

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.

39 / BARDO WORLDS

Tonight, in Chicago, Bardo Pond is playing at the Empty Bottle. Thomas had heard of them: in particular, he'd heard that they layered guitar sounds in order to create intense drones. As a public devotee of drone music, Thomas wondered whether he should make the effort to attend, familiarize himself with their work. He threw the question out, via e-mail, to some people he knows from the DroneOn mailing list, and they urged him to go.

But their urgings didn't make him feel any more certain that he'd enjoy it. One of them used the words "colossal psychedelic cacophony," and Thomas' tastes in drones have always run more towards the minimal, the stark. Imaginary landscapes made of feedback and sampled sinewaves. His reluctance was further compounded by the cold weather and the inevitable wait for the Division bus. He would rather spend his night off staying at home, sitting with Janine on the couch, both of them reading books and drinking mugs of something warm.

But by the time he called Janine, she'd already made plans to go out after work with her work friends. She's been doing that more and more lately. *Oh*, Thomas had said, masking his hurt feelings. *OK*. He wonders whether she's doing this because she wants to spend more time with Clark, the interesting co-worker she'd mentioned. He wonders if she's doing this because she wants to spend less time with him.

He spent a while moping around his apartment. Then he chastised himself for feeling bad: *you shouldn't just assume that she can come out anytime you call*, he thought; *if you wanted*

to hang out with her you should have called her earlier. But then this led to *but she knew I had off tonight* and *she can hang out with those people any night* and *now I won't get to see her until the weekend.*

At the center of this solar system of irritations and anxieties whirls a dark mass, he refuses to fully acknowledge it, he averts his gaze from it repeatedly, but each time he is drawn back into contemplating it, this fundamental fear, the fear of *what will happen* if Janine sleeps with Clark.

Finally he gets sick of thinking about it, and he catches the bus and goes to the Bardo Pond show. Not that this really helps; he is now just thinking about it in a new place. Every time he catches a glimpse of the clock behind the bar—11:45; 12:31—he worries that Janine and Clark might be sleeping together even now. He had hoped that Bardo Pond might create a drone into which he could immerse himself, a womblike space which he could inhabit, safely, for a few hours. Instead they stick fairly closely to rock-and-roll structures, sounding more like Black Sabbath than anything else, and there is no space within that for him to disappear into.

Bardo. An interval between two things. He knows the word from his investigative forays into Tibetan Buddhism. The first major bardo we experience is the *che shi bardo*: the interval between birth and death. Thomas slams back another whiskey and soda (his third). This, he reflects, is apparently how he has chosen to spend this portion of the *che shi bardo*.

Maybe, he thinks drunkenly, maybe he should just get out of his relationship with Janine, escape before he gets hurt. But once he did that he would be alone, and he doesn't have any idea how to go about finding a new girlfriend. Within the past two years he's dated two women, but does not feel like he chose either of them; they chose him. He looks around, sees a pretty Japanese girl standing by herself, listening, and he thinks, *what about her?*,

that could be great, but he feels like approaching her is utterly outside the possible options available to him in this universe.

The *si pa bardo* is the Bardo of Possibility, a period, after death, during which our next existence is not yet determined. Many different existences are open to us. Only the enlightened, however, are able to select from the available choices.

