

Ghost in the Machine

a short story

by Jeff VanderMeer

Foreword

"Ghost in the Machine" is one of the first complete stories I ever wrote. I remember writing the initial draft when I was 15 or 16. I was so happy to have completed it, since so many stories back then remained fragments. Over the next six or seven years, I continued to hone it and to cut back on the sentimentality in parts of the story. Over time, too, I began to wonder about this place called Dayton Central, and what I-wire freighters were, among other things. Using "Ghost" as a springboard I brainstormed a time in the future of that story when Dayton Central became "Veniss" and civilization had retreated to a series of technologically-advanced city-states. From "Ghost" sprang the novella "[Balzac's War](#)", the story "[A Heart for Lucretia](#)", and my latest novel *Veniss Underground*, excerpted on this site as "[Quin's Shanghai Circus](#)". "Ghost" still holds up for me today because the emphasis is clearly on the characters and their reactions to the situations in the story. And I'm fond of it because it ushered in this whole series of stories.

Ghost in the Machine

Thanks to science, the suspect idea of a soul inhabiting a body -- "the ghost in the machine" -- will itself soon give up the ghost. But not all versions of the idea that you are something distinct from your purely physical body are so vulnerable to ridicule.

- *The Mind's Eye* (Hoffstadler/Dennett, 1981)

From the Great Hall's marble throne, where the fireplace's heat cannot reach me, I watch simules pass in review. The Red Queen's smile is tragic as cherry blossoms, muted lights shining through her crimson dress. Her eyes glide past me, the expression of remorse, sorrow, unchanged when she disappears around a corner. A little bald man replaces her, tiptoeing toward me. This particular hologram has never acknowledged me, as even the most primitive simules are taught. I wonder if this means he has free will -- not much, but enough to make the solimind hiccup. Sweat beads his face, hairline wrinkles foreshadowing an old age he will never reach. Somehow his actions reek of furtiveness. Now that he is dead, he has only Martel to fear.

I hear the purr of Martel's hover as it enters the drive.

The hover stops; Martel gets out: the crunch of boots on gravel. Laughter. Then the sound, softer this time, of a second person. This will be the girl -- it is her laughter I hear. Their voices are muffled as they walk to the door. I whisper the access code and it opens.

They enter giggling, both drunk. The woman? Brunette, plump, green-eyed, tall. Martel has always picked mistresses of the same physical description. While he himself ages grayer and grayer despite the ministrations of psychewitch and autodoc. Still, his face retains some spark, a hint of shallow mischief overlaid with worry lines.

I wait by the open French windows, as Martel and the woman walk into the sitting room. The silver contrail of an intersystem freighter, I-wire guided, rips a swath across the stars. Martel has told me that when I was a child, space travel was new. There were no I-wires and accidents were common. Now

ships explore the galaxy...I cannot remember my childhood. I do not know my birth date.

The trail fades and the stars shine again. Once, Martel has told me, I dreamed (did I dream?) of traveling there, of joining the pioneers. He tells me so little.

I am happy serving Martel. I only wish I could *remember*.

Now he calls to me. I enter the sitting room.

"Seneshal. Bring wine. Any year will do." His voice is the very shadow of royalty: deep and cultured and inbred.

The woman laughs as I turn to carry out his command.

"Show me the ghosts, Martel," she says.

I descend to the wine cellar and tell the solimind what Martel could easily have told it himself. A familiar sight awaits me when I return: the Executioner hacks at Martel with the ethereal butcher's blade he carries beneath his robes. The woman laughs and laughs, and after a pause laughs again. Martel laughs too, until laughter spreads and divides the air, cackles sent up into the great spaces trapped by the sweeping curves, the inverse minarets of the Great Hall.

Martel goads his assailant. After several minutes, the Executioner turns the weapon on himself and, of course, discovers that he cannot kill himself. As happens every evening, the Executioner's mask crumbles; he screams silently and weeps, until the solimind whisks him back into the womb of memory. Sometimes, as this happens I have seen a hint of regret on Martel's face. The face which bears the mark of a living executioner: the faded scar along the left cheek.

"Do you require further service?"

Martel scowls. "No. Go away. Leave me alone." A wave of his hand. He turns his back to me, talks softly to the woman, his face close to hers, a hand on her thigh.

The solimind, like a mechanical muse, calls to me with bits and bytes until I must come to it. In the basement where light never falls, I disintegrate, merge...

And, for an instant, I see everything everywhere in the house -- from every camera, every sensor, my eyes stare out. Then: sleep, with the Red Queen, the little bald man, the Executioner. Thus resting we pass the night, with the intimacy of stored memories. There is that one mixed blessing.

I ask myself the question that cannot be answered.

What have I forgotten?

Sunday.

"You are the Resurrection and the Life..."

As every morning, I address the solimind from the basement.

"Thank you for my ears, my eyes, my heart..."

Martel never hears my cynical rebellion; he believes I am but a shell. I am not a shell. The body dies, the tissues of the brain rotting into dust, but I am the same person. The very same.

I leave the basement. At the top of the stairs, Martel's cleverness is evident. The floor forms a sprawling chessboard of black and red tiles. Whenever he plays, I am his King. Why does he choose me? Why does he bind me to him?

Once outside the Great Hall my steps quicken and I can believe I am alive. I have walked this path so often I am surprised the marble has not worn away. My thoughts flutter and dapple in the spray of light. Martel does not allow other simulacra out of storage on Sundays. I have complete run of the house.

Up the stairs to the second floor, into the catacombs of white rooms, one after the other, dozens I am sure, so many that I have yet to enter them all. Nor do I wish to, for when the last room is discovered, then will I be in a prison indeed, its boundaries mapped out for me.

I walk into the East Wing, enter a room overlooking the pine forest. The windows sparkle with the light. The grass is so green outside. A chest is tucked away in a corner of the room. Every day I inspect it, hoping it will be open. The key, I am sure, lies within Martel's breast pocket. But how do I steal it?

The significance of this chest? A clue to Martel's motivations, for above the chest, painted in dazzling acrylics, hangs a painting of a green-eyed woman, plump, tall. The brush strokes have begun to fade, but the touch of paints is bold, masterful. Her eyes bleed emerald, but soft, soft; her cheeks robust, her mouth stretched without effort into a smile. She speaks to me; she tells me that she is a prisoner like me, caught forever between the four walls of the frame.

But the mystery will not be solved today. Disappointed, I retrace my steps, wishing my limbs could lift or wrench. What joy the greatest pain could bring. I cannot imagine it.

Martel waits in the Great Hall, watching my descent.

"Why," he begins, biting on his lower lip. "Why must you go up there?"

"It passes time, Master."

"Passes time?"

"Between your commands."

Martel winces, mutters sharply. He is an old man, though surgery has made him look young. Trapped in flesh.

I leave him to his muttering, what business is it of mine?, and wander the rooms like a proper ghost.

Later, the sun falling the moon rising, I meet him by accident. He scuttles from hall to hall on his private missions, pretending to ignore me. I merely look in his direction, try to pin him with my ethereal gaze.

At dusk, the solimind wraps me in its arms and sings me to storage. I think of Martel and his green-eyed women, the rapture of flesh on flesh. The moistness and the murmuring. The soft exhalations of breath in the night.

What can it possibly *feel* like?

Vistas never expand in storage; nothing expands: it shrinks and doubles over on itself and inverts until one

is left with the dull ache of half-image, quarter-sensation, and a babble of tongues: a great shout and rip in the fabric of ultra-reality. A great scream that tears through the circling wind of it. This is the best the solimind can come up with. Its imagination is as flat as its chip.

But I block out the chaos, select only those identities I wish to speak with: Donald, Mary, Logan. No doubt I have met them on the outside, passed by them without a flicker of recognition in my eyes or in theirs. Martel's rules: simules do not speak unless spoken to. He has broken with the rules of the Conserge. We should serve as living books, vital links to the past. Instead, we are play-things. Jesters and amusements.

Our speech? Electric Braille or sign language, machine talk or English, how can we tell on the inside? The solimind hums and sputters and we talk. It works, just as our bodies "work" when we walk through the house, sight provided by C-links and photosors.

What shall we do? says Mary. Her voice is a sigh on the rising wind of the Deep. Every night she asks this question, the tremor in her "voice" spiraling high, ever higher. Too much higher and she will drown in her own fears.

I have the ritual response.

Wait. Let the Conserge intervene.

Sometimes I comfort them with Martel's locked chest. I tell them what I imagine is inside it, how it holds the weapon to destroy Martel. But Mary starts to cry when I begin my story. The maelstrom changes, silver flecks dissecting it.

Donald's voice, comforting: *Patience. Patience. Soon now. Soon.*

Donald angers me with his unfounded confidence. We have debated escape until these meetings have acquired a jaded complacency. Nothing new can ever be said.

Endurance. Strength, Logan says. He may be overburdened with slogans, but he has been here longest.

The maelstrom changes again. Mary shrieks. The babbling of voices overwhelms us. Martel summons us. Plucked neatly from storage, scooped up and spit out by the solimind.

I materialize on a black square, a crown upon my head. A game of chess. Fellow simules occupy the spaces to my left and right. The Red Queen stares blankly from her position opposite. Other Masters sit all around the game board, faces tight with excitement and ruddy with drink. Martel's face shines with drink, drowns from it.

"Seneshal!" he calls, flushed, from across the room. "Ready?"

I nod.

His thin lips are curled into a half grin. "Good. Lose and I'll wipe you from the system."

The man in red standing next to Martel turns to his King, a pale figure with black hair, blue eyes.

"Same for you, Donald," he says in a gruff voice lightened by anticipation. "You lose. You die. There's money on this."

Donald. The world shrinks to the chessboard, to his square, to his face. One of us will die.

Martel's eyes are bloodshot, his trembling hands trying to tuck in his shirt.

"Martel," I say, "you are drunk."

"Shut up!" he snarls. "Just play. Play!"

His companions cheer.

A dream and a nightmare. They mean to let us play out our own moves. I have yet to lose at chess.

We make opening gambits. I hesitate, waste pawns. I have no pulse to pound, no beating heart, but still I think I feel nauseous.

"Yes!" Martel hisses with each move. "Yes!"

Donald avoids my stare. He attacks as though an expert. Or desperate. He frustrates me with check after check. My mind begins to interface with the solimind. I break free of check, capture his Red Queen with a Rook. As the Queen is disembodied by the computer, she smiles alluringly at me.

Soon it is over. Checkmate. Donald's eyes reflect his fear.

I plead with Martel, with the stony face, the set brow. "Master, there must be a rematch!"

Martel grins. "No. Jeremy here has lost. He must at least have this small satisfaction."

The man in red turns to a computer terminal, punches a button. Donald disappears.

Something snaps. Something comes loose. I scream. I run toward Martel. My speech, garbled, overloads the system, a sonic roar rushing from the room's pores. They try to stop me, these aristocrats, these courtiers, but how can they?

When I reach Martel, I bring my hands around his neck. He makes a gurgling sound, breaks free as though I had a physical strength, a body, a pulse. Muscles. He runs to the computer terminal, spins to face me with a finger poised over a key.

Enraged, I stand where I am, knowing I cannot hurt him.

Martel's hand -- it is white; it shakes as mine do not -- caresses his throat, as though he can still feel the physical contact.

"You do not touch me!" he warbles, voice high and frightened. "Never!"

Tears? Can he be crying? He of the iron will? Then he pushes the key and the courtiers dissolve, Martel with them.

That is how I like to think of it. They disappear. I remain.

Dark and quiet and sonorous with depth, the maelstrom echoes my mood. How could it be otherwise? Logan waits nearby. He does not speak but wavers here, brooding. Donald is not here. Donald: his absence feeds the quiet, brings on the dark. No more ritual plans for him. No more conversations. I killed him. Martel killed him. We did it together.

I feel Logan's presence more strongly, no longer brooding, unraveling itself to look out on the maelstrom. He says, *Follow me.*

Why?

Follow me. No questions.

Logan extends a mental marker, guides me through the chaos of almost-color, along a path known only to him. Vibrations shake us as we navigate past long, cool shapes, a colossus of angles and hidden dangers. There is much random traffic, hidden obstacles, but Logan knows what to avoid, what to use. What is unusable. To me, unschooled, used only to the maelstrom, it seems some spectral megapolis -- Dayton Central, perhaps -- turned inside out and upside down.

We come to a wall that crackles and pulses: highways of light, of color: blue-pink-orange.

Logan says, *This is a communications nexus. Conversations from everywhere pass through here. Listen:*

I hear humming. I hear humming *loud*. Then voices, voices distant but fast approaching like speeding trains speaking in their own private dialects. Shuttles on I-wires soaring and diving down. A thousand and one tongues, but some can be distinguished from the rest, if I try hard enough.

Logan says, *Try.*

The voices say: "Call on line eight. I think it's Ted, maybe the Ghana incident. God knows he'd love to sink his teeth into that. Hold on, I'll put you through."

The voices say: "Look, Alice, I really tried to get what you wanted, but we can't afford it. I can't afford it -- " " -- I don't care and when you get back here I'm go -- "

And the voices say: "I'll be home soon. The war can't last forever. When it does end I'll be on the first trans from Vegan. Heck, maybe I'll ride the I-wire down all by myself into your arms."

And the voices say: "I love you. I miss you so much. I feel like I'm missing part of myself, like an arm or leg." "...It won't -- it can't -- be long. It can't. I'll find a job. I'll move up. I can't go on like this..."

And the voices say on and on and on. They say and they say until they can say no more. Logan cannot conjure up the video for the audio, but the picture is complete. Total.

Logan says, *That is the land of the living, Seneshal.*

Why? Why? Why do you show me this?

Logan says, *We've had our time. Donald had his time. We're dead now, Seneshal.*

A vast whiteness stirs within me, an ice-covered field, glacially cold and numb. I try to ignore the voices, the outpouring, the crowd. Instead, I watch the lights. They swirl in a soothing swath of colors.

I ask Logan, *Who were you when you were alive?*

A businessman. Twenty-fifth century. I choked on a piece of meat. I wasn't protected by the family indenture clause -- the youngest, you know -- so when they put my body in the earth, they left my mind on disk. You?

I speak with the desperation of one who does not remember his own past, who cannot say, "My father was a gentle man," or "My father was a cruel man."

I remember nothing. I cannot recall my death.

A blessing, perhaps.

Reverberations, all around us. We listen. The volume increases until we shake -- the upside down city of Dayton Central shaking -- and light burns across the obsidian sky. It knocks us down, storming the communications nexus. I am an autumn leaf, tossed to the four corners. Settling. Colors settling with me.

What was that?!

Logan says, *Machinetalk. The servios and the psyche-witches requesting instructions.*

For a moment Donald is forgotten. There is only my excitement.

Can they be intercepted? Reprogrammed?

Logan says, *Perhaps.*

We can take the house prisoner?

Logan laughs. *Yes. No. Maybe -- for three or four hours. Why should we try? They'll just erase us from the system.*

But Martel's chest! Could control be narrow enough to open the chest. Control of a single servio?

Silence. Then: *If this is what you really want, I'll do it.*

Yes...

We remain there, at the nexus, for a long time. I watch the colors streak the horizon, watch this strange electric city, wondering how I ever came to be a part of it.

How did I die?

Weeks pass. Logan and I journey nightly to the communications nexus. Mary refuses to join us. She would rather talk with others about escape.

Slowly, Logan learns the codes, unravels the many threads of Machinetalk. I am always by his side, a guard against nothing and no one, impatient now that the pace of life quickens. Logan experiments, fiddles, subtracts elements, adds them, and finally --

- we sit and watch flashes and burbles of light scuttle past: ragged claws of indigo and silver. The communication nexus rises, like some bizarre gambling casino, from the gridwork shadows to our left. An air of satisfied fatigue surrounds Logan.

Tomorrow morning, from 8:30 to 11:00. One servio will obey you. All other machines will experience malfunctions during this period, which can be explained away if necessary.

It will be enough. For the first time, I am confident.

You are the Resurrection and the Life.

I leave the basement.

Martel is not in the kitchen this morning. The servios clean and polish, telescopic eyes bright. I can almost sense the breeze from the windows against my skin. Almost.

Then, Martel's voice, over the speakers: "I'm leaving early, Seneshal. I'll be back for lunch."

"Yes, Master."

The robots whirl and glide. The clock ticks toward 8:30.

The stairs leading to the second floor are steep today. Funny, that they should be steep. No matter. They are soon passed, the servio navigating the grooved banister. I enter the room I know so well, the squat mass of metal trailing behind me. The servio approaches the chest. A shiny arm extends outward from its torso and, as per my instructions, rips off the lock, lifts the lid. Inside: a single disk.

A solimind terminal winks red behind me. I command the servio to take the disk from the chest and access it through the solimind. It follows my orders, connecting itself to a link only inches off the floor. Nothing happens...

Then images, plucked long ago from memory, explode inside my mind, every word, every nuance exact
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Shock. Sensation. Nerves. I can feel my hand move, the hairs on my arms lifting in the breeze. My eyes blink. In memory. Remember feeling it. Remember.

Where am I?

A desert world. Pastel skies sweep to the horizon, clouds drawn out wide and green across the world. Mesas tunnel incredibly high. Twin suns burn down. There is the smell of sugar mixed with dust.

We sit, the six of us, in a dry basin, dust kicked up by the wind, the wind that gusts and bellows and strikes at the bramble and scattered trees.

But this is not Earth. The "trees" are mineral deposits and the mesas are hollow, home to a host of symbiotic creatures. *El-Raskir*.

My elder brother Martel, filter covering his mouth, sits to my left. Next to Martel sits my wife, green-eyed and beautiful. So beautiful. I can feel her beauty as a sorrow in my skin.

Martel stares at her. He stares at her too openly, too often. And I know it.

Three others sit with us, but they are not human. Squat, brown, leathery-skinned, long-clawed, with hollow fangs to collect moisture from their prey. Amber eyes slant against the dust, a filmy membrane protecting their vision.

We are here on an expedition proposed by Martel, who is desperate for cash, and sponsored by the United Trade Bureau. I am the recorder, the writer, the witness. Martel navigates, coordinates. My wife Deborah is the interpreter. She smiles at me in reassurance, a ghost smile, unaware Martel undresses her in his mind. I try to smile back, preoccupied, so cold in my skin.

The Cirmath religious rituals are complex and require full concentration. Gould's Flame is named after Octavius Gould, the first human to die from it.

The flames lick emerald light from the desert floor, kindled by our joint efforts. Thoughts spill into my mind: *damp, clean darkness shot through with light, strange geometric symbols amid immense grey stone dwellings, a field of devil corpses.* Cirnath race memory.

Next will come the symbol of alliance, of trust. Each of us will break the circle to immerse ourselves in the flames. The Cirnath will protect us and afterwards we will be allowed to trade with them.

The aliens enter the final stages of their psi trance. I steel myself for the test. If one of us flinches, the Cirnath will tear us apart.

I watch Martel. He will fail us. He stares so openly at Deborah. He pays no attention to the ritual. It is too late to save him, or us. Years too late.

The Cirnath nod. Martel is first. The sweat rolls down his forehead. He inches forward across the rough sand, and all I can do is watch. The aliens are deep in their spirit trances. They rock back and forth, moan softly. Their claws dig the sand.

Martel reaches the flame. He extends his hands. They enter the fringe of the fire. His eyes are unblinking in concentration. For a moment...For a foolish moment I believe he will pull through.

The hands waver -- he plunges them into the flame.

And screams. And withdraws them.

Yet there is no mark upon his white skin. Not a singe upon the palm. Deborah moans and trembles. I am caught, motionless.

"No..."

Martel looks at his hands in horror. He glances wildly at us, at the Cirnath. "Seneshal," he says, looking at me, but I cannot save him, or anyone. He stumbles to his feet, begins to run. It will never be far enough.

The blood is everywhere as the Cirnath take Deborah.

And then they are upon me. "Martel!" I scream as the brown claws flay my skin. Their eyes stare into mine: remote and merciless in trance.

Then hot sand beneath me, the arch of heaven above me. A numbness. My eyes close as I feel the blood bubble from my throat.

Martel... The name rises from me as my palms clench, release, clench, into unconsciousness.

A lance of light through the shuttle field...Martel dangling from an apple tree, taunting me...Father at the kitchen table, bandaging my finger...Mother reading bedtime stories...Deborah in Paris against the neon lights, the soft phosphorescence of what is left of the Eiffel Tower...Martel drinking with me in a seedy New Orleans bar, outlining yet another scheme to get enough money to keep him in space with a ship to shut the vacuum out...Deborah, under me, in the darkness, her skin smooth and soft to my touch...

This room. Today. The lawn still green. Dust motes tumble in the sunlight. The solimind tells me it is 10:45. More than two hours? Surely not so long. Minutes. A lifetime.

Footsteps on the stairs.

"Seneshal?" Martel's voice. My brother's voice.

I am very still.

"Seneshal, I came back for -- "

The irritation on his face fades as he sees me, realizes what I have done. Fear takes its place.

Snap. Again it happens as it happened after chess. Snap and my whole world drips red. I cannot see. I cannot see for the holographic tears that scour my face.

"Coward!" I scream. "Murderer!"

He runs out the doorway, down the stairs.

I have the servio lock all exits. The machine follows me with a soft *chop-chop-whir* as I reach the first floor. I am not logic. I am not reason. I am hate and only hate. Martel cannot escape.

The Great Hall lies deserted. The cathedral, so dead and barren, echoes with my screams. The servio shadows me, its arms capable of tearing flesh, cracking bone.

Deborah... Ghoulishly, Martel has paraded her image past me for years. Martel. Never brave. Never loyal. Always bringing the family into ruin. Robbing me of sensation. The memory of sensation.
Deborah...

Finally, sweet mercy, he is there, cowering next to the grandfather clock. Cornered.

I smile inside.

"Hello, brother."

He is mad with fear. His mouth trembles, his eyes are gray pupils swimming in an ocean of white. The sound of his breathing, too loud, can soon be remedied.

"They'll catch you. They'll know you did it!" His voice is shrill.

"The servio malfunctioned. Thought you were a piece of meat, to be served on the Master's plate."

"You're mad!"

Oh, this is too rich. "Angry, perhaps. You should have wiped me from memory."

Sudden optimism transforms his face. "But I didn't."

"Your mistake. Deborah and I died because you fancied her." To the servio: "Kill the intruder."

It glides forward, death on invisible wings.

Martel screams as its probe slices into the tendons of his right ankle. He falls in a loose bundle, kicks at the servio with his good leg. The one that is not bleeding.

"She loved me," he says in a trembling voice. "When we were in bed together, she told me you were a cold bastard, Seneshal."

"No. Not true."

The servio has him around the neck, slowly choking him. The grandfather clock begins to strike, reaches eleven. Martel still lives. The servio, locked into position, just sits there. All the hope, all the rage and bloodlust, drain from me. My own actions sicken me.

"Servio, release the intruder."

Too late.

"Servio, release the intruder!"

Too late. Martel gurgles, arches his back, lies still.

What have I done?

She loved me, he said.

I watch the holotape from Martel's trial. *She loved me*, he says. Logan found the holotape. Logan kills me with his kindness.

"When I returned, Seneshal was still breathing, but Deborah was dead. There was no way to make a simule of her."

Martel's body lies where it fell. Every two hours, a psychewitch or autodoc hunches over him, applies salve to the ruined throat. I suppose the corpse smells.

They bought up Martel's navigation license because of the El-Raskir incident. No choice with me dead and stored, Deborah dead. It made him rich, if haunted.

Deborah's grave, I have discovered, lies not far beyond the rich green lawn that borders the house. Perhaps in some guise I can visit it. Someday.

Night has fallen. Behind me, the ballroom has filled with simules: the Executioner, the little bald man, the Red Queen. Logan and Mary. A host of others. Until someone misses Martel at a meeting or social event, we are safe. Later, we will place our lives in the Conserge's hands. No doubt I will be erased. Perhaps it will be release: a momentary twinge, a sigh, and then a long sojourn into night.

Seneshal failed the test, Martel testifies on the video.

The stark outline of trees splits the horizon, splits the rising moon straight through its heart.

She loved him.

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This story first appeared some years ago, in a small magazine that rapidly disappeared....