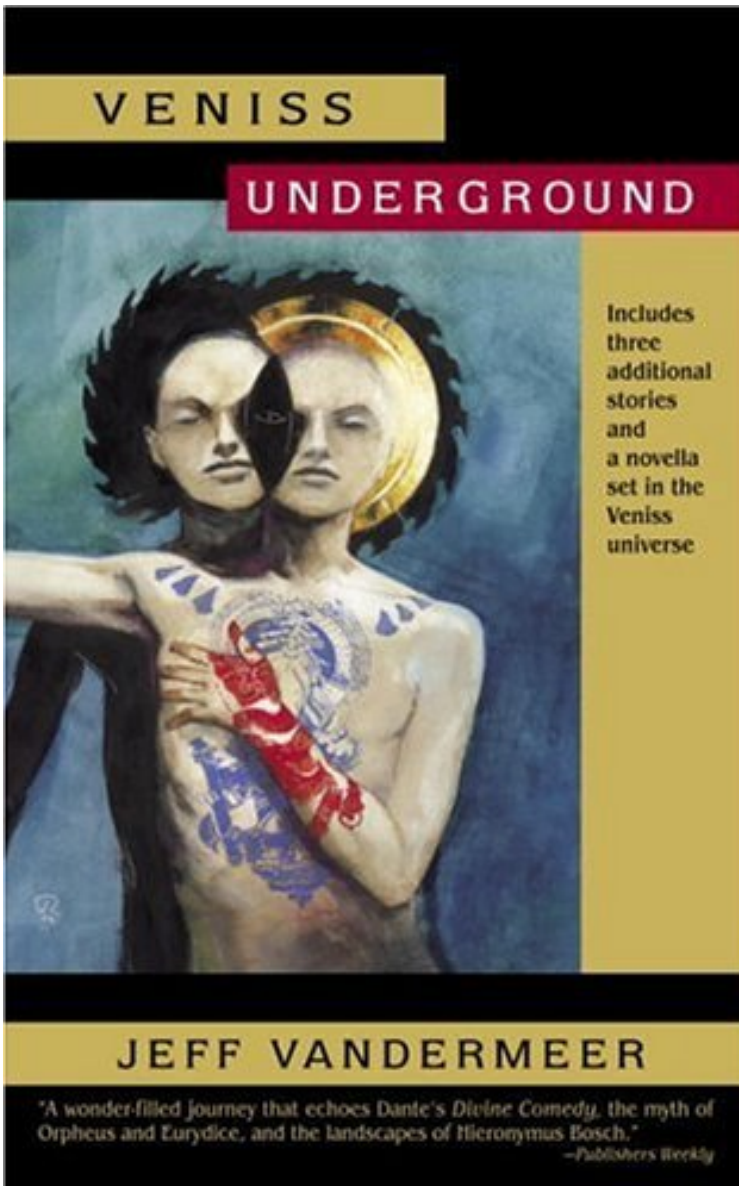


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# Veniss Underground



*Par Jeff VanderMeer*  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIn his debut novel, literary alchemist Jeff VanderMeer takes us on an unforgettable journey, a triumph of the imagination that reveals the magical and mysterious city of Veniss through three intertwined voices. First, Nicholas, a would-be Living Artist, seeks to escape his demons in the shadowy undergroundbut in doing so makes a deal with the devil himself. In her fevered search for him, his twin sister, Nicola, spins her own unusual and hypnotic tale as she discovers the hidden secrets of the city. And finally, haunted by Nicolas sudden, mysterious disappearance and gripped by despair, Shadrach, Nicolas lover, embarks on a mythic journey to the nightmarish levels deep beneath the surface of the city to bring his

love back to light. There he will find wonders beyond imagining and horrors greater than the heart can bear.

By turns beautiful, horrifying, delicate, and powerful, Veniss Underground explores the limits of love, memory, and obsession in a landscape that defies the boundaries of the imagination. This special edition includes the short stories *The Sea*, *Mendeho*, and *Moonlight*; *Detectives and Cadavers*; and *A Heart for Lucretia* and the novella *Balzac's War*, offering a complete tour of the fantastic world of Veniss. From the Trade Paperback edition.

Extrait CHAPTER 1 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 holoart, 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 under-level 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 omnipresent, omnieverything holo-vision. 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. Eye e, the opposite of me.) But we managed to rouse an autodoc from its wetwork slumber and got me patched up. (Boy, did that hurt!) Afterward, 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 as much a Goner as the AIs they'd murdered to restore Order, 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 clay, child gods creating creatures that moved, breathed, asked for attention with 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 programs 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 the first place they took him to after orientation was 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. 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 oceangoing 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 pseudowhale, 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 alkies (which I don't envy them, rotgut 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 spilling 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 failing walls. "Hi," I said. "Haven't seen you since those lousy 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 condiments 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 boots 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 selfsame stare he always has. But here was my chance. "Like what, you shiller?" I said. "A whole friggin' police unit all decked out in alkies and shiny new bribes?" He shrugged and said, "I'm trying to help. Small fish need a hook to catch bigger fish." "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, 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, 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 okey-dokey." Shadrach held me a moment longer with his gray, unyielding eyes, 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 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 canalside escalators until you see the Mercado streetlight. There's an alley just before that. Go down the alley. At the end, it looks like a dead end 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 back. He shook my hand. "Quin's a little . . . strange," 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 good-bye 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. Presentation de l'diteur In his debut novel, literary alchemist Jeff VanderMeer takes us on an unforgettable journey, a triumph of the imagination that reveals the magical and mysterious city of Veniss through three intertwined voices. First, Nicholas, a would-be Living Artist, seeks to escape his demons in the shadowy underground but in doing so makes a deal with the devil himself. In her fevered search for him, his twin sister, Nicola, spins her own unusual and hypnotic tale as she discovers the hidden secrets of the city. And finally, haunted by Nicholas' sudden, mysterious disappearance and gripped by despair, Shadrach, Nicholas' lover, embarks on a mythic journey to the nightmarish levels deep beneath the surface of the city to bring his love back to light. There he will find wonders beyond imagining and horrors greater than the heart can bear. By turns beautiful, horrifying, delicate, and powerful, *Veniss Underground* explores the limits of love, memory, and obsession in a landscape that defies the boundaries of the imagination. This special edition includes the short stories *The Sea*, *Mendeho*, and *Moonlight*; *Detectives and Cadavers*; and *A Heart for Lucretia* and the novella *Balzac's War*, offering a complete tour of the fantastic world of Veniss. From the Trade Paperback edition.