



Greyhound Seats

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image info

“Jonathan Richman: ‘You’re Crazy for Taking the Bus’ — Jonathan was a believer in the new asceticism long before most musicians. On the face of it this is a characteristic commercial for taking the bus rather than the plane . . . It’s also an argument for doing something that traveling musicians tend to avoid doing, which is engaging with the welfare gals, drunk galoots and muttering misfits who make up the real America you can find on a Greyhound bus.”

—DAVID HEPWORTH, *Nothing Is Real: The Beatles Were Underrated and Other Sweeping Statements About Pop*

It matters where one sits on a bus. It always has. Perspective, while nuanced, is both real and sometimes troubling. Window versus aisle. Up top on a double-decker or Scenicruiser versus down below on the main level. Near the driver, midway, or all the way to the back row, an undivided long seat that my friends and I used to fight for on those magic school bus trips to Birmingham to see plays or the symphony. Where you sit can define you as much as what you see on long bus trips to private destinations.

But can you also be defined by who or what sees you—sees where you are, whom you’re sitting by or across from, that is, if you’re sitting near anyone at all? If you’re all alone and lonely in your midnight or late afternoon hour? If you’re minding your own business or being interfered with by a stranger? What do we take for granted about a bus ride, about where and by whom we’ll sit? How long have we been riding without seeing ourselves so clearly, without knowing who or what we are in this lost American dream?

In the early 1980s, I was forced to ride a bus regularly on a long route from Knoxville, Tennessee, to Birmingham, Alabama, and back—a five-hour one-way car ride that

took eight on the bus since no direct route was possible if the bus were to fulfill its contractual obligations to all of its customers. My parents suggested this means since it wouldn’t tax theirs like an air ticket would. That a bus ride could be romantic and might very well enhance my aspirations to literary greatness didn’t occur to me back then and would have eaten into the time I was spending feeling aggrieved. Diesel fumes actually feel dirty, and though I wasn’t above selling my own plasma, I did feel above the bus ride.

I’ll confess: I’ve never heard a Jonathan Richman song, even though I’m a prolific pop/rock music writer. Such confession is akin to my being a professor of modern literature and teaching Joyce and Woolf and Faulkner, but never John Dos Passos because I’ve still never read a word of Dos Passos, though his cinematic style should appeal to me, as should Richman’s proto-punk sound.

After those bus-riding years, I came to know Kerouac and Cassidy and Ginsberg, and I read about their cross-country trips, taking the Greyhounds whenever they could afford them. I also know that sequence that ends *Midnight Cowboy*, when Enrico “Ratso” Rizzo

and Joe Buck tragically greyhound their way to Miami Beach.

What I want to tell you is that I know something of Greyhound and Trailways buses. Over a small sampling of time and in a decided route of some 620 miles round trip, I saw a certain part of America from buses. And I've seen some "muttering misfits" and maybe have even been one of these, as nothing can get a person talking to himself like riding a bus on the backroads and stopping at stations where the driver never tells you how long you might have to wait and has no idea sometimes of how many of you get on and off, and sometimes way off.

What I want you to understand is that left on my own, I would have never chosen the bus, even though as a child I watched the Scenicruisers pass through my town up and down US 11 toward New Orleans and Nashville and thought that nothing better could happen to a person than to be sitting in that upper section, gazing out of windows and leaving the driving to someone else. To that child a bus offered something other than being confined to a smoke-filled car going back and forth to the grocery store or to school, or to my grandmother's in the next town over every Sunday.

It offered adventure, even though my daddy told me that he had to take the bus every week, back and forth from his parents' home in Birmingham to Tuscaloosa, where he eventually matriculated from the University.

"I'd pass through Bessemer," he said (where I was born and raised), "and I swore I'd never live in that town."

Be careful what you swear to.

But that part—his being wrong about living in Bessemer—doesn't get inside of me as much as thinking about him as a young

guy—though by then he had already fought in Patton's Army during WWII—relegated to a lonely bus ride, week after week. I can't imagine all that he saw.

My daddy also rode the city bus on occasion in the 1950s and '60s from Birmingham, where he worked, back home to that Bessemer he hated. His bus used to pass right by our front door, and I'd wait for him there. I don't recall whether my daddy and other privileged people were still sitting near the front and if those who seemingly had no rights were still relegated to the rear. I have known for decades about Montgomery in the '50s, but back in this golden time, the monsters of my world were only the imaginary ogres frightening the carts and underpasses traveled by the Billy Goats Gruff.

For Bessemer was a town that defended monsters like [Bull Connor](#) and the Klan, and all those who apologized for them and looked like me and my kind, well after court orders supposedly ended all that.

Could something as seemingly inconsequential as riding a bus mark a person for life?

As a kid, I had no way of differentiating buses from trains or planes as to why a person would choose one over the other. I knew nothing of social class, of real poverty (though I saw kids come to school in dead winter with no coat, just a flannel shirt for cover), of less than mobile people whose lives dictated one form of travel instead of another. Our grammar school would charter Bluebirds for those who could afford the tickets to ride to symphonies and children's plays in Birmingham. It felt like a thrill and never the privilege it truly was.

Bluebirds could break down, and once, one of ours did, in high school, as our choir took a trip to Six Flags. We were in Heflin, Alabama, notorious for its speed traps. We sat

a long time on a bus, and I envied those in the back, making out. People stopped to help, and after a while, another bus arrived to assure our comfort and safety.

What I didn't know in that year, 1972, was that not even a decade earlier, another bus carrying people not much older than we were then was traveling from Atlanta to Birmingham, and at about this same junction was seized and set ablaze.

A decade further on, on a regular Trailways bus from Huntsville to Birmingham, we pulled in to the B'ham station and my daddy met me there, neither one of us remarking or maybe remembering what had happened at this station back in 1963 when Bull Connor and his shock troops ran amok.



So I never chose to ride the bus back then. And I wouldn't have told you this—I wouldn't have admitted it freely even to myself—but riding that bus gave me a truer taste of America than I had ever had, unless you count the years I spent going to a high school meant for eight hundred white people but which had eight hundred more students arriving by bus, crammed into the forever elusive racially balanced mix.

Truer, but how true?

How do we know about, write about the true America? How many have already written about it, and how can we know whether anything, or nothing, is real? (I once saw Strawberry Fields from the Magical Mystery Tour bus. Looked pretty real, even though until that moment, it was only the image of a song.) Maybe what I saw and experienced wasn't the "real America" either. But if not, why do these scenes stick so hard? Why are they so easy to conjure? Why am I still riding in that window seat all these decades later?

That a bus ride could be romantic and might very well enhance my aspirations to literary greatness didn't occur to me back then and would have eaten into the time I was spending feeling aggrieved. Diesel fumes actually feel dirty, and though I wasn't above selling my own plasma, I did feel above the bus ride.

“The smoke grew thicker, the testimony more intense. I had not heard so many revelations of a certain kind since I used to fall into conversations on Greyhound buses under the misapprehension that it was a good way to learn about life.”

—JOAN DIDION, “Getting Serenity,” from *What I Mean*

I once learned that it’s possible to enter a Greyhound station, board a touring bus, and see a woman die. She looked homeless, or maybe like a woman named Netta I once knew in college in a small Alabama town who dressed in long purple smocks with thick athletic socks, various coats and scarves, and who clearly didn’t favor regular bathing.

This woman on the bus, though, seemed happy enough when we embarked, her etched, rosacea face beaming at anyone who made eye contact and likely some who didn’t. She sat near the rear. I always grabbed a seat closer to the front and by the window. Life passes by quickly enough—for some, quicker than others—so why not watch it out of a Greyhound window?

We cruised along the interstate almost reaching Chattanooga, at which point we would have veered off onto the back roads for the rest of the trip to Birmingham. But this woman didn’t reach that point, and for a long couple of hours, we didn’t either. And even after we had passed Chattanooga and were almost to Birmingham, I felt that I was still standing by the roadside of I-40, still wondering what had happened, what went wrong, and maybe what had been going wrong for much of her life. I’ll never know what she thought, what she felt. This should give us all pause. We’ll never know how and why real life catches us, and just as often, what it means.

From the rear of that bus there were some gurgling noises, and then, “Driver, you better stop! She’s turning blue.”

Ever since hearing those words, I’ve imagined not the man who yelled them, but that driver, how those words hit him, and how he could never know all he signed on for when he earned his coach license. How often had he been forced to pull over in the past? Had anyone ever given birth on his bus or died on him? Was he someone to count on in a crisis?

Though he hesitated, he did pull over after a few minutes of negotiation, interstates being interstates. It took even longer for him to uncloud his mind and radio in emergency help.

Most of us got off the bus because near-death experiences make you want to get fresher air, even if that air is coming from the Tennessee foothills in December.

Of all twenty of us standing there, no one said a word. We must have wondered what would happen to the woman, living or dying in this standard time. We also wondered how long our journey would be held up. When might we expect to get to Ft. Payne, Gadsden, Springville, or Birmingham?

Eventually, an ambulance arrived. I couldn’t watch her being lifted and carried off that bus. So I don’t know, and never did, how she fared, where they took her, what happened next, or how she, or someone else, took the news and paid for the expenses.

Isn’t that how we learn about life? By looking further down the road and away from the central issue?

In *Midnight Cowboy*, when Joe Buck informs the bus driver that Rico has died, the bus driver walks to the back, looks at the dead man for a long minute, and tells everyone they’ll just proceed to Miami. For what else was there to do?

When we returned to the bus, everyone sat near the front.

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We measure ourselves by riding buses.

On the same route, another ride, a guy about my age sat across the aisle from me. We didn’t speak for the first three hours as I was struggling to understand the world of “Joe Christmas” in Faulkner’s *Light in August*. But when the Greyhound took a break at Collinsville, some passengers decided to stretch their legs or get some coffee at the station.

“Don’t let the bus leave without me,” this guy across the aisle said. How had I earned his trust?

He didn’t wait for a reply. He thought we had a bargain.

But how accountable should we be to someone who decides that Collinsville is the place to wander off?

What misapprehension did this guy live under about his fellow passengers? That we were a team? A unit? That twilight bus time was the right time to be trusting?

I’m not sure where the guy went or how long he thought he had. I was sitting on the right side of the bus, and I’ve wondered since then what real life would have been like if I had been sitting on the left, by a window looking away from the station?

The driver returned, and with barely a glance back to us, closed the door.

He put the bus in gear, and I sat there wondering if this was possible, not only that the driver was this negligent, but that I, now and maybe forever, had the fate of my aisle mate in my hands.

I kept on watching, saying nothing, and in that second—the one that either meant we’d leave this guy behind in Collinsville forever or somebody would say or do something to stop us—I saw him come running from the right back corner of the station.

Running hard.

“Stop!” I finally yelled, or at least I think it was my voice. Maybe, though, it was someone else’s, someone who had a sharper and readier conscience.

The bus lurched, and the door opened. My aisle mate boarded and returned to his seat.

“Were you gonna let the bus leave without me?” he asked, more in wonder than in anger.

I just looked at him and turned back to the window and eventually to understanding Faulkner.

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When Greyhound says, “...And leave the driving to us,” how should we interpret that?

That everything else they will leave to us? The stops, the dying, the fate of those who board and deboard? The seating?

And what about all that does or could go on in the seats, where people minding their own business, looking out windows for scenes of American life, find themselves anything but left alone?

Once the bus leaves Chattanooga, heading south, it takes the winding two-lane roads leading past Ashville (not Asheville) and Rainbow City. The stops are more frequent than you’d imagine. Riders get on at unlikely stands; sometimes there are even groups of

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eight or nine who've been waiting at a stop just outside a rundown post office, a stone building that surely hasn't changed since they began making Green Spot.

I noticed this group: high schoolers, I thought, kids moving in a pack, talking loudly as they should have in that time of their lives when inhibitions are barely raised. I couldn't help but notice them, hear them, and at some moments, I longed to be with them, to be them, wherever they were going, or leaving.

Rainbow City offers nothing but a proximity to Gadsden, which I suppose is like saying ketchup offers nothing but a proximity to tomatoes. I suppose life in Rainbow City is not much different from life in Bessemer or in Lenoir City, a place too close for comfort to most Knoxvilleans.

Jumping on board a Greyhound bus when you're seventeen and with your friends. What is that like? What do you see on board or out any window? What life is passing you by?

All of this passed through me as I kept reading *The Sound and the Fury* for my

upcoming Hemingway/Faulkner seminar. Quentin Compson can't take a bus home, obviously, since in 1910, a "greyhound" was only one thing. Instead, he takes a train, seeing the New England winter melt as he gets closer to his Mississippi homeland. All that familiar terrain and even an old man on a mule whom Quentin beats in the Christmas gift exchange.

This was winter/quarter break for me, too, and as I tried to concentrate, I noticed peripherally that one of the high schoolers kept walking up and down the aisle. It must have been five times on that late afternoon in December. When someone walks down and up a lone bus corridor that many times, at some point you have to look up to see why.

She was short, curly-haired, lithe. An All-American girl, and before I had much time to wonder what she did when she wasn't riding a Greyhound, she looked right at me. And winked.

Not a casual subtle eye closing/opening, but one of those stage winks where you want to be certain that those on the back rows can't miss the intent.

Not always as quick to notice flirtations, I simply looked back for a second and returned to my book. Some, of course, would welcome making it with a stranger on a bus from Rainbow City to Birmingham on a cold December evening. I can't any more tell you why I'm not one of these than I can tell you what there is to do in Rainbow City on a Friday night during the Christmas holidays.

What I do know is that even after all these years, I see her clearly. And what I wonder and what has always plagued me is this: Was she or wasn't she the girl my brother would later get engaged to? A short, lithe, curly-haired girl who liked to flirt and who almost tricked him into marriage? I can't explain, but this is what I wonder.

"I had trouble graduating from Berkeley...because I had neglected to take a course in Milton. For reasons which now sound baroque I needed a degree by the end of that summer, and the English Department finally agreed, if I would come down from Sacramento every Friday and talk about the cosmology of "Paradise Lost," to certify me as proficient in Milton. I did this.

Some Fridays I took the Greyhound bus, other Fridays I caught the Southern Pacific's City of San Francisco on the last leg of its transcontinental trip. I can no longer tell you whether Milton put the sun or the earth at the center of his universe in *Paradise Lost*, the central question of at least one century and a topic about which I wrote ten thousand words that summer, but I can still recall the rancidity of the butter in the City of San Francisco's dining car, and the way the tinted windows on the Greyhound bus cast the oil refineries around Carquinez Strait into a grayed and obscurely sinister light. In short, my attention was always on the periphery, on what I could see and taste and touch, on the butter, and the Greyhound bus."

—JOAN DIDION, "Why I Write," from *What I Mean*

I took trains sometimes when I went to New York, but usually just the last leg, from DC to Penn Station. The view is of those oil refineries and of towns like Trenton and Jersey City and Elizabeth. It all felt wild and alien, maybe similar to Quentin Compson's worries and fears about losing/returning home.

A bus, though, gives you time to think; things move more slowly, and you notice the shadows, or at least I did.

I must have made the bus trip from Knoxville to Birmingham and back eight times over two years. Once, the return trip was to Nashville so I could meet some friends at the New Grand Ol' Opry to see Elvis Costello and the Attractions. It was January, and I had been sick and couldn't leave the day before as planned. I remember that day before, lying

on the couch in my parents' den, watching the Miami Dolphins blow an incredible lead to the San Diego Chargers in a playoff game. I wanted to stay on that sofa the next day too. It was too cold, and I didn't exactly love Elvis Costello.

My parents took me to the Greyhound station. My mother was worried and almost crying. At the last minute, she tried to slip my glass case into my coat pocket. Somehow she missed, for when I searched for it later, it wasn't there. I worried so about that case, lying on the ground at the station, surely trampled. It seemed an omen of something, though I didn't know what. I felt small and young and wished I could be in my own bed. I sat alone, seeing nothing, and wondering why I wanted to be an adult.

The bus ride took me past the cemetery

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where my father's people were buried in the old Jewish section. We passed the football stadium where Dad and I watched Alabama play ball on Saturdays. And then it all got dark—the rolling hills of northcentral Alabama, past Cullman where the Klan still lives, and Huntsville, a town I barely knew. And my eyes, still a bit feverish.

My friends met me under the bright city lights, and we drove to the show. Elvis played “Almost Blue.” I barely noticed but thought of that old woman on that earlier bus and felt it all the same. The car ride back to Knoxville was quick and unmemorable.

My optometrist sent my new glass case COD the following week.

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I don't believe in coincidences, but twice in those years as the Greyhound from Knoxville crossed into Alabama and stopped

in Ft. Payne, a guy climbed on board, a guy I had taken a Spanish class with in college at a school maybe 115 miles from Ft. Payne and maybe six years before these chance meetings. We recognized each other, and he sat behind me. Though we had never spoken in that class, we did now, slipping into the Spanish we remembered.

I didn't know his name and maybe never did. He was older than me, and he lived in Ft. Payne but dated someone in Birmingham, or at least I think that was his story. It all gets overwhelmed, though, because I don't believe in coincidences and am forced to reckon somehow with this happening anyway.

Twice.

The first time, we were surprised and maybe a bit pleased that the ride would be broken up in this way. The second time, we almost took it for granted.

Such is riding the bus from Knoxville to Birmingham. Things out the window might appear closer than they are. Our pasts are like that too.

The last time I rode, he didn't get on. And while I expected him, I didn't believe the third time would mean anything either. I wonder what he would say now about our rides together? What view of them he might take? And if, on that last time, we had just missed each other by a day, or maybe even just an hour.

“When I called a friend in Birmingham to ask who I should see around the countryside, what was going on, and he asked me what I wanted to know and I explained, he said, ‘You want to see who’s sitting around the Greyhound bus station and who’s sitting around in a Packard car, . . . right?’ I said that was right.”

—JOAN DIDION, “Notes on the South,” from *South and West*

I had a friend named Kathy who lived in Huntsville. We were in the same MA English program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and she was very quick to answer class questions and lived in an apartment complex just in back of the old Victorian house where I rented a studio apartment. Kathy drove a midnight-blue Oldsmobile, and she'd often take me to the grocery store. Once she took me for lunch to a Jewish deli that I didn't know existed, and I had been eating at Jewish delis for most of my life.

She had a boyfriend back at Auburn, studying to be a vet. She was also a Republican, voting for Reagan in 1980, while I hedged on John Anderson.

I went swimming often in Kathy's apartment complex pool. She and I went to dinner at a nearby cafeteria within walking distance. Sometimes she'd come over to listen to music and talk. Sometimes she'd even smoke dope with me. After, I'd ask her if she wanted me to walk her home, and she always said yes. I kept wondering how committed she was to that boyfriend.

She also offered at the end of fall quarter to drive me to her parents' house in Huntsville, at which point I could catch the Trailways bus to Birmingham. At least I'd have her comfort and company in a private car for two-thirds of the trip. Of course I said yes.

Until I met my wife, rarely have I felt

as comfortable with a woman as I did with Kathy—Republican and Waspy and Auburn fan though she was. When we drove and listened to music, time felt like train time, a luxurious non-bus time. Though I preferred Blondie and she preferred Jonathan Edwards (not the Puritan), we got along.

She drove me straight to the Trailways' station that day and waited, and waited some more as I learned that my bus had been canceled; the next one wasn't leaving for four hours, which meant I'd arrive in Birmingham at 10:00.

“Don't worry, honey,” Kathy said, and she took me back to the house, where her parents thawed and fried freshwater bass and bream and we had a fine supper together, avoiding politics and football talk.

The hills surrounding Huntsville made me feel like I was in one of those old TV westerns, where something is always lurking up there in the mountain brush, waiting to take the poor settlers by surprise. But nothing like that happened, and what I remember most is that Kathy called her father by his nickname, “Toon,” and that I don't remember her mother at all.

Kathy drove me back to the station.

“Oh honey, I hope your bus is in this time.”

It was.

Later that year I went to Kathy's wedding, still wondering what was real or not between us, but on that night I'm talking about, the

I used to complain about, misapprehend, riding the bus. I knew nothing about freedom or the price people pay to find it in the real America outside our windows—the America that used to insist, and maybe still does, that some of us deserve more accommodation than others. The America that would do violence to some who wanted to ride and to get off at their station safe and unharmed. I knew so little about those who'd want to pull (freedom) riders to the ground and burn the vehicle of their freedom.

Trailways bus let me off at that old station in Birmingham, looking the same as it never did. My dad sat in a waiting room amongst the all-colored people.

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But I never had to worry. I was not the “equal” of the man who called out, “You’d better stop, driver. She’s turning blue,” about the woman directly across the aisle from him who lay dying—the one he freely touched and tried to resuscitate.

As with many of the others I saw on my recurring bus rides through southeastern America, color goes only skin deep. But of course, it, too, is thought to be very real.

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I finally listened to Jonathan Richman’s [“You’re Crazy for Taking the Bus,”](#) from 1990s *Jonathan Goes Country*. “Welfare gals” and “drunken cuss’s” find their way across the land, living, lovin’ and just being American fools. The singer prefers “meet[in]” folks on this kind of ride, the bus, to doing so on any plane you care to name because of the “newspapers,” “grit,” and “slime” you can see and get into.

But I didn’t stop there; I rode on and got to the next station, a new rendition of a song my

kids once taught me: “The Wheels on the Bus,” adapted by Jonathan and The Modern Lovers on their debut LP, lyrics by Clausen Alf, George Noriega, Joel Someillan, and Whitely Kenneth.

While the wheels go round and round and the windows go up and down, toward the middle of this song, a “lady on the bus” keeps saying “something about the driver,” and she won’t stop. And then around the next turn comes a scary monster.

“All through the town,” the passengers worry about getting that monster off the bus. And they finally succeed.

But by the end of the line, our driver, or at least Jonathan, refrains from telling us who or what it was, or how they managed it, leaving me to wonder: What monsters do we still see from our selected seats when we look out our bus windows into the lost, real America of our dreams? ∞

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Birmingham, Alabama, Greyhound Bus Station, 1951