

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.

42 / TALKING ABOUT THE WEATHER

Janine and Clark are together in the office, sharing a bag of microwave popcorn, their fingers shiny from butter-flavored oil. There is work that probably needs to be done, but no one seems to feel like doing it.

—So, you write? Janine asks. She knows that Clark is the primary individual in charge of continuity for Chordworld's narrative, but she recalls having heard Clark talk before about writing she did on her own.

—Yeah, Clark says. She throws a piece of popcorn up into the air and catches it in her mouth, chews it while she speaks. —I'm working on these poetry pieces, it's kind of a long sequence about war, it deals with this current *war on terrorism* thing, but it really goes back to the Gulf War, and especially the way the military operations continued over there, even once the war was officially over?

She swallows the popcorn, and waits. Janine nods, so she continues. —So—and stop me if this is boring—it's sort of about the way that war disappears for us, even at the same time that it's everywhere. The war continues, but people mostly stop talking about it, stop thinking about it. And yet we're still surrounded by the details of it; I mean you look in the newspaper, the details are in there. *Continuing firefights in Khost* or whatever. These details surround us even though we're no longer attentive to them; they become almost like an atmosphere that we move through, an atmosphere of total war, like a weather...

—Except not even a weather, Janine says. —Because people actually *talk* about the weather.

—Yeah, Clark says. —No, you're right.

Janine remembers when the bombings began in the fall, remembers how that time was one of awful depression for her. Mostly she doesn't connect that depression to the war, these days: now she mostly thinks it had more to do with getting laid off, but thinking back on it, in light of Clark's comments, she can remember the thick feeling of death that seemed to surround her at that time. The feeling went away: she got involved with Thomas, got a new job. But she has never really talked to anyone about it, and she no longer talks about what helped contribute to it: the bombings, the anthrax cases, the awful resonance of the thousands who died in the Trade Towers. Clark is right, though: none of those things have ever been resolved. They just operate now in the background.

Janine wonders, once again, what it would be like to sleep with Clark. She's been working up the nerve to make a proposition, although it's been complicated by Thomas suddenly getting the monogamy urge. She probably should have seen that coming. But fuck it, she is not going to let him stop her. He's just going to have to deal. OK, OK, if she's totally honest with herself she knows that she can help him—when they discussed it last week he eventually agreed to let her do what she wanted and promised to try not to sulk about it; but he also confessed a fear that he'd pale in comparison, sexually, and that she'd leave him. She reminded him, as gently as possible, that her whole nonmonogamous approach to relationships means that she doesn't have to make a choice between lovers, so she doesn't need to compare them. *If I'm not leaving you now*, she'd said, *I'm not going to leave you if I sleep with Clark. That's a whole other thing; it doesn't have anything to do with you.* She thinks she convinced him: after the chilly hour-long discussion they ended up having pretty good sex.

Sex, relationships—these are the things she feels able to talk about easily. She's lucky to have that, she supposes. It'll be easy for her to proposition Clark, when the time comes.

Is it now?

She selects a piece of popcorn and places it into her mouth. The pause between them has grown long.

—So, Clark says, —speaking of weather, can you *believe* this is spring? She gestures out the window. Snow whirls.

