

Jessie van Eerden

Johnny McNear as Glimpsed through a Bus Window

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.

(*Johnny McNear as Glimpsed through a Bus Window* continues in *J Journal* Vol. 2, No. 2 Fall 2009)