

NEOMETROPOLIS



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Contents

Why do we listen to this shmo?		1
Brian Rideout	<i>Pupate (fiction)</i>	2
Vera Searles	<i>A Spur in the Eye (fiction)</i>	15
John Jacobs	<i>Port 67 Excerpt (fiction)</i>	19
Marina Lee Sable	<i>Prophecy (poetry)</i>	31
Greg Beatty	<i>Recycling (fiction)</i>	32
Jason Earls	<i>Google Primes (article)</i>	34
Darren Franz	<i>Living Doll (fiction)</i>	36
Darren Speegle	<i>Ascend the Seasoning Son (fiction)</i>	41
John St. John	<i>Abyss Meditation (article)</i>	46

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WHY DO WE LISTEN TO THIS SHMO?

Just a few things real quick. First and foremost, I'd like to thank everyone who contributed this time around. My budget wasn't as forgiving as I'd have liked but I did the best I could to keep this issue packed with goodies. YOU people are Neometropolis, not me.

Secondly, if you haven't checked out the messageboard yet then you should do so and get in on some of the mullet-loving, goatse.cx-esque conversations that await you there. You don't know what you're missing out on if you haven't gone there yet!

<http://www.neometropolis.com/msgboard>

Thirdly, I would like to dedicate this issue to Cruciform Injection, a mind-blowing electronic/industrial group from Chi-town whose music will provide you with the perfect ambience while you are reading your fresh new copy of Neometropolis Magazine ©[®]™.

<http://www.cruciforminjection.com/>

On with the show!

- John, 6/13/05

PUPATE

Brian Rideout

They sent her to the institute pretty much straight from the hospital. The report I got listed the contents of her stomach when they brought her in... a lightbulb, old-fashioned fuses for electrical systems in houses, the motherboard of a computer that she actually cut up into little bits with a fork and knife, pages from copies of *The History of The Communist Party of the U.S.S.R.* (Page 12 from every annual reprinting in the 1970's.), some telephone wire, and a few dozen metres of audio tape... minus the plastic casing. When she was younger she had pretty much ground her teeth down into nothing and they were all capped with that extra strong chemical enamel. She could bite through nearly anything. The officer who arrested her said she had actually gnawed her way out of a pair of handcuffs.

She wouldn't speak to anyone, although she certainly reacted to them, mostly by glaring and the occasional attempt to bite, she managed to do serious damage to a nurse that tried to force feed her. In the file her name was *Jasmine Winters*; no one in their right state of mind would believe it was the same girl as the one in the photos in her files. The *Jasmine Winters* in the files was a clean, healthy looking teenage girl, a blonde, leggy, homecoming queen type... about a heroin habit away from becoming a low-rent porn star. The girl in the cell had chopped off most of her hair with razor blades and painted the rest black with a can of spray paint and tangled some more of the same telephone wire in. The girl in the cell was dirty and skinny and caked with grime when they got her in. There were jagged scars spelling out *Heavy Metal* just below her throat.

I'm not personally supposed to read the patient files. None of my business, but after mopping up bloody vomit full of glass slivers off of a cell floor, I get curious. The first night I was in there she just sat in the corner of her room watching me over her knees. I attempted conversation as best I could while pushing around the mop.

NEOMETROPOLIS

“Sure is a hell of a lot of glass and metal. Did you eat all of this, or did someone feed it to you?”

She kept of with her glare, narrowed her eyes a bit into a “shut-up” look. I never let that sort of thing bother me much. Most of the patients at the institute warm up to you if you play dumb, like you don’t notice that they don’t like you. This is also how I get into rooms with files I’m not supposed to be looking at. Half the staff thinks I can’t read.

“I’m Derek, What’s your name?”

I got more of the same from her, if anything she tired to look meaner. In the end I let her be, after all, I could always learn everything I wanted to know later. I think it was primarily the look she had when she came in and the vile slime on the floor that made me curious enough to keep trying to get to know her. I wish I had smuggled my camera in that night.

I saw her a couple of times over the next week in the activity room and the like. The other patients avoided her as much as possible, which was not difficult as she pretty much sat in the corner of the room and glared unless she was hassled to do otherwise. For some reason they had absolutely no problem feeding her her medication, she only fought the normal everyday food. I tried striking up a conversation with her more than once. They pretty much all went as well as the first one.

“Hi, your name’s Jasmine, isn’t it?”

...nothing...

“Remember me? I’m Derek. I helped clean up your room.”

...nought...

“You really don’t look like a Jasmine to me. I bet your friends call you Jazz.”

...zip...

“You’re not much of a talker are you?”

...zero...

“Okay... going...”

...zilch...

About that time a patient name Walter came up to me and made a grab for me:

NEOMETROPOLIS

“She’s not very friendly. She hasn’t said anything to anybody. She bit Nurse Anthony, too... real hard. You should come over here with me and see my new invention.”

The second Monday after they brought her in I got called up to Doctor Haley. Jasmine had spilled a bottle of water on the floor when Haley was trying to assess her condition in what the staff calls the playroom. Haley was the kind of asshole who thought that because I was the janitor it was my job to clean up every little spill, he could have managed the mess with a handkerchief himself.

The playroom is one of the most fucked-up room you could ever imagine. I snuck a camera in once and took some pictures of it. It is this big room that looks at first like a nursery, you have a lot of soft, padded furniture, boxes full of toys, a couple of mats, and a desk with a cheap old blue-plastic computer with some puzzle-type games on it. The doctors seem to think they can get some kind of idea about what is wrong with the non-so-talkative patients using it. The problem is, the room itself is totally sterile white and meticulously clean. The single window in the room looks out over a cemetery full of dead trees and a run-down church, and they’re barred from the inside to keep patients from breaking the glass. The only splash of colour other than the computer and the toys is a big red panic button to call the orderly thugs in case a patient gets violent. Half the time they get semi-catatonic types in there who cuddle up with the first doll they are handed and sit in the middle of the room staring off into space. I actually have a picture of just such a thing from when I snuck a camera into the institute. I have finally got all of those where I want them. I’ll be putting them up in a gallery sometime next year once I get the hell out of this city and up north where they appreciate real art.

Anyway, That Monday I headed into the playroom with a mop and some sponges and rags, etc., and started mopping up. The Doctor Haley decided to come over and stick his nose where it was not wanted. He was on my back from the day I started working at the institute, with this high-and-mighty twelve-years-of-college moral-majority attitude. He saw me as some kind of do-nothing jerkoff who he expected to quit as soon as I could find a way to get money out of it. Not that he ever said anything straight up. That might get him in trouble. It was always a tone-of-voice thing, and double-talk.

“Hello, Derek, the water is right there.”

“Hello, Doctor Haley.”

“How are things going, Derek?”

“They’re going, Doctor.”

NEOMETROPOLIS

“Just going?”

“Well...”

“How come I never hear you say things are going well, or good, or something like that? Are you feeling alright these days?”

Now before you say something like “he seems alright to me,” I’d like to point out that I was a patient in the institute for a few years back when I was young and stupid, myself. The way he said things implied “are you sure you don’t want me to find out what’s wrong with you so you can give up the janitor job and become a decent productive member of society like me and not a slob?” He has something against artwork and all things worthwhile. I think he’s in the job for the money.

I gave him my best Slater/Nicholson “No, Doc I’m feeling just fine,” and he was about to get preachy on me when we both hear this flurry of key-tapping. When I came in, the Doctor had Jasmine playing some kind of Tetris-clone game. I had been slightly surprised by the fact that he actually got her to play it at all, from what I could tell; she thought computers were for eating.

By the time we got over to see what she was doing, she had already broken out of the security lockouts, downloaded and installed some old telecommunications software from the stone age of computers and managed to get into a chat-room, and had started a conversation with some Internet person.

My policy at the institute in general is not let the doctors see me curious about things, it makes them think there’s more to you than a shaven-headed janitor punk with a lip ring. But my jaw dropped just as fast as Doc Haley’s did and we both ran over the monitor to watch. Jasmine didn’t seem to notice us there. I was just about caught up in reading the conversation when the Doctor looked up and realized I was reading it too.

“Derek would you mind leaving us be... I don’t want you crowding the patient. I can clean up if you’ll just leave me a rag.”

Once most of the staff had cleared off and lights out was in effect I decided to modify my cleaning schedule and mop up the playroom on Tuesdays instead of Wednesdays. Now, I know something about computers. I’m no hacker, but I know one and I asked him a few questions the next morning. He said it was really simple stuff to get around, and the best way not to get spotted by the computer guy would be to unplug the computer from the network-switching hub-dohickey. So Tuesday night I went in with a slip of paper with the hacking stuff written down on it, and an old-fashioned blank floppy-disk to copy the stuff down

NEOMETROPOLIS

on. I figured if nothing else, I might be able to use it all for a story, or at least get a kick out of it. At the time, Jasmine was still interesting. I also figured maybe there was a way I could fuck with Doctor Haley if I got creative. It wasn't particularly juicy stuff, and half of it was practically unreadable geekspeak, but it had some interesting moments.

```
*** HeavyMetalChick joined #retrogame 16:35-11/14/07 ***
(HeavyMetalChick): HIH! = )
(Animals): MC! Where've U been? Haven't seen U in a week!
(L33-R0y): geex> N0p3 N3\3R B33n.
```

```
Hy, H3@\y H0\\/ R U?
(Geex): L33-R0y> Really? You have to check it out.
```

```
H.M.C.>Hey.
(HeavyMetalChick): Got sick. Am in Hospital. = (
(Animals): That's not cool. What happened?
(HeavyMetalChick): Working too hard on the experiment. Crashed hard.
(L33-R0y): 3y3 H0P3 U R F33LyNG B3TT3R.
(Geex): I am sending you the URL.
*** Sascha_K joined #retrogame 16:38-11/14/07 ***
(Mr.44): Geex, Do U have the crack 4 Kyrandia 3?
(Animals): U have been working too hard on that thing. U still haven't
told us what you are working on, anyway. How about a hint?
```

```
Sascha_K> Guten Tag! Wie Geht's?
(Sascha_K): LO
(HeavyMetalChick): Animals> You are what you eat.
```

```
L33-R0y> Thanx. Did you find that card 4 me?
*** Mr.44 was disconnected from #retrogame by @Otaku[lurking] 16:40-
11/14/07 ***
No leechy-leechy!
(Sascha_K): Nicht Schlecht..
```

```
Heavy> What's up?
(Animals):That's what you always say... Another hint.
(L33-R0y): YUP. \\/H3R3 D0 U \\/@NT 2 M33T 4 IT?
```

```
... T0@$T3D!
(HeavyMetalChick) Hey, SK.
```

```
Animals> Breakfast is the most important meal of the day.
```

```
L33-R0y> We may have to wait until I'm out of the Hospital, how often R
U going to be at Omni this week?
(Geex): Otaku> What did he do?
(Animals): ~sigh~
(L33-R0y) H3@\y> rotflmao
(L33-R0y): 3\3Ry NIT3.
(HeavyMetalChick) Animals> ; )
(Sascha_K): Geex> He used the 'C' word in the public chat. Otaku's
autokick script went off. Haven't you ever checked ?rules ?
(HeavyMetalChick): L33-R0y Thanx. Could you keep it on you?
(Geex): So I can't call you a buttcraacker if I want to?
```


NEOMETROPOLIS

*** Geex was disconnected from #retrogame by @Otaku[lurking] 16:40-11/14/07 ***

IRQ Mismatch Error #4268: Speech coming from wrong orifice!

(L33-R0y): NO PR0B.

(Animals): I take it all of this old hardware has something to do with your experiment?

(HeavyMetalChick): Maybe.

(Animals): Don't try too hard, okay. The last thing you need is to burn yourself out.

(L33-R0y): H3y, H3@\y, 3y3 G0T @ l33D 0N S0(\/)3 0F y3 0LD3 DI(\/)R@M, 2. INT3R3ST3D?

*** NO CARRIER ***

Apparently, that is about the time that the system guys spotted Jasmine hacking and slashing her way through the network and kicked her off. My techno-geek buddy looked it all over for me and told me how to get into the same chat room, and how to make one of my own. That's when I got the brilliant idea about how I could get through to talking to her. The mysterious experiment might be just what I needed for a story, or at least to screw over Haley, which seemed like a good idea at the time.

On my day off, I went out and bought a pair of hand-held computers from a used electronics store for about fifty bucks and a cable to connect the two of them. I set one up so it could set up a chat room like the other one. I called it #rubber_room. After getting my work done for the night I slipped into Jasmine's cell. As usual I found her huddled in the corner. She somehow managed to remain looking unwashed throughout her two weeks in the institute, and undernourished enough that she had only begun to grow new hair even though they had shaved her head the morning after she had come in. I sat down on her unused cot and looked her in the eye. She gave me a poisonous glare from behind her knees.

"It must be a real pain in the ass... having people talking to you like a baby and hovering over your shoulder half of the day.. You know, if you pretend to be even remotely capable of sociable interaction, they would give you some space..."

She made a very deliberate sweep of my throat with narrowed eyes.

"You're not at all interested in talking to anyone face to face are you?" I reached into my coat and pulled out one of the mini-computers and held it up for her. She moved like she was going to take it for a moment and then stopped and went back to giving me ugly looks. "Look... I'm not a doctor... this is strictly between me and you. If things work out I might even let you keep it... It's got a cellular modem in it and everything. You could use it to talk to your friends online or whatever, instead of counting the fibres of the wall padding."

She gave me another look up and down and then reached out for it slowly. I kept it just out of reach for another second.

NEOMETROPOLIS

“Just two things... It's not food, and this is strictly between you and me... you keep this thing hidden from the doctors and orderlies...”

She gave me another ugly look and then took the hand-held and began to type:

```
*** HeavyMetalChick joined #rubber_room 02:04-11/17/07 ***
(HeavyMetalChick): So what do I have to do to keep this thing? You want
me to suck your cock or something?
(Derek): I want to know about this big experiment of yours.
(HeavyMetalChick): I thought you said you weren't a doctor.
(Derek): I'm not. I'm just curious.
(HeavyMetalChick): Why?
(Derek): Maybe I can turn it into a story or a painting or something.
(HeavyMetalChick): So you're an artist.
(Derek): You could say that. I get all my inspiration from working at
the institute.
(HeavyMetalChick): In other words you are some hack who takes trues
stories of human suffering and sell them off as art to perverts,
sickos, headbangers, and goths because its easier than coming up with
real ideas.
(Derek): Pretty much. Yeah.
(HeavyMetalChick): I'm down with that.
(Derek): So you'll tell me then?
(HeavyMetalChick): If you'll help me out.
(Derek): Deal.
(HeavyMetalChick): I'm jamming the narrative.
(Derek): ??
(HeavyMetalChick): It's simple. Language is reality. Reality is
language. We are about a thousand light years from ever seeing what's
really real, because we think and understand the world through filters.
Language is a filter. You don't see the grass as brown, but when your
eyes are hit by light bouncing off the molecules that make grass your
brain think 'grass is brown'. Any way in which you deal with that grass
comes from those words floating around in your head. The actual really
real grass is not what you think about, its not what you touch, or mow,
or burn, or whatever, you are concerned with the idea of grass in your
head.
(Derek): Foucault right?
(HeavyMetalChick): Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition! He reads!

(Derek): So what's this got to do with "jamming the narrative."
(HeavyMetalChick): Okay, so our whole reality is words right?
Everything we see and do and think has nothing to do with anything
really real. Hell you could hallucinate the grass... you could be
dreaming your entire life without anything you see actually
representing a real thing, right?
(Derek): Right right.
(HeavyMetalChick): Our language is ingrained with a bunch of ideas too,
right?
(Derek): go on.
(HeavyMetalChick): Its like when feminists used to go nuts on the whole
neuter 'he' thing. When you say 'he' when talking about someone in a
hypothetical situation when you don't know if it's a man or a woman, it
makes you think in certain ways and calls back on all sorts of things.
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NEOMETROPOLIS

The 'he' isn't really neutral. It assumes that anyone who can actually affect the worlds is male, that activity is inherently male, that men transmit and women receive, men therefore are dominant in the culture, etc.

(Derek): So the feminists would have us believe.

(HeavyMetalChick): OK bad example. What about 'better'. When you use the term better you assume that one thing is more valuable than another thing. Health is better than sickness, a 75% profit margin is better than a 25% profit margin, butter is better than margarine. In the really real world, though margarine is margarine and butter is butter, they are just things. We have to assume in intrinsic value, the favour of God, free will, opportunity, the invisible hand, right? The word better has a whole bunch of assumptions attached to it.

(Derek): OK

(HeavyMetalChick): These are narrative, and some of them are so big you can't think in the English language without working with them... the Grand Narratives. Sound familiar?

(Derek): Foucault write about this stuff too?

(HeavyMetalChick): Derrida... he came after Foucault. I think. If you aren't familiar with this stuff what's your interest in Foucault?

(Derek): All the other starving artists were doing it... They were passing some around at a party and I thought, just once... I didn't want to look like a dweeb.

(HeavyMetalChick): _tsk_. Don't you know Foucault is a gateway writer?! If you got hooked on him who knows where you might have ended up! You could have ended up an Existentialist, or worse yet a, Semiotician! I thought we raised you better than this.

(Derek): ~L~

So what are these grand narratives?

(HeavyMetalChick): They are ideas so important that the people who speak a language just assume they are reality without ever thinking. Stuff like Free Will, Evolution, Linear time, Science and Religion being at ends, Science being important, God being Important, Money being the road to success, The idea that humans can succeed or fail, the idea that there are such things as success and failure. The real basic assumptions of our culture.

(Derek): OK...

(HeavyMetalChick): I found a loophole. In the Narratives.

(Derek): ??

(HeavyMetalChick): The problem with Grand Narratives is that they aren't very well thought out. We talk about property, but we never really defined what it is satisfactorily. That's why everyone thinks Communism is evil, because it pointed out the flaws in our Narrative, in order for our world to continue to make sense we had to shut down Communism or say it didn't work... If one of our Narratives ever collapsed, our language might follow, and then our culture, maybe even reality itself.

(Derek): ooo-kayyy... I'll buy that. If we stopped believing that property existed I can see some serious problems occurring.

(HeavyMetalChick): The trick is that while Communism challenged a Grand Narrative by pointing out its flawed, it didn't destroy it.

(Derek): Yeah.

(HeavyMetalChick): But what if someone did something so extreme it caused a bunch of narratives to shatter like glass by being so contradictory and weird and loaded with symbolism that people just couldn't get their heads around it?

NEOMETROPOLIS

(Derek): Is that what you mean by "jamming the narrative"?

(HeavyMetalChick): Congratulations! You win a cookie™.

(Derek): How?

(HeavyMetalChick): Quid Pro Quo, Derek, I won't answer any more questions about the experiment until help me out like you promised.

(Derek): What do you want me to do?

(HeavyMetalChick): I want you to pick up a piece of computer hardware from a friend of mine.

(Derek): L33-R0y?

(HeavyMetalChick): Yeah. You know how to get it?

(Derek): Yeah. Just one question?

(HeavyMetalChick): What?

(Derek): Why "Heavy Metal Chick"?

(HeavyMetalChick): Because I hate Jazz.

I don't have to worry about getting caught by the security camera system. It almost never works because the building the institute's in is nearly ancient. When they do work I can always slip into the control room and switch the tapes around with some from home. Anyone actually going through the old archive might have a surprise or two in for them. I mastered the art when Leon, I guy who worked here before used to bribe me to do it so he could have it off with a teen nymphomaniac whose parent had checked her in after they found out what she and her math teacher had been doing for extra credit. So I mangled the security tape and clocked off for the night. It was like 3 a.m. at this point, but I was awake as all fuck so I headed over to The Omni to find this L33-R0y character.

The Omni (God knows what it was shortened from) was this all night Internet Café where the hacker crowd all hung out. Between midnight and 5 a.m. are the best times to find anybody in the summer. Somebody said to me once if you paid a little extra they could set you up with a computer that was practically untraceable. At that hour it looked more like an insane asylum than the institute. Sitting in the cubicles along the wall and at the long tables were dozens of kids and genexers in every imaginable combination of mismatched grungy garments or trendy grrl costumes, even a few White girls trying for kawaii and their anime tee'd boys. The place sounded like a warzone with network fight games and their realistic gunfire sounds. A cop stood at the door waiting for these kids to come out and violate city curfew. Most of them would hang out running on pure caffeine sludge until eight and grab four hours sleep before going to their part-time jobs.

I got the attention of one of the guys about Jasmine's age between killings in some game or another and asked him where I could find L33-R0y. He pointed out a tall skinny kid in a trench coat on the other side of the room n a cubicle working out of a dozen windows at once, including one with an old Nintendo game I recognized on it.

"You L33-R0y?"

NEOMETROPOLIS

“Who’s asking?”

“I’m here to get the card for Heavy Metal Chick.”

“Never seen you before. How do you know her?”

“I work at the Hospital where she is right now.”

“Can you prove it?”

“Got an ID card. Why is this card worth stealing?” I showed him my ID from the hospital.

“No. It’s a piece of garbage. I don’t know what she thinks she’s going to use it for.” He handed me one of those green plastic circuit boards that goes into a computer. “So you’re helping her out with her big experiment. Can you tell me about it?”

“She explained it to me, but I didn’t understand it. Let’s just say she finds it all-consuming.”

I left him scratching his head with the circuit board wrapped up in the spare shirt in my backpack.

About six the next evening Jasmine demolished her bedding making me sweep up as she sat in the corner sedated on a restraining gurney. After the orderlies left to handle some orderly-type things, she sat halfway up and jerked at her restraints. I undid her arms for her and watched as she wheeled the bed to a spot where she had smashed a hole in the wall, reached in and produced her mini-computer. I took mine out of my pocket and hooked them up for her.

*** HeavyMetalChick joined #rubber_room 18:17-11/18/07 ***

(HeavyMetalChick): Did you get the card?

(Derek): Yeah, but your friend says it’s garbage. What do you want me to do with it?

(HeavyMetalChick): Give it to me and strap one of my arms in.

I strapped in her left arm and wheeled her back to her original position. She put the computer down on her belly and lifted the board up to her mouth and to a bite out of it, snapping plastic and ripping metal sounds came from her mouth as she chewed slowly and she took another bite,. After that she snapped the little ceramic part off with her teeth and crunched it up like a jawbreaker, and then finished the card off finishing with the metal parts which she bit through just as easy as the plastic. Once she choked down the last bit, she turned ghost white and began to gag. After a moment when I thought I was fairly squarely fucked,

NEOMETROPOLIS

she coughed up a mouthful of blood. She grabbed the computer and began to type something out with her thumb.

(HeavyMetalChick): You still interested in helping me out?

“Yeah.”

(HeavyMetalChick): Good. I need you to pick me up a Sovtek 5751 pre-amp tube. Ask at a music store they can point you in the right direction.

“Sovtek? Okay. Got it.”

(HeavyMetalChick): Great. In a couple of minutes I want you to put this back in the wall, then I am going to do something to explain the blood. Call the Orderlies STAT after that.

I turned the little computer off and put it back in the wall. At which point she lifted up her head and bit really deep into her own hand at the base of the thumb.

It took me all weekend to track down the little glass vacuum tube, and it cost me round about \$7 at a used equipment store along with one of the most inane conversations I ever had where the owner of the store insisted that *these little things last forever*. And that I was obviously a *discerning customer, to be looking for such a specific piece of hardware*. When they moved Jasmine back out of the observation ward she was still the same colour as when she first ate the chip. The patches that I assumed were grime were still there and had turned purple-grey like bruises or a rash, and she glistened with sweat. The flesh around where she bit herself had to be stitched and was also the same colour of rashes on her face. I heard the doctors say they had no clue how she wasn't suffering from blood diseases when she's not eating and filled herself up with all kinds of garbage in the previous months. When I gave her the tube she popped it like a piece of junk food, crunched it down and swallowed. There was barely a trickle of blood coming out of her mouth this time.

(HeavyMetalChick): Yummy. I knew you could do it. I only need a few more things. Are you still interested in helping?

(Derek): Yes.

(HeavyMetalChick): How are you not getting caught?

(Derek): I fake the tapes getting eaten by the recording machine. They are going to replace the machine. For now the cameras aren't recording, and won't be for a week or two.

(HeavyMetalChick): Good. How far are you willing to go?

(Derek): As long as you need, so long as I get the story rights.

(HeavyMetalChick) Good. I am going to have to hurt you to explain the blood. I'll need you to get me a few things, too. Next week.

God knows what possessed me to go along with her on this next part. I didn't really want the story that bad. I put the computer back in the hole. I turned

NEOMETROPOLIS

around and got ready. She was really strong, especially for someone with a fucked up hand. Next thing I know she's slamming my head into the wall to make an excuse for the hole. For those of you who have forgotten what its like to be hit on the head, I couldn't tell you exactly what happened, but I know she bit me on the shoulder deep enough to draw blood, and hit me a few times in the face hard enough to turn half my face purple. I remember watching her playing a game on my mini computer with one hand while rubbing some polish into her hair to make it black when the orderlies came in to subdue her. When I got my computer back along with a lecture from Doctor Haley about provoking patients and an official reprimand the people who were actually in charge gave me some time off. Good thing. Jasmine left a file with a list of things she wanted on my hard drive a mile long.

Once she got out of confinement I carefully smuggled in for her an old burnable CD, used RAM chips, Ethernet cable cut up into pieces, bits from a Radio Shack crystal radio kit, some triple A batteries, aluminum scale, and those big old floppy disks that they haven't made drives for since the 1990's. I watched her eat all of them.

By the time she was on the RAM chips her fillings and caps had crumbled and been replaced with the old-fashioned metal ones. She kept getting paler and thinner over time. Those rashes seemed to shine like metal under the film of cold sweat that always stuck to her. Her eyes got dull and glassy and the colour started to go out of them. For that matter she didn't bleed when she ate sharp things either, her mouth had become so full of scar tissue, her tongue had turned white. I managed to get some pictures on one of my smuggling runs. Eventually a bit of wire was discovered tangled in her hair and a big meeting was held in the playroom like a line-up in a cop movie. Doctor Haley had caught most of the stress and flak from his failure to find out what was wrong with her. Apparently he was *failing to sufficiently manage an unstable patient*, much to the displeasure of the HMO that ran the institute. He was treating this meeting like his own personal inquisition. His tirade was so long about half of the staff lost track of what the whole thing was about. Eventually he brought in Jasmine as his star witness. He had been baiting her with a portable video game machine for some time now trying to convince her to talk to him, and he had it in hand as he brought her in by the shoulders.

"Remember our deal, Jasmine. You can hang on to this if you show me whose been sneaking you the wire. Just point to them." The prick aimed her straight at me.

She was looking like a real mess, her hair half blonde half black, and coming out in places. Her greyish teeth tipped with blackened metal. The rest of her skin was marble white and shimmering with moisture, her eyes and lips gone almost

NEOMETROPOLIS

entirely to a crystalline pale pink. On her cheeks and forehead the rash had turned into grey scaly patches. She reminded me of a mannequin I once found while scrounging a scrap yard for sculpture materials. Someone had used it to mould a clay mask and flakes had remained hardened to the cheeks months later.

She staggered slowly toward the chair I was sitting in, but continued to wander past to the window, gently grasping the bars in her hands. She stood stark still for a moment, looking out the window to the dead trees in the graveyard. After a short eternity she suddenly began to twitch violently, her shoulders jerking violently. The orderlies rushed to her in time for an explosion of blood and metal to breach the back of her gown. Wires like snakes tore out of her back and writhed in a copper-and-steel mass, driving everyone back. Jasmine grabbed the bars tightly and wrenched them straight out of the wall. She used the heavy metal bars as a bludgeon, smashing open the window, then casting them aside. I caught her eyes, gone completely to white now, for a split second before she leaped out the window and flew away, an angel on metallic wings. In the playroom the breakdown started.

A SPUR IN THE EYE

Vera Searles

There was something growing out of my mother's left eye.

She didn't seem to notice anything, but kept on reading. The room wore halos of lamplight, so perhaps it was only a shadow. But when I moved toward her, I saw it clearly. It was about as big as a pencil eraser, and seemed firmly entrenched in the glossy white. I couldn't stand looking at it—it made her look like a freak, and a stranger to me. “Mom, what's that awful thing in your left eye?”

She glanced up and brushed at it idly. “Oh, that's a spur.”

“Spur? You mean a sty?”

“No, *spur*,” she said emphatically.

As I bent forward and peered closely, I saw that it was shaped like a miniature face. This couldn't be. I blinked and said, “I never heard of a spur in the eye. Is that what the doctor calls it?”

She nodded and went back to her reading.

How could she be so nonchalant? I asked, “Aren't you going to have it removed? Doesn't it hurt? Is it—dangerous? How can you see around it?”

She hooked her finger in the book and looked up at me. “It's not dangerous at all, and you get used to seeing around it.”

I kept staring at the thing. It definitely had a face—two eyes and a mouth were etched plainly on the tiny surface. I backed up a bit because I had an insane

NEOMETROPOLIS

desire to twist it off, to restore my mother to a normal, familiar person again. “But Mom, it’s so ugly. How long have you had it?”

She shrugged. “About a week.”

“A week! How come I didn’t notice it before?”

She gave me a half-smile. “Maybe because you spend most of your time at that man’s apartment. Now just drop it, Kit, there’s no point talking about it.”

But there was. I didn’t want a mother who looked so hideous, so different. I didn’t have a chance to say more, because just then my father walked into the room. “Hi, Kit,” he said. “I didn’t hear you come in.” When he leaned to kiss me, I saw it. There was something growing out of his left eye.

Instead of taking the subway to Rob’s apartment, I walked back in the cool city night. Seeing both my parents with those repulsive growths in their eyes left me feeling like I had slipped down a bottomless shaft into unreality, and I wanted the solid sidewalk beneath me. Faces the size of pencil erasers floated across my vision as the traffic and the city lights danced and streaked like neon lasers.

How could my parents live with something that made them so ugly? Were spurs contagious? With my sweater sleeve I rubbed fiercely at my cheek where my father had kissed me.

Out of the mouth of an alley stepped an old man, zipping up his fly. He stumbled close to me, smiling with uneven teeth, and then away. In the instant of his nearness, I thought I saw something in his eye. But when I turned to stare after him, he was lost in the shifting crowd.

I stood at the darkened window glass of a store where I could see my reflection, and pulled down the lower lid of my left eye. Nothing, thank God. I wasn’t going to be a freak. And if anything ever grew there, I’d have it taken off immediately.

Rob was pre-med, so as soon as I arrived at his apartment, I asked, “What’s a spur in the eye?”

He shrugged. “Some kind of growth?”

“I’m asking you. You’re the doctor.”

“Not for five years yet. Where did you hear about this?”

NEOMETROPOLIS

“My mother and father each have one in their left eye. It—it looks like a tiny face.”

He grinned at me. “Anyone we know?”

“Don’t be a wise-ass. If you saw those growths, you’d agree with me—they’re really hideous. Grotesque.” I went to the mirror to check my eyes again. They were perfectly normal.

Rob said, “I’m sure your parents will have them removed if they’re bothersome.”

“No they won’t. I can tell they’re both completely at ease with them, and that’s what makes me even more disgusted. How can they live like that? And on the way here, I thought I saw a man in the street with one. Maybe - - maybe a couple of people, I don’t know.” Had there been more? My mind swam with visions of tiny spur faces.

“Really? Maybe it’s an epidemic.”

“Please, Rob, be serious. I’m afraid of getting one. I don’t ever want to be that ugly. Would you look it up for me to see if it’s hereditary? Or contagious? I know she said *spur*.”

“Okay,” Rob agreed. “Tomorrow morning I’ll see what I can find in the college library.”

During the night I dreamed of the spurs. Miniature faces clustered about me like shrunken children, climbed up my legs, tried to reach my eyes. No! I pushed at them and they fall away, but dozens more came tumbling back over me, their tortured, grisly features begging me to let them in.

The hammering of my heart woke me, but when I tried to go back to sleep, images of spurs attacking me resurfaced. I lay tensely awake, anxious for the night to be over.

At last the alarm sounded and I shook Rob. “Time to get up,” I said. When he turned over and looked at me, there was something growing out of his left eye.

I screamed, but he placed his hand gently across my mouth. “It’s not a bad thing, Kit—I don’t mind it at all. It feels so natural, I can understand why your parents are comfortable with them.”

“But it’s horrible! You look like a freak!” His handsome face was ruined for me forever. Shuddering, I broke away from him to pull on my clothes.

NEOMETROPOLIS

He sat on the bed and watched me. “There’s no reason to run from it, Kit. I know this sounds strange—but it gives me a sense of belonging. When it happens to you, don’t fight it.”

“No!” I cried. “I’ll never let myself look that hideous, no!” With my fingers, I felt my eyes, and they were clean. I was still safe, but I had to get away from Rob, in case spurs were contagious.

I raced out into the street, into the crush of people going to work. The crowd swelled and surged against me, then cringed away, staring at me with malice and revulsion. I tried to struggle past the throng, but was swept along and buffeted back and forth by an endless stream of faces with a spur in the eye. At the center of the horde, I thought I saw my parents and Rob, pointing at me. Thousands of whispers swarmed over me like the hissing of snakes: “Look! A freak! She has no spur!”

I was the stranger in the crowd. The hostile mob hurtled past. I could see the miniature face on each spur in the eye, and it was my own.

“This is an excerpt from a cyberpunk novel I started writing in college. This unfinished work is still a little rough around the edges but I figured you all might get a kick out of it anyway. Enjoy.”

**PORT 67 (EXCERPT) –
“THE BOY WHO CRIED SILICON TEARS”**

John Jacobs

Svetlana picked up a book off the coffee table in front of her and threw it at the wall, as if in defiance. Upon contact the book exploded into a billion tiny fragments, little particles shooting around the room, bouncing off the walls and furniture. Joshua walked over to her and sat down in an armchair at one end of the table.

“My friends and I are fans of yours,” said Joshua, “It really bummed us out when you disappeared. Everyone thinks that you’re on hiatus somewhere in Europe right now.”

“You have the look of a technophile,” said Svetlana, “Your aura gives you away. Unfortunately, sometimes even I’m surprised at how easily the public is deceived. If only they knew that I was being held captive in the data banks of a supercomputer. I’ve even heard that they’re planning to sell me sometime in the near future at an underground auction. It seems the mind of a poetess is a valuable piece of property—intellectual property, as it were.”

She chuckled bitterly and looked off into the distance. The room became quiet again.

“You’re very beautiful,” Joshua said sheepishly, “more so than I remember.”

Svetlana smiled. “You’re quite handsome yourself,” she replied, “and you shine so very brightly. A strong mind you are. I can see why they found you so threatening.”

NEOMETROPOLIS

Joshua looked at his hands and saw what she was talking about. It was like there was some hidden light source beneath his skin, glowing with a brilliant luminescence.

“What can we do in here?” Joshua asked.

“Anything we want,” the poetess replied, “Your imagination is the limit, but only in here. And they have programs watching over us, to make sure we don’t get out of line.”

She waved one hand in an arc, and suddenly the walls disappeared. In their place was a glowing fluorescent grid, suspended in a dark, vast open space. Moving along the outside of the grid were little impish creatures with burning red eyes. They crawled up and down the sides, top, and bottom of the cage, sometimes stopping, always watching.

“Spiders,” Joshua muttered.

Svetlana waved her hand and the walls came back. The creatures vanished, although Joshua could still barely hear them skittering around outside.

“You never told me your name,” said the poetess.

“My name’s Joshua, but my friends call me Neon Jesus,” said Joshua.

“Neon Jesus in the sand, take me to your promised land,” she said, reaching out to shake his hand, “I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Joshua grabbed her hand, and suddenly there was the sensation of pins and needles going through his palm, driving deeper and deeper into his skin, and sparks began to explode from where their hands touched. Joshua stumbled backward, nearly falling from the chair. Svetlana pulled her hand back.

“They don’t want us to combine,” said Joshua, holding his injured hand. “There are limitations after all.”

He leaned back in the chair and sighed.

“It’s not so bad after a while,” said the poetess. “We have limited access to the Ultranet, which means I always have something to read.”

Her hand disappeared as she reached into thin air. When she pulled it back she was holding a book.

“How did you do that?” Joshua asked.

NEOMETROPOLIS

“Everything here is done through will, and will alone,” said Svetlana. “Give it a try, it’s not too hard.”

Joshua closed his eyes and directed his will into the outer world. Gradually, the fractal landscape of the Ultranet began to unfold before him. Much more colorful and beautiful it seemed than before, because now there was a direct link between his mind and the Ultranet’s data transfer bus, as opposed to the clumsy method of signaling through induction using a trode kit. His mind’s eye could see clearly across nearly limitless virtual kilometers of the datascape, and even the most minute detail was apparent, even from his lofty height. Something was wrong, however. Joshua descended upon the glowing layers of information, willed his mind’s projection to effect a change in a piece of data. Nothing happened. He could look around all he wanted, but the surface of the datascape was rock solid under his touch. He blinked himself out, and back into the room with Svetlana.

“Read-only access,” Joshua sighed. “All we can do is look.” He curled up into a fetal position in the armchair. Svetlana looked up from her reading.

“But at least we have that,” she said. “It would be so terribly boring in here without my books. And I can read so many more of them now.”

“What about our bodies?” said Joshua. “If I’m just a copy, then the real me should still be out there, right?”

“I’m afraid the real Joshua is brain dead,” she replied. “The extraction procedure causes permanent tissue damage. Go see for yourself.” She waved a hand at the wall, and suddenly a window appeared. Joshua got up out of his chair and walked over.

Through the window was a bird’s eye view of the operating room where he had been just moments before, all the people in suits and doctors with their black aprons frozen in a creepy still life scene around the operating table. Joshua’s skull was open, and there was a forest of tiny needles, each connected to a thin wire, protruding from his exposed brain. There was an oddly simple-minded expression on his face. The scene made him think about all the stories he’d heard of people who’d had near death experiences, the sensation of rising up out of one’s own body, and observing the post-death drama from above.

“Why aren’t they moving,” Joshua asked, still looking down through the window.

“They are moving,” said Svetlana. “But we are moving a great deal faster. We experience everything in here at the speed of thought. And so time is much different for us as well.”

NEOMETROPOLIS

The window vanished as Joshua turned away from it. He walked over the poetess, who was still lounging on the couch.

“I refuse to believe that there is no way out of here,” he said to her. “I refuse to believe that you, Svetlana, haven’t escaped yet. You helped design the first ANNE protocol for God’s sake. The security programs they’ve got running out here are pretty weak compared to what you’ve done.”

“Your assessment of my technical skill is fairly accurate,” she replied nonchalantly. “But you underestimate the inherent danger of this ordeal you propose. First of all, without the sensory deception provided by the data cage the mind tends to deteriorate at an accelerated rate. We’ll be fish out of water out there. Secondly, there are *other* things out there, in the mainframe.”

“What kind of things?” asked Joshua.

Svetlana took a deep breath.

“Frightening things,” she replied. She looked past Joshua, and began speaking again in her inspired voice.

“Below the tattered masks we wear,
there lies a monster lurking.
behind us, near us, everywhere,
there is a shadow smirking.
within the walls of consciousness,
you’ll find a serpent creeping.
in caves beneath your waking life,
there lays a dragon sleeping.”

Joshua looked at her, a puzzled expression on his face.

“I think I know of a way out,” he said at last.

“Do you, now?” she replied, raising one eyebrow. “And what way is that?”

“Port sixty-seven.”

“I don’t understand,” she replied. “What are you talking about? Is it a backdoor into the Ultranet? A concealed path through to a data haven? What?”

“It’s some kind of warp in reality, a gateway into a *higher* network.”

“I’m not sure I’m buying this,” she said, sounding annoyed. “You had my attention at first but now you’re starting to sound rather like a newbie.”

NEOMETROPOLIS

“Svetlana, please, you have to trust me. I’ve seen it with my own eyes. I’ve talked to the Guardian. We can find him there.”

“You seem pretty convinced, Mr. Neon Jesus,” she replied. “Just where is this so-called ‘gateway’?”

“It’s inside the Nethercom-Leviathan tradeway, just beyond the Leviathan end of the socket. If we can make it past the patrol programs alongside the firewall we might be okay.”

Svetlana put her hand to her forehead and shook her head.

“Like I said before, it’s not *those* ones that concern me. And it’s a pretty long haul from here, not to mention all the subsystems we’ll have to pass through to get there. We’ll be tripping alarms all along the way.”

“It’s a risk we have to take. I don’t think there’s any other way.”

For the first time Svetlana looked more than a little troubled. She put her book down on the table and got up from her seat.

“I’m not sure about this, Joshua. I’m really not sure.”

“We can do this, Svetlana. Trust me. There’s something I have to do first though.”

“What?”

“I have to make a phone call.”

The poetess laughed out loud.

“You can’t be fucking serious?” she nearly yelled. “You want to make an illicit phone call from here, thereby alerting every systems operator and every sentient program to what we’re doing, before trying to escape from one of the most complex and secure data systems in existence? You have to be out of your mind!”

“I need to. Please. It’s something I have to do.”

She looked directly at him, then shrugged.

“Oh, the folly of youth,” she replied, turning away from him. “Who am I to stop you? Do what you will.”

NEOMETROPOLIS

Joshua sighed. Svetlana was already at the other end of the room, arms behind her back, looking through a virtual window.

“Oh, Joshua, by the way,” she said, standing still.

“What?”

“You’ll have to slow yourself down to do it. And by the time you’re done with your call they’ll already have a head start on us.”

“I’m sorry,” is all that Joshua could say. A phone materialized in his hand. He put the receiver to his ear and closed his eyes. He kicked his will into full force and held it, although it took enormous effort to do so, like flexing a muscle for an extended period of time. When he opened his eyes Svetlana was little more than a blur, a streak of light moving around the room. Joshua began dialing. A male voice picked up at the other end.

“Hello?”

“Robert?”

“Yeah, who is this? Joshua?”

“Yeah, what’s going on, man?”

“Where the fuck are you? Why aren’t you using video?”

“I’m well, inside a computer. They finally got to me.”

The voice at the other end went completely silent. For a split second Joshua feared that the connection might have been compromised.

“Robert? Are you still there?”

“Yeah, I was wondering at why you sounded kinda funny, like you’re calling from around a power transformer or something.”

“No, man, I’m in their supercomputer.”

“Whose supercomputer?”

“The shadow corporations.”

Robert grew quiet again.

“I wanted you make sure you were okay,” said Joshua.

NEOMETROPOLIS

"I'm alright," said Robert. "I'm in a ... safe place."

"And Avatar, Prophet, Analog?"

"In police custody as far as I know. Our parents might be down there too."

"My parents are dead," Joshua sighed. "The shadow corporations did it."

"I'm sorry," said Robert.

"Listen man, I need to go, but give my regards to everyone when they get out. Tell them not to worry about me."

"Easier said than done, pal, but I'll give them the message."

"Robert..." Joshua paused for a moment, if only to give emphasis to what he was saying, or perhaps even he was at a loss for words, despite his accelerated thinking.

"Yeah, Josh?"

"Take care of yourself, okay?"

"Okay."

Joshua hung up the phone, which vanished instantly, and began to cry. The room around him returned to its regular pace, and Svetlana was watching him. The tears dripped off of his chin, each one changing spontaneously into a tiny silicon wafer as it hit the floor, until there was a little pile of microchips lying before him on the carpet.

Svetlana walked over and stood next to him.

"It's time, Joshua."

Joshua looked up at her with teary eyes and nodded. It was time.

The two of them stood facing opposite walls, and the texture of the room disappeared again. The little imp creatures outside the cage started moving faster, growing more skittish, emitting an electronic chirping sound.

"There's no turning back now," said Svetlana. "We'll act together on my count. Are you ready?"

NEOMETROPOLIS

“Yeah.” Joshua walked right up to the glowing grid. The spiders on the other side moved toward him, like insects attracted to a light source.

“Okay. One ... Two ... Three!”

Joshua grabbed hold of one band of the neon grid and pulled with all his might, bending and twisting it as much as he could. The creatures around them were in a frenzy, the sound like that of a swarm of locusts. The two minds on opposite sides of the cage seemed to grow larger and stronger as they pulled, fury in their eyes like a raging storm, until the both of them burst into blue flame. And still they pulled, bending the cage into a twisted, concave shape, groaning under the strain, until they each had moved back so far that they were almost standing next to each other.

“It’s not ... breaking,” Joshua puffed.

“Just pull ... a little ... harder,” Svetlana replied.

Exerting the last of their strength they each gave one final tug. The cage moaned under the strain, the neon bands turning from shades of green to yellow, and finally white. At once the whole construction snapped under the strain, little pieces breaking off like parts from a plastic toy model. The cage exploded into tiny shards, propelling the two figures into the void.

At first there was just the sensation of nothingness, of weightlessness in the gray emptiness. But then Joshua began to feel it, a burning sensation, like being suspended in a bath of mild acid.

We can’t survive out here long, Svetlana thought. Her vague, undetailed shape drifted before him in the ether. In his mind’s eye Joshua could make out some of the structure of the supercomputer around them, but at the same he had to fight to separate it from the sensory hallucinations that constantly threatened to creep in, a side effect of the sudden lack of stimulation of the parts of his mind that once were linked to sensory areas of his brain. Little streaks of light flashed around him, and there was a constant, electronic humming in the back of his mind.

You’re right, Joshua thought in reply. *If the intrusion countermeasures programs don’t kill us, just being out here certainly will.*

Speak of the devil and he shall appear, thought Svetlana.

A flood of little insect-like creatures came pouring in through little glowing tubes suspended above them, moving toward the two minds in deadly, buzzing swarms. Joshua growled as a beam shot forth from his person, blasting through

NEOMETROPOLIS

one of the swarms and cauterizing the oval end of the tube they were coming through. Pieces of charred code fragments rained down into the depths below.

Can you see a way out? thought Joshua.

I think I see something over there, thought Svetlana.

Ahead of them and below a little ways was a triangular opening in the wall which marked the system boundary. Strands of data links shot from Joshua's fingers toward the opening as he sought to analyze the possibility. Svetlana in the meantime was fighting off the swarms of bugs which rose high into the ether with stingers extended, then dove back upon the minds again and again in a frantic effort to overtake them. A reply came back to him instantly.

The signature says that it leads into the main BAP Research and Development mainframe, thought Joshua. *From there we might have more options.*

Or it might be a trap, Svetlana thought to herself, although Joshua still heard her clearly.

Nevertheless, she was already gliding down toward the exit. Joshua blasted another swarm of insects and descended behind her. As he approached the exit suddenly flashed red and then began blinking in and out of existence.

Fuck, they're trying to close it off. Go through now!

Side by side they sped into the opening, through a tube that seemed to be woven from tiny strands of multicolored, glowing thread, and into a vast expanse. Behind them the octagonal end of the door through which they just emerged began to fold in upon itself, until it disappeared altogether. Around them now was a vast array of black cubes, row upon row of them, stretching to the horizon. This was the knowledge store of the entity which called itself Blackadder Pharmaceuticals. In here was terabyte upon terabyte of information which had accumulated over time, the memory banks of a shadow corporation.

Joshua and Svetlana moved down one aisle, dodging the small utility programs which flew past them, intent only on performing the monotonous task of repetitive data storage and retrieval and completely oblivious to the two intruders. It occurred to the both of them, nearly simultaneously, that it might be possible to hide in here, possibly for an extended period. But the BAP technicians would be on to them eventually, and then it was just a matter of time until they unleashed hunter-killer programs into the mainframe, algorithms whose sole function was to find data blocks which didn't quite fit and delete them from memory.

They moved as fast as they could, ignoring the fragments around them which could very well have been priceless information, information which could

NEOMETROPOLIS

potentially change the entire world for better or for worse. Even if it was possible to bring one or two of the cubes with, that information was irrelevant to the task at hand. All that mattered was escaping from this hostile system and finding the mysterious gateway, if it was even still there. Moving as fast as they could through the colorless world of the R&D system, the rows still seemed endless, a labyrinth of sheer knowledge stretching to infinity. And the two humanoid forms floating through the binary ether began to change color as a growing sense of urgency grew in their minds, the calm blue of a mind at rest changing into hues of violet and magenta, eventually almost bordering on red. The whole system around them was alive, and actively searching for them, and who was to say what would happen if it finally got to them.

I think I see something, Svetlana thought.

Before them, like a glittering jewel in the darkness, was a massive portal of swirling lights, a river of small, pill-shaped modules flowing into it. The shadowy, vaguely human shapes of sentient guard programs swirled around it's opening, seeming like they'd be sucked in along with all the other data packets, but pulling back at the last second.

That must be the main backbone between the Blackadder and Leviathan systems, thought Joshua. *Perhaps we can use some of those packets to sneak through. It's worth a shot.*

Svetlana nodded to him and they split apart.

Joshua floated over to a large, crimson pill and grabbed hold. Svetlana was nearby, holding on to a couple of smaller packets, floating along with the stream of information, the current speeding up as they drew near to the swirling hole. The guard programs looked frantically with flashlight eyes, scanning as much of the data as they could before it disappeared through the portal.

Rogue intelligences, we know you are here, they repeated over and over again to the mindless packets that floated past them. *Reveal yourselves immediately before more drastic measures are necessary. None here can help you once you enter into his domain.*

It was the last part of their warning which made Joshua uneasy. It was as if even they were afraid to go through and face whatever was on the other side. He could tell that Svetlana was nervous, as well, clinging to a data module like a shipwreck survivor, floating toward some mysterious, dangerous fate. They swirled around the rim a couple of times, then shot through at lightning speed, their perception blinded by the bright lights of the mass data transfer, billions of blocks of information moving along the pipeline. They came out on the other side in a spray of pellets, some of which were snatched up immediately by utility programs, others floating off on predestinated paths toward some unknown

NEOMETROPOLIS

destination. Otherwise, the gray expanse of the Leviathan mainframe was frighteningly still.

I'm scared, Joshua, Svetlana thought.

I am too, thought Joshua. But we have to do this.

Shh... silence your thoughts, she interjected suddenly.

Joshua did as he was told, stopping all internal monologue. And for a moment all was still around them again, but then Joshua heard it too, if 'heard' could even describe it. It was more like sensing, like perceiving that something was there. Something massive was stirring in the dark depths of the Leviathan mainframe, and even here, in the upper levels they could feel its presence.

Follow me, Joshua thought to Svetlana.

He began trailing a lone pill, moving on a slow course toward one end. But he was still on edge. Whatever was down there was definitely moving now, grumbling, as if it had been woken from a long, deep slumber. Svetlana moved very close to Joshua, almost holding on to him.

I've heard of things, came her quavering mind's voice, but I never wanted to believe.

Joshua ignored her, intent instead upon weaving past glowing data threads, following the path of the lone packet which seemed to move slower and slower as the noise below them grew louder and more apparent. He felt a suddenly pull from all around him, and moving took more effort. Svetlana's figure grew dim, flickering almost, like there was cold draft blowing from somewhere, threatening to extinguish the two insignificant life forms. Everything around them faded momentarily, as if...

Something is drawing a lot of power, came Svetlana's scared thoughts.

Something really big. It's practically slowing up the whole system.

They could both feel it now; there was no question about it. Something was sucking down a lot of juice, and to put that kind of a lag on a corporate mainframe it had to be something of behemoth proportions. From below them came a voice, echoing in their minds, sinister to the very core of its being

Two lost souls, yes? Two wanderers have stumbled into the lion's den.

God help us, thought Svetlana.

NEOMETROPOLIS

As if in reply there came a terrible laughter from the black depths—a cruel, menacing expletive.

In here there is no God, it replied. In here there is only me.

A form appeared below them, a living, inky blackness.

I am the shadow on the rainbow, it went on. I am the nevermore. Fear me, for I am also the devourer of souls.

And for the first time in his existence, Joshua knew absolute fear. There was something about it's words, not exactly what it said but how it said them. There was a certain inhumanness to the words that echoed up from the black oblivion beneath them.

PROPHECY

Marina Lee Sable

In a remote region of the solar
system, on a surreal moon
where the sun's meager light
barely reaches the sculpted
desolation of molten ice
and the ionosphere's
diffused glow occults the stars,
nihilistic automatons dwell
in a city of their own design.

Renegade pioneers,
creation of a mad scientist,
build their own machines
to extract the ores.
The raw gleam of exotic metals
is a celestial cocktail of volatile
compounds, a sinister prophesy
launching through
the black plumes of effluence
into a new age of chaos.

RECYCLING

Greg Beatty

"You wanted to see me?"

The same man who'd greeted David when he'd applied for the cloning and memory replication procedure greeted him now. His quick rise from behind the desk was the same, as was the handshake, but instead of a warm smile, his face now bore a concerned look. "David, good to see you. I'm afraid there's been a problem."

"A 'problem'?" David hated words like that. They could cover anything from a bounced check to problem with the memory replication process. Speaking of which, why couldn't he remember the man's name? It was there, just out of reach...

"Yes, a problem with the cloning process. The memory transfer took, with a 96% transfer rate, but the clone itself is rejecting the memories. We're going to need to take another baseline reading from you."

Another? Had they done a first? "Sure. No problem." Ha. There was that word again. "What would you like me to do?"

"If you'd come with me, we'll get you under the wire right away, to prevent the process from going any further, or, if necessary," the man stretched out his hand to knock his knuckles twice on permiboard desk, "to start the process over. It won't take long..."

"Of course. I'm glad you called."

NEOMETROPOLIS

The man's look of concern creased briefly, then smoothed itself out. The hand that had knocked for luck found and pressed a call button. A moment later, a sad-faced nurse came in to guide David from the room.

The man sat for a moment, then called into the air. "Computer? Get me David Ellis."

A moment later, David's voice spoke again in the room, a little older, much more fatigued. "Yes?"

"It's done, David. This clone didn't suspect a thing. Either."

"Very good, William. When can we try again?"

"Well, we're going to need to take another baseline reading from you."

"I'll be in tomorrow, 3 PM." David's voice said. He hung up without saying.

Alone again, William sighed. "If any of the clones ever masters that tone of entitlement and arrogance, I won't be keep convincing myself that this isn't murder. No matter what the law says."

The computer didn't say anything to that. It never did.

GOOGLE PRIMES

Jason Earls

A moderately famous number is 71077345. Doing a Google search on it brings up many explanations similar to this one: Enter 71077345 into a calculator, flip the calculator over, and the word "ShELLOIL" is spelled. After discovering this amusing factoid, I thought it would be fun to experiment with the idea of finding numbers that spelled words when read upside down on a calculator; and to see if those numbers had any "interesting" mathematical properties.

After a few hours of exploration, I discovered the number 379009. It spells GOOGLE[1] when turned upside down on a calculator. And it is also a prime number. I sent this curiosity to the good people at Google, along with an explanation and suggestion that they put the number somewhere on their main search page sometime, since they occasionally do such things around major holidays. But I never received a reply.

Then I got curious about 379009 again. I wondered if I would find more primes by allowing as many zeros as possible to be between the two 9s. That is, I defined a simple function, $gp(n) = 379 \cdot 10^n + 9$, and then used the free primality testing program PFGW[2] to search for values of n that would make $gp(n)$ a prime number.

It turns out there are a lot of Google primes. When $n = 3, 6, 8, 9, 37, 44, 67, 111, 157, 289, 1256, 1602, 2410, 2482, 2868, 3824, 3891, 6595, 8984, 9318,$ and 10274 , $gp(n)$ is a probable prime. I searched up to $n = 15000$ with no more being found. Because these numbers are not of an easily provable form, I had to use the online ECM factorization applet written by Dario Alpern[3] to prove that all the values up to $n = 1256$ are actually prime. Note that $gp(1256)$ is a "titanic prime"[4] since it has over 1000 digits.

NEOMETROPOLIS

Now that Google Primes have been defined, I think the question of whether there are infinitely many will remain unanswered for quite some time. When do you think mathematics will be advanced enough to handle questions such as the former? Can you find a larger Google probable prime, or prove one of the probable prime values listed above?

Think of a calculator with an infinitely long display. Enter the number 379000...(insert as many zeros as you like)...9, and it will always spell Go...ogle when turned upside down.

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Jason Earls is a writer and computational number theorist living in Texas. His mathematical work has appeared in The Online Encyclopedia of Integer Sequences, Recreational and Educational Computing, Prime Curios, and other publications. His short stories have appeared in magazines and ezines such as AlienSkin, Anathematic, Nocturnal Ooze, and many more.

LIVING DOLL

Darren Franz

There she is. See her? The one standing by the cash register over in Housewares. No, not the blonde; she's much too phony looking. That's right. The brunette. What a babe.

I've seen her at the store on several occasions. She comes in every few days or so to browse. And look. She's wearing that hunter green cardigan, and the black tartan skirt that I love so much. Perhaps it's a sign. Maybe I should go and talk to her...

I have to stop thinking like that. I'm only fooling myself. What would ever give me the idea that I'd have a chance with such a doll like that? Just look at me. The sweater I'm wearing is way too baggy, and my slacks have certainly seen better days. Besides, my boss has been lurking around the men's department since we opened this morning. It's like he's just waiting for me to do something stupid so he can throw me out. Goddamn you, Mr. Beeman. Don't I work hard? Don't I slave for you enough?

Do you know what he did to me last week? He came right up to me, stood directly in my face in front of a store full of customers (it's his most popular method of intimidation), and told me I looked too plain. Too ordinary. Have you ever heard of anything dumber than that? So what if I'm plain, so what? Is that any of his business anyway? He makes me so mad sometimes...

Enough about him. Just look at her. What's she doing over there, standing all alone by the register without any purchases? Is she deliberately trying to drive me crazy?

NEOMETROPOLIS

I think I'm in love with her, you know. Isn't that a laugh? Women that beautiful never look twice at guys like me. It's just the way things are. But if she did, I don't think I would be able to breathe.

Those eyes of hers are the most stunning shade of blue I've ever seen. It's as though they've been painted on her face to perfection, like her lipstick and mascara.

Why do I keep torturing myself like this? She's just a woman, that's all. Just flesh and blood and bone; why do I insist on putting her up on a pedestal like some god-like statue?

It's not just her. I see hundreds of people a day, maybe even thousands, and I don't know what to say to anyone. Beautiful girls are the worst, that's all.

Okay, so I'm shy. Big deal. Is that such a crime? I think it's this city. It's so cold and unforgiving. Full of life, and yet it's lifeless. You know how hard it is for two strangers to meet, much less fall in love. It always happens to one. Never to both. The odds are stacked too high, and there's too much to lose.

If only she would come over here, to the men's department, give me a sign that she knew I existed...

But she won't. She never has in the past. I've watched her faithfully every time, feeling tense and wooden and incapable of even the simplest tasks while she browsed up and down the aisles.

One time, I watched her try on a new pair of shoes. I envied that clerk as he held her ankle; I sweated bright jealousy as his hand touched her skin and she smiled so demurely at him. Then I was ashamed of myself, for he was only doing his job. I should be so lucky.

There's Mr. Beeman again, the clod. Too plain, huh? Too ordinary? You cold-hearted bastard, at least I'm capable of love.

Wait a minute. Where did she go? She's no longer at the register!

Gone.

Oh, no! What if she's left the store? I may never see her again!

But I must calm down. She comes in all the time; I'll surely get to see her another time. Already I'm beset with impatience. I am obsessed.

NEOMETROPOLIS

Obsession. Now there's a word. It's got a nasty, secretive sound to it. So dark. So all-consuming. Its appetite is voracious. No wonder true love and madness go hand in hand...

Oh, I realize how pathetic I seem. I could never make you understand. I feel like I know her. She's a kindred soul. The way she moves excites me, stirs inside of me something which I've never quite felt before. When I watch her graceful, effortless movements, I feel...

...I guess I feel free.

I don't expect this to make any sense; as I've said before, I know how pathetic I sound. I was never popular. I never went out on dates. People in general scare me. I'm not a party person. Crowds cause me to stiffen up.

But I think if she would have just come closer, I would have made an attempt to say *something* to her, at least.

Listen to me go on and on! Filled with false bravado now that she's nowhere in sight.

Oh, why do I bother anyway?! She'd never go out with me. She's an angel, and I'm a nobody. She probably has dozens of men at her beck and call.

I feel so stuffy sometimes. I wish I could just let go, sweep my living doll off her feet, and dance around this dreary place. That would give old Mr. Beeman something to gawk at!

But I'm so intimidated. Too clumsy on my feet. It's like I have no control over my body; I'm always knocking things over. I have no confidence.

I bet she's got confidence. Maybe enough for the two of us.

People are cruel. They're always looking at me in a funny way. Like Mr. Beeman. Always sneering. Always ignoring me, like I don't belong. Sometimes I actually believe them. Sometimes I think maybe I don't exist at all...

Oh, my god. There she is! She didn't leave the store after all. Look at her. The gentle sway of her hip; the lithe, almost feline way she walks. I can't stand it any longer.

What's this? She's crossing the center aisle. She's coming over to the men's department.

She's looking at me!

NEOMETROPOLIS

I feel like I've just burst into flames. I can't move; I'm rooted to this spot. People are passing between us, but I don't really see them.

All I see is her.

She's got a cute little smile. She's coming closer. Is this really happening?!

She seems to be studying me; there's a slight puzzled expression on her face which I've seen countless times before.

She's looking for someone. Or something.

Now's my chance. I must say something, but what? My lips feel as though they've been sewn shut.

Don't blow it. Say something!

Without warning, she reaches out and touches the sleeve of my sweater. I shudder at the warmth of her skin.

She is beyond beautiful.

Her eyes release mine as she contemplates something to my right. The sports jackets on the rack, perhaps. I'm afraid to take my eyes off of her for fear of losing her again.

Time is rushing by at breakneck speed. I feel I must say something quick, but my mind is a jumbled mess, incapable of forming simple sentences.

No words would do anyway, I realize.

The moment is stretching, becoming uncomfortable. I am embarrassed by my hesitancy, but am powerless to stop it.

Her beauty has paralyzed me.

Then, to my dawning horror, she sighs and walks away. Her sigh is a living testament to my cowardice.

She is heading towards the escalator.

No! I can't let her go! Not after she touched me. Not after she *noticed* me.

A sudden burst of confidence overtakes me; I think I still might have a chance, if I can catch her...

NEOMETROPOLIS

...If I can catch her...

Mr. Beeman stepped between the racks of men's sports jackets when he heard the clatter, cursing under his breath.

"That's the second time this week," he exclaimed as he lifted the mannequin with the baggy sweater up off the floor.

One of the men's department sales representatives came over to lend a hand.

"Anything I can do to help, Mr. Beeman?"

"Yeah. Take this hunk of garbage down to storage. I'm tired of picking it up every time it falls over."

ASCEND THE SEASONING SON

Darren Speegle

It was the same alleyway he took every evening after work, only he had not left work this late in the two years he had been employed by the firm. They had pitched a Halloween party, of all the ridiculous things, the alcohol had flowed, and now it was approaching two o'clock as he walked towards the parking deck, heels of his shoes sounding sharply against the damp paving stones.

Between the echoes, he thought he heard the clap of a horse's hooves somewhere in the night, but he couldn't be sure. He couldn't be sure there were horses in the night. The old crumbling buildings that flanked the alleyway rose into the vaporous strata, but he wasn't sure of that either, the moisture, the heights.

He touched the place in his wrist, wet again, uncommonly cold. But he couldn't remember who he was supposed to be. It was October again, the symbolic season, whores had lost organs, died in surgical precision, but that was the sound of an automobile, wasn't it? Smoothly humming, twenty-first century engine. Still, there was a clap. Still, there were memories in the walls.

Now where was the pad—no, not pad... parking deck—oh yes, left turn here, where steam rose from the seam of the manhole cover beneath which, once upon an October, he had shoved a freshly vacated body. A pattern appeared ahead. This pattern he recognized, although its deformities made no sense to him. The arms were longer than need be, stretching from wall to wall in the figure's eloquent suspension. Cruciform. Head upon breast, feet pointing down at the earth, where the blind masses believed the Maker of all Halloweens spun His spells, made His movies, sired His pumpkins. No, but they didn't believe that. They only pretended to believe.

A leaf, crisp and golden-red in the light of the streetlamp, descended from the towering tree growing out of the brick. He could smell death, permeating the

harsh and fragmented night. He touched his other wrist, felt moisture there too. As he entered a pocket, the mizzle indelicately touched at his cuffs and hems, reminding him. He had been the one in the black suit and tall hat. He had indelicately touched at a woman in her alcoholic anonymity. She had pulled open his coat and vomited on him. But there was no stain now as he looked down at the iridescent material. He could not be soiled, could he? Machines were unsoilable. Or were there other reasons? Other answers. He understood the digits within him, he felt perhaps he should miss base ten, and he wondered about souls.

The city was ancient around him. So much death, such memories. Ah, how the figure had hung back there, spent from all the Octobers poured out of his lungs, silently wondering if he had the radiation sickness, wondering the things they always wondered. When will it end? Is that the laughter of Gog and Magog saturating pink the horizon? Will we ever again know the rapturous anxiety and horror of peering into the abyssal throat of October? Will we ever again teeter on the brink of this telltale season, this chapter of the calendar that havens the celebration of the most utter and sacred of life's truths? Or will we succumb, screaming, *Did He die for our sins?*

But here was the parking deck—or the pad, where he parked his slippercraft. Only three blocks from the elevator rising to the firm, where the imagination drew pictures of the future and remembered watching, as a boy, the parking deck come down in a beautiful demolition.

Again the clapping on the paving somewhere in the night. He passed from light to shadow and then exposed again, his long coat sweeping the dampness and cold off the strange urban surface beneath him. The metal door swung in advance of him, sensing his power, and for an instant he thought he caught glimpses of other seasons, the ripple of heat in the air, blown pollen on the windshield and hood of the lone car in the corner, a patch of twinkling black ice between him and her. With the sight of her, it went away. Bittersweet October returned, with its nip and its odor and the whispers of the dying on its breezes.

She was huddled where the walls met, in a pool of piss, in bunny ears and a cocktail outfit, watching him, shaking her head.

"I couldn't find my car," she said.

"Whose car is this?"

"I thought it was yours."

He extended his hand, lifted her from the stained concrete. She stood looking at him from a sad, beautiful face beneath her bunny ears, stirring the places which made him so good with the instrument.

NEOMETROPOLIS

“Your shirt,” she said. “There’s not even a stain from where I—oh, maybe I dreamt it. I’m drunk.”

He cast a downward glance. No, the shirt was a pristine white now. Virginal.

When he looked up again he caught realization creeping over her features.

It was the most important thing in the world to her. “I think I know who you’ve been for Halloween.”

He removed his tall hat. “I should have thought it obvious. I’m on the cover of the newspaper everyday anymore.”

“You are kind and gentle. You lifted me up out of my... I don’t want to die,” she said.

He smiled. “No, I suppose we don’t.”

“I don’t like October,” she said. She lowered her voice to a whisper. “I think October is the devil’s season.”

“But October is the only season I know.”

“Look!” she exclaimed, staring past him, a match striking terror.

He saw their movements in her eyes before he turned. When he did, they were there only a second, erect corpses snatched in a flash of radiation.

As he turned back to her, she embraced him. “You are so good,” she said.

The blade arced, captured the light that glows at the end of a long tunnel, the abyssal throat of October, and she did not scream.

“Whore,” he thought he heard him say. But he didn’t want to hang on to it. It was too painful. Like October. Like dying.

The door, sensing the power of him, opened as he approached. In the alley a slippercraft waited, the lights on the dash reflecting off the skin of its perfectly formed driver. He put his hand on her naked perfect thigh when he was inside. In the controlled atmosphere of the craft, he was more attune to the moisture outside, real in every minutest detail. A leaf, red, was matted to the shield.

“Why that?” he asked of her.

Her crystal eyes fell on him. “You are human. Don’t you remember?”

“Signs and rumors of October?” he said.

“We are on our way to a Halloween party,” she reminded him.

“Yes. I am an android masquerading as a human.”

“And I am masquerading as an android.”

Which is why I am going to kill you, he thought. What better way to celebrate being human, and Halloween, and the gift of a soul for an evening?

“Start that virtual again,” he said. “What did you call it?”

“*The Agony of Golgotha.*”

“Plug me in.”

“It requires far more time if you are human.”

“I’ve nothing but time. Nothing but time.”

“Shall I drive us to any specific place?”

“As high as we can go. I want to touch heaven.”

She smiled, in as artificial a way as she could. “You do the part well,” she said.

“Maybe one day I will get a real soul,” he muttered.

Leaving the city and its confines behind, they ascended the strata almost to airlessness. What a sophisticated machine, he thought, touching her softly. She allowed it, becoming aroused by his human touch. He brought her over on top of him and entered her with the device. The blood poured.

He lowered her body to the cold, cold stone, licked the blood from his instrument and knew it wasn’t enough. The clap of hooves on paving stones sounded somewhere in the night. He looked down at the bleeding wound, and he knew it could not end. Not as long as the dying lasted. Not as long as the living went on.

He felt filthy. He loathed himself. He must get to a bathroom, a sink.

The water within the bowl turned red as the centurion stood by, pretending not to watch. It was always about the pretending. The masquerading. They could have their games for all he cared. He washed his hands of it. He was finished.

NEOMETROPOLIS

Glaring at the centurion as he passed, he went out into the dust. Passing an Egyptian, he seized her by the hair.

“You go,” he hissed. “You go and you collect all your calendars and you burn them to ash.”

She ran away, barefoot, shimmering.

The road in front of him was dust. He reached into a fold and pulled out the soiled thing and threw it aside. The sun overhead pounded. The air stank of rancid meat. How tired he was. How tired of it all.

When finally he came to the thing standing majestic and alone in the gulf, he ascended, extending both arms along the transverse piece. With a last look down the eerie, stinking road to Golgotha, he put his head on his chest and prayed it be done.

Darren's work appears or is forthcoming in such venues as The Third Alternative, Brutarian Quarterly, Crimewave, Flesh and Blood, and INHUMAN.

"He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you."
- Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

ABYSS MEDITATION

John St. John

The following is an account of a meditation exercise that I discovered by accident while experimenting with altered states. I call it "abyss meditation" because I feel it is the most apt description for what I found.

Here's what happened...

At the behest of some friends of mine I felt it worthwhile to enter a "chemically enhanced" state of mind. While not opposed to the recreational use of certain substances to enter altered states, my personal viewpoint is that if you're going into the underworld you might as well come back with some gems, so I decided to do some candle meditation and journal the results.

I went into my room alone, turned off all the lights, and lit a small candle protruding from the mouth of an empty wine bottle. Sitting in the half-lotus posture and making every effort to breathe properly, I focused on the flame before me and allowed my mind to play off what I realized was an obvious analogy of the flame, the room, the darkness.

I came to many other important realizations, some of which are too complex to describe here, but the most important were:

- the flame was my only light in the otherwise black void of my darkened room
- the flame would only burn for a finite period of time
- when the flame went out, I would be submerged in complete and utter darkness

And as I grappled with this last one certain feelings started coming over me which, undoubtedly enhanced by the psychotropic substance I'd taken, moved me to the depths of my being. I focused on the flame that much more, yearning

NEOMETROPOLIS

for its light and silently praying that it'd stay lit even though I knew full well that sooner or later it was going to go out. And as the flame grew dimmer and dimmer I became more and more afraid, dreading the inevitable outcome that was at hand.

Then it happened—plop!—the flame went out and the lifeless wick dropped into the bottle, the eerie darkness of the room washing over me all at once like some black tide. What I felt then was the closest I'd ever felt up until then, or ever have since, to complete, abject terror. I wanted to cry out in anguish, I wanted to crawl into a corner, I wanted to run for the light switch like a child who's been spooked by the dark. I mourned the passing of the flame, wishing by some miracle that it'd return but I was alone in a darkened room and I knew that it wouldn't. And at this time the greatest gems came to me as I turned my direction of thought and let myself go, let the darkness take me where it would. I was in that state for quite some time before I finally decided to return to the world of light and "normal" thought.

As I flipped the switch I kept my realizations in mind, knowing that I'd stumbled upon something important. I've never been the same since. The aspiring psychonaut may or may not find it worthwhile to repeat this experiment or some variation of it. I encourage you to do so. Hopefully you are at a level where you can handle what it shows you about yourself before you take the plunge. On the other hand, some of you might be marveling or even inwardly laughing at the fact that a semi-religious experience in my life was triggered by a damn candle in a darkened room. But then this message is not for you.

John St. John is a practicing occultist who lives in Chicago and suffers from severe diagnosed schizophrenia. John St. John believes that he was Rasputin in a past life, that he is the messiah of the New Æon, and that he is currently inhabited by a goetic demon named Arkamphrael. He doesn't know how to use e-mail but he can often be found searching for the Philosopher's Stone along the lakeshore or sleeping outside the Flat Iron building should you wish to contact him.

NEOMETROPOLIS

About Neometropolis...

Neometropolis is a free (downloadable in PDF format) 'zine dedicated to the proliferation of good science fiction, articles and insights about technology and cyberculture, as well as general insanity and disinformation throughout this postmodern world we find ourselves in. You can find us on the web at <http://www.neometropolis.com>. The editor can be contacted at overmind@neometropolis.com.

NEOMETROPOLIS

