

# IMAGINARY YEAR

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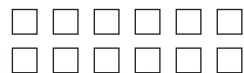
# IMAGINARY YEAR

*Imaginary Year* is a work of serial fiction by Jeremy P. Bushnell. It began in September 2000, and will run until September 2002, at which time it will be up for renewal. New entries appear each Monday and Friday on the *Imaginary Year* website ([www.imaginaryyear.com](http://www.imaginaryyear.com)).

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Thanks for reading.



**The sun is going down now:** light slants in through the western windows, glows in golden pools on Thomas' sofa. Lydia lies there, her legs propped on the sofa's armrest, crossed at the ankles. Her body feels completely filmed with sweat. Today the temperature is 95 degrees; with the heat index it feels over 100. Or so they said on the radio. It sure feels hot, she could tell you that much. She considers getting up, moving out of direct sunlight, but Thomas' apartment isn't air-conditioned: there's no real cool spot anywhere. She adjusts the straps of her shirt.

On the other side of the room, Thomas sits at his desk, his back to her. He is going to check his e-mail and then the two of them are going to walk on up to the Chopin Theatre. There's a screening there tonight, a program of video work from the 1970's, entitled "Feedback and Other Signals." She read about it in an e-mail that circulated on one of the listservs she's on: At the infancy of video during the early 1970's, many artists, often working outside of the commercial worlds of television and film, began experimenting with the tools of video as means for new ways of image making. Most of the videos in the program were made before she was born (1978).

Hand built instruments, sampling, feedback and other tools were used to translate energy and time into waveforms, frequencies, voltages, and finally into video and audio images. As well as documenting the relationship between these tools and the audio and video signals, many videos from this period are records of live performances where the tool itself plays a role, dialoging with the central performer. Yes. When she read the forwarded e-mail, those were the sentences that jumped out. They fit into a field of interest already established within her. She is interested in the relationship between human beings and their tools, particularly when those tools are electronic. She spent much of her teenage years immersed in the thump and glamour of Detroit

dancefloors, and she began to experience a conviction that she and the bodies that moved in conjunction around her formed a sort of machine, that they were all circuits plugged into some unspeakably complex motherboard. That they were essentially becoming tools. The dancefloor as a kind of factory: producing cyborgs.

Right around the time when she was beginning to chalk that feeling up to youthful naiveté, one of her Communications professors at Indiana University introduced her to the work of Marshall McLuhan. *Understanding Media*: The nonspecialist electric technology retribalizes. She thought: yes. She thought: this is what I lived through.

Since she got to Chicago she's been listening to more and more computer music: CDs which are less songs and more just arrangements of glitches and textures. Every once in a while Marvin or Paul, her roommates, will make fun of her for listening to that kind of music, and she has trouble describing what about it seems so intuitively *right* to her. She thinks the key to it is what the music is *about*: it is obvious to her that the music is about its own production, about the tools used to create it. She sees this, and so much of the other cultural material from the late twentieth century, as attempts to come to terms with electricity. Electricity is the tool that creates us. What is little understood about the electronic age is that it angelizes man. Turns him into software.

Thomas stands up from the computer, pushes his hands into the small of his back. —Urgh, he says.

—All done? Lydia asks him.

—Yeah, he says. He looks over at her for a moment. The bare flesh of her shoulders seems to radiate. They still have not had sex yet. —Let me just shut down.

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What do you want the computer to do?

Stand by

Shut down

Restart

Restart in MS-DOS mode

He selects Shut down and lets the computer go through its closing motions. He walks over to where she is on the couch. She turns her face towards him: squints because the sun is in her eyes. He moves his body to cast shade on her face and she relaxes, closes her eyes in a fair approximation of a blissful look, shakes out her hair.

—Kiss me, she says.

He does.

THOMAS  
LYDIA  
FREYA  
JAKOB

feedback and other signals

Thomas looks around at the space of the Chopin Theatre. The screening he is here for, a screening of video art experiments from the 1970's, has not yet begun. He looks at the chairs and the gathering crowd. Thinks: being a crowd in the dark is a way to disappear. This is part of the appeal of the movies. He doesn't really go to movies very much: he's glad that Lydia suggested attending this screening. He has his Sony Cassette-corder in his bag, and he momentarily thinks about pulling it out and recording his observation about crowds, but then he realizes that he would look weird in front of Lydia, murmuring into a device. In order to explain what he was doing, he would need to explain his project, and he doesn't yet feel ready to do that.

He looks over at Lydia, smiles. —I'm looking forward to this, he says.

—Yeah, she says. She smiles. —Me too.

He finds himself with nothing left to say, so he says nothing more. He meant what he said genuinely. He is having a good time, just sitting here in the theatre with her. The conversations between the two of them still tend to grow stilted and awkward— if he was to draw their shape he would draw an organism that was all corners, sparse, slightly malformed—but he has been learning that this is not necessarily cause for panic, that a silence between two people can be enjoyable. He has been learning. Janine once encouraged him to pursue Lydia by saying: relationships teach you how to be in relationships. He has begun to understand what she meant. He has begun to learn how to be in the world with another person.

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He looks out at the front of the room again and sees Freya and some guy he doesn't know, getting seats.

—Hey, Thomas says to Lydia, —I know her.

—Oh yeah? says Lydia.

—Yeah, she works at Tympanum, the record store? We kind of became friends just from me going in there so much. She calls me up when stuff comes in that I might like.

—Cool, says Lydia. —You going to go say 'hi'?

—Yeah, Thomas says. But then it looks like the films are about to get started. —After, he says.

### **Steina :: Violin Power (1971)**

This film features a series of shots of a woman playing a violin. She has created some kind of apparatus— Lydia can't imagine exactly how the hardware would be set up, but apparatus translates the violin tones into visual distortion. As the frequency of the notes change, the distortion patterns affecting the videotaped image of the woman also change. Lydia is completely engrossed: she has been thinking a lot lately about the relationship between humans and electricity, and here is a film in which a woman modulates uses sound to modulate her electronic image. Lydia never responded particularly strongly to the few feminist texts that she read at Indiana University, but she recognizes that this film features a woman seizing a type of power: the power to guide her own mutation.

Ghost: in one shot the woman's image has completely disappeared, but a form, sawing away at the violin, remains apparent, as a moving outline in a shimmering field of electronic distortion. To put your form into the noise of the age. Power.

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### **Vito Acconci :: Theme Song (1973)**

Freya snickers. This film features a vaguely homely guy lying down on the floor of an apartment, with his face only inches away from the camera. He is smoking cigarettes and playing tapes of romantic rock songs—the Velvet's "Pale Blue Eyes" is on right now—but mostly he is addressing one fucking long monologue of a seduction speech to the camera. To the audience. It's hilarious. Freya has inadvertently laughed out loud a half-dozen times now. It reminds her of every lame-ass guy who's ever tried to pick her up. Come on, baby. I'm a body and you're a body. You need it just as much as I do. It's also a little bit painful—Freya estimates that the film has been going on for nearly twenty minutes, and there has been no relief from the endless earnest pleading of this figure, who's right there smack dab in the middle of her visual field. Just come in here. See how I can wrap my body around you.

She leans over to Jakob. —At least in real life this guy would be buying me drinks, she says.

—Heh, Jakob says.

### **Steina & Woody Valuska :: Don Cherry (1971)**

This film is less experimental than the other ones, and (so far) Jakob likes it the best. It's a video portrait of Don Cherry, a jazz player. Jakob is vaguely familiar with Cherry, mainly from looking at Fletcher's CDs.

The film starts out with Cherry climbing to the top of a crumbling industrial building via the fire escape. He stands there at the edge of the building, looking out at the urban landscape around him, and then he puts his horn up to his lips and plays, plays gorgeously, reaches into apparent nothing and produces a message of utter clarity and intention. The camera pans as he is playing, revealing nothing but more gray world, dingy windows and ghostsigned brick, but the message spills over it, threads *through* it, delivers grace as it resounds off of the surfaces of the city.

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He hopes, one day, to write a novel about a city of signals. He realizes, now, that others before him have explored that secret territory. Thirty years ago, a jazz player stands on the roof of a building, and, using his voice and his horn, he produces a map—

THOMAS  
LYDIA  
JAKOB  
FREYA

feedback and other signals [II]

1.

The Don Cherry film finishes and the lights at the Chopin come up. There's going to be a short reception and then a pair of performances. Ben Vida; Carl Stone. Thomas plans to stick around, although he's not particularly familiar with the work of either performer (he knows Vida is one of the members of Town and Country, and more than one of his readers have recommended them to him, but he's never heard their music).

—That was pretty cool, Lydia says.

—Yeah, Thomas says.

—Hey, Lydia says, —there's your friend.

Up at the front of the theater Freya and that guy she's with have stood up, are standing around now, talking.

—Are you going to go say hi?

—I don't know, Thomas says. —She looks kind of involved.

He feels a little bit weird seeing Freya here. He's never run into her outside of the record store before, and their relationship— as much as it even *is* a relationship —is really built around the store. He's not sure what he'd even say to her, really.

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—C'mon, Lydia says. —I want you to introduce me. Do you realize I haven't met *any* of your friends yet?

He's not sure he would consider Freya to be his *friend*. The truth is, he doesn't have very many friends. There's Janine, and his old friend Derek, and the group from the hotel bar who he goes out drinking with after work, and a bunch of people scattered throughout the country with whom he exchanges e-mails. And now Lydia herself. He's not sure who she wants to be introduced to.

Lydia stands. —Come *on*, she says. She reaches down and grabs Thomas by the hands.

2.

—I liked that, says Jakob. —Especially that last one.

—Yeah, Freya says. —They sounded like something that you would like.

Freya had heard about tonight's screening and performance through her record store coworkers, and she had drawn the screening to Jakob's attention, knowing his interest in media and culture. When she mentioned it to him a couple of days ago he was astounded by her all over again— not only can she recall the lineups and histories of hundreds of different bands, but she also always seems to know about some interesting thing going on in town. When he thinks about it — the size of the pool of information she can draw from — he realizes how truly remarkable she is.

Jakob notices two people, a guy and a girl, hovering at their periphery. He looks over: Freya notices that his eyes have flickered away, and she turns: there's Thomas.

—Hey, Thomas! she says.

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—Hi, Thomas says.

—Were you here for the screening?

—Uh. Yeah.

—What did you think?

—They were pretty good. Oh, uh, Freya, this is my friend Lydia.

Freya smiles over at Lydia, and Lydia smiles back, says —Hi, nice to meet you. Her cheerful tone smacks faintly of falseness to Freya.

—Oh! Freya says. —Thomas, this is Jakob, he's the guy I told you about a while ago. Jakob; Thomas.

—Oh, hi, says Thomas.

—Oh, says Jakob. —You're Thomas, the Dronescape guy? I looked at your website a while ago. Hi.

—Hi, says Thomas. —It's nice to meet you.

—Yeah, says Jakob. —I actually sent you an e-mail a while ago. And then he stops, because he realizes that the conclusion of this thought is *and I never heard back from you*, and he doesn't want to start off on the wrong foot, by like *accusing* this guy of being lax in his correspondence.

—Yeah, says Thomas. —I got it; I remember it. I just- that was kind of a weird time for me, and I just didn't get around to writing you back; I'm sorry.

—Hey, says Jakob. —It's no problem.

—If you still want to go out for that drink sometime, Thomas says, —that would be great.

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—Oh, says Jakob. —Yeah.

—Hey, says Lydia. —What are you guys doing after this?

There's a pause. Jakob knows that he and Freya don't really have any plans after this, but he doesn't want to accept an invitation to do something with two strangers, especially not without an opportunity to confer with Freya about it first. He looks over at her quickly; she has her mouth open as though she is preparing to say something, but she is also paused.

—Well, Jakob says. —I have this conference next week; I'm trying to finish up a paper I'm writing for it. So I probably shouldn't stay out too late tonight. He looks over again at Freya.

—Yeah, Freya says. —Have to get him to bed early!

Everyone smiles.



Janine stares up at the ceiling. Thinks *arrgh*. Her hair lies upon her face in sweaty strands. There's no AC in Ingrid's place, and the summer humidity is still hanging on. She presses her shoulders into the bed and arches her back, channels the stretch down her legs, unclenches her toes. She flings her arm out to the side and feels around on Ingrid's bedside table until her fingers touch a half-empty packet of Parliaments. The slightest *tick* of crinkling cellophane. She fumbles it into her mouth, needs a light, has to prop herself up on her side to find fire in the jumble of bedside table crap: clock, pottery dish full of tangled jewelry, another one full of loose coins, books, tube of jelly. Packet of matches. Praise Jesus.

She flicks the spent match into a dark corner of the room. Right now, Ingrid is talking on the phone to Elsa, in Germany. Janine can hear Ingrid speaking, but the closed bathroom door shaves down the shape of the words, reduces them to punctuation. There will be something like this: ...-...-...-..., and then there will be a pause, while Ingrid listens for words from far away.

Janine and Ingrid have spent the night together three times in the last few weeks. She suspects that Ingrid hasn't told Elsa this. Janine has not asked her about it; she figures it is none of her business. But Janine does not like the way Ingrid retreats into the bathroom in order to have these conversations. This is not the first time.

Fuck, she doesn't even like it that Ingrid answers the *phone*. Ten minutes ago Janine had a finger gripped inside her and a tongue moving between her legs. Her exhalations had swelled into tiny moans; utterances meaning *keep going, do more, yes*. In essence they had said *continue*. Ingrid had obliged. This cycle had grown tight, the line between action and response had begun to waver and blur, two identities had begun to tangle together right here, on these sweat-damp sheets. Then: phone.

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Ingrid leapt back, pulled out. Outside forces snapped her back into the outline of her own form. Body as monad.

—NNn, Janine had protested. —Let it go.

—No, I can't, said Ingrid. —It might be Elsa. She felt around in the bedclothes, locating the ringing phone in some tangle. *The phone was in the bed with us the whole time*, Janine thought. Then Ingrid was off to the bathroom without so much as a backwards look. What the fuck?

She stares at the cigarette package, then flings it away, grabs one of the books off of the table. Pablo Neruda's *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*. She rifles through the pages impatiently, looking for despair: she is in no mood for a love poem right now. Tonight I can write the saddest lines. / Write for example, 'The night is shattered / and the blue stars shiver in the distance.'

The night wind revolves in the sky and sings.

Shattered night. Janine feels like a heap of disconnections, incomplete clusters. And her lover sits in the bathroom and speaks to Germany.

She's never had an apartment of her own before. She lived with her mom, then moved into the Art Institute dorm. Then Johnny. When things fell apart she moved in with Toy and Mark. It was kind of an emergency situation.

She is in a room. The room contains her bed, her little desk. A small pile of boxes containing books and kitchen utensils. A sloppy pile of magazines bound with jute twine (on top: a cut-up copy of *Wallpaper*). Some white kitchen liner garbage bags bulging with clothes. A phone adorned with stickers. There is as of yet no phone service, and she does not know what her new phone number will be. Nothing else has been arranged either; the room is a jumble; everything at cross-angles to everything else. She sits on the bed, leans backwards, plants her bare feet on the undecorated wall, stares at her toenails. Blue flakes. It's quiet in here: that's the thing that surprises her the most.

She had moved her things with some help from Gary, a new guy she works with at the record store; he offered to help out with his van when she mentioned her move. In the other room: three milkcrates containing miscellaneous small objects, CDs, cosmetics. A cheap lamp, permanently off-kilter: she never quite got it to thread right when she assembled it. A portfolio stuffed with completed and half-completed art projects. A portable CD player / alarm clock / dual tape deck. These things are not what she is. She does not much care about any of them.

She thinks of Jane, a woman she never really knew, on her way now to Mexico. Pictures her on a bus, head against the window, her curly hair tied up in a bandanna. Looking out through the glass, at arid lands. Denise turns her head, looks out the window: sees gray shingles. She suddenly understands why people choose to take on pets. Imagines a cat in her lap, all the difference that would make.

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She doesn't think she'll see Toy and Mark again.

They had been angry when she told them that she'd made arrangements for a new apartment. It meant that they needed to move, too. Toy had refused to help her move her things out. (She remembers this: being in her room, taping up boxes, and hearing Toy in the common room, saying to Mark: —Don't give that bitch any help. She's stuck us with a whole fuckload of shit to do. Let her deal with her own shit. He was in the other room but speaking loudly enough that he could only have wanted her to hear.) Mark helped her anyway. (He must have known that she'd heard what Toy said: he wore a somewhat pained and embarrassed look as the entire time he helped her carry stuff out.)

Toy had stood there at the door as she left for the last time. He did not say 'goodbye,' he just watched her go with his face fixed into a look of absolute neutrality. —What's with him? Gary had asked her as they were driving off. —Nothing, Denise had said. —He's just a jerk. This is what she thinks of Toy:

She remembers the one time they slept together. After he had come and pulled out he lay there next to her, looking at her. His face lit faintly by the glow of Chicago falling in through her skylight. Wide-eyed, like a surprised child. No, she tells herself now, not like a child— he had been drunk to the point of near incoherence, he had cheated on his girlfriend, and he had not *seduced* her into being the audience for his unskilled and stupid fuck, he had *pressured* her into it. It was a matter of force. Practically *raped* her. Child? No way. But her memory of way he had looked at her in that early morning hour, with a surprise like awe in his expression, reminds her that he too has the hum of the human within him. That is the moment when the contradictory forces in him became clear. That is what will make it possible for her to miss him.

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She will hold him in that moment into the future. She thinks if he knew that it would anger him. And this pleases her in some quiet and perverse fashion.

She opens her mouth, just to speak, just to make a sound in this empty new place. —La, she says, quietly. Then louder: —Laaaaa! She is a voice in a room.

No one can hear her. No one has a number to reach her. This place is hers. She is alone—lonely even—but this suddenly makes her glad.

8 pm. Lydia, staring out Thomas' window, frowns. She looks out into the accumulating blue of evening, wishing that Thomas lived somewhere else, anywhere else, even two streets over would have worked. She wishes that her roommate Paul hadn't needed the car tonight. She frowns, and inside her a tendril of rage twists: she wishes sullenly for the ability to destroy, destroy everything with just the intensity of her thought. The thing closest to Thomas' window is a muffler shop: she imagines its yellow and red cinderblock walls blown into wind and sand, erased by the vector of her anger.

She took the subway over here, a pain in the ass from where she is in Hyde Park: a bus to downtown and then the CTA Blue Line to Grand. And from there it's a ten-minute walk through drab industrial landscape: brick buildings of indiscernible purpose, truck garages. Normally she is fine in this sort of landscape: she's familiar with it, having learned its dimensions during the years she spent with her dad out in Detroit. But tonight she was probably five minutes away from Thomas' place when a big rattling Buick pulled up next to her, slowing down to match the pace of her walking, and the driver rolled down his window and looked out at her. She could feel her eyes on him even though she did not turn to look. —Hey, baby, he'd said, —where you going?

*My boyfriend's*, she'd thought, but she hadn't answered. Just kept her eyes ahead. He'd continued, though. —Hey, baby, he'd said, —why don't you hop in here and I can give you a ride? Again, she only thought her answer— *no thanks* —and said nothing.

Replaying it, she doesn't think she would have done anything differently. That thought annoys rather than reassures: she did what you're *supposed* to do, and things *still* went rotten. —God! she mutters. She can hear Thomas shift in his seat behind her, but he says nothing.

She told him the whole story as soon as he buzzed her in. Her vehemence had startled him: while waiting for her to arrive, he had lit a few candles and put on *What??*, an electronic drone made by Sweden's Folke Rabe in 1967. He'd been sitting on the sofa immersed deeper and deeper in the harmonic bath of the drone's slower second part; he had been doing breathing exercises for the better part of an hour and had been feeling completely relaxed. When the buzzer rang, he jumped, and he'd only just begun to reassemble his precious calm when suddenly Lydia was in the apartment, angry, telling the story almost too fast for him to turn it into sense. —But this fucker doesn't stop. No. No. He starts to get *into* it. *Come on baby, what's your name? Tell me your name.* Thomas had felt tension move into him, inhabit his tissues like some thin demon.

Right before the driver had stomped the accelerator and squealed off, he'd started to get particularly nasty: she can't tell Thomas this. She is too embarrassed to repeat it to him. Instead she plays it again and again in her mind. *You dumb bitch; you fuckin' need to learn some manners. You fuckin' need to get laid. You need to suck my fuckin' big dick; that'll teach you some fuckin' manners.* The whole time he was saying these things she had visions of him stopping the car, grabbing her, pulling her in. No one was around to see. She could envision it easily. His dirty hand clapping over her mouth; a shove into the back seat; the feeling of having her legs pried open. She wanted more than anything else to turn and say *fuck you*. To fucking spit at him. But no: unpredictable dynamics. Maybe he had a knife. An image here of her body, cut once, raggedly, then dumped into an alleyway. Fuck. Fuck. Stop it. She is trembling.

She turns to look at Thomas. —This is why I could never have a gun, she says, her voice shaking but strangely firm. —If I had a gun that guy would fucking be dead. I would just, fucking, *remove him* from the world. Thomas' eyes go wide, and she presses her fingertips up to her eyes.

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Thomas doesn't know what to do in this situation. He dreads the next couple of days. Lydia is staying with him tonight, and then tomorrow

he is supposed to meet with this guy Jakob, Freya's friend, for lunch, before needing to go wait tables in the evening. What he wants mostly is just to rest. *What??* still plays in the background, and he feels sad that he has been pulled out of its pure telepathic garden and thrust into this mess and turmoil, this situation with no possible solution. He has not been a boyfriend enough times to know what is expected of a boyfriend here. All the possibilities seem absurd. A revenge fantasy assembles itself, with him as the improbable hero: he recognizes the pure fancy of this confection, and feels stupid for having even begun to compose it.

He watches her standing there, hiding her face, and for a moment he feels like perhaps he understands. She is blocking out the world. He has been thinking lately about the traditions of suicide in other countries. He does not feel suicidal, but he always felt that he has understood suicide's appeal, its unique ability to lure. The cure for the nausea of the world's constant sensation is always nearby, present everywhere just beyond the threshold of the body. He can imagine it: a white drone of purest peace: you need only cut yourself open and spill out into it. We all indulge in minor suicides, he thinks, watching her, and he wants his tape recorder. In moments of grief and pain we indulge: we close our eyes, we turn our faces to the wall, we submerge in the warm water of a bathtub or blacken the world behind a veil. The best we can do for other human beings in pain is respect their need to reduce sensation: let them die for a few moments, and welcome them when they return. So Thomas sits, and watches.

But what she wants, most of all, is to be touched: to feel Thomas' elegant thin hand on her back, to feel the tangled rootsystem of stress dissipate beneath his fingers. He could eliminate it all so easily, easily enough that it might qualify as a kind of human magic, but she cannot bring herself to ask him to do it. It is important to her that he do it himself, that he understand how she works at least that much. It is a test.

She stands there, and waits, and the room hums coldly around her.

—So, I don't know, Jakob says. —I spent the summer writing this paper, basically on the idea that *information* is now embedded into *architecture*.

—Mm hm, says Thomas. They are sitting at a cafe table that wobbles perceptibly every time either of them lifts their mug or puts their elbows. Thomas works as a waiter at a hotel restaurant, so he is acutely conscious of the wobble: the management there requires the waitstaff to check continuously for unbalanced tables. If he was at work he would grab a wad of Silly Putty from the supply closet and mold a temporary foot from it: just another Stupid Waiter Trick from his growing repertoire.

—I'm talking about things like those buildings in New York where the day's headlines scroll across lit screens. Or the banks of monitors at an off-track betting parlor. Also structures which are primarily designed to display information: movie theaters, for instance.

—OK, Thomas says. —Yes. He takes another sip of coffee. He feels groggy; he was up late last night arguing with Lydia. They couldn't resolve the issue, and in the end she had called a cab and gone home.

—Well, anyway, Jakob says, —I came across this building called the Tower of Winds, in Japan, designed by an architect named Toyo Ito?

—Ah yes, says Thomas. (He remembers the e-mail that Jakob had sent him.)

—And that led me to your website, Jakob says. —Because you reviewed this- what was it? -this album that was inspired by the building?

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—Well, Jakob says, —I found this *really* interesting because Ito himself has said that the Tower is *like environmental music*, so you've got- what? -a man designing a building that he thinks is like music, and then musicians taking that building and turning it back into music? That's pretty weird!

—Yes, Thomas says. —I suppose so.

—But my problem is that I don't really get what 'environmental music' *is*. I mean, I don't really know what that *means*. And I remembered the sound map thing that Freya had talked about, something you were working on? And I thought that, well, we might have something to say to each other.

Jakob is a little bit nervous. He had pushed for this get-together: he started teaching again this week, the summer vacation over already, and he knew that once he got locked into the schedule of the semester, he would find it difficult to make arrangements to get together with someone who outside the logic of habit. It's surprisingly difficult for Jakob to fit someone new into the busy pattern of his life. But he knew he wanted to get together with Thomas. He had already tapped Freya with his questions about environmental music: she'd responded *Oh, like ambient?* He wasn't sure, although that word—ambient—had been one he'd been turning over in his mind. At the Contemporary City conference at Michigan State, where he had presented a rough-edged version of his paper on information architecture, someone had generously given him a copy of a book entitled *Ambient Television*, on the adoption of television into American public space.

The conference: three days, each one crammed with interesting papers and presentations, a million different provocative tidbits twinkling everywhere in the air, like glitter. Then the evenings: wandering off campus to some bar or another with the other younger academics,

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drinking too many beers and gossiping about the minor celebrities in the field. He had a good time, got some small praise on his paper, and left with his resolve reinforced, a small notebook filled with notes for further exploration, and the e-mail addresses of a few useful contacts. So he kept after Freya to tell him about environmental music or ambient or whatever and she said You really need to call that guy Thomas, he can talk about it a lot better than I can. And he didn't want to lose the trail, so when she gave him Thomas' number, he called. And he feels a bit like he's forced this meeting, like maybe Thomas said 'yes' just because he lacked a tactful way to say 'no thanks,' and so Jakob is trying extra-special hard to come across as a likable, genial guy.

Thomas' reactions are hard to read.

Thomas is only listening with half an ear to what Jakob is saying. He chides himself for not paying closer attention, but he is thinking instead about Lydia, about where he went wrong last night. She had wanted to be comforted; he had misunderstood, thinking she wanted to be left alone. They eventually got to the root of that misunderstanding, but by then the conversation had begun to broaden its scope: had become more about Thomas' general coldness and distance. He found himself remembering the conversations he had years ago with Rachel, remembers Rachel being angry at him in this precise way, remembers having these exact fantasies of withdraw, of dissolution, of suddenly being teleported to the other side of the earth. He found himself wishing that he was spending time instead with Janine, found himself missing her gentle way of teasing him back into the present.

He is thinking of what he saw last night: Lydia standing there, in the center of his apartment, her face rigid and blank, but her eyes full of tears. She said this: *for fuck's sake, Thomas, you're such a smart guy— you know all this shit about religions and music from halfway around the world— but you still don't understand anything about people.*

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What could he say? She was right; he was certain that she was right. Her anger was not like the mild annoyance he faces sometimes from the people he waits on at the hotel; there was no way he could make it better by just bringing a new set of silverware or giving out a few drink tickets. There was no way he could make it better at all. *I'm sorry*, he had said, but there was nothing he could do. She dialed up a cab on her cell phone, and they did not speak much while they waited for it to arrive. When the cell rang again, ten minutes or so later, she said *Yeah* into it and then stared at Thomas for ten seconds or so, before gulping for air and turning and walking out the door.

And now he is here with this guy, who wants to talk about the tradition of environmental music and how it pertains to a specific building in Yokohama. A building halfway around the world. *I thought that we might have something to say to each other.*

—Yes, Thomas says. —Yes, I think we do.

Lunchtime. Janine has only an hour, during which all the eateries in the Loop are of course thronged with people. Normally she just stays in the office, perfectly happy to reheat whatever she had leftover from the previous night's dinner. (She finds cooking for herself to be something of an involved hassle. She can't avoid having to do it— at least not too many times in a row, not without activating her money guilt—so when she cooks, she'll generally make enough for two people, since that's not a considerably greater hassle, and then she can save half.) She hates fighting the crowds. But yesterday she called Thomas up, and he sounded really down— worse than normal— and when she asked him what was up he said he didn't want to talk about it on the phone. Her evenings this week aren't good— her self-defense class is Wednesday night, Friday she's supposed to be seeing Ingrid, and *somewhere* in there she needs to pay the bills—so she asked him to come out and meet her for lunch.

They spend forty-five minutes or so at Au Bon Pain. She eats a mozzarella and tomato sandwich; Thomas eats a chef's salad.

J: Everything all right with you?

He explains. A new silence has opened between him and Lydia. They had a fight about something— she'd accused him of living too much in his own head, she'd gone home when she'd planned to stay, they haven't spoken since.

J: Has she e-mailed you or anything?

J: Have you tried to get in touch with her at all?

No, and no. Thomas fears, secretly, in an inarticulate space that things are really finished this time. He and Lydia had fallen out of touch once

before, but that time he only had to overcome his own anxieties about relationships, his own fear; this time he needs to overcome not only his fear of her attention but also his fear of her anger. The image of her face tensed and crying. He only hints at this in small ways. I don't know how to talk to her about this. She seemed really angry.

J: When was this fight, exactly?

Last weekend. Janine thinks that that's been too long, that Thomas should have called her long before. She wants you to call. It's a test, Thomas, she's sitting there trying to figure out how long it's going to be before you call. Trust me. Exasperated: you *should* have called her that night. (I didn't know, Thomas says, looking miserably down at his salad, and Janine believes him, and this belief fills her with a terrible ache, the desire to pull him close to her, to shield his helpless self from the complexity of the other people in the world.)

Minutes pass. Janine, still feeling rushed, checks her watch: when Thomas sees her she regrets having checked it, but a minute later she checks it again. Thomas feels guilty about making Janine give up time from her day and then talking only about himself. He apologizes, and Janine reassures him in the way that he would want, but he still feels disgusted by his own self-absorption, the morose indulgence of it. A fattiness seems to hang off of him, a corpulence of the emotions.

T: So how are you, anyway?

Janine has been involved with Ingrid for about a month now: she hasn't gone into this with Thomas, in part because she realizes that it sounds bad. That's one thing about sleeping with someone's fiancée: to most people it *sounds bad*. Janine feels like the situation is actually OK, she feels like she's behaving ethically, but she knows that in order to convey



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that to most people— including possibly Thomas —she'll need to provide a lengthy follow-up explanation. Why I See It That Way. And she doesn't have time right now for that. In another few weeks Ingrid will be gone, off to Berlin, and then Janine won't need to explain anything. She's actually begun to look forward to Ingrid's departure: she thought the relationship would be fun, a little quickie at the end of the summer, but Ingrid has spent a lot of that time growing increasingly jumpy and nervous (anxious? about getting caught?) which has a long way towards degrading the buzz of the thing. I'm fine, Janine says. Just busy.

Jakob is up early on Tuesday, on campus before the planes even hit. In his office, reading, one last time, over the Eco essay he'd assigned for the day. There is no radio or television in the office. It is a quiet morning: xeroxed pages of words, a cup of Irish Breakfast tea, a scone from a paper bag. Crinkle. He doesn't know that anything has happened until he leaves his office. In the bright light of morning he hears: One also hit the Pentagon. There's going to be a war over this. He keeps walking, but the words have unsettled him: he tries to figure out what they might mean, seeking some context that might render them banal. He can come up with no jest into which they fit.

The air on campus seems thick with some hum that he can only detect peripherally. Telepathic buzz

His students, however, are using their cell phones to compare notes with people elsewhere, and some by now have already seen the first wave of reports on TV: by the time Jakob walks in the buzz has swelled into clamor. A knowledgebase is under construction, with each student contributing whatever bit they've heard. The resultant heap of information is incomplete and contradictory, but potent enough for Jakob to know that something real is happening, something big. He looks out at the students: some look visibly shaken, others a bit thrilled. Concern spreads. Someone worries aloud that the CTA might be shut down, stranding the commuters on campus. Jakob hears someone speak the words *Sears Tower*. They can see it out the window. Its quiet solidity suddenly seems ominous. Students ask him if they can go home, if they can go use the phone to call a friend in New York, an uncle. Jakob cancels class and watches them go.

He spends the morning wandering around campus, in something of a daze. The day is beautiful: sunny and clear, slightly chilly, autumn just beginning to nibble at summer's edge. He walks through the indistinct

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edges of dozens of conversations, eavesdropping, catching messages as he passes.

He hears that planes have hit the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

He hears that the Pentagon was not hit by a plane, but that a bomb went off there.

He hears that smoke has been seen rising from the West Wing of the White House.

He hears that a car bomb has gone off at the State Department.

He hears that all domestic flights have been canceled, but that there are still planes up in the air.

He hears that another plane has crashed in rural Pennsylvania.

He hears that another plane has crashed at Camp David.

He hears that the total number of hijacked planes is eight.

He hears that the plane that crashed in Pennsylvania was shot down by the military.

He hears that the World Trade Centers have collapsed.

This last rumor he has verified by footage: he is walking through the student center where a crowd has gathered to watch TV, and he sees taped footage of them going down, collapsing down into their own fundament. The vantage point changes and they collapse again. Over and over. It is like he has come unstuck in time. He stands there for a minute, performing preliminary psychic surgery on his mental picture

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of New York. He remembers that Baudrillard has written, somewhere, that a collapsing building is a match for the fireworks displays of our childhood.

He listens to the newscasters updating the story, stumbling through what they know, correcting earlier reports. Some are visibly upset. After a few minutes it is clear how little information they have, but he grows increasingly interested in what they are saying, drawn in by the unscriptedness of it. He realizes that on some level he enjoys moments of national chaos: he enjoys the opportunity to hear the data before people have an opportunity to calculate some spin. He felt the same thing in November, during the elections. He stayed up all night, fascinated by seeing information in this raw form, watching it bleeding in through the screen. (Later in the week his sister will tell him that her boyfriend's father, a financial planner, disappeared into the wreckage, and he will remember his small enjoyment and feel ashamed.)

He heads outside again, and he looks up at the clear cold sky, and he has the terrible thought that perhaps these attacks are only the precursor to something else, something even worse: that perhaps they have a strategic value of plunging us into chaos so that we miss the arrival of some coup de grace. He remembers reports he's heard of missing plutonium, and he suddenly half-expects to look up and see some rouge nuclear missile cleaving a path across the sky. He thinks, rather calmly, *I could die today*. And he finds himself struck with the desire to be with Freya. Jakob doesn't have a cell phone; neither does Freya; she hates them. But he wishes suddenly that he could open up some channel and hear her voice.

The sky is quiet and blank. There are no planes in it any longer. And yet it teems with messages.

Two weeks have passed before Thomas finally calls her.

She is having an informal dinner with her roommate Paul, a dinner born more of encounter than of planning, both of them leaning up against the kitchen counter, bowls of miso in their hands. A portable TV is behind them, featuring talking politico heads (blah blah Ford administration) and a stockticker bar of scrolling updates. From her purse: the bleeping of a thin melody (her cell phone ringtone is the theme from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*).

—Excuse me a moment, she says. Her Caller ID indicates that it's Thomas.

—Actually, she says, —I'm going to need to take this in my room. Paul shrugs. She leaves the bowl of soup on the counter, walks towards the kitchen door, reaches up to bat at the pendant hanging from the circular fan's pullchain, hits a button on the phone, speaks. —Hello?

At the other end of the city, Thomas starts slightly at the sound of her voice. It still seems strange to him, the way the phone splices them together instantaneously. Even in this age of velocity it seems too function too fast: it seems to function at a speed that humans are not yet psychologically developed enough to fully comprehend.

—Lydia? he asks.

—Yeah, Thomas, it's me, she says. She sits on the edge of her bed.

A conversation has a self, Thomas thinks. My voice with hers creates some hybrid being. A life into which each participant can potentially

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dissolve. He wishes he had learned the art of conversation earlier, wishes that his parents had not privileged domestic silence quite so highly, wishes that he could trade hundreds of quiet dinners and quiet cups of tea for one sibling. Imaginary brother, imaginary sister: they are easy enough to wish for, but he cannot imagine how they would have inhabited the empty category that exists for them.

—Lydia, I, he says.

—What, she says.

She has already decided that their relationship is over. What is there, really, to keep her in it? They share tastes in music. She liked the way he wrote on his website. She thought he was kind of cute. But those things are not love. She is not certain that she knows what love is— she is only twenty-one —but she believes it has something to do with communication, with opening yourself to the other, with the responses you receive when you do. Thomas does not communicate with her well— neither sexually nor emotionally —and thus she knows that she cannot love him. And if she doesn't love him— *can't* love him —then what's the point?

She remembers the attacks on Tuesday, the Delphi staff gathering together in someone's cubicle right at the start of the workday, listening to the radio. Remembers her sudden awareness of being fifteen stories up. By noon they had all left the office— practically the entire Loop had been abandoned as a preventative measure against bombs and plummeting planes. Feeling like a target. Thomas knew she worked in the Loop, and on Tuesday you could hardly escape the knowledge that the Loop had been evacuated: at some point during the day he must have thought of her, pictured her hurrying out with the others. And he still did not call. She sat at home that night, watching the replays over

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and over, her breath catching in her throat suddenly at nine pm, as though the reality of what she was watching had finally seeped in through some series of invisible layers and *touched* her; it was then that she cried. He must have known, some part of him must have at least suspected that she was out there somewhere, scared, weeping, friends or family perhaps dead, and still he did not call.

—Lydia, he says. —I just wanted to say that, that I'm sorry.

It is true that something inside her pangs. It is true that she believes that Thomas is a good man, that his faults are born from awkwardness and uncertainty rather than from malice; true even that for a moment she entertains the thought of teaching him, remaining with him and guiding him gently back onto track when necessary, as many times as necessary, again and again. And it is the thought of these iterations, on and on into the future, indefinitely, that finally makes her think *no*.

—Thomas, she says. —I'm sorry, but: I just don't think it's a good idea for us to see one another anymore.

There is silence on the other end of the line. A faint shuffling noise.

—Oh, Thomas says. —Can I. A pause. Can I still call you sometimes?

—Thomas, she says. —I don't really think it's a good idea.

—Oh, Thomas says. —OK.

—I'm sorry, she says.

—No, no, Thomas says. —It's OK.

—Take care, Thomas.

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—I will, he says. —You too.

—Thanks, she says.

Silence.

—Goodbye, she says.

—Bye-bye, he says, and she can hear him hang up. She presses END and sits there for a moment. She holds the phone in both hands in her lap.

Thomas lies on the floor next to his bed, his hand still on the phone, now replaced in its cradle. He closes his eyes. In his mind, the possibility of suicide manifests itself, for a moment; just for a moment, it flares like a phoenix in his skull. He knows he will not do it. He is neither brave enough nor desperate enough to perform the necessary actions. Right now he does not want to perform any actions at all. He lies on the floor next to his bed, even after he tells himself to get up. A long time passes before his body responds to the instructions cabled to it, distantly, from the sad empire of his mind.

A friend of Jakob's in Brooklyn sends out this e-mail:

Thanks for asking; I'm fine; everybody I know is fine. Just rattled is all.

On Tuesday classes were canceled so Jennifer and I went out to Prospect Park. We just wanted to be around trees and grass, or at least be somewhere where we could be away from the TV. Two guys were playing Frisbee; that was weird. And we were sitting there and we saw these bits of paper floating around in the sky; one blew near us and I chased it down. It was a fax, it had come from some office in the towers, a breeze had carried it all the way over to Brooklyn, into my hand. And I suddenly felt this like electric charge connecting me to the buildings, these buildings that weren't buildings anymore. I'm standing there looking at the name and address on this fax and all of a sudden I'm trying to figure out whether this person is still alive or not.

It was that detail that finally seemed made the collapse of the towers seem real to Jakob. He couldn't get his mind around the hole in the skyline, even the new photos of Manhattan he's seen just seem like computer fakery, but a single piece of litter snowing down onto the city, that he can envision. And from the piece of litter it is not hard to infer the wastecan it was dropped into, and the human beings that handled it, and the office that held them. An office now erased out of the world.

Jakob and Freya are walking along a street in Chicago on a cool night in near-autumn, and Freya sees a sheet of paper skirling about in the laundromat parking lot, and she thinks of Jakob's friend, and for a moment she imagines that this sheet, caught now in some invisible eddy, has come to them from Manhattan, having spent the last eleven days traveling from East Coast to Midwest, carried only by wind and luck.

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Luck: she could use some. The recent events have brought her down. For days she couldn't turn on the TV without seeing some white male in full alpha mode, trotting out all the usual macho patriotic bullshit. She hadn't heard that particular variety of bullshit for a while; she had even begun to harbor hopes that it might be fading from this world at last; to see it return at top volume disheartened her. Going out to Arlington Heights over the weekend to see her family didn't help: she'd been hoping to try to sort out some of the tensions between her brother and her mom, but she only had maybe twenty minutes alone with Tim in his room, and he shrugged off the whole matter of the family conflict, preferring instead to talk about the terrorist attack. His take was mostly limited to *those buildings looked pretty fucking wicked going down* and an assertion that the ban on state-sponsored assassination, which he'd learned about in his Civics class this week, was ridiculous, bordering on incomprehensible. Then it was time for them to huddle around their respective pork chops, tense, miserable, as wordless as they could manage.

Clark had her annual birthday party tonight, and neither Freya nor Jakob were feeling particularly festive, but neither of them see Clark very often, they mainly know her as a friend of Fletcher's, and they felt like they should go. But before too long the conversation turned to politics, Bush's speech to Congress fresh in people's minds, and by the time Clark began saying *to say that this is a fight of 'freedom against fear' doesn't mean anything, it's completely politically cynical*, they had both begun to feel fatigued, and decided to head out, leaving Fletcher to pump the keg by his lonesome.

But it is thinking about the party that causes Jakob to remember that Clark was there when he first met Freya, at the Rainbow, it was Clark and Fletcher and Freya and him, and he remembers that that was right when the fall semester started last year.

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—Hey, he says to Freya. He is slightly drunk. —Hey, do you realize we've known each other for a whole year now?

Freya stops. The sheet of paper blows towards them, and Freya stoops to pluck it from its vector. She looks up at him. He's kind of a goofy-looking guy, with his lanky frame and wiry hair. But she loves his grin, the way his mouth crooks up wryly at one corner, animating his face. She can see it now.

—Here, she says. She hands him the sheet of paper. —Happy anniversary.

He picks it up and examines it. It seems to be a love poem, written probably by someone in high school:

I feel you holding me / warmth ripples down my spine / like the  
dissipation of an ink drop in water / wrapping your arms around me /  
my arms wrapped around you

It is gawky and awkward, the kind of thing that he would normally make fun of. But tonight, he is glad to have this message carried to him. Someone else out there, some kid, is thinking sincerely about someone they love, and he cannot help but find this heartening, inspiring.

And so without thinking he blurts it out.

She looks at him, then, smiling, looks down for a second—a surprisingly demure gesture for her. Then she looks up at him again and says: —I love you too.

I love you. These are old words, and they have survived with us, and, even now, even in the thick of the city's noise, amongst talk-about-the-weather and party chit-chat, platitudes and rhetoric, advertisements and magazine covers, headlines and signs, even amongst all these

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millions of competing messages, these old words can be spoken, without irony, gloss or packaging, and can still be heard. On this street there are two people, and they stand still for a moment, creating meaning for one another, out of the thin air of the present.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeremy P. Bushnell lives and works in Chicago, IL, where he helps to run Invisible City Productions, a collective dedicated to the promotion and distribution of independent media projects. He is the author of *Bombing Starbucks*, a freeware novel available for download at the Invisible City website ([www.invisible-city.com](http://www.invisible-city.com)).

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