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## **Johnny McNear as Glimpsed through a Bus Window**

*To harm a person is to receive something from him. What? What have we gained (and what will have to be repaid) when we have done harm? We have gained in importance. We have expanded. We have filled an emptiness in ourselves by creating one in somebody else.*

—Simone Weil

1

On the morning of the first frost, Heather, a little girl in a green sweater, boarded Bus 26 where a dirt drive met the road at a black mailbox with the flag down. She was the new girl on our school bus, boarding in Preston in between the McNear stop and the bus turnaround where Stormy got on. Heather's hair was tied back in a ratty mass, her sweater a sweet afterthought of a mom still dreaming. Her mom stood smoking a cigarette and waved her girl on, losing the small shape behind the line of frosted windows. Through my window, I watched the ash of her cigarette light a pinhole of unreal orange in the darkness of the morning, until she turned to follow the driveway back to where it had led her from. All that morning we kids had quit our houses for the bus, one by one, me among them, a thirteen-year-old dawdling after my sister and two brothers. We came out of our homes, down off our porch steps, and sensed the change in the air at once: our footsteps shattered the earth that the frost had turned to crystals. From our bus seats, we watched that fragile world through frosted-up windows, as though watching through a thin veil, watched to see if we had done any real damage. I pressed my cheek against the cold glass and, almost without knowing it, I sang in my seat, quiet but loud enough for the boy in front of me to hear, a country song, then some Debbie Gibson.

I watched from the window as we went from house to house. I imagined things hidden in the houses that each kid came from, sometimes

specific things, like a slack bed and an empty bowl in Nellie's house because she seemed sad, seemed to float above her small self. For other houses, images came and went, things being acted upon or received inside there: I could imagine a pillowcase ironed, beautiful blouses ironed. A still-cold stove, a just-warmed stove. I could imagine the way two voices talked to each other—they overlapped and interrupted, wrapped around one another and held on for spite and for dear life. When the bus pulled away from our house, my mom stood silhouetted by the porch light, and I imagined the black sweater she was wearing over her nightgown, how it smelled like barn and Dove soap both.

2

It was harder to imagine the unfamiliar insides of the houses in Preston. Willie Helmick, from the Whetsell Settlement where I lived, drove his three boys and the rest of us Settlement kids on Bus 26. He kept his bus parked in front of his house. My sister and two brothers and I were among the first to board, from the white bus stop that we shared with the Gribbles who lived in the trailer next door. Willie made the loop to pick up the Sislers, Molissees and Dodges, the Childs kids and Joey and Nicky Wilson beside the church, then down Church Hill for the Gillespies and for Angel. Then Willie drove across the Cheat River Bridge and took a left onto Route 72 that followed the river into the community of Preston. There were about six stops in Preston, all along the river, starting with the stop where Beverly Metz boarded, just beyond the sewage treatment plant, with her sisters Stacy and Kim and her brother Henry. They lined up single file at the end of their driveway and wore the same matching winter coats from year to year, lavender with a light blue collar. *Carp smell*, the boys would whisper in Beverly's direction when she got on—*Beverly Metz is a skank*. She, like me, mostly stared out the window at the river and at Patriot Coal Mining Company which we passed next and which I could also see from the top of the field that neighbored my home, when winter had shaken loose the last of the leaves. Next, we stopped for three right in a row: Bobby Cooper, Johnny McNear, and then a group of Johnny's cousins: Sarah, Steve and Tony

McNear, and sometimes other kids, too, who lived with them. So many for one house, a long flat trailer with a plywood addition jutting out from its right side, hidden by a few thin trees. A panel painted turquoise patched the siding by the porch. Heather's stop was after that, her first bus ride being that morning of the first frost. Stormy's house was the last stop; she was a high school girl in my brother Jake's class who carried her textbooks in her arms and a slender beige purse that bounced down the aisle behind her between the seats.

That was it. That was Preston. Houses grouped together like a pack of dogs bent on survival, not unlike the houses in the Whetsell Settlement, but we kids never saw that likeness. If you stayed on Route 72, you hit Route 50 and Rowlesburg and the Cool Springs truck stop with its yard-museum of train skeletons that bore witness to the boom and bust of rail-haul logging and the mines and all that. But we only went as far as Stormy's stop, then turned around in the pull-off next to the river where refrigerators and tires poked out from between the rocks.

The houses in Preston sank back into a hillside that sloped to the river road, most of them two-story boxes with sheets of particleboard covering the gaps in the siding. As I looked through my bus window, it was harder for me to imagine what went on in these houses because the imagining was done for me, out loud, by the other kids on the bus. Sarah McNear, with black eyes and black hair, sat tight-lipped and erect on the bus. She wore a pretty side-ponytail sometimes and a thin plastic white belt with her jeans. *Don't lean your head back on that seat*, a Helmick boy would say as she was getting off the bus. *Sarah was sitting there, you're bound to get lice*. And her bed pillows came up in everyone's imagination, unwashed, with white bugs marching stupidly across the pillowcase, if there was a pillowcase. Newspaper-rugs in the kitchen at the sink, a dank curtain drawn around the toilet and towels hung on a nail. Sarah, we knew, would likely go the way of Angelina, with a child now, or Crystal whom we heard about at school, a girl fooled with by an older guy and quieted. But worse (kids whispered on the bus), Sarah would get a baby by her brother or cousin—this is how the imagination made its ugly connections—and then there were the boys' rooms in our minds,

Tony's and Steve's and Johnny's, and the secret patterns their shadows would make in the moon's weak light as it came through windows with no curtains.

This was a violence done by bus kids to other bus kids. Once the bus pulled back out onto Route 7, which took us into Kingwood to school, the houses went sturdy, brick and pillared. Hedges sported clean cuts, evergreen shelves. Sidewalks smoothed out in front of house rows like bright ribbons. Willie picked up a few kids in town, too, kids with new jackets, and for them, the line between kids from the Settlement and kids from Preston must have all but dissolved.

3

The day the first frost came and made the ground breakable, the day when Heather boarded Bus 26 for the first time in her green sweater, the day of tiny changes that sent out a tiny rupture that opened the world for something to be revealed—I saw something through my bus window that I'm still trying to understand, and each time I try to understand it, it surprises me and teaches me anew. This concerns Sarah and Tony and Beverly Metz and the Helmick boys and the whole lot of us, but it mainly concerns Johnny McNear, who got on at the third stop in Preston, and not him in his entirety but just a glimpse I saw of him on this day of first frost.

I keep replaying what I saw. It's like a puzzling text in the Hebrew Bible that sets rabbis arguing for years and years, or maybe like a line of an imagist poem, or a sharp-edged koan given to a young monk. I am trying to find the meaning, and if I can't find it, to create it. As I do so—like those poring over a sacred riddle or a tight line of discordant images—I find myself in contact with ancient things, older and bigger stories, with our own stories grafted in and, in our stories, the crucial moments when we decide if we will take our turn: if we will rise, if we will act. I am always uncertain as I look into my own grafted-in story, as though I'm ever seeing through a frosted-up bus window, but I still need to look and to trust that one day it will come clear.

4

During the afternoon bus run, on the day of that frost, I saw Johnny McNear's legs arc up into the air when he got off the bus—

Johnny McNear wore horn rims and tiny T-shirts and jeans rolled up three or four times. He was about four feet tall at age thirteen. His walk reminded me of a wrestler's: intent, arms never relaxed. His voice rasped low and sweet, like a grown man's, and I liked the way he said my name on the rare occasions that we spoke. He didn't meet anyone's eyes straight-on; sometimes I thought that was because he was afraid, but other times I wondered if he was just able to see something else and fix his eyes there, something I couldn't see, like a good idea that nobody else had thought up yet.

In Kingwood, Johnny and I both got off the bus at Central Junior High, a school that, like most junior highs, had some clearly demarcated lines drawn to divide out the *skanks*—the *carp*—the kids who were distinguishable by their clothing-bank sweaters, by their smoky unshowered smell, and by their questionable family status, living as they did in big clumps of nine or twelve. Skanks disappeared in the hallways, moved along the walls and lockers like ghosts. For the most part, the Preston kids who rode my bus qualified as skanks, as did some other kids too fat or too dark-skinned or too slow. But there were blurry lines too; some of us neither fit in with the town kids nor got lumped with the skanks. Our allegiances and shoe brandnames and shows of proper contempt for skanky people determined how we were pegged.

It was Friday and the cheerleaders held a pep rally in the gym for that night's basketball game with West Junior High. The rally was mandatory. The bell ended seventh period twenty minutes early, and we started piling in from all entrances as dance music poured from a boom box sitting on the gym floor. Central's gym was boxed in, its bleachers built in three-tier balconies that looked down over the court from both sides. It was already stuffy in the balcony bleachers, and loud and punchy. Kids scrambled to sit with friends, or at least with safe people who would distance them from skanks by a few degrees.

I had found my seat on the top row beside Rebecca, a pretty girl with soft blond hair. She and I occupied the unmarked territories, both having a penchant for kindness but a removed sort of kindness that wouldn't cause any trouble. We tended to be quiet, to offer pencils to anyone who needed one, to go relatively unburned and unremarkable. I sat tugging at my turquoise sweater; by the afternoon on that October day, the frost was long burned off and it was too hot to wear the sweater, but it was a bright new hand-me-down from my neighbor so I had wanted to show it off.

As the cheerleaders came bounding out in their burgundy and gray skirts, a commotion started on the bottom tier close to me. Some boys had assembled themselves in a row: Adam and Kenneth and Ryan, boys from town, then two kids from my bus—Rodney and Eric—who had worked their way into the ranks of town kids by the available means (Nikes or Reeboks, a sly punch delivered to the stomach of an unsuspecting skank). They had all propped their feet up on the railing in front of them, blocking the path of anyone wanting to pass. In came Johnny McNear through the fire escape door, and he headed right for the aisle in front of the boys. Of course he should have chosen another route, kept to the periphery, if he knew what was good for him. But maybe he didn't want to this time. Maybe he wanted to be visible, forceful. Maybe he just didn't get it.

He tried to pass in front of them and Adam was the first to lock his knees in place, refusing to let Johnny by. Each boy followed suit as Johnny pushed and pushed to get through. Adam gave way with his legs and Johnny lunged forward onto Kenneth's locked legs that trapped him there and the boys laughed and chanted *Mc-Near! Mc-Near!* as the pony-tailed girls assembled in a perky triangle on the court floor below us and began in unison, *We are the Wildcats!* Johnny clambered up on top of the boys' shin bones, gripping the railing. They loved it, his short body towering for those few horrible moments. They let him teeter there for a few seconds and then they collapsed their legs and he fell hard to the floor, disappearing among the hard soles of high-tops.

I looked and I looked away.

The boys held out their legs like little emperors, with a crude form of power, like that of a mob at dark. I knew some things about the boys, things that peered into their interior rooms. I knew about dads who cussed them and sometimes worse, or moms who ran around; I knew how they eyed each other and vied for the dark-haired Samantha's attentions. I knew that Rodney envied the bone that the town boys threw Eric. I knew these things but didn't know why the boys struck Johnny down or why none of the other kids spoke up, why I did nothing. My mom's words ticked around in my head: *there's always one thing you don't know about somebody, something causing them to act the way they do.* She had said that to me after this woman cussed her out in the checkout line at Foodland because Mom had bumped the woman's cart. Mom had sniffled in the parking lot afterward, trying to let it roll off her back, saying who knows what the woman has to put up with at home or someplace. But I didn't know if what she'd said applied here in the gym. Her words suspend judgment and action; they suspend a little pendulum before your face—how long before you're supposed to grab the wagging, patient pendulum and holler?

Yet, it wasn't really my mom's words that kept me in my seat by Rebecca as the rally started. I felt ungainly with my own falling-out braid and pimples and that turquoise sweater that I hid inside, contending for my own place in the human spectrum. I wanted to be on the winning side. I had a shot at this. Besides that, I had a crush on Eric and I didn't want to ruin my chances. And what was I supposed to say, anyway? Sure, I saw a bit of myself in Johnny, felt the sting of the occasions when those boys had taken aim at me and my canvas shoes from Family Dollar, or when they scattered their comments like buckshot and everybody in the vicinity got a piece. Johnny was a dusty mirror for me, but, to tell the truth, so were those boys. I was ecstatic when I was invited to a sleepover at a girl's house in Kingwood and had cream-filled donuts for the first time, and I never sat with Sarah McNear on the bus and though I had thought Sarah pretty at one time, I'd corrected my thoughts soon enough.

*Who are we cheering for?* the cheerleaders asked in another cheer

against the West Panthers, and they cupped their hands to their ears to catch our response—*Wildcats!* A call and response chant, back and forth, the burgundy and gray pompoms poking up at us like a flock of bird heads. The boys' excitement over Johnny faded as they started hooting at the cheerleaders, and he finally broke through their gauntlet. He trudged, with his head down, to the other side of the gym and took his seat beside his cousin Tony. I lost sight of him.

—but during the afternoon bus run, as I stared out my window like Beverly and Sarah stared out theirs, when the bus stopped at Johnny's house where his small mother waited on the porch in her flannel shirt, he passed my seat before the bus fully stopped, like a small, legged boulder barreling downhill. He was out the door, into the gravel of the road's shoulder, and up his driveway toward the house with the low black railing, and all of a sudden—his thick rolled-up pant cuffs whirled into the air in an arc as he cartwheeled like a plucked-up plant, his roots sailing behind the spin. He didn't even look back before he darted onto the porch and past his mom into the house. My adolescent self saw him through my bus window and I sat up stiff with surprise in my seat.

5

It was, perhaps, a fuck-you to the world, or a dare his cousin Tony gave him, a lark or a joke, but, my, whatever it was, it was good, letting his legs lift like that—not overly sincere, but swift and clear—to disturb the dominion of adolescent gloom, that pressing-down weight of feeling and dreaming way more than you can understand at the time.

When I come back to Johnny and his cartwheel, I add nothing and I take nothing away. I don't sentimentalize it as you might expect: I see the same barely-distinguishable shades of black and brown in the siding of his house and the dirt drive and the river road—the doings of the day in Central's gym still sting. I never see Johnny's face as he goes, but I see his small self as he is in particular, disruptive in his particularity. I see the house bloom as the house it was, its lattice work coming to the fore. Its smoke stuttering from the chimney. It was not transformed that day—

but it was fully what it was, standing there, a force to be reckoned with. And the house did bloom into a thing unrecognizable, not that it went sturdy and brick and pillared, but that it moved away from comparison—like Johnny, measured against no one else in that moment when he spun.

I see my young self, too, sitting up in the bus seat and taking notice. I see the almost imperceptible change passing over my face; I watch how Johnny's act loosens my fingers from their grasp on the intersecting gridlines of self-preservation and cruelty and silence.

6

What if we were to receive the world through bus windows—my reflection is always there, my self superimposed onto the landscape outside, rushing past—Patriot Mining Company, rusted refrigerators in the river, houses and apartments slouching under an invisible weight? The bus stops, lets on a kid with a wild thicket of hair who looks down the aisle for a seat. She's a piece of the world coming to touch me: Kayla, boarding at Sarah and Tony and Steve McNear's stop—as various foster kids or cousins would now and then—she plops down beside me and picks her nose and wipes her finger on my pant leg, for spite or for attention, I'm not sure which. I pretend to ignore her, and we both look out the window wondering who should forgive whom, and for what.

7

The cartwheel again: a boy as a pinwheel, spinning one spin uphill, onto the river's bank—didn't see his face, just his full-body act, his body and motion becoming one. He was not watching himself like I always watched myself as a kid. There in his singularity—in the opposite of autonomy or possession—it was more like self-abandon, a dream of yourself that comes into being in the wheeling of hand, then hand, shoe, then shoe against the cold earth.

8

When I sit again in the bus seat—singing Debbie Gibson or dog-eared the book I'm reading—I am eager for a vision through the

windows. Maybe the other passengers are, too.

Maybe we cannot see it all, only the partial visions through the smudged-up windows and through layers of memory and dream, but one day, maybe it will come clear and we will rise in response and act without hesitation. Till then, I return to the cartwheel—its fuck-you or its forgiving, its lark, its revealing and its incendiary potential. And I ride on, as everyone must, to the next stop, and the next, the bus carrying us home, kids delivered like sacks of bread to a mother waiting, or to a block of row houses where cop cars blue our porches with their lights. I watch the others get off at their stops, and when my house appears around the bend, when it's my turn, I gather my things and I'm up out of my seat, flying down the aisle, before the bus can grind to a halt. I feel my legs go weightless in the air.