

Quin's Shanghai Circus
a short story by Jeff VanderMeer

Let me tell you why I wished to buy a meerkat at Quin's Shanghai Circus. Let me tell you about the city: The city is sharp, the city is a cliché performed with cardboard and painted sparkly colors to disguise the empty center -- the hole.

(That's mine -- the words. I specialize in holo art, but every once in a chemical moon I'll do the slang jockey thing on paper.)

Let me tell you what the city means to me. So you'll understand about the meerkat, because it's important. Very important: Back a decade, when the social planners ruled, we called it Dayton Central. Then, when the central government choked flat and the police all went freelance, we started calling it Veniss -- like an adder's hiss, deadly and unpredictable. Art was Dead here until Veniss. Art before Veniss was just Whore Hole stuff, street mimes with flexi-faces and flat media.

That's what the Social Revolutions meant to me -- not all the redrum riots and the twisted girders and the flourishing free trade markets and the hundred-meter-high ad signs sprouting on every street corner. Not the garbage zones, not the ocean junks, not the underlevel coups, nor even the smell of glandular drugs, musty yet sharp. No, Veniss brought Old Art to an end, made me dream of suck-cess, with my omni-present, omni-everything holovision.

Almost brought me to an end as well one day, for in the absence of those policing elements of society (except for pay-for-hire), two malicious thieves -- nay, call them what they were: Pick Dicks -- well, these two pick dicks stole all my old-style ceramics and new style holosculpture and, after mashing me on the head with a force that split my brains all over the floor, split too. Even my friend Shadrach Begolem showed concern when he found me. (A brooding sort, my friend Begolem: no blinks: no twitches: no tics. All economy of motion, of energy, of time. Eyee, the opposite of me.) But we managed to rouse an autodoc from its wetwork slumber and got me patched up (Boy, did that hurt!).

Afterwards, I sat alone in my apartment/studio, crying as I watched nuevo-westerns on a holo Shadrach lent me. All that work gone! The faces of the city, the scenes of the city, that had torn their way from my mind to the holo, forever lost -- never even shown at a galleria, and not likely to have been, either. Veniss, huh! The adder defanged. The snake slithering away. When did anyone care about the real artists until after they were dead? And I was as close to Dead as any Living Artist ever was. I had no supplies. My money had all run out on me -- plastic rats deserting a paper ship. I was a Goner, all those Artistic Dreams so many arthritic flickers in a holoscreen. (You don't have a cup of water on you, by any chance? Or a pill or two?)

I think I always had Artistic Dreams.

When we were little, my twinned sister Nicola and I made up these fabric creatures we called cold pricklies and, to balance the equation, some warm fuzzies. All through the sizzling summers of ozone rings and water conservation and baking metal, we'd be indoors with our make-believe world of sharp-hard edges and diffuse-soft curves, forslaking the thirst of veldt and jungle on the video monitors.

We were both into the Living Art then -- the art you can touch and squeeze

and hold to your chest, not the dead, flat-screen scrawled stuff.

Pseudo-Mom and Pseudo-Dad thought us wonky, but that was okay, because we'd always do our chores, and because later we found out they weren't our real parents. Besides, we had true morals, true integrity. We knew who was evil and who was good. The warm fuzzies always won out in the end.

Later, we moved on to genetic playdoh, child gods creating creatures that moved, breathed, required attention for their mewling, crying tongues.

Creatures we could destroy if it suited our temperament. Not that any of them lived very long.

My sister moved away from the Living Art when she got older, just as she moved away from me. She processes the free market now.

So, since Shadrach certainly wouldn't move in to protect me and my art from the cold pricklies of destruction -- I mean, I couldn't go it alone; I had this horrible vision of sacrificing my ceramics, throwing them at future Pick Dicks because the holo stuff wouldn't do any harm of a physical nature (which made me think, hey, maybe this holo stuff is Dead Art, too, if it doesn't impact on the world when you throw it) -- since that was Dead Idea, I was determined to go down to Quin's Shanghai Circus (wherever that was) and "git me a meerkat," as those hokey nuevo westerns say. A meerkat for me, I'd say, tall as you please. Make it a double. In a dirty glass cage. (Oh, I'd crack myself up if the Pick Dicks hadn't already. Tricky, tricky pick dicks.)

But you're probably asking how a Living Artist such as myself -- a gaunt, relatively unknown, and alone artiste -- could pull the strings and yank the chains that get you an audience with the mysterious Quin.

Well, I admit to connections. I admit to Shadrach. I admit to tracking Shadrach down in the Canal District.

Canal District -- Shadrach. They go together, like Volodya and Sirin, like Ozzie and Elliot, Romeo and Juliard. You could probably find Shadrach down there now, though I hardly see him any more on account of my sister Nicola. That's how I met Shadrach, through Nicola when they shared an apartment.

You see, Shadrach lived below-level for his first twenty-five years, and when he came up he came up in the Canal District. "A wall of light," he called it, and framed against this light, my sister Nicola, who served as an orientation officer back then for peoples coming above ground. A wall of light and my sweet sister Nicola, and Shadrach ate them both up. Imagine: living in a world of darkness and neon for all of your life and coming to the surface and there she is, an angel dressed in white to guide you, to comfort you, to love you. If you had time, I'd tell you about them, because it was a thing to covet, their love, a thing of beauty to mock the cosmetics ads and the lingerie holos...

Anyway, ever since the space freighters stopped their old splash 'n' crash in the cool down canals, the Canal District has been the hippest place in town. Go there sometime and think of me, because I don't think I'll be going there again. Half the shops float on the water, so when the ocean-going ships come in with their catch and off-load after decon, the eateries get the first pick. All the Biggest Wigs eat there. You can order pseudo-whale, fiddler, sunfish, the works. Most places overlook the water and you can find anything there -- mechanicals and Living Art and sensual pleasures that will leave you quivering and unconscious. All done up in a

pallet of Colors-Sure-To-Please. Sunsets courtesy of Holo Ink, so you don't have to see the glow of pollution, the haze of smog-shit-muck. Whenever I was down, there I would go, just to sit and watch the Giants of Bioindustry and the Arts walk by, sipping from their carafes of alkie (which I don't envy them, rot-gut seaweed never having been a favorite of mine).

And so I was down, real down (more down than now, sitting in a garbage zone and speling to you), and I wanted a talk with Shadrach because I knew he worked for Quin and he might relent, relinquish and tell me what I wanted to know.

It so happened that I bumped into Shadrach in a quiet corner, away from the carousing and watchful eye of the Canal Police, who are experts at keeping Order, but can never decide exactly which Order, if you know what I mean, and you probably don't.

We still weren't alone, though -- parts merchants and debauched jewelried concierge wives and stodgy autodocs, gleaming with a hint of self-repair, all sped or sauntered by, each self-absorbed, self-absorbing.

Shadrach played it cool, cooler, coolest, listening to the sea beyond, visible from a crack in our tall falling walls.

"Hi," I said. "Haven't seen you since those lousey pick dicks did their evil work. You saved my skin, you did."

"Hello, Nick," Shadrach replied, looking out at the canals.

("Hello, Nick," he says, after all the compli- and condi-ments I'd given him!)

Shadrach is a tall, muscular man with a tan, a flattened nose from his days as courier between city states -- the funny people gave him that -- and a dour mouth. His clothes are all out of date, his sandals positively reeking of antiquity. Still thinks he's a Twenty-Seventh Century Man, if you know what I mean, and, again, you probably don't. (After all, you are sitting here in a garbage zone with me.)

"So how're things with you?" I said, anticipating that I'd have to drag him kicking and screaming to my point.

"Fine," he said. "You look bad, though." No smile.

I suppose I did look bad. I suppose I must have, still bandaged up and a swell on my head that a geosurfer would want to ride.

"Thanks," I said, wondering why all my words, once smartly deployed for battle, had left me.

"No problem," he said.

I could tell Shadrach wasn't in a talking mood. More like a Dead Art mood as he watched the canals.

And then the miracle: he roused himself from his canal contemplation long enough to say, "I could get you protection," all the while staring at me like I was a dead man, which is the self-same stare he always has. But here was my chance.

"Like what, you shiller," I said. "A whole friggin' police unit all decked out in alkie and shiny new bribes?"

He shrugged and said, "I'm trying to help. The bigger the big fish, the more the small fish need a hook."

"Not a bad turn of phrase," I said, lying. "You get that from looking into the water all damn day? What I need is Quin."

Shadrach snorted, said, "You are desperate. An invite to Quin?" He wouldn't meet my gaze directly, but edged around it, edged in between it.

"Maybe in a million years you'd build up the contacts," he said, "the raw

money and influence."

I turned away, because that stung. The robbery stung, the not-being-able-to-sell-the-art stung. Life stung. And stunk.

"Easy for you, Shadrach," I said. "You're not a Living Artist. I don't need an invite. Just give me the address and I'll go myself to beg a meerkat. Anything extra I do on my own."

Shadrach frowned, put on a more serious face, said, "You do not know what you are asking for, Nicholas." I thought I saw fear in him -- fear and an uncharacteristic glimpse of compassion. "You will get hurt. I know you -- and I know Quin. Quin isn't in it for the Living Art. He's in it for other reasons entirely. Things I don't even know."

By now I'd begun to break out in the sweats and a moist heat was creeping up my throat, and, hey, maybe I'd had too much on the drug-side on the way down, so I put a hand on his arm, as much to keep my balance as anything.

"For a friend," I said. "For Nicola. I need a break or I'm going to have to go below level and live out my days in a garbage zone." (And look where I am today? In a garbage zone. Talking to you.)

Bringing up my sister was low -- especially because I owed her so much money -- but bringing up below level was lower still. Shadrach still had nightmares about living underground with the mutties and the funny people, and the drip-drip-drip of water constantly invading the system.

He stared at me, white-faced, the knuckles of his hands losing color where they clutched the rail. Did he, I hoped, see enough of my sister in me?

But I'm not heartless -- when I saw him like that, the hurt showing as surely as if they'd broken up a day ago, I recanted. I said, "Forget it, my friend. Forget it. I'll work something else out. You know me. It's okay-dokey."

Shadrach held me a moment longer with his gray, unyielding eyes and then he sighed and exhaled so that his shoulders sagged and his head bowed. He examined his stick-on sandals with the seriousness of a podiatrist.

"You want Quin," he said, "you first have to promise me this is a secret -- for life, god help you. If it gets out Quin's seeing someone like you, there'll be a whole bunch of loonies digging up the city to find him."

Someone like you hurt, but I just said, "Who am I going to tell? Me, who's always borrowing for the next holo? People avoid me. I am alone in the world. Quin's could get me close to people."

"I know," he said, a bit sadly, I thought.

"So tell me," I said. "Where is it?"

"You have to tell Quin I sent you," he said, and pointed a finger at me, "and all you want is to buy a meerkat."

"You that budsky-budsky with Quin," I said, incredulous -- and a little loud, so a brace of Canal policemen gave me a look like I was lunny-o.

"Keep your voice down," Shadrach said. Then: "Go west down the canal-side escalators until you see the Mercado street light. There's an alley just before that. Go down the alley. At the end, it looks like a dead-ender because there are recycling bins and other debris from the last ten centuries. But don't be fooled. Just close your eyes -- it's a holo, and when you're through, there's Quin's, right in front of you. Just walk right in."

"Thank U, Shadrach," I said, heart beating triple-time fast. "I'll tell Nicola that you gave her the time of day."

His eyes widened and brightened, and a smile crossed his face, fading quickly. But I knew, and he knew I knew.

"Be careful," he said, his voice so odd that shivers spiraled up my vertebrae. He shook my hand. "Quin's a strange...man," he said. "When it's over, come and see me. And remember, Nicholas -- don't -- don't dicker with him over the price to be paid."

Then he was gone, taking long, ground-eating strides away from me down the docks, without even a goodbye or a chance to thank him, as if I was somehow tainted, somehow no good. It made me sad. It made me mad. Because I've always said Shadrach was Off, even when Nicola dated him.

Shadrach and Nicola. I've had relationships, but never the Big One. Those loving young lovers strolling down by the drug-free zones, those couples coupling in the shadow of the canals, they don't know what it is to be desperately in love, and perhaps even Nicola didn't know. But I thought Shadrach would die when she left him. I thought he would curl up and die. He should have died, except that he found Quin, and somehow Quin raised him up from the dead.

What does Quin do, you ask? (As if you have the right to ask questions knee-deep in garbage. But you've asked so I'll tell you:) Quin makes critters. He makes critters that once existed but don't now (tigers, sheep, bats, elephants, dolphins, albatrosses, seagulls, armadillos, dusky seaside sparrows) or critters that never existed except in myth, flat media, or holos (Jabberwocks, Grinches, Ganeshas, Puppeteers, Gobblesnorts, Snarks) or critters that just never existed at all until Quin created them (beetleworms, eelgoats, camelapes).

But the best thing he does -- the Liveliest Art of all, for my purposes -- is to improve on existing critters. Like meerkats with opposable thumbs. His meerkats are like the old, old Stradi-various violins, each perfect and each perfectly different. Only the rich could procure them, through influence mostly, not money, because Quin didn't work for money, it was said, but for favors. Though no one could guess what favors, and at what cost. Rumor had it Quin had started out assisting state-sponsored artificial pregnancies, before the fall of government, but no one knew anything concrete about Quin's past.

So I daydreamed about meerkats after Shadrach left me. I imagined wonderful, four-foot tall meerkats with shiny button eyes and carrot noses and cool bipedal movement and can-I-help-you smiles. Meerkats that could do kitchen work or mow the atrophiturf in your favorite downtown garden plot. Even wash clothes. Or, most importantly, cold cock a pick dick and bite his silly weiner off.

This is the principal image of revenge I had branded into my mind quite as violently as those awful nuovo westerns which, as you have no doubt already guessed, are my one weakness: "Ah, yessirree, Bob, gonna rope me a meerkat, right after I defend my lady's honor and wrassle with this here polar bear." I mean, come on! No wonder it was so hard to sell my holo art before the pick dicks stole it.

But as I headed down the alley which looked quite dead-endish later that night -- having just had a bout of almost-fisticuffs (more cuffs than fisties) with a Canal District barkeep -- I admit to nervousness. I admit to sweat and trembling palms. The night was darker than dark -- wait, listen: the end of the world is night; that's mine, a single-cell haiku -- and the sounds from the distant bright streets only faintly echoed down from the loom `n' doom buildings. (Stink of garbage, too, much like this place.)

As I stepped through the holograph -- a perfect rendition that spooked me good -- and came under the watchful "I"s in the purple-lit sign, Q U I N ' S S H A N G H A I C I R C U S, I did the thrill-in-the-spine bit. It reminded me of when I was a kid (again) and I saw an honest-to-greatness circus, with a real sparrow doing tricks on a highwire, even a regular dog all done up in bows. I remember embarrassing my dad by pointing when the dog shat on the circus ring floor and saying, "Look, Dad, look! Something's coming out the back end!" Like a prize, maybe? I didn't know better. (Hell, I didn't even know my own Dad wasn't real.) Even then the genetic toys I played with -- Ruff the Rooster with the cold eyes I thought stared maliciously at me during the night; Goof the Gopher, who told the dumbest stories about his good friends the echinoderms -- all produced waste in a nice solid block through the navel. But I have let my story run away without me, as Shadrach might say but has never said, and into nostalgia, and we wouldn't want that.

So: as soon as I stepped into the blue velvet darkness, the doors sliding shut with a hiss behind me, the prickly feeling in my spine intensified, and all the sounds from the alley, all the garbage odors and tastes were replaced with the hum of conditioners, the stench of sterility. This was high class. This was atmosphere.

This was exactly what I had expected from Quin.

To both sides, glass cages embedded in the walls glowed with an emerald light, illuminating a bizarre bunch of critters: things with no eyes, things with too many eyes, things with too many limbs, things with too many teeth, things with too many things. Now I could detect an odor, only partially masked by the cleanliness: the odor of the circus I had seen as a kid -- the bitter-dry combination of urine and hay, the musky smell of animal sweat, of animal presence.

The cages, the smell, made me none too curious -- made me look straight ahead, down to the room's end, some 30 yards away, where Quin waited for me.

It had to be Quin. If it wasn't Quin, Quin couldn't be.

He sat behind a counter display: a rectangular desk-like contraption within which were embedded two glass cases, the contents of which I could not I.D. Quin's head was half in dark, half in the glow of an overhead light, but the surrounding gloom was so great that I had no choice but to move forward, if only to glimpse Quin in the flesh, in his seat of power.

When I was close enough to spit in Quin's face, I gulped like an oxygen-choked fishee, because I realized then that not only did Quin lean over the counter, he was the counter. I stopped and stared, mine eyes as buggee as that self-same fishee. I'd heard of Don Daly's Self Portrait Mixed Media on Pavement -- which consisted of Darling Dan's splatted remains -- but Quin had taken an entirely different slant that reeked of genius. (It also reeked of squirrels in the brain, but so what?)

Portrait of the Artist as a slab of flesh. The counter itself had a yellowish-tan hue to it, like a skin transplant before it heals and it was dotted with eyes -- eyes which blinked and eyes which did not, eyes which winked, all watching me, watching them.

Every now and again, I swear on my slang jockey grave, the counter undulated, as if breathing. The counter stood some three meters high and twenty long, five wide. In the center, the flesh parted to include the two glass cages. Within the cages sat twin orangutans, tiny but perfectly

formed, grooming themselves atop bonzai trees. Each had a woman's face, with drawn cheekbones and eyes that dripped despair and hopelessness. Atop the counter, like a tree trunk rising out of the ground, Quin's torso rose, followed by the neck and the narrow, somehow serpentine head. Quin's face looked almost Oriental, the cheekbones pinched and sharp, the mouth slight, the eyes lidless.

The animal musk, the bitter-sweetness, came from Quin, for I could smell it on him, pungent and fresh. Was he rotting? Did the Prince of Genetic Recreation rot?

The eyes -- a deep blue without hope of reflection -- stared down at the hands; filaments running from each of the twelve fingers dangled spiders out onto the counter. The spiders sparkled like purple jewels in the dim light. Quin made them do undulating dances on the countertop which was his lap, twelve spiders in a row doing an antique cabaret revue. Another display of Living Art. I actually clapped at that one, despite the gob of fear deep in my stomach. The fear had driven the slang right out of me, given me the normals, so to speak, so I felt as if my tongue had been ripped from me.

With the sound of the clap -- a naked sound in that place -- his head snapped toward me and a smile broke his face in two. A flick of his wrist and the spiders wound themselves around his arm. He brought his hands together as if in prayer.

"Hello, sir," he said in a sing-song voice oddly frozen.

"I came for a meerkat," I said, my own voice an octave higher than normal.

"Shadrach sent me."

"You came alone?" Quin asked, his blue eyes boring into me.

My mouth was dry. It felt painful to swallow.

"Yes," I said, and with the utterance of that word -- that single, tiny word with entire worlds of agreement coiled within it -- I heard the glass cages open behind me, heard the tread of many feet, felt the presence of a hundred hundred creatures at my back. Smelled the piss-hay smell, clotted in my nostrils, making me cough.

What could I do but plunge ahead?

"I came for a meerkat," I said. "I came to work for you. I'm a holo artist. I know Shadrach."

The eyes stared lazily, glassily, and I heard the chorus from behind me, in deep and high voices, in voices like reeds and voices like knives: "You came alone."

And I was thinking then, dear Yahwah, dear Allah, dear God, and I was remembering the warm fuzzies and the cold pricklies of my youth, and I was thinking that I had fallen in with the cold pricklies and I could not play omnipotent now, not with the Liveliest of the Living Arts.

And because I was desperate and because I was foolish, and most of all, because I was a mediocre artist of the holo, I said again, "I want to work with you."

In front of me, Quin had gone dead, like a puppet, as much as the spiders on his fingers had been puppets. Behind me, the creatures stepped forward on cloven hooves, spiked feet, sharp claws, the smell overpowering. I shut my eyes against the feel of their paws, their hands -- clammy and soft, cruel and hot, as they held me down. As the needles entered my arms, my legs, and filled me with the little death of sleep, I remember seeing the orangutans weeping on their bonzai branches and wondering why they wept for me.

Let me tell you about the city, sir. Like an adder's kiss, sharp and deadly. It's important. Very important. Let me tell you about Quin and his meerkats. I work for Quin now, and that's bad business. I've done terrible. I've done terrible things -- the deadest and deadliest of the Dead Arts, the cold pricklies of the soul. I've killed the Living Art. I've killed the living. And I know. I know it. Only. Only the flesh comes off me and the flesh goes on like a new suit. Only the needle goes in and the needle comes out and I don't care, though I try with all my strength to think of Shadrach and Nicola. But the needle goes in and... Let me tell you about the city....

Afterword

I must first confess that I stole the title of this story -- it is also the title of a novel by Edward Whittemore, long out of print, that will be back in print this year. The story has nothing to do with the novel, but I liked it so much I had to use it for something.

Quin's is my contribution to the new cyber-goth-genetic-poetic horror-myth movement of which I am one of the only practitioners. Like all of my far future tales, it has much less to do with SF than with dark fantasy. Oddly enough I cannot remember how this particular story came to be -- only that I wanted to apply to SF the kind of convoluted voice I'd been using in my dark fantasy stories. Once I'd written the story, I saw immediately that it was part of something much larger -- basically, that although self-contained, it also contained the seeds of two more sections: one from Nicola's (the name of my first girlfriend!) point-of-view and one from Shadrach's (name stolen from Silverberg's fiction) point-of-view, each section advancing the story. The resulting novel tells the entire tale of the mysterious doings of Quin through their eyes. I'm currently marketing the novel to publishers.

This is probably the last work I will set in the far future. My series of stories set in the imaginary city of Ambergris has progressed to the point -- rather, the history of the place has blossomed into the mid-1900s rather than the Victorian era -- that I can now play out my fascinations with genetic tampering and genetic alterations -- with biology in general -- in that dark fantasy setting instead.

© Jeff VanderMeer 1997, 2000

"Quin's Shanghai Circus" first appeared in Interzone #124, October 1997.