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book two
games and poems

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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.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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18 / HOW TO DO THINGS WITH WORDS

The floor of the kitchen is green tile. Coils in the toaster glow around bread. Fletcher cracks an egg with one hand and lets the insides fall into the oiled skillet. In his other hand he holds Joan Retallack's book *How To Do Things With Words*. In the background his computer is on. Its screen burns a poem into the air.

He flips over the book to read the back again. *Borrowing the title of J. L. Austin's important philosophical tract, Joan Retallack seeks through poetry answers to Austin's questions about the relationship between saying and doing.* Fletcher has read the Austin text, years ago, in his undergraduate days. He remembers some of it. Performatives, behavatives, locutionary and illocutionary acts. *I am frying an egg. My semester is over.*

His semester *is* over; all except for the grading, and that's going to be easier than normal this time. This semester, he taught Intro to Poetry Writing, and he has decided to give every student an A. This is not because he thinks their poems are good, but rather because he never quite made them understand that poems are not just feelings about your day run through a strainer. They believed until the end that poems are just lyrical diary entries. And Fletcher doesn't have any idea how to grade that. What grade should he give the person who is writing about having been left by her boyfriend, and whose poem reads like transcribed weeping? *No / no / my heart.* C? D?

It is not like he did not present them with other possibilities. See him in the classroom, in his shabby blazer, speaking: *poems are machines for connecting disparate things in the world. That's what metaphor **does**; that's why metaphor **exists**.* He underlines METAPHOR on the blackboard. *The more diverse and far-reaching the connections between things, the richer your poems*

will be. Notecards taped above Fletcher's desk— Georges Braque: "I do not believe in things but in relationships between things." Andre Breton: "To compare two objects as far distant from one another as possible, to confront them brusquely and strikingly—this remains the highest task to which poetry can lay claim." Fletcher's toast pops up and he lifts the two slices out, drops them on a plate.

But his students all believed that writing is just opening up and spontaneously spilling out genius. The Kerouac Technique. All they care about is how to make their poems "flow." Thanks a fucking lot, Jack. What a fucking boon you have left to the world. (He wonders: do his students even know who Kerouac was? Not that it really matters: popular culture has repeated the image of the Beats so endlessly that they are now always in the background of everyone's mind. Even the students who don't know him know him.)

Kerouac: You're a Genius all the time.

Kerouac wanted poems to be like jazz. But he seemed to think that jazz was all about spontaneity, wild undisciplined blowing. Fletcher thinks of jazz differently. He thinks of jazz (and poems) as being kinds of games. Systems, within which you do something in accord with a set of rules. You choose the rules when you build the system. He thinks Kerouac didn't know shit about jazz.

He flips the sizzling fried egg onto a slice of toast, presses the other slice down on top, carries his sandwich over to the computer, looks at the screen, letting his thoughts drift: games, strategies, moves.

He has a new crush: Isabelle. She's in the English Department, so he sees her around, but she's in Lit, he's in Creative Writing, so their classes haven't overlapped yet. He mostly has seen her so far in the hallways. She is not without a certain dorkiness—big glasses, straight brown hair, a certain shy turning-away from things—he admires these traits,

inasmuch as they bespeak a kind of bookish intelligence. But it wasn't until Esmet's orphan Thanksgiving that Fletcher realized that the dorkiness masked a quiet sexiness: he spent a good part of the evening in a kind of trance, staring at the curve of her neck and the fullness of her lips.

The semester is over now, and this means that he won't see her again until January. He should have said something to her at Esmet's, before he left. He contemplated it: rehearsed lines in his head, a thousand variations on: *do you want to get together over the break? For coffee?*

A locutionary act is uttering a noise that you know has meaning. Perlocutionary acts bring about effects on the hearer. There are infinite, unpredictable possible effects. Persuading. Alarming. Upsetting. He is not sure what would happen were he to make a particular move. And so what did he do? Nothing.

In the center of the night sky of his poem, he types words, in a solid block, like an ingot:

should not

might not

has not

could not

do not

did not

will not

can not

A notecard:

Jasper Johns' notes on process:

Take an object.

Do something to it

Do something else to it

" " " " " "

19 / IMPULSES AND SCENTS

Their plan tonight is to eat sushi and watch Kurosawa's *Dreams*. Two plastic boxes of California rolls, artfully assembled by someone working at Dominick's, lie stacked in the refrigerator. The video sits on the coffee table. Thomas lights a cube-shaped candle and puts on a CD—disc one of the new double album by Stars of the Lid. The room's air thickens, takes on an autumnal richness. Brian Eno: We are moving towards a position of using music and recorded sound with the variety of options that we presently use color—we might simply use it to tint the environment. The future will be like perfume.

Janine shows up, fresh from self-defense class. Thomas comes towards her for an embrace and she dodges, grabs his arm and twists it around behind him. He makes a tiny, surprised *ah!*

—Hi there, she says.

He can smell the dizzying tang of her sweat. She leans in to kiss him on the cheek. Then she lets go his arm, moves past him into the apartment. It was like an unexpected dance. The motion of bodies in proximity. The touch and release, the mix of tenderness and a potential for violence. The odor of her is still in his nose. She throws her coat over his desk chair, ruffles her hair with her palm, and turns to face him. He is painfully aware of the shape of her breasts in her shirt.

He wonders whether they're going to have sex tonight. He is never quite sure. She is the one who controls whether they have sex or not: sometimes she will come over, hang out for a while, and leave; other times she will stay the night, but go to sleep without even kissing him; other times she will want to have sex right away. He plays along diligently. He

feels, every time, as though he is having sex due purely to alien luck. Her sexuality seems utterly beyond his comprehension: he doesn't have the foggiest idea what makes it function, or how he could possibly influence its workings. He is like the opposite of a hardened Vegas gambler: when faced with a system of suitable complexity, he develops no method to master it, instead he decides that its operations are aleatoric, driven entirely by randomness.

He is not complaining. He has not yet fully mapped out how his own sexuality functions. His desire seems to be completely contingent: when Janine wants to have sex, he wants to also, and the rest of the time he doesn't. Or perhaps it is not that he doesn't want to, but just that it seems so impossible: he cannot figure out how he could even *begin* to take this person, standing there across the room from him, talking about her day, and just *direct her* into the bedroom. And yet she successfully manages to direct him all the time. There are things he could learn from her.

—Hey, she says, sticking her head into his refrigerator. —Remember that job that I told you about? They called me today; want me to come in for an interview.

—That's cool, Thomas says.

—Yeah, we'll see how it goes.

They sit on the sofa and eat sushi. Violins enter the room's atmosphere. Janine cocks her head to listen.

—I like this, Janine says. —Who is it?

—Stars of the Lid, Janine says.

—I really like it, Janine says. —It's so warm. You should get me this for Christmas.

—Really? Thomas says.

—Sure.

Thomas shakes his head. —You know, he says, —I've known you for, what, two years now? And I still don't really get your tastes in music.

—I don't know, says Janine. —I like a little bit of everything. She smiles. —I just like what's good.

To Thomas, this seems strange: he has always thought of his musical taste as a key element of his identity. He feels like someone could look at his CDs and conclude something about him. He looks over: there they are, hundreds of them, on a shelf that runs from one end of the wall to the other. He has thoughts and opinions about each one. Taken together, then, they add up to something, a narrative about his mind. There are themes that run through the collection. Certain discs have been brought in solely to develop some argument, to flesh out his understanding of the zeitgeist, to connect two disparate traditions. He has trouble imagining someone who would request music as a gift strictly on the impulse of a moment, simply because they like it. And yet here she is.

Again: there are things he could learn from her.

They put in the movie. He leans against her. The air on screen fills with whirling petals.

20 / CONFIDENCE [II]

Lydia is at the Empty Bottle, drinking a Newcastle Brown Ale, trying to blink smoke out of her eyes.

Tonight's show, "Taking Liberties," features a bill of five separate improvisers. She's here by herself, which makes her feel a little bit like a loser. She wishes she was here with the group of music-geek friends that she left behind when she left Bloomington. (She thinks of Thomas, a guy who she went to shows with here in Chicago for a while, and she momentarily—very momentarily—regrets dumping him.)

Earlier she'd gotten Paul to agree to come along—he's not really into improvisational music, not so much, but he's politically progressive, and she knew that proceeds from the door are going to the American Civil Liberties Union, so she played up the benefit angle and he eventually agreed. But tonight he was all *I have to get caught up on work stuff*. He showed her an accordion file full of memos. She almost gave up on the show right then—she felt a strong instinct to just stay home, pop a movie into the VCR, curl up with a blanket and a thing of ice cream. But then, perversely stubborn: *fuck it. I'm going to go out and have a good time*. As though to prove something.

And so here she is. The first act was pretty weak: a guy on a laptop, making some kind of structure out of clicks and static, not unlike some of her own audio experiments. The piece maybe would have sounded OK through headphones, but it was a poor choice for barspace: its subtleties, whatever they may have been, ended up shredded by side conversation and ambient clatter.

This second guy she sorta dug, though. First of all, he looked kind of absurd. He had on a fedora, and he wore a long-stemmed rose jammed through the buttonhole of a tweed jacket. It bobbed around ridiculously. She read the gesture as a spirited declaration of beauty's preeminence. His set went like this: he had his guitar lying down on a tabletop, and he tapped the strings with what appeared to be a set of chopsticks, creating a kind of weirdly detuned, trance-inducing percussive rhythm. He would play a rhythm for like five minutes and then pause to roll a handful of dice—it was hard to tell, but some of them looked like Dungeons and Dragons dice—and then he'd start tapping on the guitar strings again, playing the same rhythm. Or *was* it the same rhythm? Something seemed different about it each time, as though the dice had shifted it in some direction that she can't quite describe.

Now she's watching the third guy, who's playing a trumpet and putting weird effects on it. After a while, the combination of hammering blare and accumulating cigarette smoke really begins to get to her, so she wanders out to the Bottle's front room, where it's a little quieter and the air is a little more fresh. There is a cat lying on the billiard table; she scratches it behind the ears for a while. She checks out the photo booth, considers getting a strip of photos taken. That's fun. But it's more fun if there's two people.

The fedora-and-rose guy wanders into the room, talking to some other guy. Lydia takes note.

—You need help with your stuff? says Friend to Rose Guy.

—Nah, says Rose Guy, I already brought it out to the van.

—OK, man, says Friend. —Take care.

—Take care, says Rose Guy, and he makes for the door.

He's going to walk right by her. Lydia is all prepared to let him go, but then she remembers that for the past month she's been berating herself: be more confident! That part of her brain kicks her into action, and so she reaches out and taps him on the shoulder.

—Hey, she says.

He turns around to look at her.

—I like your rose, she says.

This is the first time she's gotten a chance to see his face. He's not half-bad looking. He has big calm eyes and a long face, like an elf. And yet the slight elegance of his appearance is belied by a nose that holds the hint of a long-ago break; the hair that sticks out from beneath the brim of his hat looks unkempt. He looks at her, almost puzzled, then looks down at the rose, as though he has forgotten about it.

—Oh, yeah, he says. —You like it?

—Yeah.

He shrugs, and fiddles it out of his buttonhole. —You can have it, he says, and he proffers it to her. He smiles. She watches the lines in his face: she can tell from their shape that he smiles a lot, and she likes that.

—No, no, she says, mock-modest. —I couldn't possibly.

—You sure? he says. His smile grows wider. He lowers the rose towards her.

—Well, she says, and she takes it. She puts her nose up to it, and inhales, and its rich flavor makes her feel slightly flushed. —At least let me give you something in return.

She puts her hand in her pocket and pulls out her wallet. She needs both hands to manipulate the wallet, and she's got the rose in one hand, so she fumbles and juggles for a moment (*fuck, fuck*, she thinks, *real smooth*), but eventually she gets what she's looking for: her card. Lydia Ramirez, Administrative Assistant, Delphi Management Resources. She shows

it to him, long enough so that she's certain he knows what it is, then she tucks it into his fedora's hatband.

—I thought your set was good, she says.

—Thanks, he says.

—I'd, uh, I'd be interested to talk to you about it; you should give me a call. Maybe we could have a cup of coffee or something.

He looks at her for a moment. —Yeah, he says. —Yeah, that sounds good. My name's Austin.

—Lydia, she says.

—Yeah, I, he says. He points at the card in his hatband. —I, uh, got that. He grins, and takes one step back towards the door. —Well, maybe I'll see you around.

She shrugs, shows her palms. —Anything's possible, she says.

—Yeah, he says. —I suppose it is. He pauses, still looking at her. —Well, he says. —Bye.

They seem to be prolonging the conversation past the point where it should have stopped. The stalling is strangely exhilarating.

—OK, she says. —Bye.

—Yeah, um, he says. —Yeah. Nice to have met you.

—Same here.

—See ya, he says, and then he's out the door, with one last backwards look.

Lydia stares down at the rose in her hand, and, as though it had been someone else acting through her the whole time, she suddenly realizes the actuality of what has just happened: she just gave her number to a guy—a stranger—and he *seemed interested*. Cool. Cool. Fucking cool.

She decides to quit while she's ahead. She zips up her jacket, walks out to the street, gets in the Beetle, and drives home.

21 / NONSMOKING

—But what I'm *saying*, Clark says, is that when you're talking about *warfare*, when you're talking about warfare between *global systems*, it complicates the whole issue of innocence. I don't think there's any such *thing* as an innocent in today's world.

She wants a cigarette. But Elliot gets fussy about people smoking while he's eating, and this whole night out is supposed to be celebrating the completion of his semester and the successful passing of his exams, so she agreed to sit in Nonsmoking. She sticks her hand in her coat pocket just to feel her pack of cigarettes.

—So, what? Elliot says. His fork, with a red triangle of steak impaled on it, hangs in the air halfway to his mouth. —A baby? Not an innocent?

—*No* it's not innocent, Clark says. —Not in the sense that it's born into a system with built-in, long-running discrepancies in equality. That *baby* begins to reap the benefits of its privilege *before* it's even born. We talk about *innocents* like there can—

Elliot points the fork in her direction. —But in a market system—

Clark, interrupted, in turn interrupts, starting again, louder this time. —We talk about *innocents* like there can be people who can exist *outside* of our system and not reap its benefits. Cheap gasoline! We put the lie to our innocence every time we gas up our car. Clark notes, with some satisfaction, that the wedge of steak has finally made it into Elliot's mouth. —I don't put myself outside of this. I enjoy the advantages of this system as much as anybody. But there's a drawback, and that drawback is that I'm not *innocent* of enjoying those privileges, and those privileges are fucking *predicated* on the suffering of others.

—Don't curse at me, Elliot says. —You know that I don't like that.

Clark swallows down the impulse to pitch her water glass at his head. Then she swallows down the urge to say *Why the fuck should I give a fuck what you like?* Then she looks for something else to say. She won't say *sorry*. This is just the fucking way she talks. Dear God she wants a cigarette. She stabs into her salad.

—I don't see why you have to get so *upset* every time we have a political discussion, Elliot says.

—I'm not *upset*, Clark says.

—I'm just trying to *say*, says Elliot, that a market system isn't hierarchical. It's a system of agents, each acting independently in their own self-interest. The primary characteristic of a market is that it lacks a central controller. So, within that system, each individual retains an identity as, well, as an individual. So when you argue that our individual innocence, by which I mean our individual absence of antagonism towards others, is rendered *invalid* by our presence in a totalizing system, I simply disagree. It just relegates the very idea of a personal, individual ethics to a position of absurdity; it says that everyone deserves equally to die.

—Listen, Clark says. —I get the feeling that you're trying to back me into some corner here; I want you to be clear on what I'm saying. And what I'm *not* saying that those people *deserved to die*.

—Could you keep it down? Elliot says, looking around surreptitiously at the other diners, as though they all might be undercover Homeland Security agents.

—Jesus *Christ*, Clark says, even louder. —You just can't *get over* the idea that everybody is focused on *you*, can you? Look *around* at these other people! She waves her hand. —They're not listening to us. They couldn't care *less* about us!

Elliot looks down at his plate, places eight fingertips calmly on the table's edge. — Clark, he says. —Stop it. You're embarrassing me.

—You think this is embarrassing? Clark says. —You haven't *seen* me act embarrassing. You want to see *embarrassing*? And she stands up.

She's not sure what she's going to do: probably just scream. She doesn't give a fuck what these yuppies think about her. When she was nineteen she used to walk around with Doris until they'd found some yuppie restaurant to target: then they'd run up to the window, pull their shirts up, and press their breasts against the glass. Clark had tiny ones and Doris had enormous ones plus a big belly to match: they'd squash it all up against the window for just long enough to see the diners recoil, and then they'd peel free, leaving oily breast-prints behind, and tear off down the street, practically peeing their pants from laughter. That was only ten years ago. Ten years is a long time, but not long enough to fully forget that you once did shit like that.

—Clark? Elliot says. —What on earth are you doing?

She looks down at him, practically sneering with contempt, and she sees the fear on his face, and has second thoughts for just a moment, long enough to completely snuff out the impulse. It just suddenly seems pointless.

—I just need a cigarette, she says. —I'm going to go over by the bar for a minute.

—You need one that bad? he asks.

She turns and goes.

22 / STRATEGIES

Paul and Lydia sit around a card table in the living room, waiting for Marvin, who sits at the kitchen counter, scribbling unknown things into his notebook. It is a Saturday morning and as soon as Marvin finishes his notes, the three of them will begin a new Dungeons and Dragons campaign.

Paul makes some minor adjustments to his character sheet, erases a few stray marks, flicks the eraser curlings away with the edge of his hand. He will be playing his old favorite Adi-Kaya. Marvin, the Dungeon Master, will be controlling a non-player character in their party, Galbraith, a cleric. Lydia hasn't played in a few years, and she lost the sheet for her old character, who she wasn't really that interested in revisiting anyway. She instead rolled up a new character for the campaign: Malgorra, a bard. *The Player's Handbook* describes bards as characters who use music to perform magical feats. Malgorra has a lute thrown in with the rest of her gear.

For flavor, Lydia has imagined that Malgorra occasionally inserts small objects between the strings of the lute, or attaches items to them, in order to produce a wider range of sounds. (She is also hoping that Marvin will be taken with the creativity of this idea and will reward her with extra experience points, or perhaps additional spells.) The idea basically comes from John Cage and his prepared piano experiments. She's been thinking about that a lot, ever since she saw that guy Austin last week, performing with his prepared guitar. This reminds her: she has news.

—Hey, she says to Paul. —Remember that guy I was telling you about?

—Austin? Paul says.

—Yeah, Lydia says. (This is part of why she likes to confide in Paul: when she tells him what is going on in her life, he remembers it, down to the details, and this makes her confident that she can pick up where she left off.) —Well, remember, I gave him my card? (Paul nods.) —Well, he called me.

Paul opens his eyes wide in pleased surprise. —When? he asks.

—Just yesterday, Lydia says. She laughs nervously. —He wants to get together for lunch. He's leaving town in a week or so, just going home for the holidays, and, uh, he said he'd like to try to get together before then.

—Lydia, Paul says. —That's *great*.

—Yeah, Lydia says. She picks up her pencil, swivels it into her mouth, and bites down on it for a second. —I'm kind of nervous, she says.

Paul listens.

—I mean, this guy's like, a *musician*. I don't really, uh, I mean, I don't know what I'm going to have to *say* to him, really. I need a strategy. She puts the pencil between her teeth again.

Paul taps his index finger to his lips for a second. —I can give you your strategy in just two words, he says.

—Oh yeah?

—Yeah, he says. —Be cool.

—Be cool?

—Yeah, says Paul. —You know, cool. Be relaxed. Try not to be too focused on how you're coming off. That's what makes people freeze up.

—But you can't *try* to be relaxed, Lydia says. —That'll only make you *less* relaxed.

—Well, Paul says, —I suppose that's true. But you can go into it not trying too hard to do *anything*. Remember: ultimately, this lunch is not the thing that determines whether you're a likable person. What this *guy* ends up thinking about you is not the thing that determines whether you're a likable person. I've known you for a long time now, Lydia, and I can tell you without a doubt: you *are* a likable person. A *lovable* person. If this guy has any sense at all, he'll see that. And if he doesn't see that—then he's probably not the kind of guy who's worth spending your time with, and at least you'll know that. So try not to worry: no matter which way the lunch goes, ultimately, it'll be a positive experience.

Maybe, Lydia thinks. She already feels like she likes Austin. The rose he gave her leans in a vase by her bed. She likes Austin, and she wants him to like her. If he *doesn't* like her, she doesn't know that she'll feel convinced that the fault ultimately lies in him and not her. But it gives her something to think about, in any case. And she's reminded of just how often Paul listens to her and gives advice, and she's reminded, once again, that she's never had the opportunity to reciprocate, because Paul has been single for as long as she's known him.

—Thanks, she says. —Listen, Paul... if you ever need, like, advice from me on— (and here she wants to say *on finding a girlfriend*, but she pauses and revises, because she's never quite been certain whether Paul is gay or not, and she doesn't want to explore that particular matter right now, but she also doesn't want to make the wrong assumption) —on *relationship matters*, you know that you could ask me, right? I feel like, like maybe I could help you in finding someone, if that was what you wanted.

Paul thinks about this. Paul feels like he's good at helping Lydia because she's a woman. He grew up with three sisters and feels like he understands women; he feels like he has strategies for negotiating their particular needs and soothing their particular insecurities;

and inasmuch as he shares those needs and insecurities, he, too, feels feminine. But he desires men. And he can't say that he understands them: he can't even say that he understands the ones who he's had sexual experiences with.

(An example: Noah Gardner, a college classmate of Paul's: they had taken a handful of Communications seminars together, and had become study partners. Noah looked like David Bowie: tall, thin, blond, a slightly alien aloofness about him. Noah and his five housemates had a party at the end of that semester, and during that party he maintained eye contact with Paul almost the entire time, eventually drawing Paul upstairs, wandering backwards down a hallway, keeping his gaze on Paul, groping drunkenly for the doorknob of his dark bedroom, which the party hadn't reached. He sat on the bed, got out his dick, held it loosely in his fist. *I want your mouth on this*, he'd said. And Paul had been happy to oblige. Afterwards, Noah took Paul's face in his hands and kissed him deeply, and then went back to the party. They never talked about it again. Paul would chalk it up to just being used, except for that kiss—prior to it he had looked in Noah's eyes and had seen immense tenderness there, the presence of so much adoration that it came through as a kind of sadness. Paul is convinced that those feelings were not faked, were not just drunken sentiment, and he cannot comprehend why Noah never came back to them, why *anyone* would decide not to explore those feelings further.)

Paul needs a strategy for understanding men better, and he suspects that Lydia is just as confused about men as he is, and thus cannot help him. Still, he is moved by her gesture.

—Thanks, he says.