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## Cardinal

CHRIS WIEWIORA

On Fridays, the café at Frederiksen Court in Ames, Iowa, offers one dollar off all Starbucks drinks. I use the café as my need-to-pee location on the bus route I drive. My CARDINAL bus cycles around the volleyball courts and picnic tables in the grassy median of Freddy Court's several dozen dorm buildings, and then loops around Iowa State's central campus. The route is shaped like a figure eight, but riding the wheel doesn't feel like infinity. Maybe it's because a cup of coffee fits perfectly in the triangle space made between my radio speaker, tally counter, and dashboard.

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Today, another end of the week in April, Lauren wears a septum piercing. She glances up at me and then away as if an invisible thread pulls her nose ring to the espresso machine. She shouldn't be ashamed to be a student—one of my former students—and working a service job. I want to tell her I worked at a coffeeshop and it paid my rent as well as supplying my caffeine throughout my undergraduate studies.

Then, I wonder if she's embarrassed to see me driving for CyRide—a bus system named after the school's mascot of a cardinal caught in a cyclone. I was a graduate student. I was her teacher. And this—riding the wheel—is the job I have with my degree and experience?

I don't think she thinks this about me. She was one of my innovative students from the College of Design. I remember when she suggested that ISU install a ski lift-like rail system like the one that connects the campus of West Virginia University. WVU has the same enrollment as our school, and their system has a lower cost than CyRide.

Drivers wouldn't be keen on their chauffeuring jobs transitioning to automated ferries, but isn't that the

future? If gas engines are kneeling to electric batteries, then won't drivers eventually be phased out? I want to tell Lauren that now I know the future is not a savior; it's a gravedigger at worst and a zombie at best.

~

Back in 2003, Ames considered installing light rail. The plan called for it to run from downtown through campus and then out west where most of the students live. Maybe the tracks could have also gone north to the Mall. Basically, the light rail would mirror an L—zipping up and down Grand Avenue and then along Lincoln Way.

Light rail would have cost Ames only three million dollars. The total cost would have been 60 million dollars, which state and federal government grants would have paid. So, the city would have paid five percent. Still, the city thought the cost too much.

Who knows what the university would have contributed, but ten years later, ISU began to push enrollment toward 40,000 students. When I attended, the campus already felt maxed out as it corralled over 30,000 students and CyRide's ridership increased by one million passengers per year. ISU's student body fees pays 60 percent of CyRide's budget. When I started driving, CyRide projected 10 million dollars for operating expenses to provide an estimated seven million rides per year.

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In the loop, outside Freddy Court's café, Ryan gets out of his bus and strides over to my window. I'm waiting to start my "extra" shift where I help out the scheduled bus. Ryan talks faster face-to-face to me than when I've heard him on the radio. *When you start CARDINAL you wannaholdbackatthecafeuntilthefirstbuscyclesaroundthevolleyballcourtsandthenfollowasextra.* His oval wraparound sunglasses settle under his mop of brown hair. The lenses look like alien eyes. Ryan is a full-timer who's trying a little too hard to become a lifer. He gives obvious advice to new drivers like me. There's no amount of niceness that gets you into the top-twenty with benefits. It's only how much you have ridden the wheel—your seniority—that boosts you up the list.

Ryan holds up his hand and splays out his fingers, opening a space between his middle and ring finger.

Live long and prosper. I don't know if I can by riding the wheel.

~

I mostly ride the smaller wheel of CyBrids on CARDINAL because of its bulkiness. The CyBrid hybrid bus's roof is higher than that of other buses, and that makes clearance under overhanging buildings and trees a hazard. So, CyBrids are used for routes around campus, where there aren't any awnings to skirt under or boughs draping into the street. While CyBrids guzzle less gas, they're 3,000 pounds heavier than the other buses in the fleet, and they tear up the roads more with that additional weight. Nonetheless, though the steering is smoother, the brakes apply in three clinches and build up lots of rebound. CyBrid's batteries charge up as the bus slows down. The brakes create heat from friction while stopping and the bus stores that energy in its battery. After releasing the brake pedal I have to wait for a clunk—the sound of the CyBrid's engine shifting back into drive—before pressing on the gas, so the bus doesn't lurch. Students going to and from class are more forgiving of the start and stop of a CyBrid than citizens riding through the city.

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It's warm and sunny and cloudless. I've got all the windows open. I slant the front vent to suck air in and then send it along the ceiling to the tilted rear hatch. I've not used the a/c yet, and I'm trying to see if I can get to the end of the semester without blasting the Freon.

Students wear cotton hoodies; maybe a rayon sweater. Some wear shorts and their pale skin gleams whiter than the still-patchy snow on the ground, unless they do sessions at Sun Tan City and look rusty.

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422 CARDINAL to CARDINAL EXTRA, 10-32? I ask the bus in front of me if they're supposed to skip the stop, because it's time for me to roll.

10-77. I've got some time here, still. My extra disagrees.

10-76 to the front of Freddy, I say, indicating that I need to get rolling because my watch says I'm already late.

10-36 is 9:42 and 10,11,12 seconds... Dispatch interrupts to offer the correct time.

I set my watch back.

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In the 1860s Billy Childs and his brother had operated the stagecoach line with his horse drawn carriage through Ames. Then, on July 4th, 1891, Ames's first engine-driven public transit system rolled along tracks laid on the rutted dirt road from downtown to the campus of Iowa Agricultural College. The Dinkey train—fondly named from a corruption of its small, “donkey” steam engine—pulled three passenger cars. Actually, two locomotives with cattle catchers comprised the Dinkey: one with a flat Victorian roof and ornate lettering and another with a curved roof and simple, block lettering; both read Rapid Transit and #2 along their sides.

From 8am until 9pm, after the Childs' operation was taken over by the Dinkey, a man named Hank conducted one-hour roundtrips. He would blare the whistle three times to signal that he would depart from downtown in five minutes, and then he would sound two toots as he set the Dinkey chugging out of the depot. Sometimes, the Dinkey linked a flat car behind the passenger cars for mail, luggage, and bicycles. The Dinkey cut through central campus and ended its route next to Morrill Hall at a terminal building still called the Hub.

Sixteen years after the Dinkey's first trip, after the town council and the school approved more tracks to create a loop around campus, the Fort Dodge, Des Moines, and Southern Railroad bought the Ames Street Railway Company and replaced the steam engine with a trolley. They bought two electric streetcars; one numbered 86 and the other 88, eventually renumbered as 286 and 287. CyRide continued the numbering with mini-buses in 300-series, CyBrids in the 400s, and the

other buses continuing to count up.)

By 1912, the streetcar's 20-minute interval trip was engineered down to 15 minutes. Daily, two thousand passengers rode to and from the school and downtown. During the transition from steam to electric, the fare had stayed the same and continued to cost one nickel for almost the next twenty years. Eventually, the cost to ride rose to seven cents to compete with the unregulated Hutchinson Bus Line, but in 1929 the trolley ceased rolling. In 1930, the tracks were removed.

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The air crackles and my arm hair stands up straight. Gray dyes the clouds. This weather reminds me how big the sky is out here. The sky stretches past the disked-up

bare fallow soil until the corn sprouts up its green maze.

Another day—one which I decide is a mocha day—I wish I was home, but I'm about to ride the wheel. My book *Darkness Sticks to Everything* fits perfectly into a slot created by the space between my driver side window and my dashboard. I take a sip of my drink and I read a poem each time I return to the start of CARDINAL.

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Vivica wears her braids pulled into a bunched ponytail and drapes them over the collar of her CyRide polo. She's a type-A personality. In conversation with other drivers, Vivica gloats when she's right about a sports score and huffs about a news item she doesn't believe, but which the other driver has proven. She works as much as she can between her classes. I don't know what she's studying, but I imagine it's a management degree.

Yesterday at the dispatch window, Vivica said she needed to swap shifts with me so she could do her taxes. She wanted me to drive her Friday evening YELLOW—a mini-bus route which rides along downtown and past the highway, without relief or an extra, and which feels especially stressful during the end of week rush to get



PHOTO COURTESY OF CYRIDE

out of town—but I have a nice loop-de-loop of CARDINAL throughout the day. I drive it in the morning and then in the late afternoon just after every student has driven back home or headed out for dinner before the beginning of their weekend. I wanted to tell Vivica that she should ask for an extension, but I said, If you need to do your taxes, then give away your shift.

Today Vivica is my extra and she demands 10-32 (continue to next bus stop). She wants me to leave early. I know dispatch hears us on the radio and they'll say something to reprimand her later, but now I say 10-12 at Freddy. I guess she didn't get her shift swapped, but I'm standing by, waiting for my departure time to expire.

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There's a hate that ebbs from me. It's not the hate the ignorant passenger shows for the guy riding the wheel; it's the slow burn of resentment at the maliciousness passenger shows to passenger and that passenger shows to driver.

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Riding the wheel on Friday evening is a perfect time for me to add to my list of ISU vanity plates. When students pull out of their dorm parking spaces and drive out of town I watch their bumpers for the yellow backgrounds and red lettering. Most of the jumbled alphabet and assorted numbers have to do with ISU athletics' motto CYCLONE NATION.

WE ARE 1  
EYE ST  
GO2ST8  
ALUMCY  
CYFAM  
CYBIRDS  
CY4US  
ALLN4CY  
FANS4CY  
CYS1FAN  
CY LUV

NUTZ4CY  
FARRCYD  
EXCYTBL  
DCY4  
IAMCY  
CYCLOWN

~

An international student runs from one Freddy stop to the one where I'm closing doors. The only reason I spot him is a group of guys who have already boarded laugh and point. I open my doors and they groan.

Hey guys, I holler behind my shoulder. I don't even get on the PA. You'd want me to stop for you.

As I roll along Wallace Road after the stop sign at Beach Road the chord is pulled and the STOP REQUESTED bell bings. The bell bings. It bings. And it bings.

At the stop by Food Sciences, I park. The guys tap the rear door attempting to break the sonar. I haven't unlocked the doors. Only pull the chord once, I say. The guys begin shouldering the door. I activate the rear door and it hisses open.

The international student exits with this pack of guys. Apparently, they are his friends.

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There's a hate that ebbs from me. It's not the hate the ignorant passenger show for the guy riding the wheel; it's the slow burn of resentment at the maliciousness passenger shows to passenger and that passenger shows to driver.

I have to let this hate go. I have to treat students like they treat me. I have to treat students like nothing. It hardly helps.

~

A student stands at the last stop out of Freddy Court holding a half-eaten can of corn with a plastic spoon jammed into the cooked kernels. He digs around in his pocket for his wallet. He doesn't need to show me his student ID. The circulator routes like CARDINAL are free, but I don't stop him or any other student who

shows me their ID so they don't lose the good habit for fixed routes. However, I can't have him eating on my bus and so I put out my hand and say, Either my bus or your corn.

The student places the can into the red plastic bucket sitting on a shelf behind the front doors that serves for passenger trash. I ride the wheel into campus. The student pulls the bell for a stop by the Memorial Union. He walks forward to exit, reaches into the bucket, grabs his can, steps off my bus, and scoops out some corn into his mouth.

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The four-sided clock tower rises on my right above an irregular cluster of round maples and oaks along with a smattering of pine spires. Every weekday, a music professor—whose only two duties are teaching an online music appreciation class and training a half-dozen future campanilers—takes an elevator up the clock tower and, at 11:50AM, plays the fifty bells for a twenty-minute live concert. I've heard the theme from Super Mario Brothers on a Friday, "America the Beautiful" on the anniversary of 9/11, and "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" around graduation.

An updated school tradition says that a student can only become a true Iowa Stater if they are kissed under the Campanile at midnight. During homecoming, on central campus, sets of first-semester freshmen can be found staring at the internally lit dials edging all the way up. Their lips are pouted and puckered and prepared.

The original tradition was a little different. It held that a woman at Iowa State College—who had never been kissed—could become a true coed if she was kissed under the Campanile on the stroke of midnight. Afterward, the coed had to drop jellybeans in front of the door of each of her dorm house's rooms. If she was a senior, then she had to leave lemon drops.

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During my first year at ISU, students walked out of classes at noon to protest for Occupy Iowa at the Campanile. It was a Thursday and I didn't have to teach or take any classes. I stayed home as one hundred people

gathered during the lunch hour. I thought that there weren't clear demands, that the cause didn't have a center, that it didn't affect me.

Some of the other graduate teaching assistants attended the protest and lofted cardboard signs above their heads. One read ENOUGH. They had had enough and they wanted enough. By 1pm, after the lunch hour, they walked off campus to Lincoln Way and dissipated.

They were part of a group I joined: people looking for jobs who had done the right thing. We had gone to school, had done internships, and then—nothing. Or not nothing, but the lowest of the low. We were reaching down to jobs where other people were reaching up to work.

Six hours away, in Chicago, I've heard of the clear demands: Fifteen and a union. But that's what I get already at CyRide and it's not enough. What about health insurance, what about consistency of hours, what about physical hardship, mental struggle, and respect?

I'm riding the wheel instead of someone else.

~

By the stop for Student Services, a guy stands on one foot, the other bent back at his knee in a cast. I close the space between my front tire and the curb. I attempt to deploy my wheelchair platform. The alarm sounds, but the lift sticks. A mechanical grinding gnashes. Other drivers must have thrown grit on the front door's entrance instead of out on the cement and the rock-and-sand wedged down to clog up the gears.

I look at the guy and raise my shoulders.

He sets a determined jaw, adjusts his crutches, and leaps up.

~

I put my left hand on the door lever as a fattish nerdy girl waves her arm across Union Drive on the sidewalk by the copy shop. Bumper-to-bumper cars exiting the parking lots for Eaton, Martin, and Helser Halls stream in front of her. I know her cat-eye glasses frames and curly brown hair and body stuffed into tights. I think of her as someone who plays board and

card games at Mayhem Collectibles down on Lincoln. She's the girl who disregards the crosswalk and walks in front of my bus to make me wait every Friday on CARDINAL.

It's my turn, on this round of our game, today. I turn my hand on the lever. Close and go.

~

At the end of CARDINAL route, a guy walks forward to my seat. He always spikes his blond hair and keeps his goatee trim. He wears a corduroy jacket over his Oxford button-down tucked into jeans. I think he's a lecturer or a graduate student, because he's just casual enough to dress below a professor and above an undergraduate, and why would he be on my CARDINAL route unless he lives in Freddy Court or he walks north from the car pool lot down by Haber Road's railroad underpass.

Lecturer guy glances at my nametag and says, Hey

Chris, would you mind dropping me off on the other side?

I have to loop around Freddy's median because a bus can't fit through the archway on Haber. I say, No problem. I ride the wheel just before the stop so no one else mistakes me for the next bus.

"Thank you, Chris," lecturer guy says.

I wish I knew fancy dressed lecture guy's name because there's a certain humanity—even if it's forced politeness—in acknowledging a person beyond what they look like, what they do.

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A student walks out of the Freddy Court café, two frozen wheels of pepperoni pizza under one arm and a case of Mountain Dew in his hand. He's ready for a Friday night at home. No more classes, no more bus. 🍃



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