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book two
games and poems

issue five
february 2002

ABOUT IMAGINARY YEAR

Imaginary Year is a work of serial fiction, written by Jeremy P. Bushnell. It began in September 2000, and is renewed each September.

New entries appear each Monday and Friday on the *Imaginary Year* website (www.ImaginaryYear.com). Printable versions of the entire story to date, such as the one that you are holding, are available through that site as well.

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30 / FOUR DECISIONS

It is a Wednesday midmorning. Austin sits in an overstuffed chair, drinking a mug of aryuvedic tea, looking out the window at the falling snow. Gray flecks whirling silently against gray sky.

The morning is quiet, as his mornings often are. His roommate is at work. His friends, too. But Austin doesn't have to be at work until two-thirty. He teaches kids how to use audiovisual equipment in a neighborhood program that meets after school, and this has allowed him to use the mornings as a private time, during which he can gather his thoughts, recenter. He hardly ever even puts on any music. He just does not feel ready for the presence of another mind. Generally.

Today, however, he is thinking about Lydia. Preparing to call her. They've gotten together twice now, each time out somewhere in public, and he's decided that he's definitely interested. His roommate's out of town this weekend, so he'll have the apartment to himself. He wants to take advantage of that privacy, invite Lydia over for an evening. But it's already Wednesday, and the weekend is fast approaching. He fishes her business card out of his wallet, downs the last mouthful of tea, and punches buttons on the phone.

#

Friday night. Austin is on his couch. Lydia is sitting on the floor, indian-style, reading liner notes. She is leaning her back against his legs. They've spent the evening listening to music. Lydia had browsed the hundreds of jewel cases on the shelves and pulled out anything she'd heard *of* but hadn't actually heard. They listened to everything from Wire's *Pink Flag* to a set of discs of John Cale's 1960's sound experiments.

She looks up at him. —What time is it? she asks, groggily.

—It's, uh, one.

—Fuck, Lydia says. —I don't feel like trekking all the way back down to Hyde Park.

I don't even know if the buses *run* this late. (She pauses, giving Austin a chance to interject.

He offers nothing more than a noncommittal *hmm*, so she continues.) —I guess I could take a cab.

—Look, Austin says. —If you wanted? You could crash here tonight.

—Really? Lydia says. —I wouldn't want to inconvenience you...

—It's no thing, says Austin.

—Then I could just take the bus back tomorrow, Lydia says, as though she is figuring this out as she goes.

—Sure, Austin says. —Don't waste all that money on a cab.

—That *would* be more convenient, Lydia says. —Are you sure I wouldn't be imposing?

—Yeah, it's fine.

—OK, Lydia says. —Thanks.

#

Austin shows her to his bedroom. Lydia looks around and she sees his guitar, a small bookshelf crammed full, a bureau on which his hat sits. Austin had anticipated that she might see this room tonight, so he's hidden all the dirty laundry, cleaned up the apple cores and empty glasses, washed the sheets.

—You can crash here, he says. —I can go, uh, crash on the couch.

Lydia notices that he is still pretending that they're really talking about convenience. But she can see his interest. She can tell by the way he hesitates: he is giving her an opportunity to change his mind. She can recognize this because she has done the same thing in the past.

—It's OK, she says. —You can sleep in here with me.

—You sure? Austin says, his voice all concern.

—Sure, she says. —I'd hate to think of you out there tossing and turning all night.

Besides, you seem like a perfect gentleman.

#

It is 2:13, and so far he has, in fact, been a perfect gentleman. They lie in the dark, next to one another, not touching. Both of them are fiercely awake.

—Austin? she says.

—Yeah? he says.

—Are you awake?

—Yeah, he says.

—Come here, she says.

She slides her leg over his. This decision has immediate ramifications. It is as though an electricity runs through them both. He rolls towards her.

31 / AFTERNOONS AFTER

Lydia and Paul sit on the sofa, with a big bowl of popcorn between them. They are watching the Super Bowl, mainly so that they can see the ads. When actual football is on the screen, like now, they mute the TV and makegossip.

—I want to call him, Lydia says.

She means Austin. Friday night they made out lazily for hours, drifting in and out of semi-sleep, and finally, shortly after dawn, she pushed down on his chest with her hands and straddled his cock and rode him until they both cried out with release. Afterwards, she slid herself off of him and lay on her back, breathing hard, and he knotted up the condom, only to let it slide from his grasp and become lost somewhere in the tangle of bedclothes. He looked for it for only a moment before returning to her, kissing the tips of her breasts gently, then nuzzling his scratchy face into her neck and resting there.

The next afternoon was pleasant enough: they went out for lunch, and they thankfully did not talk about what would happen next or where this would go. (Instead they discussed their pet peeves, which Lydia took as a sign of future interest: a gift of a knowledgekit of behaviors to avoid. She was grateful, too, that none of his pet peeves seemed like things she would be prone to do.) But now she's trying to figure out if she's misplayed her cards.

She's surprised that she went all the way with him so early. Normally she doesn't do that: she feels like it causes a relationship to develop at the wrong rate, like a flower that blooms so brightly and so quickly that it snaps its own stem. But on Friday she felt herself just wanting so badly to abandon herself to *fucking*—maybe it was something she needed,

after dating Thomas for an entire summer and never even getting to take all of her clothes off.

—You *should* call him, Paul says.

—I can't, Lydia says.

She called him on Saturday night, just a few hours after she'd left, using the pretense of just calling to see if she'd left her scarf at his place (she had). Once that was settled, she'd asked *so what are you up to right now?* and he'd said *I'm just working on something on the guitar* and she'd exclaimed *oh!* and, not wanting to be the type of girl who is seen as an interference, she'd said *well, I'd better let you get back to it.*

He'd said *no, it's OK*, but Lydia did not want to take any chances, so she lied and said *Actually, I'm just on my way out the door, I just wanted to check about the scarf*, and she gave him time to hurry out a goodbye and she hung up the phone.

Now it is Sunday, and he has not called, and the day has slid into evening.

—It's not that I *can't*, Lydia says. —It's more that I don't want to be one of those girls who, like, *crowds* a guy. She digs into the popcorn bowl.

—I don't know if I'd worry about that, Paul says. —It's obvious that he likes you.

—You're thinking that way because *you* like me, she says. She selects a piece of popcorn out of the handful and tosses it into her mouth, chewing it while shaking her head *no*. —Just because a guy sleeps with you doesn't mean that he likes you. I mean, he *seems* to like me, but he could just be, you know, some guy who wanted to get his rocks off.

—I think you're a better judge of character than that, Paul says.

—Yeah, Lydia says. —I think so, too. But I just want to be *sure*. But if I call him up and start asking all these questions about *do you like me?* or whatever, I'm just going to seem weird and he's going to freak out. And I keep saying *oh, just call him up, and be real casual*, but I

know that if I call him I'm going to start asking those questions; I won't be able to help myself. What I *really* want is for him to call *me*, because then I'll have at least *some* piece of evidence that he's still interested, and maybe I'll be able to actually get through a conversation acting like a normal human being.

—I see, Paul says.

Lydia sighs, picks another piece of popcorn out of her cupped hand, and fits it into her mouth. —I hate all this game-playing shit. Can I just tell you that? I hate trying to *pretend* that I'm all casual and that what he thinks doesn't *matter* to me. I wish I could just *be honest* and tell him that, you know, sometimes, at the beginning of a relationship, *especially* after the first time I have *sex* with a guy, I need a little reassurance. But the second I *say* that, this guy's going to be like *whoa, I didn't sign up for this!*

—Maybe you could tell him that you're worried about crowding him, Paul says. — Try being honest by telling him that you're concerned about *his* needs. Because you certainly are. Maybe he'd find that less threatening.

—Maybe, Lydia says. —I don't know. I think he'd find that weird. If I say *I don't want to crowd you* what he's going to hear is *I want to crowd you but I'm trying to hold back.*

—Hm, Paul says.

—This sucks. I almost wish that I hadn't even fooled around with the guy.

—Really? Paul asks.

—No, Lydia says. She grins, then points at the TV. —Ads, she says.

32 / POETRY IN THE COMPLEX

For people like Clark, who have made it a point to position themselves against the military-industrial complex, the news, these days, has been bad.

—Bush continues to drag out the word "evil" (*false word, false dialectic*, Clark thinks, every time).

—The U.S. refuses to give prisoners of war status to prisoners taken in the so-called War on Terrorism. (She thinks *The Onion* sees it for what it is: "Those Geneva Convention rules were made back when we were fighting white people.")

—Yesterday's *Sun-Times* featured the headline "Powell Cranks Up 'Let's Invade Iraq' Talk." (She saw it in the morning and registered it bleakly, then forgot about it while she was at work. On her way home, later that night, slightly drunk, she saw it again, and the experience was that of waking out of a pleasant dream, and being reminded of where you are, the way the world really is. A photo of Powell with clenched fist. She stopped in her walk for a moment and imagined weeping.)

Today she is in her Perihelion office, writing a poem, *Arena*.

It is a long, thin poem: her lines seem only able to advance a few words before they die.

...

helicopter surveillance

anxiety, nervousness, weakness, or dry mouth

GBU-12 Paveway II

GBU-16 Paveway II (people char)

loss of appetite

yawning

...

Sometimes, when she writes, she wonders whether she shouldn't be doing something else. She remembers Adorno's statement: "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." But Clark thinks that Adorno is writing about the range of actions appropriate for him personally, not issuing an edict to all poets, for all time. (She has read a later quote by him: "I have no wish to soften the saying that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric ... [But] literature must resist this verdict.")

Adorno had lost those he loved: of course the only appropriate action, for him, was to grieve, to attend faithfully to the dead.

She stares at the screen, frowns, drums her fingers on the keyboard.

The question, she thinks, is one of determining the appropriate action for your context. She lives in a military-industrial complex during a time where airstrikes are committed in the name of her government. The War Machine and the State Machine working harmoniously. She wonders whether she should not be protesting more usefully, fighting more visibly.

But she thinks back to Bush and his use of the word *evil*. She considers the way that this word fails to admit any shade of gray, fails to suggest that the causality of events may be even slightly complex. It makes a simplified cartoon world of the world.

Clark thinks of her poems as pockets of ambiguity. *Arena*, for instance, is stripped of almost all its verbs: she articulates no system of interactions between her nouns. She lets

them pile up, a junkyard of things and their meanings orbiting independently around some unspoken core.

She leafs through a pile of printouts until her eye settles upon some words. She types: semi-active laser (man-in-the-loop)

There is another complex that Clark inhabits, an information-entertainment complex, which runs on unambiguous messages. It does not particularly care whether the message is Bush's speech or Total Request Live or even a protester's slogan, as long as it is simple, easily reducible, redundant. These are the prerequisites for clean transmission.

Clark's poems are a part of this complex, but they do not work the right way. They may *mean* something, but this meaning is not distinct, not whole: her readers must assemble it for themselves (and different readers may assemble it differently). This process of assembly takes time, it is slow. Her poems are a sand in the lubricant. A friction in the machines.

Her context is now. Her appropriate action is to be difficult, and irreducible. Anything else would be barbaric.

She picks up a pencil and taps it against her front teeth.

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.

34 / THE BREAKING OF THE FELLOWSHIP

Paul and Marvin sit around a table covered in Dungeons and Dragons rulebooks, legal pads, hex maps, dice, glasses of pop, and bags of chips. Paul looks over the character sheet for his barbarian, Adi-Kaya, and listens to Marvin sigh with exaggerated impatience.

When they started up this new campaign, they first had to agree on a time when they could all consistently meet. They discussed weekday nights, but then, in a burst of optimism, they decided to give over a weekend afternoon, hoping for longer sessions of gaming, less constrained by late commutes home and thoughts of *work tomorrow*.

But now it is Saturday, and they were supposed to start playing at noon, and it's pushing towards 12:45, and Lydia is nowhere to be seen. Paul recalls her heading out to Austin's last night; he suspected that she might stay over, but he also assumed that she'd be back in time to play. They've already called her cell and left her a message—*call us and just let us know what's going on*.

—We could just get started, Paul says. He knows that Marvin wants to play: Marvin looks forward to the game more than any of them. And Paul feels responsible, partly responsible anyway, for the delay, because it was his idea to invite Lydia into the campaign in the first place. (He's not sure why Marvin didn't want to invite Lydia, although he suspects it has something to do with her being a woman.)

—I don't know, says Marvin. —I just wish she'd have *thought to call us*.

—Yeah, I know, Paul says. —I'm sure she'll call soon and let us know what's going on. She's probably waiting for a bus or something right now. So do you want to play?

—I guess, Marvin says.

—You guess, Paul says. —Come on. I can see it.

So they begin playing. Marvin contrives something to separate Lydia's character, Malgorra, from the rest of the party. (She steps on a trapped plate and slides down a chute.) One moment later another chute opens beneath Adi-Kaya and Galbraith, Marvin's cleric, and they slide into a coal bin that's at one end of a giant underground forging complex, run by dwarves who have been enslaved by ogres.

After a few minutes the game has raised Marvin's spirits. The ogres, on catwalks high above, begin to fire crossbow bolts; one catches Galbraith in the shoulder. Adi-Kaya embraces Galbraith to him, blocking the rain of arrows with the bulk of his scarred and armored back, and charges across open space, aiming for the shelter of an alcove at the far end of the room. A single ogre guards the path with a pole-arm, and Adi-Kaya glares, raises his axe and swings—

A froth of blood rises from the ogre's slashed throat; Marvin describes it with great animation and obvious relish. Paul enjoys watching his performance: Marvin's love for the game becomes so clear. It is obvious that the game is the thing, more than anything else in this world, that helps Marvin to feel competent, needed, and cool. The game is the thing that helps him to come fully alive.

The phone rings. Marvin rolls his eyes and grabs the cordless before Paul has a chance to intervene.

—Yeah? Marvin says. A pause, then: —Hey, where *are* you?

Paul has already forgiven Lydia. The game does not do the same thing for her. He knows that she comes alive in other spaces. Right now, those spaces are the ones that she shares with Austin. He wonders if he can find a way to help Marvin to understand that.

—Yeah, well, Marvin says. —I guess. We got started without you.

35 / STALLED [I]

After work, Freya hops a bus over to Jakob's apartment. He buzzes her in and meets her at the door. —I'm still working on this thing, he says. —I'll be done in a minute.

He sits back down at the computer, and she leaves him there, staring at what look like pictures of gutted factories. She sheds her coat and hat, and gets the new issue of *The Wire* out of her shoulderbag (she borrowed it from the store because it has a cover article on Richard Hell, and she's been listening to a lot of Voidoids and Television lately). *I belong to the blank generation and I can take it or leave it each time.*

She sits on Jakob's sofa, flip through the magazine idly for a while. After a few minutes Jakob shouts —I'm just about done in here. —Great, Freya says.

She looks in at him through the doorway. He leans his head back, stares at the ceiling, and says —Ugh. Then he hunches over again, looking back at the computer.

Freya flips another page in *The Wire*. She is no longer reading.

—You know, she says. —I've been thinking.

—Yeah? Jakob says.

—I've been thinking about going back to school.

Jakob pauses for a second, and then swivels in his chair to face her through the doorway. —Really? he asks.

—Yeah, really, she says. —I just, I don't know, I just feel kind of *stalled out* these days. She sort of gestures vaguely around her.

It's true, she does. She's been at the record store for three years now; and aside from the manager and the owner, she's outlasted everyone else who was there when she was hired.

She's the assistant manager now, and there's nowhere else to go from there. (That is, unless Don, the manager, quits, but Freya doesn't think Don will ever quit. He's got a good thing going: he assigns all the major work of running the store to her and then spends his days examining the incoming used vinyl. He prices the rarities cheap so that he can buy them himself, either to put in his own collection, or to sell on Ebay, to finance a rumored drug habit.)

Being the assistant manager is fine, she guesses—it pays the bills—but she feels strangely *guilty* about having dropped out of college. She dropped out in her second year to play drums in a band. The band only lasted for about eight months, but once she'd skipped the groove of the school thing it was all too easy to find stuff around Chicago to keep her busy and entertained. But now everything seems to have a certain *sameness* to it, and maybe school would be the trick. It would be good, she thinks, for her mind to be in an environment where it could brush up against other minds.

Not that the people around her aren't smart. Jakob's getting his Master's degree and, fuck, Fletcher's getting his *doctorate*. But she feels like it's difficult for her to talk to them about their intellectual work. Maybe what she needs is to be around people who are working closer to her own level.

—Hey, Jakob says. —If that's what you want to do, that's cool; I'm totally supportive of that. But, I mean, I don't know. I see a lot of entry-level college kids, and I just try to, like, picture you in that classroom. I think you'd feel pretty thwarted. You're a lot smarter than those kids: I just see you eating them *alive*.

Yeah yeah yeah, she's smart. Sure. But Jakob and Fletcher are thinking about ideas that they've been working with for like ten *years*; they were reading the kind of shit that they read while Freya was out every other night drinking Old Style and playing pool and fucking

lowlifes. She's tried to get them to explain, to fill out the details of where they are in their own heads, and every time they sort of heave a sigh and begin explaining things to her like she's four and she immediately wants to say *forget it*.

—Yeah, Freya says, —but I'm just kind of *tired* of not being at the same *level* as everybody else around me. I mean, you've got this *project* that you're working on, Fletcher and Clark have their poems, but what do I have like that? Nothing.

—I don't know, Jakob says. —Academia's not all that great. Most of the people there are pretty boring. That's part of why I like you, you know: you're kind of *outside* of that whole scene. And that's, that's *refreshing*.

Freya interprets this as basically meaning *I like the novelty of having someone around who's dumb*. She knows that this is uncharitable, but she's feeling in a pretty uncharitable mood tonight. So fuck it.

—Like, Jakob continues, —you're interested in stuff *besides* your research?

But that's the whole problem, Freya thinks. *I don't **have** any research.*

36 / STALLED [II]

Jakob's sinuses feel as though they have been packed full of heavy wet cereal, and yet the tissues of his nose are paper-dry, desiccated from two days of constant blowing and a season spent in heated buildings. He is in the university library; the decor is cement and salmon tile. He groggily enters terms into a computer, then clicks Submit, to send off his search request: the screen goes blank and hangs there. He tilts his head slightly. He's been tilting his head slightly all day. Each of his ears seems set to a different level of pressurization, leaving him feeling like his head isn't on quite straight. Finally the results come up. He jots down a few book titles and their call numbers onto an index card, and heads off into the stacks, looking first for HT361.W55 1991, his eyes heavy-lidded, his mouth hanging open, as though he has just taken a punch to the face.

The call number would locate the book on the lowest shelf. He crouches down to get it, folds up his body despite the aches that riddle it. The book isn't there. He double-checks and it still isn't there. —Fuck, he mutters. He hauls himself back up and his knee pops, loud as a gunshot. This bodily treachery incenses him, makes him feel like he may vomit with rage.

He wanders towards the back of the library. He is not looking for the other books he's written down; he is just moving for the sake of moving, because, you know, animals are essentially motile, so why the fuck not?

Then he passes a study carrel and he wearies of moving and he sits.

There are a thousand messages carved into the wood, including a giant swastika.

Jakob makes a fist and presses it into his forehead and leans his head back on his neck, and, in this position, he embarks upon a session of self-reflection.

In May he will turn in his qualifying paper and, if all goes well, he will receive a Master's degree in American Studies. And then he will need to figure out something to do. He is not certain what that will be. He could go on teaching, probably, although he's going to be relegated to a pretty low rung. The Master's degree isn't really going to impress anyone. There is no Ph.D. program in American Studies, not that he knows of, and he doesn't feel like he has a distinct enough interest in Literature or Sociology or Urban Planning to go on and get his Ph.D. in any of those fields.

He had plans last summer to write some articles—with a few articles published in respectable journals, he might seem more promising. But his interest in writing the articles fizzled as soon as he had the abstracts cobbled together. The closest he came was the short presentation he gave at Michigan State. What Jakob is mainly interested in is the mystery of things he does not know, and this makes him a bad academic. Once he understands the general topography of an area of knowledge, his interest in it begins to wane. He does not have the discipline to stake out an area for five years, ten, twenty, bringing each nuance of its landscape into light. He hardly has the discipline to do it for a week. One week he is interested in alternate systems of mapping, the next he is interested in loop theory.

Thinking of *mapping* reminds him that he hasn't been in touch with Thomas in months. The two of them had agreed, way back before the holidays, to get together and work on this project, this soundmap thing. Then Jakob got caught up in the madness of shopping, and going back to Ohio for two weeks, and the plan got moved to a back burner, where it's been ever since. Jakob can't fathom why he would let something like that drop. It had seemed promising; he was hoping that it would give him ideas for his novel.

Oh, God. The novel. The poor novel. He keeps telling himself to begin writing it: he's got an entire shoebox full of scribbled-down notes and ideas held in stasis. There just never seems to be a good time to sit down and *begin* the thing. He tries to envision himself doing it. He sees himself there, in front of the computer, writing. He multiplies this image a hundred times, trying to imagine all the hours it would take to produce an entire book. The picture just seems ludicrous; the self in it seems a pathetic fantasy, so different from the one he actually inhabits.

He has considered going into an MFA program, buying himself the time and space needed to write, but he doesn't want to just go through life accumulating Master's degrees. At some point he is going to need to find a job.

He is thirty years old now. Before he came to Chicago for grad school he was working in Ohio as an assistant to the director of a fundraising organization. He wore a tie and was liked by the other people in the office, enough anyway. He spent his days scanning files and keeping someone else's tasks straight, and he looked forward mostly to the cappuccino that he would pick up at the end of his lunchbreak.

He does not want to go back to that world.

But he does not yet seem poised to succeed in any other.