

# GANDY DANCER



ISSUE 1.1

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GENESEO



## About the Authors

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She is currently in the process of applying to MFA programs. Her least favorite literary character is Jimmy Corrigan.

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EMILY WITHERS is a junior English major at SUNY Geneseo. Her native town is Manlius, New York, which is where, with help of Disney Princess audiotapes, she learned to dance manically and to sing. Emily earned an award for writing from the National Council of Teachers of English in 2009 and has been three times published in Fayetteville-Manlius' *Voices* literary magazine. She finds Okonkwo from *Things Fall Apart* dull, because he cares only for yams.

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# Leda's Testimony

Jesus bit my bone marrow,  
seared down under my skin as if it were  
a panel of dresses in a closet you could  
push out of the way.

My nerve went cold in the grasp of his teeth;  
the white in me poked aching through my  
muted seal.

EMILY WITHERS

# At the Railroad Crossing

that bold headlight  
once burned: a white star  
  
night-now ascends,  
the sun has turned its face in shame,  
the sky is brighter than ever  
  
glow of the train, a visual crescendo:  
you and I sleeping,  
  
mouths wide awake to  
kiss and question,  
  
hands locked tight:  
tiny mothers  
in their tiny prayer;  
  
we escaped the knee-highs and  
metal rulers, found our holiness;  
  
the train smiles,  
paints schoolgirls white  
in the road  
  
we lay across the horizontal  
ladder of the tracks, promise  
end-for-end:  
  
hold each other's softness  
as the sleeper clacks on,  
whisper, kiss, steam, trumpet, shout  
  
joyous:: terrified  
freedom:: derailed trains

# Cover Yourself, אשה; to the Wailing Wall

A heat blanket:—this scarf fevers  
my body—: a cooking s'more, bitter  
milk chocolate melt. Oh holiness, oh great stone  
graham cracker. In this open-air oven  
I oven a flavor of watered salt & bile  
or whatever the word in two backwards dialects translates to  
something like a near-blind woman chopping carrots  
for her husband with a rusted knife.  
How the blame for wounds on her  
fingertips is her first possession—the ugly pockets of her  
skin-suit, a sweated burden of saline & sin  
she must apologize for in layers. This is no sweet  
duty in the price of an apple-bite, but a bearded fear of eyewandering  
& wishes caught  
in whiskers with crumbs—the way woman means wife  
before she even becomes one. We are always preparing  
for a meal.

Yael Massen

# Cafeteria, or The Sixth Grade Classroom

This paper fortune cookie—cootie catcher—  
has me all hooty-eyed & orthodontically  
challenged, like a psychic's favorite sucker—  
I unfold the bettied page:—origami futurescribble  
divined in pink-milky pen—: *pick a number*  
(twenty-dumb) *pick your color* (empurpled, or  
whatever shade a phlebotomist will puncture against)  
*the number again*—dance a fingersequence  
quickstep to floating calligraphy: fates I've ouija'd  
myself: body that will summon the fox—my wild—  
every twenty-eight days: a game of double-dutch  
played in this treetrunk—the half-children wait their turn.

# Unarticulation

Under floorlamps I have listened, grown  
cold as nights healed without a sound—  
satellited skies in your throat.

No guests gathered with potluck  
words, and nothing scathed or swept you,  
your chest paper and pen, away.  
We've done our best to remember

this silent hour, its valley of mirrors.  
I leave my notebook open, page

blistering reflection : a game  
from an altered state of cues.

Tonight grew long as cattails : unwritten  
letters within concrete vestibules.

Think of your voice saying anything,  
everything undone.

We take ourselves away.

KYLE SKOVIRA

# Calamity in the Snapping of Twigs

We are ten years from bike rides on trails  
riddling with curfewed freedom, breadth between sticks : space  
between overhanging branches flaring  
incandescent into memory: the smell,  
gold and green and brown : pine needles  
caught beneath puddles reflecting telephone wires, guiding us  
south to the creek bend : elongated hours of asymmetrical  
wind and water as high as our knees—  
our recollection of childhood is sunlit.  
I am still last winter tracing chain links; culling  
sticks clenched between thumb and forefinger :  
icicles on warning signs, Private Property: florescent, white.

# Flitting Hope

Dwindling light flickers through the maple tree's budding green leaves, tracing hopeful shadows on the cracked sidewalk below. A house sparrow nestles above the movie theater sign, the one down on Stone Street. He ruffles his grey feathers and braces himself against the air that still carries a bite of winter's chill. His eyes open and close slowly, containing the liquid black of his eyes. Under the sparrow's nest, the sign screams a single title in green neon lights – *Star Wars 2: Attack of the Clones*.

The little wooden bench under the maple tree is occupied by a furry orange cat. She is the town's collective cat; everyone feeds her when they see her. Billy Ferguson quickly pets her light golden fur, holding the hand of his mother, Peggy Ferguson. The cat quickly gets annoyed with Billy's quick motions. She hops off the bench and pads away, towards the nursing home on Chancer Road – the residents are much gentler than children.

Billy drops Peggy's hand and runs over to a poster directly beneath the sparrow, with an image of buttery golden popcorn, rubbing his grubby hands down the sides and begging: *Mom, can we get popcorn? Please?*

*Not right now, Billy. You'll spoil your dinner.*

*But MOM! Everyone gets popcorn at the movies!*

*Billy, I'm making lasagna for dinner, can't you just wait until then?*

*No! I want popcorn now!*

The sparrow scrambles upright and hops in the air, beating his wings until he reaches the street light next to the bench. Billy stomps his feet below and begins to cry while Peggy desperately tries to calm her son, holding him firmly in her work worn hands. She leans down to look into his eyes and speaks shamefully quiet –

*Fine, you can get a small thing of popcorn. But if you spoil your dinner...*

*No, I want a big one!* Billy rips away from his mother, flinging his small arms

in the air. Thomas Greysly, an elderly man who has just recently lost his wife, walks by the scene staring at the five year old boy. Thomas shakes his head. The sparrow chirps at the old man, a greeting given every night for the past three years that Thomas had been walking this street. The sparrow reminds Thomas of his wife, Rachel, and how she spoke of sparrows as being an overlooked sort of hopefulness. She loved the common birds more than even the Blue Jays at her feeder, who chased the other birds away, and she would sketch house sparrows and finches for hours, focusing on the small variations in color that made each unique. The old man glances upwards at the sparrow, giving him a slight nod and continuing down Stone Street, leaving Peggy to spoil her child's dinner.

*Ok, ok! I'll get you a big one. Just be quiet.*

Billy giggles in delight, jumping up and down and running the remaining six feet to the door of the theater. Peggy looks to have aged five years just in the past minutes, her crow feet pulling her eyes backwards so it looks like her brain is suctioning them in. Slowly, she follows her son, pulling a faded wallet from her purse.

The sparrow flies back to his nest as Tommy Garrison runs up and hangs off the light pole, showing off to his new girlfriend, Beth Moore. His hands brace the pole and he is sideways for a few seconds before lightly pushing off and landing next to Beth. The sparrow listens to her laugh, enjoying the chiming sound. He tilts his head to see the light glint off Beth's red highlighted hair, golden and chocolate waves that cascade down her back. Tommy grins at her and puts his arm around her back, sliding his hand craftily down to her back pocket on her Levi's. She keeps smiling, but gives him a hard look that he laughs off.

*C'mon, I'll buy you something. What do ya like? Anything your little heart desires is on me tonight, babe.*

Beth has already seen this movie. On opening night, Joe Harris had asked her to come with him, and she'd agreed because she wanted to make Tommy jealous. Joe hadn't even asked her what she wanted to eat – he'd snuck in a big box of Nerds in his Jedi robe. She had been shocked that he'd known what her favorite candy was, and he'd laughed and said – *How could anyone not know? You're always chomping on them in homeroom.* She'd blushed and actually enjoyed herself.

Tonight, though, she was sure it would be the best date ever. Beth had had a crush on Tommy since the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, and she had finally won him over. Yeah, sure, Joe was pretty hurt, but she figured he would get over it. She turned to Tommy, her eyes flashing green in the fading light.

*Can I just get some Nerds? I love Nerds!*

*Eew, ok, but those things are gross! Are you sure you don't want real candy? Like chocolate?*

*Oh, sure, yeah I guess a change would be good.*

Beth opens the door for Tommy as they disappear into the theater. The

sparrow settles into his nest of bramble, hair, and straws carelessly left next to the trash. He tucks his right leg artfully under his body while his other leg hangs awkwardly to the side. His left leg has been shriveled and useless since birth, but he has adjusted well. The sun rolls slowly out of sight into a burning sky of purple and red, hidden by the buildings across the street. There's a large abandoned house with the windows broken out where the orange cat lives, next to the coffee shop, *MochaLoco's*. A dark alley resides between the two buildings, containing nothing besides cigarette butts and an industrial sized green dumpster.

The street lights flicker on, glowing softly down on the now quiet street. The sparrow listens to a train in the distance, the horn announcing to all in its path that it will stop for no one. Quick footsteps cause the sparrow to turn his head to the left, down towards the direction of the trailer parks and houses on Center Street. Abby Costanza is running lightly across the street from the sparrow, wearing baggy sweatpants and a long-sleeved white tee shirt that is far too big for her. She counts her steps in her head in time to the Every Avenue song playing in her ears – *It's a long night down 95, trying to beat the sunrise, staying up all night, I'm not sleeping till I cross the state line*. Her eyes have deep circles underneath them, and she knows the feeling of staying up all night too well. The sparrow has seen her running every night for months now, even after he sees her at six in the morning before work. She chases her demons with every step she takes, embracing her love of self hatred. Miss Chantal, a voluptuous nurse at the nursing home where Abby works, seems more concerned with Abby's health than even her parents. *What, you lose another five pounds? Girl, you lose anymore and there ain't gonna be nothin' left. A man's gotta have somethin' to grab onto!* Abby shakes her head to rid herself of the conversation and pushes ahead passed the abandoned house. She's not happy yet, but she's sure that chasing this dream will eventually leave her pleasantly joyful. *Someday, someday I'll figure it out, someday somehow*. She nods at Joe Harris as she passes by him.

The sparrow stretches around to clean his feathers. His eyes are drooping, a sign that it is getting late. He can hear Joe walking across the street, scuffing his worn black Converse on the pavement. Joe is contemplating the day at school, where he had seen Tommy, his ex best friend, holding hands with and making gooey eyes to Beth. Joe can remember a time when he was happy, when his parents had been together and Tommy had been his partner in crime. That was when Joe's family had owned a real house, down on Center, right next door to Tommy. Joe and Tommy would play Jedis in the backyard until nightfall, using sticks as light sabers and jesting back and forth about whether Han had shot first. When Joe's father had lost his job as a mechanic and started drinking heavily, Joe's mom had kicked him out. Then they had lost the house and moved to the apartment above the coffee shop, and Joe had started to wear worn out clothes that didn't fit him right.

That was when Tommy had left him, too. Tommy had started to distance

himself, hanging out with Ken Chase, the local bully. At the middle school, Joe was the brunt of a lot of jokes. *Poor boy, his mom's broke ass can't even buy him clothes, bet she does drugs, you ever want meth just ask Ms Harris!* He'd heard all of these jabs walking down the hall to each class, and they followed him home every night when he tromped up the stairs to the small two bedroom apartment his family shared. Even after he got out of middle school, the jokes still followed him. He would furiously write poetry every night before bed, attempting to get his feelings of belittlement and worthlessness out. When that didn't work, he took to a more destructive habit.

Joe is walking down Stone Street with his head down and his black hood up. The street lights softly glow on him, revealing his swoosh of unkempt black hair dangling in front of his eyes. The sparrow above the movie theater watches him with partially closed eyes, catching the glint of silver from a pocket knife sticking out of the back pocket of his jeans. The shine interests the bird, and he twists his head to the side before leaping in the air to follow Joe's descent down the alley between the coffee shop and the liquor store. The unnatural shadow cast by the dumpster creates an eerie light. He lands on the gutter of *MochaLoco's*, straining in the poor light to see. There is suddenly a flash of skin as Joe rolls up his sleeve, and the sparrow sees the street light's reflection in the switchblade. Suddenly, the smell of blood reaches the sparrow, and he flies back to his nest in fear. Warily, he watches Joe walk out from the alley, who is pulling his long ripped sleeve furiously over his now bleeding arm. He breathes deeply, feeling the rush of bad feelings flowing out of his new wound. A piece of paper flutters out of his pocket, but he doesn't notice. He feels better than he did as he unlocks the door to his apartment above the coffee shop.

It is eight fifteen at night, and the movie is finally out. Peggy and Billy are the first to leave the theater and begin walking home. Billy is making light saber sounds and Peggy is asking if he is hungry for dinner.

*I don't like lasagna. I want a light saber! Can I have a light saber?*

*Billy, I told you not to spoil your dinner! You are going to eat lasagna when we get home, and no, you cannot have a light saber, they are dangerous.*

*But Mom! Please!*

*We'll talk about it.*

Beth and Tommy follow them out the door, Tommy's arm around her small frame. Beth sees the scrap of paper on the street and picks it up, reading the lines Joe had scrawled out – she would recognize that handwriting anywhere. *There are only choices, whether conscious or subconscious, that determine a person. How is it that we as humans love each other? We take the best of each other and throw it aside, deeming it hopeless. Sidelong glances, brushing fingertips, ignoring a painful truth. It's not my problem, we think, until one day we realize that we've been led astray by the cruel side of "love." We cry by ourselves and shiver in the dark, holding our bleeding arms and blemishes under the shadows and existing only in the night,*

*for the light reveals too much.*

The stars twinkle in the stratosphere, casting down gleaming light on the sparrow's liquid eyes.



The maple tree trembles slightly with the breeze, playing in the misty spring air. A daffodil is beginning to bud in the small flower bed in front of the coffee shop, its hopeful face sleeping in the midst of unborn petals. In his nest, the sparrow watches his street while eating a small spider that had gotten too close to his nest. Thomas Greysly is across the street, putting a coin in the newspaper box. The bird tilts his head and swallows breakfast while he watches Thomas turn back towards his house on Fox Tail Lane, to the right and up the road about a mile. He considers following the old man to keep him company when Abby Costanza steps out of the coffee shop.

The sparrow balances his weight forward, delicately balancing on his one good leg. He blinks quickly, letting the shifting morning light sweep over his tiny frame. Across the street, Abby is dipping her multigrain, no cream cheese bagel into her black coffee. She has been sitting on the little bench outside *Mo-chaLoco's* every Monday and Friday since she'd gotten the job at the nursing home. The sparrow opens his wings and launches off of the theater sign, flitting silently across the street to land on the pedestrian crossing sign directly in front of Abby. She sits with her bagel and coffee for exactly forty five minutes, seemingly dissecting the calories into neat nibbles, and saves him her last four crumbs, as always.

The sparrow is not quite comfortable eating out of her hand yet – he is still wary of humans and their confusing ways. But Abby coos at him as he eats her crumbs off the ground.

*You're a pretty little thing, aren't you little guy? Yeah? I wish I was small and carefree like you. You just get to do whatever you want, don't you? And you're so small and light I bet you can fly forever. Huh Mr. Sparrow? You like my bagel?*

The sparrow looks up at her and tilts his head, enjoying her pleasant voice for a minute. The church bell down the road strikes eight, and like always, Abby Costanza is off.

*I have to go to work now, but I'll see you later Mr. Sparrow.* She gives him one last lingering look, then darts down the street to take care of Mrs. Winzel at the nursing home. Mrs. Winzel will call her Emily again and Abby will play along, pretending to be a girl who is not eating herself apart with her mind.

The sparrow flits down the street, past the cobblestone wall in front of the brick church and down to the High School on Center Street. There are always crumbs of leftover food behind the school for the sparrow to sift through and pick from. He stops to rest on the chain linked fence, peering through the mist to see a group of kids loitering by the door in a cloud of smoke. Beth is with

them, chattering and laughing with Tommy's arm around her shoulders. Tommy takes a drag off of his cigarette, talking loudly to Ken Chase, his best friend. They cause mischief together, from leering in the girl's bathroom to throwing rocks at the orange cat on Stone Street. The sparrow had seen them laugh once when they'd hit her, and although the bird was not fond of the cat in general, he had thought it best to avoid them from then on. He sat and waited for them to go back inside, turning his head to clean his feathers.

*Dude, Mike got a sick new ride last week. His parents bought him a motorcycle for a graduation gift, and he said he'd let us ride it sometime.* Ken spat after he spoke, making the sparrow twitch at the noise.

*That's sick, dude! Beth, you should come! I'll take you for a ride after you take me for a ride, if ya get what I'm saying.*

Beth blushes at this and punches Tommy lightly on the arm. *That does sound like fun. But motorcycles are so dangerous!*

*Aw come on, you only live once! I wish my folks were cool enough to buy me a motorcycle for graduation. All I'm getting is a lame old dinner. God, they're so lame.*

*Yeah man, I feel ya. My old man isn't even coming to the ceremony. He told me he wouldn't come unless I got into college but man, I got other shit to do.* Ken throws his cigarette butt away, towards the sparrow on the chain linked fence. The sparrow hops away, his left uselessly long claws getting snagged briefly on the fence as the smell of smoke burn his eyes, the fence making a clinking sound as the sparrow lands safely away. The three kids look towards the sound, Beth seeing the sparrow first.

*It's just a little bird, you paranoid freaks.* She giggles at the boys' foolishness.

*That thing scared the shit out of me! Dude, let's get 'im.* Ken leans down a picks up a rock.

Tommy laughs. *Yeah I guess we need some practice, don't we? It's a pretty small target though. Think you can hit it? I don't think you could hit the broad side of a barn, man!*

*Oh yeah? Watch me!* The sparrow tilts his head, the voices sounding unpleasant. But he doesn't want to leave without first getting his fill of nibbles.

Beth is distressed at the thought of watching a murder take place – she likes the bad ass side of Tommy but she doesn't want to see it happen. She pulls on his sleeve and looks at him with her widened green pleading eyes.

*Come on Beth, loosen up. He won't hit him.* Tommy smirks at Ken.

Ken draws back his arm and lets the rock fly, spiraling like a football in practice. If time were to slow down the way it does in movies, maybe the sparrow would flinch, or get his claws disengaged in time to move out of the way. But time doesn't slow down. Time stops only in the minds of the naive, and within a second's gaze, the rock connects with its target, dropping the sparrow to the ground with a small reverberating thump. Ken raises a fist in triumph. Tommy pats him on the back. Beth turns on her heel and leaves.



A nest of bramble and straws sits cozily above the sign that now reads *Spi-derman*. The superhero's poster is hung to the side of the door, next to the list of prices for popcorn and tickets. The twilight enfolds the creatures of the day and shadows the creatures of the night. In the weeks that follow, the daffodils blossom in front of the coffee shop, yellow and cheerful, and the buds on the maple tree begin to cascade from the branches. Mist shrouds the street in silence, as the sun slides softly down later and later each night, casting shadows on the movie theater.

JENNIE CONWAY

# Writing in History: An Interview with Erika Dreifus

With her debut short story collection, *Quiet Americans*, writer Erika Dreifus proves her immense talent at crafting tales with “incredible emotional nuance and empathy” says *Shelf Unbound*. Dreifus, who has degrees from Harvard in Modern European (primarily British and French) History and Literature, uses this historical knowledge in her writing. Dreifus is also the editor/publisher of the free, popular, online newsletter *The Practicing Writer*, where she generously shares her knowledge of writing resources and advice.

Given the ALA Sophie Brody Medal Honor title for 2012, *Quiet Americans* is a collection comprised of historical knowledge seamlessly blended with the family stories of her paternal grandparents, German Jews who escaped the Nazi regime for the United States.

*Quiet Americans* was an assigned text for my Fiction class when Dreifus came to SUNY Geneseo to give a reading of her collection before speaking directly to my class. As I read, I found myself pausing after each story to put the book down so I could process the emotional intensity of what I had just read. Each story of Dreifus’ nearly wrenched my heart from my chest. The feelings present in each story transcend the page and haunt the reader. At Dreifus’ reading, where she read “Lebensraum,” I suddenly flashed to sitting in my great-grandparents’ farm house, listening to them tell me stories about World War II. Dreifus’ stories are entirely relatable and that is why they resonate with so many people.

In the interview below, Dreifus kindly answers questions about *Quiet Americans*, along with imparting some insight about her writing process.

**Can you talk about your writing process? How do you start a story—with a character or an outline?**

Unfortunately, I'm typically unable to benefit from either a character or an outline. For me, a story emerges from a circumstance, or a set of circumstances, that I find compelling. There's a situation that makes me wonder: *How did that happen? How did it change things for everyone involved? What was at stake?*

**How much of the content in *Quiet Americans* was inspired by your grandparents' stories?**

Several of the stories in the book were sparked directly from my grandparents' experiences as I'd understood them, from my grandparents' accounts of circumstances that seemed to me fairly extraordinary and demanded further exploration. For instance, "For Services Rendered" developed from my grandmother's account of a pediatrician she came to know as a refugee here in New York City; "Lebensraum" emerged from my grandfather's World War II military service in the U.S. Army; "Homecomings" stemmed, in part, from my grandmother's childhood memories and her experience, recounted to me later, of returning to her hometown for the first time in 1972. One story, "Matrilineal Descent," was born more from my questions about a story that wasn't told, about my grandfather's biological mother, who died when he was an infant.

**How did you decide the order of the collection? Why are "Matrilineal Descent," "Lebensraum," and "Homecomings" placed together? Do you think they would've had the same effect had they been separated?**

This is a great question! You've read the book—what do **you** think about the effect and how it might have been different?

This question also makes me want to mention a wonderful new collection that I've just finished reading, David Ebenbach's *Into the Wilderness*, in which the four linked stories are spaced throughout the book, which is to say that one of the linked stories begins the collection, and another one ends it, and two others are essentially placed, non-sequentially, elsewhere.

But back to *Quiet Americans*: For the most part, there's a chronological thread running through those stories, so it made sense to have them follow each other. There are seven stories in the book—"Homecomings" comes at the midpoint. That story takes place in 1972; the three stories that precede it, including "Matrilineal Descent" and "Lebensraum" are set in periods prior to 1972, and the three stories that follow it take us up to the early years of the 21st century. So there's that general logic.

**How does your degree in history influence your writing? Can you talk about the way research informs your fiction?**

On a very direct level, my experiences studying history have presented me with some amazing opportunities to discover some of those circumstances I was alluding to earlier. For example, it was while I was conducting dissertation research in an archive in France that I found a set of letters that led me to write my first (but alas, unpublished) book of fiction, a novel.

On another level, as you've suggested, my training in history helped sharpen my research skills more broadly. But I should note that I earned my PhD in 1999, which seems like a lifetime ago for a number of reasons, including the fact that so much more research is accessible online these days. I'm a little envious of newer scholars and the skills and opportunities that they have in that respect.

**How long did you work on this collection?**

Well, I drafted the "oldest" story for the first time in the fall of 2001, and the collection was published in January 2011. So, all told, it took nearly 10 years. I hope that readers will agree that it was time well spent!



*"The Only Way," Summer in New York City* — Jonathan Back



*“Leap Frog,” Summer in New York City — Jonathan Baek*



*"Abbey Road," Summer in New York City* — Jonathan Baek



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The State University  
of New York

