

Imaginary Year

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"it all has to do with it"

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Thanks for reading.

THOMAS

AMBIENT STRUCTURES

He is listening to the Toral disc that he bought last week. The TCM-454VK sits on the table in front of him. Next to a selection of stones. He holds an Evidence legal pad filled with jottings, flips through, looking for the notes on Toral that he's taken before. He listens. Like the other *Cyclorama Lift* pieces, this one is made from feedback. As Toral himself has explained it: *It's performed with an empty circuit, basically a feedback loop using as main instruments two 8-second delays and a 4-band parametric equalizer. There's no input, the loop is constantly nourishing and digesting itself. The circulating sound is electronic resonance. The tones buzz and hum.* "Hum," Thomas says, into the TCM-454VK.

He's planning to review this record for his website. He's maintained a drone music site for about a year now—it's simple, really, mostly just a collection of reviews of new drone albums, links to the websites of the labels that release those recordings. Janine taught him most of the HTML he needed in a single day. Stretching, she ran her hands up the back of her neck, lifting her black hair for a moment before letting it drop back. A quiet polygon of pale skin.

He shakes his head and returns to the listening. He thinks about Portugal, where Toral is from. What is it about Portugal that would make someone produce this kind of music? All music is cultural; he believes that. You can see this if you examine the music that has evolved in isolated cultures, music produced by the inhabitants of islands, like Japan. Where his parents were born. (He tries for a moment to imagine them there: he has never been there himself, so he has to place them into the Japanese environments that American media has provided him with. A room with ricepaper walls. Tokyo's blistering electronic landscape. Neither of these seem right, and he abandons the experiment.)

But he knows Portugal is no island, even though he's not exactly sure where in Europe it is. He flips through the pad's pages: somewhere in there are felt-tipped pen maps of the continents of the world: he traced them from an atlas, wanting to follow the movements of music around the globe. So: why Portugal?

Perhaps it has something to do with planes. Toral has gone on record as saying he loves planes, and Thomas knows that a plane is a droning device, acoustically-speaking. He suddenly wants data on the flightpaths over Portugal; he wonders if the Web can help him with that. But this album, *Cyclorama Lift*, does not sound like a plane. This piece—part three—is different from parts two and four; when those other parts were released he had wondered why this one was skipped and now he sees: this one sounds more organic, wetter: at points it sounds like

holding your ear to a drain as water travels through it.

—More bloopy, he says into the TCM-454VK.

He thinks momentarily about his college roommate, Derek, the guy who first introduced him to weird music: he remembers getting stoned and listening to the Talking Heads, *Remain In Light*, with its strange narratives about shifting faces and losing yourself in the new formations of the world around you. Together that they discovered the albums of Brian Eno, and those albums— documents of self-generating ambient structures —led Thomas to discover the music he listens to today. Derek is now married, he works for a consulting company down in the Loop: they still get together every once in a while, but it has been a long time since Thomas and his friend have sat down and listened to something and asked together: what could make this music?

And you may ask yourself: what is that beautiful house?

Thomas listens, and he remembers something he read somewhere: a story told by the synthesizer player Keith Emerson. He claimed that Jimi Hendrix once told him that the two of them both played the same instrument: the speaker.

Cyclorama Lift does not sound like a plane, it sounds like a stereo.

The smooth stones are arranged on the table. The TCM-454VK records everything. SONY. Clear Voice.

DENISE

THE THING THAT WILL NOT HAPPEN

She's halfway through her Thai cucumber salad when she looks up and sees the two people waiting at the table across from her. The woman has her head turned to her left shoulder, and her eyes are cast even further to the left, and downwards, as though she is staring at an electrical outlet at the base of the wall behind her. Her hand is held up at her mouth, and she is biting at her thumb, positively *gnawing* it — Denise thinks of the way rabbits in cages will curl around and chew (anxiously?) at their own sides. The man is blithely reading a magazine. The magazine serves as a perfect interference pattern, blocking all communication between him and his companion (*girlfriend*, Denise supplies, without quite thinking about it).

Denise watches the couple from behind her sunglasses. She actually stops eating. The woman, so uncomfortably perched in her chair, her face so tensed and drawn, radiates such tension that Denise can't comprehend how things in the room can just proceed as normal: she expects everything in the room to hesitate and shatter even though she also knows that this is the thing that absolutely will not happen. But she wants *something* to happen. If the man across from her won't lay a hand on her shoulder and say *are you OK?* then somebody else should — one of the beautiful waitresses or another patron. Or Denise should do it herself. She *feels* this; it doesn't feel like a conclusion born from any internal moral or ethical system, it feels like a drive built into her very musculature; it feels like an act that she must *clench back* in herself.

This is one more reason to distance yourself from people in the world around you. Because the world is full of people who are suffering. And if you see each of them in close-up, the lines of pain in their faces and the stifled emotion in their eyes, all the while knowing that you cannot help them, the rules of the world do not allow it — it's enough to make you look for a razor. To try to use the pain of the body to block out the pain of knowledge. She knows.

The whole time she is looking at them and trying to stifle her empathy there is another part of her mind that is thinking about Edward Hopper, this painter — she'd seen a book of his paintings once at Johnny's. Johnny was still sleeping, but she was awake, so she'd gotten up and walked naked around his apartment, until she found this book of paintings by this guy Hopper sitting out somewhere; she'd sat on the couch then and leafed through it, inspecting his tiny, lonely worlds.

She ended up looking at the entire thing. She found herself most attracted to the paintings of his that depicted human pain but *isolated* it, hemmed it in, surrounded it by fields of visual space that were empty yet impenetrable. One of his paintings depicts a woman sitting, striking notes at a piano, while a man reads the paper. But what the painting mostly depicts is invisible. It depicts *absence*: the same total absence of communication that she sees in the people sitting in front of her right now.

If you gave the woman a piano her boyfriend would still not hear her. She would need to scream. She would need to take the fucking thing and set it on fire.

JAKOB & FLETCHER

PARALLEL CONVERSATIONS

A plate scattered with blobs of oil and the remnants of salad. Fletcher's book: John Ashbery, *As We Know*. Jakob sips from his coffee mug, sets it down. The mug is one of those thick cream-colored ceramic jobs that Jakob has seen in a million different diners and cafes. One stabilized element in a personal iconography that's normally prone to shift.

Fletcher says —So, how go your attempts to bang my old friend? and Jakob laughs at the unexpected crudeness. Deep down, he knows that it serves a purpose—it masks the true business of talking. When two men try to talk directly about their feelings about women they worry: they don't want to be seen as the kind of people who see themselves as *sensitive*.

—I don't know, Jakob says. —I've been thinking a lot about our date.

—Date? Fletcher says. —What the hell was I, your chaperone?

—You know what I mean, Jakob says. —I could say *I've been thinking a lot about the first time that she and I hung out for an extended period since I decided that I was kind of interested in her*, that may be more accurate, but Christ, doesn't it strike you as unwieldy?

—Point taken. So, go on.

—I don't know. I wish it had gone smoother. I wish we'd clicked a little bit better.

—Yeah, well, the Gold Star is probably not the best place to have, like, an intimate conversation.

—I just kept *saying* these *things* and I could hear myself from outside, and I just sounded like this fucking pointy-headed academic *geek*...

—Yeah, well, you *are* an academic geek. But Freya's pretty smart. A lot smarter than you'd expect for someone who didn't finish school. I don't think she was, like, *put off* by that.

—Mm.

—In fact, I think she's kind of craving some, you know, *intellectual discourse*. (Fletcher puts air quotes around these words.) —It's hard, you know, to find a community of smart people if you didn't go through school. I don't think she really meets that many through the record store. And, uh, I've seen some of her last few boyfriends, and they didn't particularly strike me as real strong in that department.

—Great. She likes big dumb tough louts. I don't stand a chance.

—No, Fletcher says. —I think she's, um, had her fill of those types of guys for a while. (He remembers, not last summer but the summer before,

remembers her face, the space around the eye swollen and green. The television broadcasting a *South Park* episode in bright colors. Her cursing—*fuck I'm so stupid*. Her huddled shape on the couch suddenly boiling up into action. She seized a milkcrate full of Mike's LPs, hauled it out to the back balcony, lifted it, pitched it down into the alley below. Fletcher had reminded her of Mike's anger, and what it would be when he returned—and Freya pulled an aluminum baseball bat out from under the sofa and screamed *I'll split that fucker's face right in two*.

—I don't know, Jakob says. Every time she and I talk it seems like we're having two different conversations.

Fletcher hears someone at the next table over: *She's actually funnier on e-mail than she is in person*.

—Different conversations aren't necessarily a bad thing. A faulty connection between two people is often more interesting than a clear one. It can stimulate in unexpected ways.

He thinks here of the Ashbery book he's reading. The long poem "Litany" is set up in two columns, and its introduction instructs you to read them as simultaneous but independent monologues. And yet each of the two parallel signals invariably interferes with the other; there's no other way to read the thing. The intersection of different voices is what makes the poem interesting.

—So there's some interference, Fletcher says. —It's no big deal. That's where complexity enters.

—The Situationists say "cities are born from interferences of situations," Jakob says.

Fletcher nods, and thinks of the cafe's side wall, where people have posted various bulletins and flyers. Before he'd placed his order he'd checked it out for a few minutes, let the culture flow over him. Requests for roommates and flyers for shows. A poster for this band Town and Country which reads *it all has to do with it*. A photocopied image of a television remote with the word LOST written at the top. "Remo" : missing since 12/15/00. Reward! If found, please call. A number. One voice in a field.

FLETCHER

COMPILER OF ENVIRONMENTS

The computer has completed its array of warm-up exercises, and Fletcher has prepared a fresh pot of coffee. He sits at the desk. Papers, books, mail, and a few sections of yesterday's *Tribune* fill the space between the desk's edge and the monitor; he plows some of this printmatter back with his hand, clearing a small triangle of desk space for his steaming mug. Once that's settled, he pulls the mouse out of the sprawl, orients his hand to the position of the pointer on the monitor, and moves to the Word icon and clicks.

While Word's loading, he reaches down to retrieve the keyboard. Pulls it up into his lap. (When not in use it lives under the desk, umbilicated to the tall column of the CPU, which also lives under there. It hardly ever needs to be seen, so he keeps it down there in dark footspace rather than giving up any more of the desktop's valuable visual area.)

He goes into the File menu and pulls up a poem that he's been working on, entitled "The Sphere of Practical Operation." His MFA program required him to turn in a manuscript as his thesis. He did — a short collection called *Focused Attention* — but when he got close to the the manuscript submission deadline approached he'd written some poems hastily and included others that he had come to think of as early work, written before he'd really developed ideas about what a poem is and what it does. In those closing days he often remarked on the irony of a two-year program — you're required to let your poems demonstrate what you've learned in the program at the exact moment that you've finally learned that all those poems are the unformed efforts of a novice.

While in the program, he'd imagined that he would submit his manuscript to the battery of first book contests, but now he knows that it needs more work, a good dose of focused attention, ha ha. He's currently filling in his theoretical blind spots in this Ph.D. program (they've got him reading Kristeva and Barthes right now) and he enjoys thinking about that stuff, finds it helpful and interesting, at its best he thinks it achieves its own kind of poetry — but he hasn't been working much on his own writing. Sometimes, when he looks the matter straight in its face, he has to wonder whether he's given it up. The idea always pangs him, sends him back to the computer. "Sphere" is the first new poem he's worked on in three or four months. (Appalling.)

He looks at the page on the screen. It looks like a night sky of language: he tries to separate each word or phrase from the others with as much blank space as possible. (He read a lot of Zen poetry in his MFA program, looked at a lot of Japanese art.) He uses Word's Columns function to break the page into three areas and adds bits to all three, more or less simultaneously, sometimes below what he's previously written, sometimes above. He has given up on the idea that a poem should be read from beginning to end: he wants his poems to function as *fields* of information rather than a linear *progression* of information; he wants people to begin looking at them wherever a detail catches their eye, as one would look at a painting. He has a Rothko print tacked up above his desk. And, taped up next to it, a John Ashbery quote written on an index card: "I think I consider the poem as a sort of environment, and one is not obliged to take notice of every aspect of one's environment — one can't, in fact."

He needs words for the field. He looks at the headline on the *Tribune*. Drug war nets smaller fish in city. Drug war nets? People who don't like poetry don't like it because it's not efficient; it doesn't release all of its information at once. Sometimes he wonders if any language does. He begins to type.

FREYA, JAKOB & FLETCHER

A MILLION-DOLLAR IDEA

Fletcher: So I've got a million-dollar idea.

Freya: Another?

Fletcher: I'm telling you, I'm unstoppable.

Freya: Uh-huh.

Fletcher: Now listen. Here's the idea: a personals service for airline travelers.

[Jakob and Freya look at him.]

Fletcher: Think about it. You're, say, a college student in Chicago. It's spring break; you're going down to, let's say Austin. For South by Southwest. You're young, you're single, you're headed for a hip destination: you don't want to be stuck next to some Joe Briefcase corporate executive. You want to be sitting next to some cutie who's going out to South by Southwest. You want to be able to talk about what you're going to see while you're there; maybe tell her where you're staying; make plans to get together for drinks one night—and, hell, if she's *from* Chicago, and if everything goes well, you could make plans to see her when you get back. So, anyway, before you get your ticket, you go onto my website, enter in what day you'd like to travel, what airline you prefer, where you're going and then your preferences for companion — who you'd like to sit next to. The system matches you up with anybody traveling the same route as you who meets your criteria. Hell, it doesn't even need to be for *dating* — you could do it by occupation, or whatever. The exec can find another exec to sit next to so they can talk about golf or whatever the fuck. If you're a dentist going to some dentist's convention you can sit next to another dentist. Air travel's pretty boring — if you could turn it into a social thing, an extension of your conference or whatever, wouldn't you? Hell, you can make plans to meet the person at the gate — that way if your flight gets delayed, you can flirt or talk shop instead of leafing through the goddamn *USA Today*. I'm telling you: a flight is the perfect place for a first date. It's a few hours long, there's other people around so nothing's going to get too weird, it has a pre-determined ending time so there's an easy out.

Freya: Easy out? What if the date starts going wrong in the first five minutes? There's no escape during the flight itself. It's not like you can just leave. I've ended a date after *fifteen minutes*.

Fletcher: Eh. I haven't worked out all the kinks yet.

Jakob: I've got to admit; I think you might have something.

Fletcher: A million-dollar idea. I've got a million of them. I should be getting an MBA instead of a goddamn poetry Ph.D.

Freya: It's the world's loss.

THOMAS

HUMMING WORLD

Thomas climbs the steps out of the L station and steps out into the snowy night. He shivers, draws his coat tighter around his not-very-warm waiter monkeysuit, and heads down the street, towards home. He passes a Walgreens (METABOLIFE and HERSHEY'S on their marquee), a Citgo, R & H Plumbing Equipment and Supplies. He reads letters painted on a door: Please deliver mail for 855 around corner. A long arrow pointing towards the door's edge.

As Thomas passes a large brick building at the corner he can hear something on its roof humming—a heating vent, or duct of some kind? He moves into the space of the hum, passes through its center, and moves out through its far edge. He remembers a phrase from liner notes: *A continuous sound defines the space that it occupies. It has a center and a radius and an intensity curve that peaks at the centre and trails off to the edges.* He smiles to himself as he passes through the space, pleased by the sound and equally as much by his having *noticed* the sound.

For a while now he has been taking notes for a history he wants to write—the history of drones. He's taken so many notes, in fact, that his zeal for the project has begun to sag under their accumulated weight. The history of drones is essentially the history of resonance, and the history of resonance is essentially the history of music itself. The world proliferates with resonating objects and spaces, from harmonicas to silos. The world is a humming space: where to begin the map?

He supposes that most of the drones that he listens to and writes about can be characterized by their minimalism — they opt out of exploring the whole range of dynamics that a resonator like a trumpet bell can produce, in favor of exploring sustained tones and harmonic patterns. But even then. Just listen. Cars go by on the street: their engines hum; their tires hum on the pavement. Each moving car tows droning spheres around with it. As the cars near one another their spheres intersect. Interference harmonics. The city is occupied at all times by a mobile drone orchestra. Stand on a corner and let the sounds wash over you. Or move through the city, towards home, and pass through a sequence of humming spaces defined by vents and fans. Your path is the score.

Music reacts. Drone music comes from people who have listened carefully to a world already thick with drones: they attempt to understand it by recreating it. La Monte Young: There are two examples of sounds of electrical power transformers that I remember listening to during the first four and a half years of my life. One was a telephone pole on the Bern road (there's only one road in Bern, Idaho; it is gravel), near where I was born and not too far from the intersection

with the road that goes to Montpelier, the closest town. I used to like to stand next to this pole and listen to the sound. The other electrical sound was produced by a small power distribution station just outside of Montpelier next to a Conoco gas depot that my grandfather managed, and where my father worked. I often stood next to this depot outside of a fenced-in area, which had about twenty electrical transformers and produced a louder, more complex sound. Sometimes on warm days I would climb up on top of the huge gasoline storage tanks and sit in the hot sun, smelling the gasoline fumes, listening to the sounds, daydreaming and looking off at the mountains.

It is Idaho. It is over fifty years ago. The world is gravel roads and mountains. And it is humming.

JAKOB & FLETCHER

DEEP MECHANISMS

Spider plants hang in a row, parallel to the cafe's front windows. They hang in a space colored by music. Acoustic guitar, no vocals. The music has a sparse delicacy—it's pretty—yet Jakob thinks he can hear complex parts in it. Pale green in the wan winter light.

While the woman behind the register readies his coffee at the back counter Jakob tries to assess some link between her and this music. When you control the CD player in a space, you control a limited sort of broadcast range; what you broadcast must reveal something about you. Choosing to play a piece of music to a group reveals what kind of music you like; the kind of music that you like probably reveals the deep structures in your mind, mechanisms of enjoyment and pleasure.

She turns around and puts his coffee and his apple spice muffin in front of him. He looks at her, smiles, says *thanks*. She has glasses with tortoiseshell frames, a face that holds hints of that elegant Eastern European bone structure that he sees around the city fairly often. A little skinny for his tastes, but attractive; looks smart. She taps the register awake, it responds by emitting a short series of blips and crunches.

—That's \$3.59, she says.

He pays with a five, she gives him his change.

—Thanks, he says again, and she smiles. He throws the forty-one cents in the jar.

—Thanks, she says.

He heads for the table (Fletcher is already sitting there, eating his way through a salad), still listening to the pretty plantlike music and thinking about the barrista. He wonders if romantic relationships between musicians tend to be successful, because they have the advantageous ability to glimpse the structures that move deeply in one another's minds. He wishes that he had played an instrument in high school. An image here of a cute girl he knew who played the clarinet. He had wanted terribly to go out with her, but all of their conversations had been characterized by failed attempts at connection. The clarinet lived in a small opaque black box with latches. Maybe if he had played the clarinet himself. Drawing his voice into harmony with hers.

Fletcher sees him coming, pauses his fork midway to his mouth.

—Hey, man, what's on your mind?

—What? Oh. Girls who rejected me in high school.

—Ha!

—How I could have won their love, that sort of thing.

—Come up with any good strategies?

—Oh, sure, plenty of good strategies. Fifteen years too late, but plenty of strategies.

—That's memory, man. Fucking interferes.

He places the fork in his mouth by way of punctuation. Jakob nods, then thinks about it and realizes he doesn't really understand what the hell Fletcher means.

—How do you mean?

He holds up a finger until he's finished chewing.

—I mean, look at you, man: you're so busy thinking about how you could have done things differently back in whenever, fucking 1988, that you don't even get an opportunity to think about how you might be doing things differently *right now*. We're enslaved to our memories.

—Hm.

—I think that's part of what poets are doing: trying to free themselves from that. Poets write a lot—I mean a *lot*—on the theme of memory. You'd think that we were all constantly walking around in the past. But I think—well, here's what I think—I think writing poems is a way to create an external *repository* for those memories, to get them outside of you, to free up some of the space in your head, so you can be attentive to what's going on around you: you know, "the now."

—Very Buddhist.

—Fuck right it's Buddhist. But let me make this point clear: *poetry* isn't Buddhist; *poets* are Buddhist. A book of poems isn't part of the poet anymore: it's pieces that he's deliberately released. A reliquary.

—That's what you should call your next book.

—*Reliquary*? Fuck, maybe I will. And he takes out a pen and writes RELIQUARY across his napkin in huge letters.

—That's interesting, you know, what you said.

—Was it? I was making it up as I went along. Tomorrow I'll say something completely different.

Jakob has to laugh at this.

—That's what living in the now is all about, says Fletcher. And, for a moment, Jakob feels like he *gets it*—he listens again to the music—

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