

Gandy Dancer Archives

Volume 2 | Issue 2

Article 3

5-1-2014

Window Seat

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Recommended Citation

Ryan, Jim (2014) "Window Seat," *Gandy Dancer Archives*: Vol. 2: Iss. 2, Article 3.
Available at: <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/gandy-dancer/vol2/iss2/3>

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JIM RYAN

Window Seat

Hanna slides a dollar bill into the slot, where it is accepted with a beep. “Thank you, sweetie,” the woman behind the wheel says. It’s 6:35 and still dark outside as Hanna makes her way toward the middle of the bus, where the heaters are. Glad to be shielded from the February air, she will be at the community college in an hour—a commute that would take her only twenty minutes if she had her own car. She is self-conscious of the fact that she is still without a driver’s license at nineteen, but this is made slightly less embarrassing by the fact that she can’t afford a car anyway.

Hanna is normally the first one to board the morning bus, since West Springs is the farthest point from the city and the last stop on the route, but today there is a young man with a neck brace sitting in one of the seats closer to the front. As she makes him out in the near-darkness, her eyes meet with his for a second. Blue under-lighting from the seats glows faintly against his wide stare, and his beard is pressed out by the brace as if it grows horizontally from his chin. She catches her breath slightly and lowers her eyes as she finds a seat several rows behind the man with the brace.

Hanna slides over toward the window and fogs the glass with her breath. A heavily-bundled couple walks by the bus, holding hands as they pass beneath a street lamp, and Hanna wonders for a moment who would choose to go for a walk at this hour. Maybe they will be leaving for their respective jobs soon and this is the only time of the day when they get to do whatever they want. Hanna remembers how she and Thomas used to go for walks, how on their last walk she had reached her hand into the small space between them and he didn’t close the gap with his, how during their following walks they had walked a little farther apart. Soon the couple is out of sight and the street returns to its usual morning inactivity.

Hanna opens the thick notebook she holds in her lap. It contains everything from class notes to meandering thoughts and drawings. Each page is marked with a colored sticker that indicates its category: blue for notes, yellow for parts of stories and poems, green for the pages she shows to no one else. Flipping to the last page marked in blue, she confirms that she's done all she needs to do for today's classes. She keeps her coat wrapped close but pulls off her knit hat, planning to replace it with headphones from her backpack—she will slip them over her ears, turn up the volume and drift off until the bus gets close to the college stop. But before she can get comfortable, a body drops into the seat next to her with the swoosh of a Nylon windbreaker.

"Hey, you wanna talk about something?" the man with the brace asks.

Hanna turns to him—he's very close to her now. He must be in his late twenties, and his face looks like it's been left out in the snow too long, blue eyes etched with red. He is staring at her expectantly, not blinking.

No, she does not want to talk to him, but she has nowhere to go and she has a feeling he won't take no for an answer. "Um, sure." Hanna rests the headphones on her lap.

"I really need to smoke a fucking cigarette," he says, in a way that she guesses is supposed to seem conversational. "You know what I mean?"

"I don't smoke," Hanna says, moving her eyes to the back of the seat ahead of her. She focuses on the pattern of crisscrossing colored lines in dark-blue fabric. Maybe if she doesn't feed into what he is saying, he will give up and leave her alone.

"Yeah, that makes sense. It's really shitty for your health. Still, I've been on this bus for a while, now, and I'm starting to really need one."

Hanna sees that his hands are shaking and imagines that cigarettes aren't his only vice. There is a lighter in his right hand that he keeps flicking, hard enough to cause a faint spark, but not to bring a flame. She has the urge to tell him that he probably shouldn't fidget with a lighter on the bus, but she doesn't.

"Broke my neck," he says. "Never should have gotten on the horse, I guess, but I really wanted to. Mom said, 'You better not do that, honey,' but I did, anyway. That's pretty much why I'm where I'm at now. Dad kicked me out of the house. Can't work with a busted neck, ya know, so I lost my job at the Sunoco station. And who am I gonna sue for this?" He taps a fingernail on the brace—*click, click*. "Am I gonna sue the farmer because I jumped bareback onto his fucking horse?" He raises his eyebrows at Hanna, his gaze jumping back and forth as if considering alternatives. "Well, am I?"

"No, I suppose you aren't." Hanna looks up at the driver's rear-view mirror, which seems so far away. The driver apparently has her eyes set firmly on the road, and Hanna can only see the rim of her blue hat. Hanna presses her body tight against the cool window, if only to put a few more inches between

her and the man who has cut off her passage to the aisle. The bus passes over the river, and Hanna gets a quick look at the water through the bridge's guardrail, pushing onward as if refusing to freeze—it has someplace to be in a hurry.

"You're damn right I'm not," he says. "That shit I was doing is illegal to begin with." He looks around for a minute as the bus comes to a stop just past the bridge.

Maybe he will get off here, Hanna thinks. But he doesn't. She turns again to the window, her breath forming veins of frost on the glass. They have reached Platt Falls, a step closer to the city. A church stands near the bus-stop, and she can see a man carrying a briefcase stepping through snow toward the bus. Soon they continue to roll, and the man with the brace looks to Hanna again.

"I have no home right now because my father kicked me out of my own house. I'm homeless. Does that sound right to you?" His eyes bear down hard at Hanna this time, and she feels a knot tightening in her chest. He looks so angry. At his father, at her, it doesn't seem to matter.

"No, I guess it doesn't."

"I've got a good mind to severely lower his quality of life." He reaches up with his left hand to scratch at his chin. "I mean, my life is over. I have no money and I can't even nod my fucking head. Just spent my last bit of cash on this box of cigarettes and the fare." He starts to laugh with his chest heaving like he's trying to hold it in. The noise of his laughter eventually trails off.

Hanna thinks there is something particularly menacing about his choice of words: *lower his quality of life*. She imagines that he is riding to his parents' house now, where they are probably still sleeping. Would he knock down the door? Or quietly step through the house and into the bedroom before pouring gas over his father and igniting him with that lighter he is still flicking? The fire department would find two roasted bodies—the father and the mother both consumed by the flames. Or maybe the fire wouldn't kill the mother right away, and she'd live out the rest of her short life, unrecognizable, in the burn ward of the city hospital.

The man is still in her personal space and isn't showing signs of leaving anytime soon. They come to two more stops without change. People walk up and down the aisles absorbed in their routines and seem to not even notice him. They zip and unzip coats. They talk on cellphones. It is like the man with the brace is a ghost placed on the bus just for Hanna.

Hanna wonders if he will stay with her until she gets to the college and if he will follow her off the bus. At five feet, five inches, and probably only half his weight, she feels she is too small and thin to defend herself against him, even with his broken neck. She thinks of the fork that she packed with her lunch—maybe she can get it out of her bag without him noticing and then

stick it in his eye if he comes at her. But that thought disturbs her as well. The idea of seeing the contents of his eye slop out across his beard and over the white plastic and Velcro of the brace makes her queasy.

“Anyway,” he says, “my name’s Brian.” He shifts the lighter over to his left hand and reaches his right over to Hanna in a friendly gesture. His eyes are creased in the corners and the anger seems to have relaxed out of them somewhat.

“Hanna,” she says. His hand feels surprisingly soft as they shake, not like she expects. But what *did* she expect? Brian lets go of her hand with a tremble and continues flicking his lighter.

Then he’s getting up from his seat next to Hanna and rushing toward the front of the bus. “Shit, that’s my stop. Stop the bus!” he says. He’s already pulling a cigarette from a rather crunched-up box and shoving it between his lips.

Hanna looks to the empty seat at her right, almost expecting that Brian will have left something behind, but there is no trace of him except the slight smell of cigarette smoke, which fades in moments. It’s only after he steps out through the folding door and the bus starts moving again that she notices her hands are shaking, not unlike Brian’s.

Hanna slowly makes her way down the hall connecting the administrative building with the geoscience classrooms. The financial aid offices are on this hallway, and there are lines of people shifting around like worms. Sunlight bears down through the windows on the opposite side of the hall as restless students type text messages and shuffle papers and listen to music through fat headphones pressed into baseball caps, afros, and bedheads.

Nearing the end of the hall, Hanna needs to nudge through one line of students to reach the hall where her class is. She bumps her elbow into a tall boy wearing a black hooded sweatshirt, and he turns around, seeming to make eye contact with her for a brief second.

“Oh, hi; excuse me,” Hanna says.

But the boy is already facing back toward the windows, staring into the distance. Hanna’s face feels hot and she keeps walking. As she passes the last group of waiting students, she pulls her phone out to check for messages, though she knows she doesn’t have any.

She arrives at Human Geography five minutes early. Professor Laney is a tall woman with blonde hair who can’t be out of her twenties, yet has a surprisingly deep voice. Hanna thinks she is nice, even pretty, but not necessarily the best teacher. Professor Laney once said that limited crude oil supply is not really a matter of concern—if we just keep digging, we’ll keep finding more

oil, no problem. Hanna had wanted to challenge Professor Laney on this. *What about the millions of years it takes for animals to fossilize into the oil we use? How can that be sustainable?* But, just as Hanna had started to raise her hand, a boy toward the back of the room spoke up: “Amen to that! I’m so sick of hearing about this so-called energy crisis,” and she had dropped her hand back to the desk.

“Good morning, everybody,” Professor Laney says. “It’s good to see all of your lovely faces.” She turns off the lights and uses her laptop to project a PowerPoint presentation, just as she always does. The PowerPoint lulls Hanna into a stupor with charts and bulleted points about birth-rates, death-rates, GNPs and GDPs. Hanna knows she should pay attention, take notes, and engage with the material. These are important things to learn, after all—there is a lot going on in the world, and she should try to be aware of it. But she finds her thoughts drifting back to the morning’s bus ride, to the blue under-lighting between the seats, to the man with his neck brace, to the feel of Brian’s hand gripping hers. Hanna looks to the girl sitting at the desk to her right, whose chin is planted in her palm as she stares at the projections. Professor Laney clicks forward to the next slide, and Hanna sees the colors reflected on her neighbor’s glasses flip in unison with the image on the screen.

On the ride home that night, she reads part of Elie Wiesel’s *Night*, trying to make some progress on her homework for her class, Literature of The Holocaust. As usual, Hanna’s the last one remaining on the bus, and the driver decides to make a stop at McDonald’s before driving by her block to let her off. Hanna watches the driver’s heavy gait as she makes her way across the parking lot to the glass box of a restaurant, the glow from inside McDonald’s casting a broad shadow in her wake.

Hanna wonders if Thomas ever watched her as she walked away from him. Would she have looked resolute to him? Or just alone?

She has replayed the moment over and over in her head: Thomas is wearing his glasses as he sometimes does when he is in too much of a rush to put in his contacts. They stand outside the room where they have statistics class together and where they have just finished taking the final exam.

“Hey, I’ve been meaning to talk to you,” he says. “And now that we’re done with finals and everything—”

He trails off, his fingers messing up his short blonde hair.

“What’s wrong?” Hanna says.

“It’s just that I know we’ve been hanging out less, lately. Talking less and everything.”

“Yeah. Well, we’re done with classes now. More free time to do other stuff.”

“That’s kind of what I wanted to talk to you about,” he says. “I’m going back to work now, and I’m sure you’ll have a lot going on too. Neither of us is going to be around the campus for a while, and we obviously don’t have class together anymore. What I’m trying to say is that it probably won’t make sense for us to try and keep hanging out.”

“Oh,” Hanna says. The pain in her chest is worse, and she’s staring down at the floor, at the flakes of bluish and red color in the smooth tile and the bands of shiny metal separating one square from the next. That’s what their relationship has been reduced to: *hanging out*.

“It’s not that I’m mad at you or anything. Really.”

Thomas’s voice sounds like it is coming from far away and Hanna can’t bring herself to say anything. What could she possibly do? Ask him to please change his mind and keep seeing her? No, she thinks. If she has to ask, then it isn’t worth trying. She’s already lost him.

“Say something?” he asks.

“Okay,” Hanna replies. “I understand. What you’re saying makes sense.”

She makes herself look back up at him. He looks uncertain, not of whether he’s making the right choice, but of whether he has properly let Hanna down easily.

“So, are we okay? I mean, are *you* okay?” he says.

“Yes, I’m fine. See ya later.” Hanna turns and walks down the hall, away from Thomas. Her arms are crossed in front of her, gripping the straps of her backpack. She listens for Thomas to say goodbye back to her, or tell her to wait, but she hears nothing except the relieved voices of other students leaving the final exam.

After several minutes, the driver is back in her spring-cushioned throne, filling a cheek with some apple pie as she pulls a lever to shut the folding door. “So sorry to keep you waiting, honey,” she says. “Woman’s gotta have her sustenance, you know?”

The bus continues rolling and Hanna reads a passage from *Night* about a group of people who were hanged in Auschwitz before a sea of onlookers. One of them was a small boy—a “sad-eyed angel,” Wiesel calls him—who struggled and dangled there for some time before dying. He was simply too light for the rope to do its work quickly. Hanna finds herself thinking something this bad could only be the product of a stray, dark imagination, but reminds herself that it is real and wills herself to see it that way. However she tries, though, she suspects she will never understand how bad it was, and she is ashamed of herself for this.

After stepping off the bus, Hanna makes the short walk down her street to the house. The sun has dipped below the horizon, but the sky is still par-

tially lit. As she gets closer to home and a pinecone crunches under her foot, it seems that all the color has drained from the world. But, surely, it will be back in the morning. After all, she has no reason to feel sad—her life is comfortable, safe.

Dinner is leftover spaghetti. Her dad pulls it from the fridge in a Tupperware that had belonged to Thomas. He made her cookies for her birthday late last year and she never remembered to give the container back. She offered to bring it to him, but he said he didn't care—he had more like it. Hanna still suspects that he wanted to avoid seeing her again.

Her dad twists his fork in his spaghetti, scraping the tines against the Pyrex plate, making her cringe. "Something wrong, munchkin?" he says, wiping tomato sauce from his neat beard.

"Nah, Dad. Everything's fine, just a bit tired." And her eyes are back on the Tupperware.

It was just luck that Hanna met Thomas at school. Growing close with him was like an alignment of the planets; she is sure it won't happen again.

Hanna is alone on the bus, slipping in and out of sleep, as usual, listening to the same old songs on her iPod, even the ones that remind her of Thomas that she never seems to get around to deleting. Like the previous day, there is no sign of Brian. She wonders if she just imagined him being there, if there was never really a man who dropped into the seat next to her and shocked her with his words and the click of his lighter between thumb and fingers. The more she considers the possibility, the more likely it seems. After all, she's been getting very little sleep lately on this schedule, getting up before the sun every day and going to sleep after midnight. Isn't it possible for people to hallucinate when they are sleep deprived?

But when the bus stops at Platt Falls, she sees him. He's walking up alongside the bus toward the open door, head held rigidly forward by his brace. Soon the bus is rolling and Brian gingerly sits himself down in the seat next to Hanna. He doesn't say anything at first, just stares forward at the seat in front of him. Hanna feels the hairs on her neck standing up, but she wants him to say *something*. His silence worries her.

"Hanna, right?" he says.

She nods. "And you're Brian."

"Yeah, so I ended up getting my dad to let me back into the house. Says I better get a fucking job real soon but it's fine if I stay there for now. You know, I'm not *that* old. I know plenty of 24-year-olds that still stay with their parents from time to time."

“Sure, yeah, that’s good. I’m glad to hear it.” Hanna thinks he must look older than he is because he smokes, or maybe just because he hasn’t had an easy life.

Brian rotates his shoulders so that he can look over at her. “Thanks,” he says. He gestures at the notebook in her lap, and she notices that he’s holding his lighter, just like before, but not flicking it as much this time. “Nice notebook. It seems like people hardly ever write by hand anymore. Always clacking on the keyboard.” He makes an exaggerated typing motion in front of him.

“Thanks,” Hanna says. “I write in this all the time.”

“I figured as much. Since you had it with you last time I saw you, too. Look,” he scratches his beard, “how would you like to grab a drink or something sometime?”

“What?” Hanna says. Her ears suddenly feel hot. “I’m nineteen, I mean. I can’t drink.”

“Oh, you seem older than that for some reason. Coffee then? I don’t mean like a date or anything. We could just talk, ya know? I’d like to talk to you more.”

Hanna looks down at her lap, running her fingernail along the spine of her notebook. “Thank you for asking, but I better not.”

“What do you mean, you better not?” He raises his eyebrows.

“It’s just that—I don’t know.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it,” he smiles, “I don’t want to seem like some creep who tries to impress pretty girls with his all-day-pass.” He laughs. “It was silly. I’m sorry.”

Hanna realizes that Brian probably won’t talk to her anymore. He seems embarrassed, turning to face forward again and flicking his lighter. The bus is approaching a stop a few blocks away from the college, and she notices Brian reaching for his pack of cigarettes and nudging one out with a ragged thumbnail.

“Are you getting off at the next stop?” Hanna says.

“Yeah, I need to shop for some stuff up here. Get a bit of food to bring back to my folks’ house.” He speaks abruptly as if he’s not interested in Hanna anymore. He makes her nervous, but at least before he seemed to like her and care what she thought of him. She feels a weight in her throat and wishes she could rewind to before she said “no” and say “yes” to him instead.

The bus comes to a stop, brakes whistling, and Brian gets to his feet. He has the cigarette between his lips now, ready to light up. Standing just before the bus comes to a stop, he holds onto the seats for balance.

“Brian,” Hanna says.

He turns to face her. “Yeah? I gotta get off here.”

“I know, it’s just, why don’t we meet for coffee sometime?”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, why don’t you meet me at the Java’s on campus this Friday? I’m done with classes around five. Does that work for you?”

“Sure, Hanna. I’ll see you there.” He smiles for a second, then he’s gone, stepping off the bus for his smoke.

She wonders for a minute if she’s out of her mind, wanting to meet with this stranger. It’s almost like she wants something bad to happen to herself, or maybe she’s just seeking a thrill—a sort of social skydiving. She watches Brian stride away from the bus, his frozen breaths mingling with cigarette smoke in the air behind him.

All Hanna can think about as her history class wraps up on Friday is her imminent meeting with Brian. If he remembers their plan, he’ll be waiting for her at the campus Java’s, ready to have a cup of coffee with her. Loading her things into her backpack, along with her notebook, she keeps wondering what she will say to him. She has no idea what he will want to talk about, but that’s what keeps her dwelling on their encounter—because based on her previous encounters with Brian, he will have *something* to talk about, and it will be important to him that Hanna listens. Her presence at Java’s will be meaningful, and she won’t have to work to make it so. Rather, it will come naturally. Will he call her pretty again? Will he ask to see what she’s been writing? These questions fill her mind to the brim and cause the end of class to approach rapidly.

Hanna makes her way toward Java’s. It’s five o’clock, and as usual, the halls of the college are thinned out by this time of the day. Java’s is located in an open area between two parallel hallways in the central building on campus. The floor and chest-height walls around the seating areas are a brick façade, and there are comfortable booth seats along the sides as well as round tables with steel-frame chairs in the middle of the café.

As Hanna approaches Java’s, she gets just enough of a view over one of the walls to see Brian sitting at one of the booths on the opposite side, neck brace firmly Velcroed. Her chest feels hot when she sees him. He actually came? She still hasn’t prepared for what she would do if Brian followed through on their meeting. But there he is, gaze set on a napkin in his hands as he tears the *OK*-hand of the Java’s logo into small fragments that drift to the tabletop in front of him. A few other people are sitting here and there, but the area is empty in comparison with the activity of the early afternoon.

She pictures herself walking up to him, at which point they would exchange greetings and smiles. They would walk the fake-brick ramp to the serving window and order coffees, standing shoulder to shoulder. At one point, their arms might brush against one another. He might offer to pay

for hers, and then again, he might not. They'd sit back down across from one another while he would stare into her eyes with that particular intensity of his and talk to her; all the while, Regina Spektor would sing about the color blue over the speakers in the background. Brian's own blue eyes would refuse to let Hanna's gaze go—the rapids of his thoughts would prevent her from becoming complacent or disengaged.

But as she stands there beyond the perimeter of the coffee shop, she sees other groups of friends, couples, and individuals studying alone. They each have their reasons for being there. Brian, sitting there picking apart his napkin, is there for no reason at all other than to meet a girl he doesn't even know. Hanna remembers the bus that she will probably miss if she doesn't leave now, the meal that will be waiting for her at home, and also remembers that certain planets will never align because they orbit on different angles. She knows that, in reality, she will sit down across from Brian at a loss for words and he will launch into a stream of consciousness, with or without her. They may or may not even get coffee, they won't stand shoulder to shoulder, he won't ask her about herself or how her day was. She and Brian aren't friends—maybe they could be, with enough effort, but their lives are largely different and nonintersecting.

Hanna turns from Java's while glancing back over her shoulder at Brian, who doesn't look up from the napkin he is tearing. Holding her notebook at her side, she makes her way to the sliding glass doors that lead out onto the sidewalk and eventually to the bus-stop. This time, she's positive that the stranger with the neck brace won't be on board.

A few weeks have gone by since Hanna last saw Brian in the coffee shop. She hasn't spotted him on the bus or around the campus, and she is mostly relieved. He probably isn't happy with her since she stood him up—then again, he might have found somebody new to talk to, to frighten with stories about his life.

Professor Laney is having trouble with the projector in the classroom. Hanna watches her frantically pressing keys on her laptop, trying to get her PowerPoint presentation to display.

"The technology issues at this school..." Professor Laney says. She sighs dramatically and says not to go anywhere—she's going to get the computer guy to help out.

The room is dark except for the glow of the solid blue projection screen in the front of the room. People shift around restlessly at their desks and chat among themselves. The girl sitting next to Hanna just stares forward, tapping her pen on the three-ring binder in front of her. Hanna knows her name is Marcy from the roll call at the beginning of each class, but they've never

spoken. Of all the tables in the room, Hanna and Marcy's is the only one that isn't contributing to the soft hum of conversation in the room.

"Hey," Hanna says. "I'm impressed you actually take notes in here." She gestures at Marcy's binder. *That was dumb*, she thinks. *Who starts a conversation like that?* "I'm lazy and just download all those lame PowerPoints in order to study."

Marcy turns toward Hanna, the blue glare reflecting off of her glasses suddenly vanishing to reveal a set of surprised eyes. For a moment, she looks at Hanna as if she had just popped into existence in the next seat over, but then her expression quickly changes to a smile.

"I know, right? These presentations always put me to sleep," Marcy says, laughing. "Hey, you're Hanna, right?"

"Yep, and you're Marcy?"

"That's me," she says. "Nice to actually meet you."

Professor Laney flurries back into the room and presses a button on the projector. The cover page of her PowerPoint appears on the screen, an image of a high, sharp cliff-face with a neatly-pruned field running right up to its edge. "What do you know," Professor Laney says. "One push of a button and we're back on track."