

This is an excerpt from *Imaginary Year*, a work of serial fiction by Jeremy P. Bushnell. Visit the *Imaginary Year* website (<http://www.imaginaryyear.com>) on Mondays and Fridays for new updates.

1 / GETTING BACK TO NORMAL

Two weeks after the attacks the radio begins to instruct us that life is returning to normal. Airlines are resuming flights, late-night television hosts are returning to their monologues. Fletcher writes 'normal' on a Post-It Note and sticks it on his refrigerator, where it joins some of the words Bush used in his speech last week, and a taped-up snippet of *Tribune* headline. *An open wound forever.*

There are some bottles of Heineken in the refrigerator, and he helps himself to one.

The ascendance of *normal* in the cloud of discourse is curious to him; it serves counterpoint to the other national theme of the moment, that of *Everything Has Changed*. When one of the guests at Clark's birthday party suggested that it was nice that things seemed to be returning to normal, Clark had delivered one of her offhand savagings: *right, right, normal, except for the fact that our country has basically just authorized a shadow government to indulge in a state of permanent war.* Spoken around a cigarette, while trying to get her lighter to ignite. Flick. Acid, but acidity has always struck him as attractive. Of course, it helps that he finds her physically attractive, too. Simple haircut, no makeup, black clothes: she could be a French student radical. Flick. Sitting out in the dusk, watching her make sparks.

He understood her desire to resist this language, the language of *getting back to normal*, although he does find it more interesting than the language of the Bush speech, political language, words that have lost their meaning, that have been worn blank, like a coin

smoothed by the texture of too many hands and too much time. *Freedom. Fear.* These are words he tells his students not to use.

His sympathies to Clark aside, he must admit that really does feel normal. Entire nations are in the grip of geopolitical turmoil but the direct effects upon him are minimal. The sum total? A few extra hours of listening to NPR, slightly more anxiety regarding air travel, a different set of words traveling into the fields of his poetry. Otherwise? Otherwise he goes to a party and drinks beer and cracks irreverent jokes and tries to score. And now: at home, he sits on the couch, takes a sip of the Heineken, and pulls a xeroxed poem out of the mess in his briefcase. It is Jane Hirshfield's "Poem With Two Endings;" something one of his colleagues stuck in his mailbox. This is all normal.

(He feels guilty sometimes, as though he should have suffered more. He's heard some of his colleagues talking about their grief, describing episodes of breaking down in tears in front of the TV—these people have not lost a friend, or a friend of a friend: he has trouble understanding what has affected them so profoundly. Perhaps he is jaded, but six thousand more dead does not surprise him. To him it just seems like another part of the world's sad story.)

He begins to read the poem:

Say “death” and the whole room freezes—
even the couches stop moving,
even the lamps.

Like a squirrel suddenly aware it is being looked at.

Say the word continuously,
and things begin to go forward.