

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.

44 / INTERLOCKING PARTS

Austin sits on a low three-legged stool, his head directly in front of the black face of the stereo receiver. He has his Minidisc recorder wired up to play through the speakers, and he is currently listening to a piece that he's been working out this morning.

The first thing he recorded was a minimal guitar melody, no chords, just fingerpicking. For maybe five minutes he repeated the same two vaguely mathematical bars, varying only the inflection. Then he transferred this five-minute chunk to audiotape, and played it back, and as he listened he improvised a new melody on top of it, recording the resultant duet to Minidisc in a kind of low-fidelity overdub.

In his second improvisation, he tried to create melodic fragments that would interlock interestingly with the repetitive patterns of the first. Once he nails it, he'll move it to tape, play it back and improvise another layer on top, and so on. He knows that the multiple re-recordings will cause the original line to degrade. But the notion of generation loss doesn't bother him. He has long been attracted to things that are weathered. Ancient statues scoured away by time. Images photocopied and rephotocopied until corroded. Abandoned buildings. When he first learned that Lydia had grown up in Detroit he got excited; he wanted to ply her for firsthand descriptions of the crumbling industrial landscape. (He can still remember the fascination with which he explored a site on the Internet a few years back: *The Fabulous Ruins of Detroit*.)

Austin reaches down and scratches Blob, his cat, who has seen Austin closer to the floor than normal, and has taken this opportunity to wander over for attention. Blob flattens his ears and pushes his face forwards into the cup of Austin's hand. —Gotcha, Austin says, gently moving Blob's head back and forth. Blob just purrs.

The take that Austin's listening to isn't really great—it fails more than it works—but it hits a stride around three minutes in: it enters a period where the harmonizing pieces fit, and create something interesting. This will be the starting point for his next take.

He thinks, here, about Lydia. It's weird—in some of his past relationships, this point, the two-month mark, would be about the point where things would start going awry. But he doesn't see much sign of that here: the time they've spent together has grown progressively more comfortable, not less.

The age thing is a little bit weird—Austin's 30, and he can perceive the age difference between them, for sure—but her youth mainly shows up in her as a kind of energy and enthusiasm. He's seen her, more than once, pull one of his records out of its crate and hug it to herself, hopping up and down, saying *can we please listen to this?* Sure. Why not. He finds himself bemused by it, but it's hard not to get swept up in her zeal. It's helped to make some of his music collection exciting again. He had begun becoming more and more of a somber reptile, thinking of the music room as a kind of study, listening to records with his hand on his chin. *Hmm. Yes. Very interesting.* Fuck, it feels good just to have someone around with whom he can laugh a little bit.

He catches himself wondering if this is the early onset of some kind of midlife crisis. He doesn't want to be dating 22-year-old women when he's 40. At least that's what he's telling himself now while he's 30.

The track runs out. He hooks the microphone back into the Minidisc player, rewinds the tape back to the beginning. Brings the guitar back into his lap, and begins again.

