins into the machine, leave the bus, and run to the back. Today, the bus driver opens the doors. I go to the last row and plop down next to a lady who gives me a warm smile. She smells like the ocean and cowrie shells hang from her braids. Her blue and white dress ripples around her, lifted by the wind blowing in through the windows.

“Yemaya,” she says.

“Oshun,” I reply, returning her smile and leaning back heavily into my seat.

I check my afro in the bus window. It’s shrunk a bit in the humidity, but it still looks good. Behind me, a nurse from Burrell Memorial Hospital leans her head on the window, eyes closed. Across from me, two Lucy Addison high school students are talking to each other in low whispers. I rub my neck and hum a little song to myself, but my eyes stay in a swivel, looking for trouble as always.

As the bus fills up, the white folks are coming farther and farther back. I tense up, gripping my purse just in case I am asked to stand up. Yemaya pats my hand reassuringly; I give her a quick nod of thanks.

An older Black gentleman gives up his seat for a young white boy

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2009/03/15/101719889/before-rosa-parks-there-was-claudette-colvin>

who sneers in his direction. The older man leans heavily on the pole, his breaths labored. He wears a sharp black suit with an elegant velvet tie. I catch a whiff of cigar smoke and I am reminded of my granddaddy. I motion to my seat, but he gives his head a quick shake.

A white woman stares me down. She leaves her seat in the front and darts to where I am sitting, her hair whipping behind her.

“Get up. My daughter needs to sit,” she demands. Her daughter’s blonde hair is pulled tight into two pigtails. She looks to be barely two years old.

“She can sit in your lap.” I say the words slowly, like I am pulling my hand from the mouth of a lion.

“Get up,” she demands, her voice getting louder, more pronounced. Everyone has turned to stare. The high school students have stopped talking and the nurse sits up, alert.

I consider standing and allowing the woman’s daughter to take my place, but Yemaya places her hand on my shoulder, and for some reason I stay seated. Though I tremble, she holds me still. I clear my voice and say, “No. I will not.”

The lady grabs her daughter and calls for the police, crocodile tears already flowing down her face.

A red-faced officer appears from thin air like an apparition and storms down the aisle. I lift my hands, palms forward, and wait for the sting of silver cuffs.

Yemaya stands up and blocks the officer’s path. She is much taller than I thought—her head reaches the top of the bus. She lifts both her arms, and a flood of water pours into the windows and through the door. The bus fills to the brim with ocean water, yet curiously, I find that I can still breathe. The police officer and all of the people

at the front of the bus are washed away with the waves. Yemaya lowers her arms, and the bus is dry once again.

Those of us who are left look around in awe. The floor of the bus is covered in sand, and gold nuggets are tucked beneath each seat. Yemaya walks to every person and hands them a seashell. I receive a shell with a rose painted on top. When I tilt it, I find a pearl tucked inside. With the gold and this pearl, I can finally take care of my family. As she walks past me, Yemaya wipes my tears and kisses my cheek.

With a wink, she flits away and hands a shell to the nurse behind me. The nurse presses her piece of gold against her lips and whispers a prayer of thanks. In her other hand, she holds a seashell that smells of lilacs and summer rain.

“Whenever you need help again, call my name into the shell, and I will appear,” Yemaya announces when everyone has received a seashell and gold. “Sit where you please.”

Yemaya waves her hands around the bus, which now shines so bright, it is as if she has scattered the stars across the seats. The older gentleman takes a seat right at the front and releases a deep breath, the frown lines on his face softening. He closes his eyes, holds the brown shell Yemaya gifted him to his ear, hums quietly to himself. His shell smells like cedar and honey, and it is covered in swirls of tree rings. We all follow suit and spread out around the bus. We have never been in a bus filled only with Black people and we have never been allowed to take up space in the front before today.

The Lucy Addison students break into song, their voices like bubbles rising to the surface of the sea, and we all laugh and marvel at our luck. The bus begins to move on its own, without a driver, as if by magic. We wave as Yemaya flows out the door, back to a distant ocean, her seashells warm in our hands.

And so, the myth goes

Cronus, worried his children would usurp him,
transformed himself into a bus and waited for them to board,
planning to swallow them whole.

Their mother, Rhea, warned her children, who devised a plan.
First, they went about their bus route as normal.

Hestia carried a single red candle in her purse, her heart a pulsing
flame. She busied herself by peeling bark off sugar maple branches.

Demeter carried a bag of rice and wore a wreath of wheat.
As the bus drove by, she flung seeds out the window.

Hera held two snoozing children—one in each arm. They didn't
make a peep even as the bus jerked forth and stopped abruptly.

Hades sat in the back row, the cries of the dead rising from his skin.
Shhhhh, shhhh, he whispered to the ghosts.

Poseidon held a sea glass fish tank, kelp swaying
with the bus's motion. The beta fish inside was hard at work
building a bubble nest.

When Hera's children cried, they all rose and unturned
their pockets which held heavy stones.
They dropped their load and scurried out.

Cronus tried to revert back into his human form but could not.
He remained a bus, forever moored to the ground,
stomach full of stones.

Birdsongs Omnipresent

A long rope of ivy
crawls onto the sidewalk
trees lean into the street
a leaf kisses my third eye

A robin sings on the cable above me
her voice a chattering staccato
like the plinking of rain drops
falling into a tin can
the whir of air conditioners
a steady vibrato

A hawk glides along the sky
a small animal in its beak
I lose them both to the mountains

I walk down Franklin Road

stop

listen

In front of Christ Episcopal Church
a yellow throated sparrow
sings of her lost lover
his little foot caught
under a broken beer bottle

Outside Lotz Funeral Home
a cardinal utters a frenzied lament
her child's pink body
splayed on the sidewalk

On Elm Ave a crow

and her sister bicker
over the last crumb
of a glazed donut
At Third Street Station
a blue jay's whistle
cuts through the hum
of bus engines

though I cannot see it
I know it is there

A New Friend

I am riding the 25 bus under the cloak of night when I see it—a blinking light on top of the Virginia Museum of Transportation. And hidden behind the Lawson Self Storage sign. And again, beneath the shrubs on Orange Ave. I had planned to do my English homework on my phone during the bus ride, but now I must find out what the light is.

I rub my eyes, but it moves so quickly I can't get a good look.

Perhaps it is a falling star trailing the bus, or the tail of a comet, or a ray of light that has forgotten to follow the sun to the other side of the earth. Or maybe, it is a lightning bug.

I hold a bouquet of flowers in my hands, take a petal, and drop it out the window. The flashing orb catches the petal before it falls and finally, I see.

She floats down onto the baby's breath in my bouquet, sniffs the honeysuckle, and dances with a sprig of lavender. Her laughter sounds like a leaf crinkling in the wind. She has turquoise wings that twinkle like windchimes, her eyes are large and round, her afro shimmers in the moonlight, and she wears a dress made of blueberries and thyme.

She tells me her name is Ajá.

I look around the bus but no one else seems to notice her. I wish I could tell someone about finding a fairy, but no one at my school would believe me. I'm in ninth grade now—time to grow up. But when Ajá flits around the bus, and we play hide and seek among the seats, I feel like I finally belong.

As we speed down Hollins Road, I show Ajá my favorite weeping



willow and she points out her favorite black walnut tree.

“Why is that one your favorite?” I ask her. The tree is missing limbs and most of the leaves are yellow and brittle. There are many full, green leafed trees surrounding that one. I thought perhaps, she would choose one of those.

“That is the tree I was born in,” she replies simply. “Please visit her when I am gone.” I pinky swear and cross my heart.

Ajá sings me a song known only by fairy-folk, her voice like slow brush strokes. As she sings, I can feel the wind on my skin and hear the trees whisper lullabies. I swing my feet as I hum along to her song. Ajá chirps like a cricket, chitters like a squirrel, and then she mimics a nightingale’s call.

“Can you teach me?” I ask. And she shows me how to purse my lips to get the right sound. I sing the nightingale’s song until my voice is hoarse, so I can commit it to memory. I will show my sister the song when I pick her up from the airport.

“Where are you going?” I ask Ajá.

“All fairy-folk travel to Iceland this time of year to see the Northern Lights. It strengthens our magic. How about you?”

“Wow, I’ve only ever seen the Northern Lights in videos! I wish I could go with you. I’m going to pick up my sister Nova from the airport. She just finished her first semester of college, and my mom is working late tonight, so she asked me to bring Nova this bouquet and take the bus home with her,” I reply.

“I will save strands of the Northern Lights for you and your sister, for when we meet again,” Ajá says, placing her tiny hand on mine.

“Thank you,” I say trying not to cry. Ajá stretches her arms and yawns, eyelids droopy. I promise I’ll wake her up when we reach

the Roanoke-Blacksburg Airport, and she snoozes in my bouquet. While the bus rocks her to sleep, I sing her an earth song about fire burning in a hearth. The streetlights illuminate her face while she dozes off.

We are at Towne Square when I wake her up. Outside, a black lab strolls out of Petco with its owner, carrying a stuffed cactus in its mouth. A Marshalls' employee is sweeping the floors listening to his headphones, and the Bed Bath and Beyond is already dark and empty.

Ajá packs some honeysuckle for her flight and she hands me a drawing of her favorite black walnut tree.

“I won't forget, I promise,” I tell her. She sings the nightingale's song as she flies into the plane.

I clutch her drawing to my chest and blow her a kiss goodbye, her light blinking at me from the window.

Note to Self

1. Force your legs over the side of the bed.
2. Pour dry noodles into hot water.
3. Add oil, salt, chop up the onions, broccoli.
4. Set them afloat on a sea of tomato sauce.
5. Bite, chew, swallow. (It is flavorless, but you are eating, so this as a win.)
6. Grab your bag, pat your wallet, roll your keyring around your finger.
7. Lift your legs, cross the threshold from your hardwood floors to the sidewalk outside.
8. Walk up Franklin Road to the 55 bus, ascend the stairs.
9. Slouch on the chair and lean your head against the window.
10. Let the bus carry you.

Artist Statement

When I first learned about the Writer by Bus program, I was ecstatic! I grew up taking public transportation to school in New York City, and I'd often write poetry on the bus to pass the time. I couldn't believe how perfect this project would be for me—I could continue doing what I had always done.

When I rode the bus in Roanoke, I encountered so many kind souls. I've taken public transportation in Philadelphia, New Jersey, New York, London, Italy, Costa Rica, and Spain. Of all the places I've traveled, Roanoke, Virginia has the warmest transit community.

Throughout the duration of this project, I went to the Virginia Museum of Transportation and the Harrison Museum of African American Culture to do research for my stories and poems. I took the trolley downtown, walked around my neighborhood, and performed poetry at open mics so that I could connect to the community around me. Without this project, I wouldn't have been able to find so many hidden gems within Roanoke.

I would like to thank the City of Roanoke Arts Commission, RIDE Solutions, and Valley Metro for this incredible opportunity. I am so grateful for the Roanoke bus drivers that get us where we need to go, and all of the riders who treated me with kindness. Many thanks to Andrea Garland, Doug Jackson, and Elizabeth Elmore for coordinating this project. I would also like to thank Jeffrey Cameron Stallings, for creating the beautiful artwork that has graced the cover of this chapbook.

This project wouldn't be what it is without all of the people who read it over for me and gave me feedback. My deepest gratitude to Professor Meighan Sharp for your thorough feedback and for your continual compassion and guidance.



Thank you Paramita Vadhahong for your rigorous editorial notes. I am so thankful for Daiyan Hossain, Para, and Chanlee Luu for all of your support and for listening to me talk about this project for hours.

To my mother Nuria Lynch-Comer, thank you for looking at an earlier draft of this collection and for always giving me loving, constructive criticism. Pura Vida! Thank you to my sister, Ana Patricia Lynch-Comer for inspiring me to be better every day. And I am so grateful for my precious dog Osito, for always being there for me.

About the Writer

Eva Lynch-Comer is an Afro-Latina and African American poet with Costa Rican ancestry. She is a Creative Writing MFA student and teaching fellow at Hollins University. Eva holds a B.A. in Creative Writing from Hamilton College where she received the John V. A. Weaver Prize in Poetry and the Sydna Stern Weiss Essay Prize in Women's Studies. She is a two-time pushcart prize nominee. Eva's work has appeared in over 15 literary magazines including *Free Verse Revolution*, *Honeyguide Magazine*, *Nightingale & Sparrow*, and *Capsule Stories*, among others. Her writing centers on themes of healing, family, love, social justice, the divine feminine, nature, jazz, music, ecofeminism, the ocean, and magic. In her free time, Eva enjoys singing, drinking tea, and walking her dog Osito. You can find more of Eva's work at www.evalynchcomer.com



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 visit RIDESolutions.org/artbybus.

About RIDE Solutions

RIDE Solutions is a sustainable transportation program operated by the Roanoke Valley-Alleghany Regional Commission in partnership with the New River Valley Regional Commission, the Central Virginia Planning District Commission, and the West Piedmont Planning District Commission. It is a grant-funded program that provides multimodal trip planning services - including carpool matching, bicycle commute routing, transit assistance, and telework consultation - for citizens and employers in the southwestern Virginia. Visit ridesolutions.org for more information.







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