

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.

## 32 / POETRY IN THE COMPLEX

For people like Clark, who have made it a point to position themselves against the military-industrial complex, the news, these days, has been bad.

—Bush continues to drag out the word "evil" (*false word, false dialectic*, Clark thinks, every time).

—The U.S. refuses to give prisoners of war status to prisoners taken in the so-called War on Terrorism. (She thinks *The Onion* sees it for what it is: "Those Geneva Convention rules were made back when we were fighting white people.")

—Yesterday's *Sun-Times* featured the headline "Powell Cranks Up 'Let's Invade Iraq' Talk." (She saw it in the morning and registered it bleakly, then forgot about it while she was at work. On her way home, later that night, slightly drunk, she saw it again, and the experience was that of waking out of a pleasant dream, and being reminded of where you are, the way the world really is. A photo of Powell with clenched fist. She stopped in her walk for a moment and imagined weeping.)

Today she is in her Perihelion office, writing a poem, *Arena*.

It is a long, thin poem: her lines seem only able to advance a few words before they die.

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helicopter surveillance

anxiety, nervousness, weakness, or dry mouth

GBU-12 Paveway II

GBU-16 Paveway II (people char)

loss of appetite

yawning

...

Sometimes, when she writes, she wonders whether she shouldn't be doing something else. She remembers Adorno's statement: "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." But Clark thinks that Adorno is writing about the range of actions appropriate for him personally, not issuing an edict to all poets, for all time. (She has read a later quote by him: "I have no wish to soften the saying that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric ... [But] literature must resist this verdict.")

Adorno had lost those he loved: of course the only appropriate action, for him, was to grieve, to attend faithfully to the dead.

She stares at the screen, frowns, drums her fingers on the keyboard.

The question, she thinks, is one of determining the appropriate action for your context. She lives in a military-industrial complex during a time where airstrikes are committed in the name of her government. The War Machine and the State Machine working harmoniously. She wonders whether she should not be protesting more usefully, fighting more visibly.

But she thinks back to Bush and his use of the word *evil*. She considers the way that this word fails to admit any shade of gray, fails to suggest that the causality of events may be even slightly complex. It makes a simplified cartoon world of the world.

Clark thinks of her poems as pockets of ambiguity. *Arena*, for instance, is stripped of almost all its verbs: she articulates no system of interactions between her nouns. She lets

them pile up, a junkyard of things and their meanings orbiting independently around some unspoken core.

She leafs through a pile of printouts until her eye settles upon some words. She types: semi-active laser (man-in-the-loop)

There is another complex that Clark inhabits, an information-entertainment complex, which runs on unambiguous messages. It does not particularly care whether the message is Bush's speech or Total Request Live or even a protester's slogan, as long as it is simple, easily reducible, redundant. These are the prerequisites for clean transmission.

Clark's poems are a part of this complex, but they do not work the right way. They may *mean* something, but this meaning is not distinct, not whole: her readers must assemble it for themselves (and different readers may assemble it differently). This process of assembly takes time, it is slow. Her poems are a sand in the lubricant. A friction in the machines.

Her context is now. Her appropriate action is to be difficult, and irreducible. Anything else would be barbaric.

She picks up a pencil and taps it against her front teeth.