



IMAGINARY  
YEAR

[www.ImaginaryYear.com](http://www.ImaginaryYear.com)  
ideal for reading at work

11

book two  
games and poems

issue eleven  
august-september 2002

## **ABOUT IMAGINARY YEAR**

*Imaginary Year* is a work of serial fiction, written by Jeremy P. Bushnell. It began in September 2000, and is renewed each September.

New entries appear each Monday and Friday on the *Imaginary Year* website ([www.ImaginaryYear.com](http://www.ImaginaryYear.com)). Printable versions of the entire story to date, such as the one that you are holding, are available through that site as well.

*Imaginary Year* is free, and copies of it may be made in whole or in part by any individual for noncommercial purposes, provided that those copies retain the full text of this notice.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Jeremy P. Bushnell lives and works in Chicago, IL. His fiction has appeared in *Another Chicago Magazine*, *River Oak Review*, *Quarter After Eight*, *The Crescent Review*, and *Christopher Street*, and has been produced for broadcast by Chicago Public Radio.

He can be reached by e-mail at [jeremy@invisible-city.com](mailto:jeremy@invisible-city.com).

## 72 / TEXAS

Freya unlocks the store, disables the alarm, flips on the lights. It's the first time she's been back to work since the funeral.

She never got a chance to see her father's body—the casket had been closed. She wishes they had opened it. Let people see the messy real of death. Get their faces right up against it. People should see what a penetrated skull looks like. Maybe then they'd think twice before doing some *fucking stupid* thing like what her dad did. They'd be conscious, at least, of how they'd look when they were through.

She heads into the back room. The familiar things are there: the wall of lockers, layered over with a thousand promo stickers. The Darth Maul PEZ dispenser hanging from the florescent light's pull-chain. Everything looks strange, although everything is the same. Maybe it looks strange *because* it is the same. She has been to Texas; she has seen her father's gravestone. It seems as though the world should be more torn.

Jakob brought her big cartons of Chinese takeout last night. *They say you're supposed to feed people who have suffered a loss, he said. I know it's not much, but—*. She had spent a lot of her time in Texas angry at him for not coming with her, but something about the helplessness of this gesture made her want to forgive him. She took him into her arms and he shuddered, as though he were releasing some weight he'd carried in his body the entire time she'd been gone. *Ssh*, she'd said, as though he was the one who needed comfort.

Perhaps he was. She cannot say that she felt much grief. She felt disturbed, as though her history had been disrupted. This particular ending forces her to read the earlier

chapters of her father's story differently, to see signs and pointers where she had not seen them before.

She also found herself forced to place herself in new categories. A person who knows someone who has committed suicide. A person who has lost a father. These shifts were not necessarily easy to make—and she is not certain that she's fully made them yet—but they were not accompanied by great sorrow. She has not cried.

This makes her feel guilty. The whole thing makes her feel guilty. *If only I'd been a better daughter*, she thinks. *Called him every once in a while. Just to check in. Just to make sure he was doing alright.*

In Texas, her Uncle Bill showed her a few recent photos of her father, the few he had. Her memories of his appearance had been twenty years out of date. *So this is him*, she thought, this shirtless stranger, bare chest covered in a thick mat of gray hair. He's frowning into the camera, as though he wants to punch out whoever's taking the picture.

Thinking of those images now reminds her that her father was a bad person. He hit her mom and he hit her and in the last twenty years he's probably hit other women, too. He threw things and he occasionally broke her toys on purpose and he once put a hole in the wall of her bedroom. Fuck him. Fuck guilt. She's glad that he's dead. She should have spit on his grave.

She imagines his picture going up in flames, reducing him to ash. And she imagines the fire passing over her, too. Her old skin will burn, come off like paper. But she will rise up new.

## 73 / ADMITTING IT

1.

Did you know, Fletcher says, taking a sip from his beer, —that there's a Fletcher Street in Chicago?

—I guess, Clark says, shrugging.

—I think next time I move I'm going to try to find an apartment there.

Clark snorts.

—Come on, Fletcher says. —To be Fletcher on Fletcher Street? You've got to admit that that would be cool.

—That would so *not* be cool. *Especially* if you moved there *on purpose* to look cool.

—Admit it, Fletcher says.

—No, Clark says, flatly.

—Admit it, Fletcher says.

—No, Clark says. —Listen, there's a Clark Street in Chicago, too, but you don't see me wanting to move *there*, do you?

—No, Fletcher says. —But that's because your street sucks.

—Drop dead, Clark says.

2.

—So how are things with Janine? Fletcher asks.

—They're not, Clark says. She sighs. —We've been totally avoiding one another at work. We haven't gotten together outside of work in *weeks*. I think she knows.

—Knows what?

—I don't know. Knows that I'm not interested anymore.

—Are you not?

—I don't know. I don't think so. I just don't feel it with her. And that's hard for me.

—Why? Fletcher asks.

—Why, Clark repeats. She drains the last of her vodka tonic, uses her tongue to secret a few slivers of ice away in the pouch of her cheek. —I kind of went into this thing thinking that it would be an adventure, you know? This big self-discovery thing, where I finally become, you know—bi. *For real* bi instead of just *pretend* bi. And I *wanted* that. It fits with who I am; it fits with what I do; it *makes sense*. But I think I'm starting to realize that you don't always get to *have* a sexual orientation that *makes sense*. I'm thirty years old. I'm almost thirty-one. And maybe—I don't know, maybe it's time for me to realize that I'm just *not bisexual*.

—Hm, Fletcher says. —So it's back to guys for you, eh?

—Eh, Clark says. —Sex with guys has never been that great for me either.

—I hate to break it to you, friend, but there's really only two options here.

—I don't know, Clark says. —That's not really accurate.

—You mean there's something new? Fletcher says. —*That'll* shake things up around here.

—Nothing *new*, Clark says. —It's just—I mean a third option would just be to kind of *get out of the game*, you know?

—To get out of the game?

—To just *give it up*. Just—sometimes when I'm having sex I just get this feeling of like *what's the point?* I'm just—sometimes I feel like I'm totally *asexual*, Clark says.

—You're planning to reproduce by *budding*, I guess?

—Now, I *know* you're just trying to be a dick, but I'm going to remind you anyway that I *don't* have much interest in kids. That maternal impulse just never took root in me. And I mean—it just seems like lately I don't feel a lot of desire, for men *or* for women. If I'm to be honest I have to admit that I never really have. I mean, I've always been all sex-positive, because that's what the culture demands, for everybody to be like *oh, sex is the greatest*, but for me it *isn't*, and it never *has* been, and maybe I'm just *ready* to *say* that. Sex just isn't that *important* for me.

—Huh, Fletcher says. —It is for me.

Her eyes flicker up to meet his. —Are you sure?

*Sure I'm sure*, he wants to say, but the words go dead in his throat. He thinks. It's been over two years since he last had sex with someone. And he hasn't really pursued any of the leads he's had during those two years. Sometimes he *feels like* he misses sex, but other times he doesn't seem to. When he notices that he hasn't been missing sex he gets concerned: he sometimes feels like he'd better start *missing it more*, in order to confirm that there's nothing really wrong with him.

He thinks here about what gives him the most satisfaction and he is somewhat surprised to find that his first answer is *my work*.

—Sure I'm sure, he says.

## 74 / STRESS REDUCTION

Clark is playing a Flash game on her computer. The game is called *Kill*.

She plays a red humanoid figure standing in the center of a wide, featureless plain. White humanoid figures appear at the horizon and rush at her. When one gets within range she clicks on it, and her avatar delivers a single blow, and the enemy disappears into a chunky, bloody mist. When this happens, the computer makes a satisfying meaty *thud*—it sounds like someone hitting a cow with an ax—and a counter registers one more kill.

There is no way to lose the game, even though the enemies come at her in heavy swarms. If one of them reaches her, autopilot will take over, and her figure will kill it on her own. She can walk away and get coffee and come back and her figure will still be there, killing things. The game doesn't work too well as a measure of skill, but as a stress reduction tool, it's superb. Some of her coworkers turn it on in the morning and let it run all day. She's heard that the counter rolls over after 10,000 kills.

The game was designed by one of Perihelion's programmers. He burned copies of it for everyone, and since then the sounds of computer butchery have become a fixture around the office. There must be a lot of stress that needs reducing.

Perhaps it could be because the company numbers are so far from what they projected. They wanted to have 1,000 paid subscribers by the time of September's launch. That seemed attainable, frankly people thought of it as *modest*. But right now they have a few *dozen*. They counted on a market of non-gamers who might be willing to play a game if it was sophisticated enough, and if it didn't resort to the normal science-fiction or fantasy scenarios. This market exists, but they're all signing up to play Sims Online.



It doesn't help that Perihelion has no full-time, in-house marketers. The leanness of the company undoubtedly makes it easier for Jean-Pierre to keep sending the checks from Paris—lots of their more bloated competitors have disappeared over the last few years. But right now the company could really use ten people spending eight hours a day trying to convince the masses to subscribe.

*This isn't my problem*, thinks Clark. She clicks on an enemy and her figure bursts it by delivering a karate kick to its midsection. *This isn't my problem*, she thinks, *all I'm supposed to do is write the story*. She clicks again. Her figure dispatches its assailant with a head-butt. Clark smiles a thin smile of satisfaction: the head-butt is the rarest move in the game's arsenal.

A voice behind her: —Knock knock. It's Paul.

—Come in, she says.

He sits down in the free chair. —Listen, he says, —I'm taking tomorrow and Friday off, so if there's anything you need me to do for you this week, let me know and I'll try to get to it today.

—Okay, Clark says. —I don't think there is anything, though.

—Great, says Paul.

—So what are you doing with your days off? Anything fun? Little vacation?

—It's GenCon, Paul says.

—It's what?

—GenCon. It's the biggest annual, uh, role-playing gamers convention, Paul says.

—My roommate and I have wanted to go for like ten years, but this is the first year where we actually got our act together to go, and had the money, and all that.

—Oh, Clark says. —That sounds like fun.

—I think it will be fun. There's like twenty thousand people there.

—Really? Clark says.

—Yeah, Paul says.

Clark remembers something on her To Do list: *talk to Paul about guys*.

—You should try to score while you're there, she says.

—Oh, Paul says. He fiddles with his shirt collar. —I don't know.

—No, really, she says. —All those gamer boys in one place? I'm sure some of them are queer. This is a good opportunity. *Everybody* who goes to one of these things single is looking to score.

Clark wants to see Paul get laid. But upon realizing this, she thinks *wait, what are you doing?* She feels like she's putting the pressure on, and this doesn't fit, exactly, with this notion that she was talking to Fletcher about at the Ale House just the other night, this notion that not everyone needs or wants sex equally. If it's true, shouldn't you let people determine the magnitude of their need on their own? But on the other hand, she feels that Paul's problem is not that he feels no desire, but that he he feels desire that he cannot express. And maybe here is where she could help. She has never had much of a problem expressing herself.

She snaps her fingers. —You should make up your mind that at GenCon you'll be out, visibly out.

—I don't even know how to *do* that, says Paul.

—Just get like a button or something, Clark says. —You know. Rainbow pin. Or go to a T-shirt shop at the mall and get them to make you a shirt that says QUEER GAMER in iron-on letters.

—I don't know, Paul says. —I don't think that's, uh, my style.

Paul looks both ways nervously, as though seeking an avenue of escape. Clark decides not to push it.

—Okay, she says. —But keep your eyes open for someone who is out. I'd like to see you with a nice gamer boy.

Paul would like that, too. —Okay, he says.

## 75 / THE END OF THE WORLD

Paul locks up the Volkswagen, and starts walking up the street, towards work. It's Monday, his first day back from Milwaukee. He spent the last four days at Gen Con, the annual games fair, surrounded by thousands of people who are at least as dorky as he is, from the kids in their Luke Skywalker outfits to the old guys dollying around huge cases filled with wargame miniatures. He's rarely felt so much at home. When they first made it to the convention center Marvin kept punching him in the arm and whispering *Oh my God. Oh my God. We're in heaven.*

Marvin spent half of his time in heaven chatting up girls wearing cute little cat ears. *You better find somewhere else to sleep*, he informed Paul over donuts one morning, *cause tonight is my night to score.*

Paul didn't flirt too much—he never found that openly queer gamer that he was supposed to be on the lookout for—but he did have a small taste of pleasure when he participated in a live-action role-playing game, in which everyone pretended to be a character in a soap opera. He played a wicked industrialist, engaged to a society matron, and in true soap-opera style he performed a dramatic reversal mere hours before the wedding, declaring himself gay, and confessing that he truly loved his arms dealer. The arms dealer conveniently felt the same way, and the two of them showily embraced and pretended to kiss passionately, much to the delight of the other gathered players. It felt good to be in the arms of another man, even if only for a brief moment, and even if the romance was only imaginary. That's more than Marvin got from the cat girls, anyway.

*Clark will be proud*, Paul thinks. He can't wait to tell her.

He sees Janine, standing outside the Perihelion office, smoking a cigarette. He waves.

—Hey there, he says.

—Hey, she says.

—How's it going?

—OK, I guess, she says. She flicks her cigarette. —Considering.

—Considering?

She stares at him for a second, as though trying to assess whether he's made a joke.

Then she closes her eyes. —You've been gone, she says. —You don't know.

—Don't know? Paul asks. Something inside him yawns open. —Don't know what?

—David got a call from Jean-Pierre on Friday, she says. —He's pulling funding.

Paul blinks. Then he blinks again. —That doesn't make sense, he says. —We're not self-sufficient yet. If he pulls funding then there's no game.

Janine looks at him bitterly.

—Oh, Paul says. —Oh.

—Everything's in a chaos, Janine says. —Nobody really knows what's happening, not yet. David's supposed to be letting people know at the meeting today.

—Oh my God, Paul says.

—Yeah, Janine says. —It's bad. She throws her cigarette down to the ground and stamps it out with the toe of her boot. —I've already done a job search *once* this year; I'm not really feeling in the mood to do *another*, you know?

Paul leans up against the bricks and stares across the street, into a fenced-in lot full of salvaged radiators, and he feels as though he may be leaving his body.

At Gen Con he saw elaborate games, simulations so complex that they spread out to cover the entire surface of conference tables. He watched people who feel happiness most strongly when they come together to arrange tiny figures on vast maps. When they have worlds to imagine.

The worlds exist exactly as long as the players believe in them. And then they disappear.

## 76 / KILLING THINGS

The plug's been pulled on Perihelion's funding.

This means that, soon, there will be no more Perihelion. Clark knows this. But she doesn't really want to think about it. She especially doesn't want to listen to everybody wringing their hands endlessly about it. She's never been good at long goodbyes: once you know that it's time to leave, she figures, it's best to just walk away.

So she's not going to the Monday meeting. Instead she's going to stay here, locked in her office, playing *Kill*.

Her figure kills an opponent. And then another.

And then another.

## 77 / TEXAS, REVISITED

Freya agrees to hold the table while Fletcher goes up and orders the first round. She watches him standing there, at the bar, and he must sense it or something because he turns around and makes a goofy face at her, fixing his mouth into a chimplike grin and rolling his eyes. She smiles, and looks down, to free him of the burden of performance, and she thinks about how long she's known Fletcher, and how familiar—how safe—it all feels.

A minute later he's back with two Red Stripes, and they clink the bottles together.

—Sorry to hear about your dad, he says, once he's settled in.

—Oh, Freya says. —Yeah.

She's surprised to remember that this is the first time she's seen Fletcher since her dad died. There used to be a time when she and Fletcher got together every week, hell, back in high school they'd see each other two or three times a week, not *counting* the time they'd see one another in school. Now she only sees him about once a month: on an average night she usually just defaults to hanging with Jakob, hanging out at his apartment, or having him come over to hang out at hers. The scene's all very domestic. Nice enough, although she misses the drunken stumble of the old days. She hardly ever goes out for a night like this anymore—fuck, this may be the first time she's been to a bar at *all* since she went to the Fireside last month. With Joshua. The same night she got the call about her dad. But before that it had been a pretty good night. She didn't feel old. Joshua's twenty-one, and when she's with him all she has to do is squint and pretend and presto, she goes through the timewarp, she's twenty-one, too, for as long as she's willing to play make-believe. Of course when she actually *was* twenty-one, she wouldn't have been flirting with guys her own age: she would have been looking for guys who were in their thirties. Dirty rocker scumbags pushing



into the lower ranks of middle age. Haggard dudes, wasted and full of menace, as pale and weathered as vampires, sniffing around for young flesh as though it were an antidote. Like she herself may now be doing.

But, oh, yeah, right, her dad.

—I don't know, she says. —I mean, you know what my relationship with my dad's been like.

—For as long as I've known you, you guys have barely been in touch, Fletcher says. —Right?

—Yeah, Freya says. —He'd call me like three or four times a year. And every time I'd be like *dude, I don't want to talk to you* the whole way through. So I can't say that I'm really too *ripped up* about him not being around anymore. I still haven't cried, you know? And I kind of feel guilty, like I should, I don't know, *care more*.

—You did go out to the funeral, Fletcher says. —That's something.

—Yeah, Freya says. —I guess. I don't even know why I went, really. I mean, I didn't ever go out to see the guy when he was alive; I don't know what I thought I was going to get by going out there.

—Closure?

—No, Freya says. —I mean, I don't know, maybe. The only way I really feel like I could get *closure* on the thing with my dad would be to confront him, and, well, by the time the dude's dead there's not really much opportunity for confrontation *left*, is there? That's what I wanted in all those phone conversations. I didn't want to make nicey-nice small talk about *what I'm up to* and *how's work*. I wanted to say *I remember what you did to me, and it sucked, and you were wrong, and I hate you*.

Something catches in her throat. She shakes her head and the feeling subsides.

—And I never said that. And now I'll never get the chance to say it. And that right there is the worst of it. I went to Texas to confront him, only by then it was too late.

It was hard for her, she remembers, standing there in front of his fresh grave, fists and teeth clenched, feeling angry and voiceless. Wanting to scream up into the sky. She wishes Jakob had been there. She still feels like he failed her by not going. By staying home to read his books instead.

— He must have known that you felt that way, Fletcher says. —I mean, to do what he did. He must have been suffering.

—Not by my hand, says Freya. —I wanted him to suffer by my hand. As I did by his.

## 78 / EVERYTHING

They're on their second round now.

—So how was working for your dad this summer? Freya asks.

—Let's not speak of it, Fletcher says.

—OK, Freya says. —How about teaching? You ready to go back for another year?

Fletcher makes a face. —Let's not speak of that, either.

—OK, Freya says. She makes as though she's going to gather her things and head out. —Well, bye! she says, mock-cheerful.

—Sorry, Fletcher says. —It's just that, well, work... it's, well, work.

—I know what you mean, Freya says. She's sick of working at the record store. Sick of not getting credit for what she does there. Don, her manager, just hides in the back room all day, gabs on the phone to his friends, monitors eBay auctions. She's taken on all the duties that he shirks: if she quit, the place would fall into total disrepair. At times she's tempted to do it, just to watch Don crash and burn. But the prospect of starting over fresh somewhere else is too dismal to contemplate.

—I think about work enough when I'm working, Fletcher says. —I don't want to think about it when I'm getting drunk, as well.

—Amen, Freya says.

They both drink, and they look at each other and grin, and then they drink again.

—So are you writing? Freya asks.

—Yes, Fletcher says. —The writing is actually going well. For the first time in a long time.

—What are you working on?

—I'm working on a long poem called *Everything*, Fletcher says.

—*Everything?*

—Yep, Fletcher says.

—I hesitate to ask what it's about.

—Go ahead, ask.

—Is the answer obvious?

—Yep, Fletcher says.

—It's really about—everything?

—Inasmuch as it's about anything, Fletcher says.

—Ambitious.

—True, Fletcher says.

—So how's it coming? Freya says.

—Pretty well. See, I had gotten on this tip where I was digging through the Internet for language. You know, I'd start browsing and I'd end up on the Weather Channel's website, reading pollen count data, and I'd be like *this is great!* and I'd copy the shit down, only then I'd end up writing a poem about pollen and mold. And I don't really want to write a poem about pollen and mold. I want to be writing a poem about all of it, you know, all of it together. About the way that all of this language connects together.

—You think it does?

—Yeah, says Fletcher, —I think so. I mean—try to think about it this way. As an observer moves through the world they pass through these different, I don't know, *language spaces*, and as a result the *head*, I mean the literal *head* of the dude moving through the world, becomes kind of this place where *everything connects to everything else*. You know? Like the radio comes on in the morning and they're talking about, I don't know, today there was this thing

on about state quarters, and then you're eating breakfast and the Honey Nut Cheerios box has this write-up about some fantasy school where there's no classes, only recess, like where the kids are all in charge, this kind of *anarchy school*, and there's no link between the quarters and the Cheerios school except for the link of the experiencing subjectivity, which experiences one, then experiences the other, and there's like a linear thing between them, a kind of—he claps his hands together—*unh!* you follow me?

—I think so, Freya says.

—So I was just like *fuck it*, Fletcher says. —For a long time I was trying to keep the linguistic material discrete, or organize it with other stuff that was related somehow, related in some sort of *artful* way. But I've come to believe that you can't sit any two things next to one another without *some* sort of relationship emerging. The head makes relationships. So the poem just moves the reader between things. Like it could connect... I don't know... *this beer* to, say, the parts of a crab.

—The parts of a crab? Freya asks.

Fletcher closes his eyes.

—The antennules, he says. —The lateral spines. The cheliped. The pleopods.

## 79 / CLOSING DOWN AND REOPENING

Friday is the first day that there is no job for Janine to go in to.

Perihelion is deep into the business of making itself disappear. In another two weeks or so the act will be formally concluded, and everyone will be let go. Janine's just lucky enough to go first. *Unemployed*, she thinks. *Again*, she thinks. *Thank you, President Bush*.

She tells herself that she should update her resume, but then she agrees to put it off until Monday, that she should give herself at least one three-day weekend without worrying about the hunt for a new job. She got a modest severance package, so she's covered through September, maybe longer if she files for unemployment. Although she despises the idea. So instead she spends Friday doing apartment things that she'd long put off—she cleans the junk out from under the bed, scours grime out of the tub. She deletes a bunch of e-mails that are no longer relevant. There's one from Clark: an invite to her annual birthday party. It's addressed to the entire Perihelion employee listserv. She doesn't delete that one.

In the evening, Thomas, who doesn't work Fridays, comes over with some California rolls from the Dominick's and a movie. This has become a regular ritual of theirs since July. Since around the time that she stopped sleeping with Clark. She frowns, feels tension spread across her forehead.

She sits crosslegged on the floor in front of the sofa, leans her head back onto Thomas' knees. —Will you do my neck? she asks him. —I'm really tense tonight.

—Sure, Thomas says.

He puts his fingers on her and feels for the tension.

It was weird to say goodbye to Clark. Janine said *well, I guess I'm heading out*, and Clark stopped working on whatever it is she works on in her office and looked at Janine for a

moment, as though gathering her resolve, as though somehow weary inside. —Janine, she had said. —I'm sad to see you go. We should get together again sometime.

—I'd like that, Janine said. —You have my number. Feel free to give me a call.

Such amicability. So strange, after everything, to find herself here, being polite, pretending that there is nothing to say, not asking what she most wants to ask: *what happened?*

*Why did you stop wanting to touch me?*

—Oh, Clark said. —I'm having a birthday party September 7. You should think about coming.

—I will, Janine said.

Thomas' hands knead the tight muscles in her neck until something seems to drain from her. Jesus it feels good.

—Hey, Thomas, she says.

—Yeah? Thomas says.

—Do you want to sleep with me?

A beat. His hands pause on her neck. It's been four months, maybe more, since they last slept together. But he does not need to think about his answer. —Yeah.

—Why? Janine asks.

—Why?

—Yeah.

—Um, Thomas says. —Because. Because... you're beautiful.

—Oh yeah? Janine says.

—Yeah, Thomas says. —And because—you're my best friend.

Janine smirks a bit at this. It seems so fourth grade. But it's sweet. And she manages to say as much: —You're sweet.

—I just say what's true, Thomas says.

He's surprised to realize that what he said *is* true; he *does* think of Janine as his best friend. For a long time he thought of his college buddy Derek as his best friend, but he hasn't gotten together with Derek in months, and he gets together with Janine just about every week—

—So you want to? Janine says.

—Sleep together? Thomas says.

—Yeah, Janine says.

—Yeah, Thomas says. His hands lie still on her shoulders.

—Keep rubbing, she says.

—OK, Thomas says.



## 80 / CIRCULATORY SYSTEMS

September arrives and Jakob renews his lease, begins his third year in this Chicago apartment.

It's not a perfect apartment—it's too small, and the faucets in the shower leak, and the intercom system hasn't worked well since last winter (one freezing in February, Freya spent twenty minutes chucking stones at his window so he'd come let her in). And yet, for all the things he'd change, he has to admit that it feels good to go a few years without moving. It feels nice to know, with certainty, where things are.

He gets the coffee filters out of his kitchen drawer, stands there in his bathrobe and grinds some beans. Pours water into the back of the coffeemaker, and switches it on.

A tremor passes through his feet, followed by a second one moments later.

He draws the curtain, to check out what's going on, just to make sure that it's not the end of the world out there or anything. He's not that worried. For the past week they've been demolishing the defunct industrial building that used to be next door, reducing it to a fenced-in field of debris. He looks out onto the lot, where there's a bulldozer dumping piles of bricks on the earth. He watches it for a few minutes. A toddler's love of heavy moving equipment still lives within him somewhere, down deep.

He hears the coffeemaker gurgle like it does at the end of its cycle. He goes and pours himself a cup, then returns to the window.

He'll miss the plating works. He enjoyed the sense of continuity that the building provided, the way it hearkened back to Chicago's industrial past. Maybe he's just nostalgic, but still, he'll take an old empty building over a Starbucks, or whatever else they'll put there

next. (Maybe it'll be a Blockbuster Video. Then there will be three within walking distance of his apartment instead of only two.)

On the other hand, his apartment has more view now. He can see a deeper picture of Chicago's tangle of trees and poles and wires and bricks than he could before. If he looks through a particular sliver of space framed by buildings he can even see the L tracks. He sips his steaming coffee and waits until a chain of cars rumbles through. He smiles: seeing them reminds him that he lives in a place where trains circulate constantly. He can derive comfort from that. It reminds him that life is always happening.

He feels the faintest pulse of caffeine in his blood. He begins to calculate plans for the day. He thinks he'll go visit Freya at work, maybe they can grab lunch or something. He will take the train out to another point in the city. And then, later, he will return here, to home.

## 81 / ENCODED

They erased their world today. Perihelion, liquidating the last of its assets, sold off its computers to an animation house, and so Clark spent her day following one of the guys from Tech through the proving room, watching him reformat all the hard drives.

Once the computers were blank, she went down to the basement, where the original packaging had been stored. She and the other remaining staff members filled up the boxes, sealed them, and piled them by the door, where they were left to wait for the UPS man who would take them to their new life in a Southern California render farm.

After they were through, Clark crossed the conference room, stepping over the scraps of paper and loose lengths of phone cord that littered the floor. She walked down to David's office and found him organizing Perihelion's few remaining pieces of office furniture into a sparse herd: whatever couldn't be sold, now available for any former employee to take home, if they wanted a little bonus to their severance package.

—Clark, David had said. He opened his arms to hug her. —I'm sorry it didn't work out.

She hugged him back, although quickly, and stiffly. —It's OK, she said.

—I just had really hoped to give you something—a job that could—

—It's OK, Clark insisted.

Three years worth of work. She saved a copy for herself, five CD-Rs, rubberbanded together. A world that no one will ever visit, encoded behind plastic. She has no plans of what she might do with it. Her home computer doesn't even have the processing power necessary to run it. That doesn't even matter. She doesn't want to play it herself. What she really wants is for someone else to play it, for someone to try solving the puzzles that she put

in there. The Vanishing Angel. The Inverted Monument. The Tender Crypt. No one will. No one will ever enjoy discovering the Pleasure Garden that she hid in the plainest corner of Eggshell.

This, she thinks, is the fate of everyone. People live, and as they live they grow, and as they grow they develop secret areas inside themselves, pockets of ornate beauty that would amaze anyone who came along and discovered them. But no one does. There is not enough time. And there's no money in it.

Tomorrow is her birthday. She'll be thirty-one. She feels the same as she did when she turned thirty. But she knows that she's one year further along in the story of her own life. In that year she has accumulated all sorts of experiences that no one else will experience quite as she has, and so she is one year more complicated, one more year away from a time when she could have been fully understood.

## 82 / BIRTHDAY

Ok, in her worst moments she feels unattended, misunderstood, alone. And it's true that she's newly unemployed, faced with the prospect of finding a new job, *starting over fresh*, meeting new co-workers, smiling, making nice with the exact people who will eventually drive her to exasperation. And, yes, it looks more and more likely that the United States will go invade Iraq any day now, in a gesture of perfect insanity.

But none of those things mean that she can't have a good time tonight. It's her birthday, and she's having a party, and, goddamnit, she is going to have a good time even if she has to drink this entire bottle of apricot brandy.

This is the fifth year that she's thrown this party, and over those five years it has developed something of a reputation, so now it draws quite a crowd. Half the people here she barely knows. Lots of friends of friends—like, there, at the door, it's Fletcher's friend, Freya, and her boyfriend, that guy whose name Clark can never remember. She shoots a wave over that way.

She moves from there into the kitchen, checks in with the cluster of her co-workers from Perihelion—her ex-co-workers, she supposes. They're standing around in a knot, drinking beers and talking about what they're going to do next. She's surprised to see that David's not in his suit: instead he's got on one of his old punk T-shirts. The Exploited.

Paul's here, too, dressed very sharply, down to a very dapper-looking bow tie. He smiles, and waves his fingers over the top of his beer bottle at her. She grins back.

No sign of Janine. Clark's disappointed; she would like to have the chance to talk to her again, maybe make plans to get together sometime. Pick up where they left off. It's early yet. Maybe she'll still make it by.

Clark takes another swig of brandy from the bottle. Fuck, it's hot in here. Since everyone seems to be having a good time, and no immediate crisis seems to need her attention, she decides that she can shirk her hosting duties for the moment, head outside, grab a quick breath of air.

Fletcher's sitting on the back steps, staring out into her yard, looking into the trees at the edge of the property. She sits next to him, puts her arm around his shoulders.

—Hey, he says. —Having a good time?

—Sure, she says. —And you?

—Not bad, he says.

—You sure? she asks. —You're not sitting out here by yourself as part of your whole *hating life* thing, are you?

He smirks. —No, he says. —I suppose I'm not.

—Good, she says. She pulls his head down onto her shoulder, kisses him on the temple.

—Have you started looking for a new job yet? he asks, after a while.

—Huh? she says. —Oh, God no.

—Do you have an idea of what kind of job you might be looking for? Fletcher asks.

—Not really, she says. —But, hey, it's my birthday. Can't we talk about something else?

—I live to serve, he says. —I can talk about whatever you want. Do you want to hear about how I'm losing my hair? Because I think I am. Check this out. He places his fingers up by his hairline.

—No, she says. —Tell me about your work, your new poem.

—*Everything?* he says.

—Yeah, she says. —How is it going?

Before beginning work on *Everything*, Fletcher wrote this in his notebook: *The work of the poet is to connect disparate things. Since we move constantly through a shifting sphere of interconnections, then any moment can be poetic, every moment is poetic.*

He thinks about this moment, now, as he has thought about many others, since he began. He is here. Clark is here. His head is on her shoulder. A cool breeze passes through the yard, undercutting the thick heat of summer. There is the scent of apricots. All of these things are connected to one another: taken together they form an intricacy. The cat's cradle of energy and being and attention that we call a moment.

—It's going well, Fletcher says. —It's really going well.