

Imaginary Year

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"a field of harmonies and discords"

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Thanks for reading.

THOMAS & LYDIA

6ODUM

Green light on a cinderblock wall, a circle, broken by the milling silhouettes of people. White votive candles at selected points. Thomas moves among the crowd, looking for his date. He's thankful that there's some light; sometimes at 6Odum they do performances in total pitch blackness. He's not sure how he would have been able to locate a woman he's never met.

It's tricky enough under the present circumstances. He's milling about keeping his eyes open for a hat with a cartoon penguin on it. *Oh, look for my fabulous Badtz-Maru hat, which has served as my faithful companion all winter, she wrote in response to his last e-mail. Do you know who Badtz-Maru is? If not, refer to the attached image.*

He's looking. Every hat he sees jumps out from the surrounding visual noise. After seeing a few wrong hats, his expectations of finding her begin to thin. He begins to suspect that he's been the victim of a prank; somebody stumbled upon his website and detected his loneliness and thought it would be funny to toy with him. Oddly, he feels somewhat relieved by the possibility. Disappointment, at least, would be something that he knows how to deal with. Everything else is a huge unknown.

And then he sees the Badtz-Maru hat. And then he sees her.

She's shorter than he'd expected, and younger. She doesn't look much older than 21 or much taller than five feet. He had just mentally placed her at average size and at his age (twenty-seven), so he's surprised. Not necessarily unpleasantly.

—Hi, he says. —I'm Thomas Wakatami? He hopes it's her and not just another woman wearing a similar hat—

—Hi, Thomas, she says. —Lydia. It's the first time that he's heard her name. She extends her hand and he shakes it. Although they've been e-mailing one another a few times a week for almost a month, he suddenly finds himself almost totally without words.

—It's nice to meet you, she says.

—Yeah, it's nice to meet you, too.

—Do you want to find a spot to sit? she says.

He nods. —That's a good idea.

Clusters of people have begun to sit near the walls. They've carried in beers and they're drinking them. Some people have stretched out on the floor. Thomas and Lydia find an open spot and they lay their jackets beneath them. Overall there is an atmosphere of picnic, which fits strangely congruously with the unfinished concrete of the room.

—I haven't been here before, Lydia says. —I kind of like this place.

—Yeah, Thomas says. —The first time I was here I was like, *wow, um, it's a big cinderblock box*. But, I don't know, since then I've come to feel that this place is perfect. It gives off a sense of things happening in secret.

—Yeah, Lydia says. —It's like watching a band play in somebody's basement. (She is remembering her time in Bloomington, Indiana; more than once she spent an evening sipping pisswarm beer from a plastic cup, standing next to a hot water heater or somesuch, listening to weird guys from the music college throw a crazy-quilt carpet of musical influences into the smoky air, struggling to make it fly.) —Underground, she says. —I mean in a literal sense.

—Exactly, Thomas says.

They look at one another, and each of them are struck by a crazy, giddy feeling: the feeling that someone else, this *stranger* sitting next to them, has glimpsed something within them, a self, a secret one, normally nurtured in silence, now unexpectedly, suddenly, seen. It is like a pleasant variety of terror.

THOMAS & LYDIA

CALLS AND RESPONSES

The LAMPO guy gets up and gives an introduction, mentions some upcoming shows. Phill Niblock is coming to town — Thomas and Lydia exchange anticipatory glances. Thomas notes how good that feels, to be excited by a particular name, and not to have to explain that excitement, not to have to translate it into words. To communicate it just by looking over and seeing it reflected back in the eyes of another. The LAMPO guy mentions that tonight Mirror will be accompanied by Jim O'Rourke. This is a complete surprise. Thomas and Lydia exchange glances again.

The set starts off quietly, with the sounds of twittering birds. Thomas closes his eyes and shifts his head into listening-space. He hears the birdsong as a complex acoustic network, a series of calls and responses. He enjoys this for a while, and then notices a low hum creeping into the mix, a gathering thrumming. A machine appears in the forest. The juxtaposition opens a dialogue between the voices of technology and the voices of nature, establishes a set of tensions for the music to maneuver through. By putting certain sounds together, the musicians reveal something about the way they think about the world. It is like they are having a conversation.

Lydia is also listening. This pastoral phase of the music reminds her of the placid intros that start off so many techno songs, she expects some electronic beat to kick in any second. When she was a teenager, living in Detroit with her dad, she spent a lot of time going to raves, she did the whole pacifier / candy-necklace thing for a while. That ended when she moved with her dad to Indiana. She'd been ready to get out of the scene anyway. She'd seen her share of cute little X pixies in suspicious relationships with skanky undead-hippie guys in their forties. She'd seen her share of friends having nervous breakdowns.

Bloomington was clean and leafy and she felt *purified* there. She made friends with some of the guys from the music college; they were getting their hands on the work of minimalist composers: Philip Glass, Steve Reich, Terry Riley. She connected with that stuff immediately. After years on the dancefloor her ears knew how to follow shifting fields of patterns. She spent many hours in college lying on the floor, tripping on acid, watching the music build ornate Persian rugs in her optic center. From there it wasn't long until she found her way into drone, and from there she found Thomas' website, and she read his reviews of performances and

those made her hungry for Chicago. When she graduated with her degree in Communications (class of 2000) she didn't have much of a plan, but Marvin and Paul, her geek friends, were planning to move up to Chicago, and they were looking for a third person, so she decided— why not?

She's a bit surprised to be here, in this concrete room, with Thomas. She didn't expect that he would have welcomed her e-mail in the way he did. She still sort of thinks of the Web as being part of *the media*, and so she's been surprised to realize that the people who produce its material are accessible, cut free of the usual hierarchies. She's been surprised to realize that the people who produce for the Web are aiming for connection. For fuck's sake, Thomas' e-mail address was on every single page of the site: how could she have thought that he wanted anything *but* contact?

Satisfied that she's figured something out, she lies down on the floor and returns her attention to the music, which is still birds— a complicated mosaic of voices—

FREYA & THOMAS

SUBVERTING ROUTINE

The store's software generates an array of bar codes. A sheet of stickers emerges from the printer. Freya begins to affix them to the jewel cases of CDs, half on autopilot: there may be a mental voice guiding her through the basic routine of sticker peeling and placement, but, if so, it is so far down in her mental mix as to be inaudible. The routine is a subroutine. The first audible level in her mind is taken up with a call-and-response dialogue occupied with making sure the right labels go onto the right CDs— Quintron; Quintron. Olivia Tremor Control; Olivia Tremor Control. There's another layer that is occasionally processing the lyrics (You came / you went / my mind it got a dent) of the Beck album playing over the store PA (*Stereopathic Soul Manure*, a likable combination of straightfaced yet surreal steel-guitar country tunes, juvenile tape experiments, and Sonic Youthian noise). Yet another layer considers plans for the future. *Maybe I'll head down to Quimby's sometime soon and see what's new over there. It's been a while since I've read something interesting.* Typanum sells its share of music magazines and zines, but there's only so many reviews of the new Tortoise album she can read before she feels like screaming. They carry *The Baffler*, too, which she enjoys, but there hasn't been a new one of *those* out in over a year.

The sound of a tingling bell. She looks up at the door. Hey, it's Thomas. She pauses in the stickering routine and waves; he waves back.

—Hey, she says. —I haven't seen you around in here in forever.

—It *has* been a while, says Thomas. —What'd I miss? Anything good?

—That you would like? Freya says. —Let me think. New Matmos... (Thomas makes a noncommittal gesture, a cross between a nod and a shrug) ...new Windy and Carl.

Thomas' eyebrows perk a bit at that. —I'll take a look.

—So, she says. —What have you been up to?

—Nothing, really, says Thomas.

He supposes he could tell her about his date with Lydia, the primary thing he's been thinking about for the past few days. After the show Lydia had graciously offered him a ride home. On the drive he'd rattled on about his observations about the tension he'd perceived in the music, a tension between nature and technology, and about his theory that Japanese electronic music downplays that tension, treats the two concepts as though they're integrated, as though the world contains technology and electronics as naturally as it contains trees and wind and rain. She'd listened, and asked pointed questions (Do you think that might be connected to the difference between Western and Eastern religious systems?) and when she dropped him off at his apartment there was a moment, right before he said goodbye, when they were both quiet and they just *looked* at one another. He'd recognized this as the moment where they would kiss if they'd kissed before, as the moment where he could conceivably kiss her. This recognition triggered a flurry of questions— *should* he kiss her? did he *want* to kiss her? what would she do if he *tried* to kiss her? —and this series of questions effectively snapped him out of the moment. He'd looked down at his lap instead, and when he looked back up he'd simply said *I had a really nice time*.

He's not sure if it's really appropriate to share this information with Freya, she's only a casual acquaintance, after all. But even if he knew her better he still might not speak of it—it's all still too new; he hasn't formalized ways of thinking about it yet. He's not sure what he wanted, or what he wants, or what terms he should use to speak about the events that have already transpired. He feels a nascent hope, but he's reluctant articulate it, because articulation will clearly define it, and a clearly defined hope is the first prerequisite for disappointment.

The other thing he's been thinking about ever since that show is collaboration: at the show, he felt like he'd witnessed three people working through an idea. He had been reminded of his thoughts on narcissism, and it had struck him that their musical conversation didn't seem self-absorbed at all: it seemed like conversation, not introspection. Their play created an architecture of connections and tensions, a field of harmonies and discords that one mind working alone could not create.

—How's the website? Freya asks.

The website. Mainly he's just been writing reviews and doing a little link gardening. All that is fine, easy. But he can't help but feel that he should use the site to do more. For a while now he's wanted to put up some long-form essays, but he can't seem to muster the inspiration to write them. Really there's enough material for an entire book, but a straightforward book doesn't really fit with what the Web can do, and he doesn't have the time to write one anyway. So he's been thinking about other projects that he could put on the site, but his thoughts on them just go around in circles until they come unfocused. Maybe working with other people could take him in new directions, useful ones. He decides to put this into the conversation.

—Actually, Thomas says, —I’m starting to think about using the site for some kind of collaborative project. If you know anybody who might be interested in putting something together...

—What kind of project?

—I don’t have all the details worked out yet, Thomas says. —But I’ve been thinking a lot about the city in terms of its acoustic qualities; I’ve been thinking about doing some kind of Chicago soundmap; something like that.

—Hey, that’s cool, says Freya.

—I just—if you know anyone who you think might be interested in working on some kind of project like that, let me know.

—You can put a flyer up in the store if you want.

—That’s cool, Thomas says. —But I don’t even know what form this thing is going to take yet.

—Uh huh, Freya says. Then she snaps her fingers. —You know who you should talk to?

—Who?

—This guy, Jakob. He’s not really big into music but he’s really interested in, you know, urban space? Alternate systems of mapping, or, I don’t know, stuff like that? He’s a grad student right now. And he’s interested in sound, too; he’s working on this book, it’s about, like, cell phones and their use in cities.

Thomas raises his eyebrows. —Yeah, he says. —He sounds like someone I might be interested in getting in touch with. Is he in here fairly often?

—Not really, says Freya. —I’ll see him, though. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind if I gave you his number; do you want it?

—Yeah, Thomas says. —That would be great.

—Hang on, Freya says. She hurries into the back office and comes back a minute later with Jakob’s number written on a Post-It note. Thomas folds it in half, adhering its top edge to its bottom one, and sticks it in his shirt pocket.

—Let me give you my e-mail address, too, he says, and if you could pass it on the next time you see him, that would be great.

—Sure, Freya says. —No problem.

She hooks him up with a pen and a piece of scrap paper and he jots the address down. Already he can begin to feel his thoughts feeling out new directions. A new pattern of branching lights in the brain.

FLETCHER

THIS SENTENCE GIVES FLAVOR

Fletcher is reading a student paper entitled “Title.” *Very metafiction*, he thinks. He circles the word in red pen. He momentarily considers adding some comment, but the best one he can come up with is *come on*. Which actually is more or less the comment that he feels like putting on all the student work he reads. Come on— separate those list items with a comma. Come on— when you change topics, start a new paragraph.

He has to get through a stack of papers that’s roughly the thickness of a novel. This is the fifth such stack he’s worked his way through this semester. No wonder he’s not writing as much as he should — after throwing himself around in the tangled briarpatch of student syntax for a few hours, he no longer wants to think *at all* about the way words fit together. The language centers in his brain fatigue, and he just wants to stare into the color fields of his Rothko poster and dissolve. Or drink a beer and listen to jazz CDs, concentrating on the lines of the melodies. All the pleasures of rhetoric—narrative and idea, argument and agreement—embodied in something other than words. Dave Holland, *Conference of the Birds*. Often he’ll just end up watching *The Simpsons*: staring at black print on white paper all day long wearies his eyes, and the bright pastels and simple shapes of that show are visually soothing.

But, for God’s sake, he wants to be a writer. And blowing an hour every night watching the syndicated *Simpsons* back-to-back wastes time— valuable time. *Writing* time. So, of course, does grading these papers. Fuck. He repositions his pelvis on the chair, hunches lower over the kitchen table. Scribbles comments in red. Misplaced modifier. He knows full well that this student doesn’t know what a modifier is, but fuck it, he can meet them halfway but that’s it.

He tries to make the process useful to him. In his poems he tries to use words that have particular charges, that carry particular energies. So he sets his students to work: he assigns them to tear advertisements from magazines, to find the “charged phrases” and analyze the connotations that they carry. To map the borealis of meaning that surrounds each word. He hopes that some of his students will hit upon nuances that he wasn’t aware of, and that he will be able to mine those nuances for his poems. In this sense he uses his students as antennas. (He should pass that one on to Jakob.)

Words have energy, he believes this. The ones with the greatest charge burn for him with a kind of light, a color outside of the visible spectrum. (He doesn't think he's the only poet who sees things this way, either. Anne Carson, in her new book, writes this on the word *marriage*: Look how the word / shines.) His poems are attempts to call attention to these charges in print. He feels limited by the page and its standardized sizes: ultimately he feels like each word should be immersed in a cloud of other words—its associations and counterpoints—which should extend indefinitely in all directions. Language as atmosphere, as weather. A book with pages of infinite area. In the library of his mind there are other fantastic books as well: a book that begins with only a single word, which is read by a reader who adds whatever word the first word summons, creating a book of two words; a third reader can add a word inspired by either of the first two, or both, and so on, the book becoming a branching tree of language. You could gauge the relative charge of particular words by looking to see which ones would most gnarl and bristle with other words.

He flips a page in the paper he's reading. His students can't help him to detect charges; they're not adept at it. He reads: This sentence gives a negative flavor to the reader. *This sentence gives flavor?*

As soon as April is over he's free till August.

It's almost 5:30. There'll be a *Simpsons* on soon.

DENISE

JUST BE YOURSELF

Denise is drunk and it's the middle of the night and she has a large chef's knife in her hand. The kitchen reels around her. A cutting board sits on the counter, covered in a helter-skelter of half-chopped scallions; she's trying to get the board centered in her field of vision. The board is shaped like the outline of a whale, or a cartoonish simplification of the outline of a whale. A hole is drilled through the board where the whale's eye should be. It seems absurdly funny. It seems to be perpetually receding. She has to put her free hand against the wall for support. The knife waves in the air. Ha ha.

Her roommate Toy is standing at the stove, stirring a steaming pot of Kraft macaroni and boiling water. Other roommate Mark is out somewhere tonight: work? No, no, not work, it's fucking midnight. After midnight. Isn't it? She turns, trying to spot the clock in the chaos of the items on the countertop. Digital numbers leap out red from the darkness: 1:22. Jesus. 1:22 and they're making dinner? She has to be in at the record store at ten tomorrow. Opening on a fucking Saturday, usually their busiest day. *How the fuck did I get so drunk?* she thinks. *Cause you drank too much.* Ha ha. She pulls her hand off of the wall, stumbles, presses her hand up to her face to stifle her snorts of laughter.

Toy drains the macaroni into a colander set up in the sink. Oh, she's going to need to finish chopping these scallions. They're supposed to go into the mac and cheese. She plants her hand down on the cutting board to hold it steady and she holds the knife over the scallions. It wobbles in her hand. She tries to figure out how to do this.

She can hear massed violins and cellos and squalling electric guitar. The music sways and surges, oceanic. Denise looks over the counter and through the open space there, looks into the other room, where Toy's girlfriend, Cassie, sits hunched in front of the stereo. There's something weird about the three of them being together, all by themselves. Denise and Toy slept together a few months ago, when he and Cassie were having problems. She wonders if Cassie knows that. She's tempted to just blurt it out, just to see what happens.

She looks down again at the puzzle of scallions and knife. She looks over at Toy. He's squeezing the foil packet that came with the macaroni: a bright orange oyster of processed cheese slowly emerges. The Blob. There's something weird— well,

something about the evening seems faintly unnatural. Constructed. She has the feeling, suddenly, that Toy's goal for the evening is to sleep with both of them. The music seems to soundtrack her lack of balance. She stares at the orange glob creeping out of the packet: it takes on something of an erectile quality, vaguely horrible. When she looks up at Toy again she sees that he's looking at her, not at her face but at her body; his face looks dark and strangely tense and his eyes are on her, intense with a singleminded drunken focus.

She wants to make a joke, lighten things up: she lifts the knife, holds it in a mock-defensive pose, a pose learned from a hundred movies, she shouts "Stay back!", attempting to speak in cliché. Ha ha.

Toy's reaction is sudden. He comes in *towards* her—even this drunk she knows that the knife is now too close to both of them—he reaches around the knife and grabs her wrist, twists hard. *Ow*, she says—he presses his thumb hard into a tendon in her arm and her hand opens; the knife drops, its unbalanced shape whipping through a series of unpredictable acrobatics on its way down. —*Fucking*— let me *go*— she says; she pulls, he holds on, she suddenly becomes conscious of the mass of her body and with that consciousness in mind she finds herself suddenly unable to manage the trick of balancing it all on two thin legs. She falls—he's still holding her wrist and something in her shoulder *pulls*—

She's in a heap on the floor. He lets go of her wrist finally and her arm falls down to join the rest of her. The knife is by her hand and she has to strangle down an urge to grab it and ram it up into his groin.

—What the fuck were you doing? he shouts. This again. Her whole life seems to generate this response from the people around her. Before things with her mom went to shit (age 13) her mom had probably told her a million times: *just be yourself. Just be yourself and people will like you.* But when Denise lets that self out, her true self, she finds that the world is angered by it; she finds herself asked to justify it, again and again, in precisely this fashion. Fuck being yourself—it is easier to be no one.

She will let fucking Toy do whatever the fuck he wants with her—

FREYA & JAKOB

BENJAMIN SMOKE

It's Saturday morning and Freya and Jakob sit in the Music Box, watching Jem Cohen's new documentary, *Benjamin Smoke*. It had been a few weeks since they'd last gotten together— he'd warned her that he might temporarily “vanish,” citing an end-of-semester wall of student papers and a project of his own that he needs to complete. *I'm going to hermit for a while*, he'd said.

She can respect that. When she heard about *Benjamin Smoke*, though, she decided to ring him up. She's seen an earlier documentary by Cohen, a documentary on Fugazi entitled *Instrument*, and she remembered that it was full of shots of urban and suburban landscapes, an American wasteland of parking lots and freeway underpasses and bridges, and she figured this new film, a memorial for a deceased Georgian drag chanteuse, would share some of that vision. Jakob studies cities (“social space,” as he puts it sometimes), and so she guessed that he'd pick up on whatever it was that Cohen was doing in these films, and find it interesting. (Plus: they may have been only seeing one another once a week— usually during her lunch break on days he wasn't teaching — but she has to admit that she'd come to like that time. A comfortable type of being had begun to emerge from the awkwardness of their early times together, and when those small comforts went absent she missed them.)

—I know you're busy but you should come out for this. Getting out of the house would do you good. He decided that she was right. He's working on a paper and he's so deep into it that he can no longer tell if his argument makes sense at all. It's become a kind of climate: he inhabits it, can move about in it, but he's no longer sure what its outline looks like. Getting out of the house for something besides teaching and seminar *would* do him good. Hopefully he'll be able to return with some perspective. (Plus: in the background of his mental channel there had been a thin hiss of panic about Freya; he's still interested in her romantically, and he had worried that revising her out of his field of attention for a time would blow his chances: he has to admit that he was thrilled when she called.)

Now he's here in this theater watching dirty go-karting kids in Cabbagetown, Georgia, Benjamin's home. The film is a memorial, undoubtedly, an archive of Benjamin's extinct tales and mannerisms, but the film is also about Cabbagetown. If anything, Jakob would say that the film is about how a certain place can produce a certain person. A map of the interrelationships between place and identity.

Cabbagetown was formerly a milltown, and the partial demolition of the mill punched a hole in the world. The mill defines the town through its absence, the same way a dead person defines their empty home. Its ruin haunts the film, appearing over and over again, an empty center.

Towards the end of the film, as Benjamin wanes, Cabbagetown begins to show signs of gentrification: its ruins suddenly appealing to yuppies seeking marks of authenticity, or simply appealing to speculators smelling a bargain. Estate agents appear, the advance guard of some future generic, cheerful sprawl. The film seems to ask: what kinds of people will this new landscape produce? Will this new landscape produce a new Benjamin?

In the distance there is Atlanta: the new Atlanta: gleaming corporate towers.

Jakob's arm touches Freya's.

Afterwards, walking back towards the L, warm weather, birds: —I'd be interested in seeing that other movie he did, the one you mentioned, *Instrument*?

—Yeah, Freya says. —I've got a copy of it at my place, do you want to come over and watch it, maybe once your semester finishes up?

—Yeah, he says. He's never been over to her place before. —Yeah, that sounds great.

LYDIA

SOCIAL PLAY

Lydia is in her room, looking at the screen, when she hears Marvin's voice from the doorway. —Are you online?

She is. She'd gone into Yahoo to check her mail and a story on protesters occupying the bombing range at Vieques grabbed her. Her dad is Puerto Rican, so she's followed the Vieques story with some interest as it's developed over the past few years.

—Um, yeah, she says to Marvin.

—You know, he says, —other people in this house need to use the phone line too, occasionally. She knows he's just being a pain in the ass for the sake of being a pain in the ass. It's theatric. Pure play. It doesn't (really) mean anything.

He strolls into her room and sits on the edge of her bed. Both he and her other roommate, Paul, tend to disregard the boundaries of personal space. She barely even notices: their ways of mutually interacting were formulated by dorm housing, an environment where the one room you're given serves as both social space and personal space. Every bed becomes a couch. She and Paul and Marvin now *have* a neutral room (the "living" room), which *has* a couch, but they haven't yet unlearned their dorm life habits. Next to him on the bed is the newest issue of *The WIRE*; he lies down on his side and starts flipping through it idly.

While he's paging through, he asks her: —Any mail from your *boyfriend*? He means Thomas, who *isn't* her boyfriend; they've only gone out once and they didn't even kiss. This must be (part of?) why Marvin put so much ironic emphasis on the word. But there *was* mail from him. *I enjoyed getting together with you*, it said, *should we do it again soon? Maybe for the Niblock show?* She wrote him back: *yeah, that would be great.*

—In fact, there was, she says. She's losing touch with the Vieques article: its information can no longer reach her. When the names of Puerto Rican celebrities jump out of the textual noise—*Benicio del Toro*; *Ricky Martin* —she realizes it's time to let the article go.

He keeps flipping through the magazine. —Uh huh. How come he can't just call you on the phone like a normal suitor?

She thinks on this, for like half a second. —I don't know, she says. —He has my number. (She's also tried to get Thomas interested in using an Instant Messenger client, but he seems reluctant; she's not certain why.) —I think he just prefers e-mail. And that doesn't solve your problem, anyway.

—What problem? he says.

—”Other people in this house need to use the phone, you know.”

—Oh, yeah, he says.

Now she's going to lay into him a bit: more play. —Since when do you need to use the phone anyway? Calling up the game store to see if any new d20 product is in?

—You wound me, he says. And leave the d20 product out of this. What did it ever do to you?

This could be part of why Marvin and Paul lack proficiency with the basic rules of etiquette: they're both role-playing gamers. They spend lots of time mastering the social rules of various artificial worlds and probably not enough mastering the social rules of the real world. She acknowledges this on an intellectual level but doesn't particularly *feel* it on a gut level, not enough to turn her off to them. Perhaps, she hypothesizes, because she's spent a huge portion of her life using computers, perhaps she herself has failed to “properly” socialize. She kind of enjoys the exposure to the games-and-comics world: it seems complexly obsessive in ways that strike her as alien, but tantalizingly so. Her e-mail handle, `unseen_girl`, is in fact drawn from some comics that Paul showed her, about a science-fictional band, the Bulldaggers, inhabiting a world called Bugtown (which is also, somehow, inhabited by some real-world musicians: Conrad Schnitzler, the Residents). The Unseen Girl is a sometimes member of the Bulldaggers: she plays the instrument “tapes.” Her contributions are contributed from a distance. This seemed appropriate for the way words are put into the net.

“Sometimes member” also describes her relationship to the fictional worlds that Paul and Marvin spend their time in. Boys, boy worlds. But in a way she loves them.

THOMAS & DENISE

CONSCIOUSNESS

It's a warm spring evening and Thomas is standing on the L platform, looking out over the streets below. He sees the yellow arches of McDonald's and a Miller Genuine Draft (MGD) billboard. Never Miss A Genuine Opportunity. He's eager to get home because earlier he picked up the new Windy and Carl album, *Consciousness*, and he's looking forward to hearing it. He'll get into bed and put it on the bedroom stereo. He anticipates lying in the warmdark of bed, and dissolving the chatter of his thoughts in the solution of their vast, spacious sound. Sometimes, when listening to music in bed, he finds himself inhabiting a strange still world—the boundary zone between sleep and wakefulness. There's a term for it: the *hypnogogic state*. He likes being there: he's heard people tell of visions that they've seen in that space. The drones will thread through his dreams, as well—often, when he wakes up, he will replay the CD he fell asleep to, and the dream images will come back to him, impossible shapes all on a string. He wonders if Windy and Carl are keyed in to these notions: the album title would suggest it, as would the cover art, words arranged into a colorful mandala. (They've released earlier projects, too, with titles like *Dream of Blue*.)

Denise enters the L station, feeds her transit card into the slot. She bangs through the turnstile, spots the sign for Dan Ryan, and heads up the stairs. She's dreading going home: Toy, that prick, won't leave her alone about the goddamn Knife Incident last weekend. I still can't believe you pulled a *knife* on me, he'll say. She was fucking joking. It was meant to be a fucking joke. She told him this probably three times but then she just lost interest. He can think that she's a psycho if he wants to. Let him think whatever he wants. She is concerned, though, that he may be grinding her down like this for a reason; it may have something to do with wanting to sleep with her again, but really, she's not sure.

Thomas is thinking about Lydia / *unseen_girl*, about their date, about how to proceed with that. He thinks he wants to pursue a relationship with her, but something about the age difference makes him slightly uncomfortable — she's six years younger than he is, younger than he'd thought from her e-mails. There's a certain part of him that feels like he'd be taking advantage of her, manipulating her. But another part thinks that he couldn't manipulate her even if you *wanted* to. This is probably true; Thomas hasn't had a girlfriend in, oh, maybe five years now (he resists the urge to actually count back the years to Rachel). So, if anyone's the naive one here, it's probably him. Yet something about the age difference still

unsettles him. He makes a note to discuss this with Janine— she has a keen eye for not only what makes him uncomfortable but also for the biases and assumptions that lie beneath. She's not shy about taking those biases and assumptions and dragging them out into the open, exposing them, challenging them, ultimately leading Thomas to question them. He's grateful for it: it's not always a fun process to go through but he feels lucky to have a friend who can do that; he imagines that most people don't. He's going over to Janine's Thursday, for the *Survivor* finale — he'll talk to her about it then.

Denise reaches the platform. She can hear an ambulance siren. She hates hearing sirens: they signal that someone is suffering. Someone not far away. It's easy for her to imagine someone dying in the back of every ambulance she sees, easy for her to trace the fantasy back to a small group of survivors sitting in their home, a home with a sucking hole newly punched through it. Her brain runs grief footage borrowed from television newscasts: weeping family members standing on their porch, their words catching their throat, breaking up. She supposes it makes "good television." Then it haunts her mind for days afterwards. Jesus. She can't even watch the news anymore; she can't take the physical sickness that she feels. She feels literally battered by the loss of others.

An ambulance is going by on the street. Thomas watches the blue and white and red lights whirl. A code, meaning crisis. Crisis in the grid tonight. He listens to the sirens, applies a sonic appreciation to them, notes the Doppler effect happening as the code moves through the streets. This reminds him of the sound map project that he mentioned to Freya, which reminds him of the number that she gave him, that guy, Jakob. Maybe he should call Jakob; he sounded like someone who might be fun to collaborate with. But he knows he won't. He's not good on the phone; he can't imagine calling someone he doesn't know up out of the blue and trying to explain who he is, what he does, what he wants.

Someone walks by him, then stops and stands on the platform next to him. He looks over— it's a woman, wearing dark glasses, even though it's evening. This quirk rings a bell for him; he mentally searches for half a second before he figures it out: she works at Tympanum with Freya; she's waited on him before at the register.

Denise can feel someone staring at her. She looks up to see who it is. It's a Japanese guy, he looks familiar for some reason, probably a customer from the record store.

—Hi, she says.

—Hi, he says.

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