

This is an excerpt from *Imaginary Year*, a work of serial fiction by Jeremy P. Bushnell. Visit the *Imaginary Year* website (<http://www.imaginaryyear.com>) on Mondays and Fridays for new updates.

33 / RAINCOAT

In Fletcher's closet is a raincoat.

It is a rubberized navy blue job with a big rip up one side.

He got it in spring, for his birthday. This was back when he was a month away from graduating from high school, four months away from going off and starting college. His mom gave it to him. She said: *I don't want you to be wet when you go off to college. A mother doesn't want her baby to be wet.*

He ripped the coat a little over two years later, climbing a chain-link fence, on a wet summer's day. The material of the coat snagged on a sharp prong and tore. *Ob, shit*, he'd said, and then he burst out laughing. It didn't bother him.

He'd been out in Ohio on that day, visiting Lynn. He'd met her in the spring of his freshman year, in an Introduction to Poetry course. She would raise her hand in class and say smart things, and he was the other person in the class who would raise his hand and say smart things, so they drew towards one another. She described her tastes by saying *I'm an absolute fiend for Anne Sexton*. This was back in a time when he didn't know who Anne Sexton was.

He ended up in her dorm room one night, and she read one of Sexton's poems to him out of *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry*. It began like this:

I have gone out, a possessed witch,

haunting the black air, braver at night;
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
over the plain houses, light by light:
lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
I have been her kind.

He listened, and his feelings swelled. She was plain-looking— white blouses; straight brown hair —but her selection of this poem, from the total field of all possible poems, revealed an internal life that was wild, and misshapen. He thought he might die of love.

It was around that time that he started reading as much poetry as he could get his hands on. He looked to find ones that he could bring to her.

They had classmates who plodded through bullheaded literal readings, or who insisted upon the accuracy of some stingy, reductive interpretation. They adopted these people as their common enemies.

He smoked for a while during this time, because she smoked.

Things happened, in the way that things happen: he met other women with flint-sharp minds and fondnesses for poetry and it began to seem that the only things that distinguished Lynn were her negative qualities: her depressive episodes, which he could not ever ultimately find a way to understand; her tendency to needle him about things he felt helpless to change, like his tone of voice. Eventually they brought the relationship to an end. They maintained a friendship; continued on as diligent readers of one another's work; managed to stay close until graduation. (Fairly close: he spent a few months of that final year involved with a sophomore who wore heavy black eyeliner and ankh jewelry, and he could tell that Lynn was bothered by this, even though she never confessed as much to him.)

And he stayed in Chicago, and she went off to the Writer's Workshop at the University of Iowa, and after Iowa she went off to be in Brooklyn, he thinks he might have her phone number somewhere in some e-mail, and he stayed in Chicago and moved his raincoat from apartment to apartment, even though he doesn't use it much anymore, nowadays he just carries an umbrella.

But it is a rainy summer in an Ohio of the past. He has torn his coat. Their feet slap on wet pavement. He is chasing her down the street, and both of them are laughing, and the future that will one day be packaged in closets is all still unfixed, loose in the sun and rain like her hair.