



EROTIC

THE VANITY PAPERS

An Oxford Literary Review.

Michalemas Term 2022.



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Oxford Review

Michaelmas Term 2022

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take your one phone call
and plead insanity
order champagne
make love in front of the artwork
open your outré gifts
and the original Michelangelo red chalk drawing
a fresh scent rises from her flesh
the hedonistic orgies
you're obsessed with it; it's making you sick
keep all your food in plastic boxes
coke brings us closer together
tell me to eat
the body, the blood
drips from your mouth
so much more than XXX
today, tomorrow
the ravenous monsters and
their shadows on your white walls
...daddy, my friend has been arrested

— WELCOME TO THE EROTIC ISSUE

THE
VANITY
PAPERS

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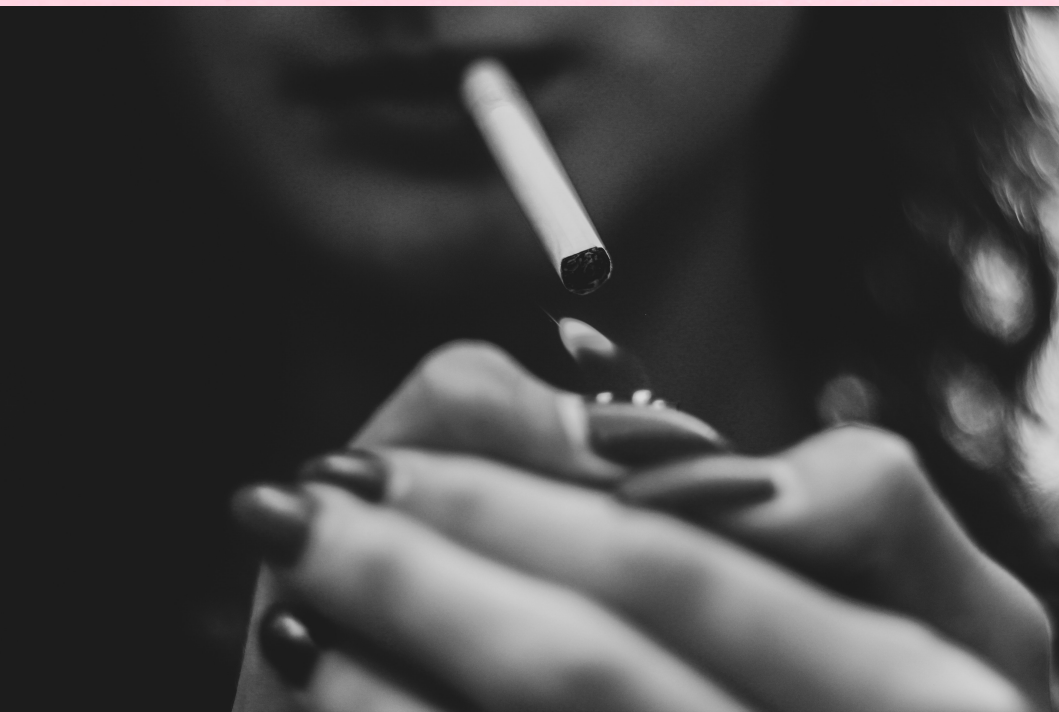
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WHEN WE
FALL
ASLEEP

JAMIE

CAMERON

When We Fall Asleep

Jamie Cameron

we share, without knowing,
the same dream.

Clouds clear beneath
our feet to reveal

a town's set geometries,
the same motifs repeating

all the way to the sea,
where a group of islands

stretches out like the small
bones of the hands and feet.

We hang there for hours,
looking down on the barren

tops of buildings, green
space, gridlock, bridges.

And maybe it is this
analogue silence –

the hush of your nervous system
like something tuning in,

the white noise
of each other's breathing –

that brings to mind
each private dread

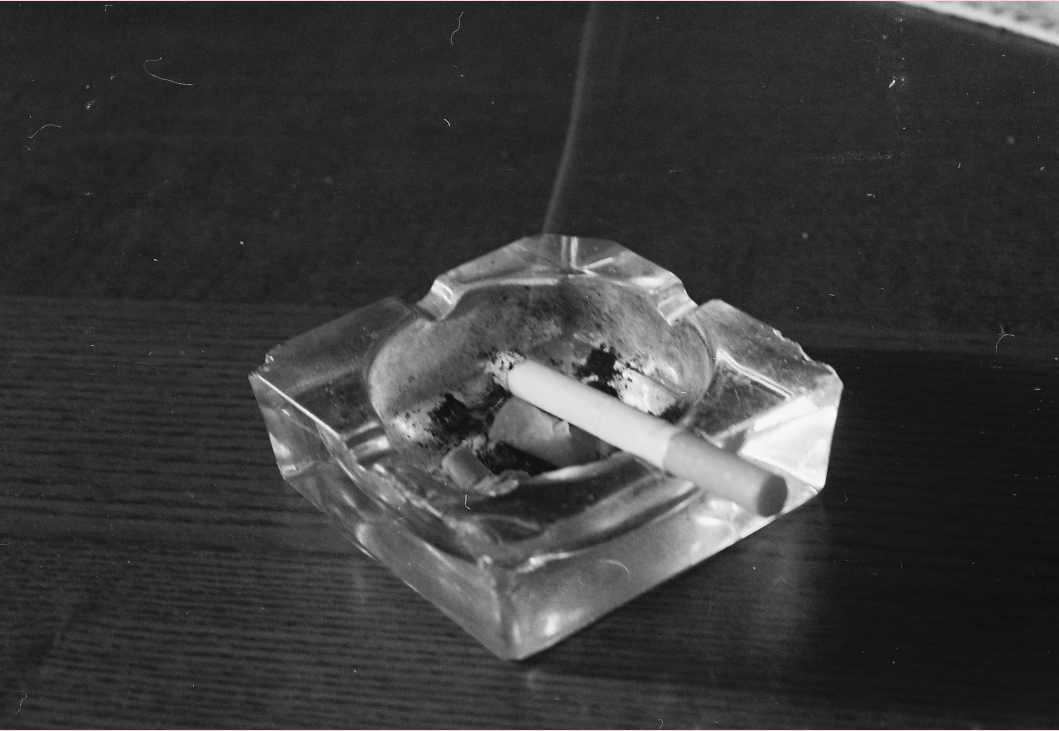
and secret hurt.
It might not even be yours.

Or do I just imagine

you said that?

When we wake I press
my ear against your chest –

a prisoner at a wall - to hear
one beat. No. Two beats fall.



EKPHRASIS

CATHERINE

DIGMAN

My name is Cara Lennox - Lennox isn't my real surname, I changed it when I moved to New York out of respect to my father who is an English lord. I was here looking for my friend Katy but that's another story. I was working at the New York branch of a big auction house when I became obsessed with a girl called Alina who was one of my co-workers. I think it was the freckles - like a map of some exotic place drawn across the bridge of her nose - her curly hair and m-shaped mouth like one of the old renaissance paintings; the mouth of a cruel emperor or a martyred saint.

We used to eat almond croissants, the ones with icing sugar that falls like snow when you bite into them, I would buy them from the bakery on the corner with black coffee for me and a latte for her. We were both in our twenties and were trainees at the auction house - one of those jobs that looks good on a resumé but pays almost nothing. My father had cut off my allowance for reasons I won't go into but I was surviving by dog-sitting for an old friend of his who paid well and felt sorry for me, Mrs Van Eyke. I looked after her Pomeranian on weekends while she visited her toy-boy in Buenos Aires — I used to sit and drink Martinis with her and listen to her stories and she would overpay me — I think she was lonely. She also used to give me her old clothes, bin-bags full of Alaïa frocks and Chanel jackets. I would keep some and sell others for a lot of money to a vintage store downtown. She was my anchor in New York - she had attended

Erlstone Hall with my father and talked about their childhood together. Other than that I was pretty disoriented.

It was a Tuesday - I had one of those days at work where you don't seem to sit down for ten hours — my ears were ringing with the click of my high heels on the marble floor and my back was sore from leaning over to look at a computer screen at a desk. I'm not one of those women who enjoys wearing high heels but it was an expectation at work and I was too young to question it. We had a work function straight after work so I dashed there without showering — hoping that my black shift dress would pass as black tie. We had a lot of these parties. Alina and I used to stuff our faces with tiny canapés when no one was looking because we

couldn't afford food. The free champagne was nice but you'd get drunk really quickly due to exhaustion and an empty stomach. I think we were officially there as eye-candy but I had a degree in History of Art and would chat to the collectors' wives in my English accent while they fawned over how charming I sounded and asked my advice on what type of art would work in their mid-century house out on the West Coast.

Alina was talking to a very old man. They were friendly, I figured that maybe he was a big buyer. Alina had access to the client database and she knew who was worth talking to. She was more mature than I and understood work politics and salesmanship, she could tell instantly if someone was a tyre-kicker or a big spender, and it wasn't always obvious. Some of the richest people wear bad shoes or don't bother going to the barbers. The man was unassuming, his iron grey hair blending into his suit, and his face lined from years of responsibility. I saw him touch her arm, and whisper something in her ear. Maybe they were just trying to talk over the noise of the room, Alina was very knowledgeable and could hold a conversation with people older than herself. Later that night I saw her leaving with him. My boss saw too and didn't seem to mind.

A week later I saw them at a party at Mrs Van Eyke's house, she had come as his plus one, and they seemed very close, whispering together in a corner, and gazing at Mrs Van Eyke's paintings. She had some good de Koonings. Her house was 19th Century with the all details and mouldings, but she had painted it all white so it didn't look too fussy, the house offset the art rather

than the other way around, a tin of cheap whitewash transforming a chintzy old home into her own personal gallery. The furniture was all Dutch, or 60s Italian so you could feel like you were sitting on art and your arse was on something considered and carefully sculpted.

Over the next few months I saw Alina date various men, mostly a lot older than us. She didn't have a type. I was unsuccessfully chasing some boy the same age as us who worked for a record label over in The Bowery, and had tried a few times to set Alina up with twenty-somethings I knew, public school boys working on Wall Street or up and coming artists we met through work. She didn't seem interested in anyone under thirty-five. I wondered if it was just a maturity thing, but Mrs Van Eyke introduced her to a handsome college professor who was thirty-eight and she didn't bite. She seemed to only like guys with money. I'm not normally an interfering friend, but after I saw her with Mr Altschloss, I freaked and couldn't hold my tongue any longer. There was something about his ancient skin next to hers, he looked like a naked mole rat, shuffling along with a cane, and she was fresh as a peach. I had to say something.

We didn't get lunch breaks at our job, so I offered to buy her brunch on a Saturday morning. I lied and said that my Dad had sent money. We met at the Clinton St Baking Co. I fancied something homemade and wholesome, it seemed appropriate. Alina was wearing a pink bouclé jacket of Mrs Van Eyke's that I had given her with a pair of old jeans and Margiela Tabi boots, which had been a gift from one of her boyfriends. I mused on the

fact that they were a slightly outré gift for a sugar daddy to give, but didn't say it out loud. She tugged at one of her curls, like a coiled spring, and apologised for being late. I watched her eat, flakes of pastry and icing sugar clinging to her lips, we gossiped about work, and our career plans. The clock struck eleven. I ordered champagne for us. My mind played various conversations: *Alina, I saw you with that mole rat again... Are you short of money?...*

In the end I said, "Are you dating anyone nice at the moment?" it sounded like a question someone's auntie would ask at Christmas dinner.

She sipped her champagne thoughtfully, "yeah," she said, "a few interesting people, nothing serious, just fun."

"Alina, I saw you with that old German man, at Le Bernardin, last week. If you're short of cash you can stay at mine for a bit. You don't have to go out with people like that...I'm not judging you..." I stammered through the sentences which had sounded a lot smoother in my head.

Alina laughed. I was glad she wasn't offended. I had seen her looking through the client database at work, and jotting down phone numbers on post-its. I hadn't asked any questions. But it was only a matter of time before our boss caught her.

I could see the cogs turning in her head. And she laughed again. "I can see how this would look bad," she said. It was a long time since she had dated a boy her own age. And she was an attractive woman short of money in New York. She took another sip of her drink and said, "I like to date people who have art."

"Oh, that makes sense," I said, I assumed she meant they were cultured or a better class of person.

"I like to make love in front of the artworks," she continued, "if there's a work I'm attracted to, I find out who bought it. There's something about the art, I can't quite explain it, the energy that comes off it. The man is really just a conduit for the art. But I respect them as well. It's as if we are believers in the same church."

She told me about her first time. A school trip to Paris. The French boy she was dating at the time, kissed her deeply in front of a Caravaggio in the Louvre. "It was a religious experience. I cried. *La Mort de la Vierge*, draped in cardinal's red, like the apparition of blood or lust. The boy was average, I just remember his skin on mine as something came out of the painting, the fugitive artist, the dead prostitute, the heretics burnt at the stake. A security guard ushered us on, into the room where we witnessed the queue for the *Mona Lisa*. There was a Botticelli, the graces emerging from the plaster, once wet, now imprisoned forever in a wall. I could feel too many ghosts in that room, Biblical patriarchs and pagan nymphs, conjured up by the artists, the paint a portal from the other world, the alchemy that allowed them to cross through the liminal and into our world. Artists are priests, people don't realise that."

Alina had grown up in South London, and had been bullied at her comprehensive. She had attended university on a scholarship, and with her mother working two jobs had managed the trip to New York to train at the auction house. "I'm not

materialistic,” she said, “if you see my apartment, it’s very basic, and I share with two boys, a drag queen and an Italian lad who works in fashion.” I found out that Alina was very frugal. She liked to eat the stalks of broccoli as well as the flowers and she had a second job helping in a restaurant where she got leftover food. Her landlady had arthritis, and Alina got cheap rent because she helped with chores like grocery shopping and writing letters when the woman’s hands were sore. “The building has rats, but I don’t mind because you get a discount. You just have to be careful to keep all your food in plastic boxes,” she explained. It was one of those old derelict A.I.R. buildings, one of the few that hadn’t been redeveloped and gentrified. Alina liked the spirit of it. She spoke about how much she loved her Mum, and how she wanted to do well at the auction house, and get a good job in London. She was applying for postgraduate programmes, and hoping to get a scholarship.

We drank some more, and she told me stories of the people she had met. The old count who owned an original Michelangelo red chalk drawing, “those are very special,” she said, “Michelangelo destroyed most of his rough work, he only wanted us to see the finished product. The sketches are really powerful, you can see the strokes of his hand, his fingers imitating life, he knew he was a god, and the pope knew it too. He was what triggered the reformation. The worship of images, the artist as supreme creator. Karlstadt wasn’t stupid, he knew the power of art, that was why it needed to be destroyed. The people weren’t

worshiping the images, they were worshiping the gods that came out of the images, the paint made flesh.”

There was the lady-billionaire who collected Picassos. Claimed they gave her phallic energy, allowed her to tower over the men in her life. I don't think she really needed the paintings to do that. Picasso was a bastard, she said, a womaniser. But his art was amazing, so maybe we can forgive him. Perhaps his sin was that he loved women too much, or that he saw them all as embodying some universal feminine, all emanating from the same cosmic place, and ultimately, all one. And the Swiss couple who took her to their house in Europe to see a Caravaggio. A lesser-known painting of a young Artemisia Gentileschi, painted with a deep love, a lock of hair framing her round face, and her own genius shining out from the painting. That night Alina made love to Artemisia, while Caravaggio watched. And the old, old man who was penniless but owned an Otto Dix painting smuggled out of Nazi Germany, the hands only, cut away from the main painting and rescued from destruction. “We kissed and I felt the pain of all those who were murdered, I could hear cries from the darkness. I was not the same after that. The paintings burned like the Jews and the books.”

“Did you ever kiss anyone in front of a stolen painting?” I asked her. “No,” she said, “but I wonder what that would be like...maybe one day... there's something romantic about an art thief... perhaps they are the true art lovers... willing to risk everything.”

Later that week, we were alone in a room at the auction house, a painting by Vermeer had just been unwrapped and hung, she took my hand, “can you feel that?” she said, “there’s another presence in the room, another person, not just the two of us.” The dead painter and his young muse walked the corridors of the auction house, visible to anyone who knew how to look for them. I felt a small tingle of energy. Was it the art, or was it the excitement of being around *Her*? I loved art, and it was something I could excel at academically, but I didn’t have Alina’s sensibility.

On Friday evening we went to a private view, and on to an after party at a client’s house. Alina left with a gentleman I hadn’t seen before, late thirties, tall, stocky, with a beard, well dressed. I stayed late talking to an artist. I got home alone at 1 a.m. As I was falling asleep, the phone rang. It was *Her*. “Cara, are you there?” she said. My apartment was cold and messy, and my mouth was dry from drinking too much. I had fallen asleep with my make up on, and there was a blurry face printed on the white cotton pillowcase. “Why are you phoning so late?” I said, irritated.

“I think I’m in trouble,” said Alina, “I’m at the police station, they said I could have one phone call.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“There’s been a break in, someone stole a Pollock from an apartment uptown, they were disturbed, and shot the owner, apparently someone saw me go into the apartment last week, and my face is on the building’s CCTV, they’ve taken my phone, and my laptop.”

I sat up in bed, suddenly very sober, and wondering why she hadn't used her one phone call to call one of her rich friends, someone older who might know a good lawyer.

"What did you tell the police?" I asked,

"I told them I was dating him, and that I had visited him at his apartment, which is true.... Does your Dad know any lawyers? I think I'm in trouble.... My fingerprints are all over the apartment... they asked how I knew him... I only met him twice... and we texted... the police took my phone... they can see all my texts...."

I could hear her hyperventilating on the other end of the phone. I froze, the room slowed down, and a selfish part of me wondered if I could be in trouble as well. I was close friends with Alina and we exchanged texts and emails everyday, if they had seized her phone I would be the first contact they would see. "Don't say anything to the police," I said, "wait until you have a lawyer." I know nothing about the law but I had heard this in movies. I could picture Alina word-vomiting at a policeman, trying to explain her sensual love of art, and making it all worse. Perhaps she could plead insanity. Fuck knows.

I called my Dad, it was dinner time in England, and he was irritated at being interrupted. He was having shepherd's pie, and a nice glass of malbec. "Daddy, my friend has been arrested, for stealing a painting, except she didn't do it, and someone got shot." He rolled his eyes. "I'll send someone," he said, "what painting was it?"

"A Pollock."

“Why would anyone steal a bloody Pollock?” he asked, “when are you coming back home?”

My boss was a total scumbag about the whole thing, said he felt violated by what had happened. The police came and looked through our computers at work. He threw Alina under the bus and said he was “unsure” about her, whatever that meant. After the police visit, I ended up crying into a Martini at Mrs Van Eyke’s house, “never mind those bastards,” she said. She made a few calls and got me a new job at a gallery with a female boss. It paid even less than the auction house, but I was glad to be away. My new boss wore Issey Miyake tunics, and a Tiffany bone cuff in rose gold, she took me to lunch and talked about how she wanted to mentor me in my career. She encouraged me to submit my articles on art to academic journals and popular magazines, and let me curate a small exhibition on my own. I told her about Alina, and about Alina’s love of art. “Not many people get it,” said my boss, “your friend is really special.”

Late one night, Alina’s housemate Shantih called at my apartment. They were distressed. “I’ve been reading the news,” they said, “I’m obsessed with it, it’s making me sick.”

“Come in,” I said. We went out onto the fire escape and smoked, and drank rosé out of mugs. We talked for hours, about life, and art, and Alina.

“Do you know what the Dark Web is?” said Shantih,
I shook my head.

“I don’t really understand it fully myself,” they said, “but it’s like this secret version of the internet with really shady people.

Alina used to go on there a lot, and look up people who were offering to steal art, for a fee, I don't think she messaged any of them, I warned her it was a bad idea, but she does her own thing.”

If you put a foot wrong the authorities can pull up your records, who you talk to, who they talk to, what you look at online late at night.

A gun was found in the river mud at low tide, the police were able to pull fingerprints off it, which matched a man, who had been arrested but not charged three years ago for petty fraud. He was a UK citizen and had fled home the day after the shooting. I was relieved, yes, Alina had been seen on CCTV going in and out of the building, but someone else's prints were on the weapon, that could only be a good thing.

I followed the papers throughout the trial, going to the news stand each morning, buying all of them, walking into work with them tucked under my arm. My boss pretended not to notice but I knew she was concerned about me. At night I would hammer a bottle of wine while cutting out all the stories and comments about Alina, and Blu-Tacking them to the wall of the apartment. Highlighting the bits that seemed important, and scribbling my own notes on scraps of paper.

John Walter-Brook, a 42 year old hedge fund manager was due to make a work trip to Paris. It was postponed, so he worked until around 10am, and picked up Chinese food on the way home. He arrived home, greeted the doorman of his building, chatted about football, and went up to his apartment. He ate

supper, took a shower, and fell asleep. Around 11.30pm a man in a hoodie was seen entering the building, he had the code for the front door. He didn't make eye contact with the doorman, but the doorman did not stop him entering. He was carrying a medium-sized black leather satchel. The man went up in the elevator, and with a key, let himself into Walter-Brook's apartment, a large loft duplex, airy, open-plan, modern, painted white, with tall metal windows, and artworks from Flora Donne's gallery and Art Basel, mostly new artists, pieces worth \$2000-\$5000 dollars. There were two more valuable pieces, a bronze aqualung by Jeff Koons, and a Roman bronze, but both were too heavy to steal. Walter-Brook had fallen asleep without drawing the blinds, so the lights of the city danced outside and illuminated the scene inside. The man went over the wall and lifted down the Pollock, it wasn't heavy, a small canvas framed with wood, dated 1944. At some point, Walter-Brook woke up, and came down the spiral staircase into the lounge. He was shot twice in the chest, and fell on the stairs, his blood splattering across the white walls, seeping and pooling at the bottom of the stairs. The last thing Walter-Brook ever saw was his painting being stuffed into a satchel. The last sound he ever heard was the bang of the door as the man dashed down the hall to the fire escape.

The next morning when Walter-Brook didn't turn up for work, his colleagues tried to call him, there was no answer. They called his next of kin, no one had seen him, so they called the reception desk of his apartment building. The doorman went up and knocked on the door. The police were called. They broke

down the door and found the half eaten Chinese food, the body, the blood. Alina's finger-prints were on the wall near the painting. The man had panicked, and thrown the gun into the river, but it was found at low tide, he hadn't understood the flow of the water.

Sveral nasty columns speculated about Alina. How had she known the collector? Did she know the killer? None of them mentioned her love of art, or her scholarship. There were lots of conspiracy theories, a ring of international art thieves, and Alina as a pawn or a mastermind. Her face was splashed all over the papers, the Ben Day dots distorting the beauty of her freckles. People speculated over where the Pollock had gone. Was it still in New York? Had the killer shipped it to the UK? Or somewhere else entirely? I wondered if Alina had encountered the killer. Had they exchanged messages about stolen art? Had she confided in him? Had she accidentally given him the location of the Pollock?

The case dragged on for several months, my father's lawyer managed to convince the jury that Alina wasn't directly involved in the murder. He encouraged her to look like a dumb gold digger when she appeared in court, a bimbo who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. But there was a twist when the prosecutor revealed that Alina had viewed one of the thief's posts on the Dark Web which suggested she was his accomplice and had seduced the victim in order to scope out the apartment. Her bank records were clean, but that didn't mean anything. Criminals normally pay each other in cash. The doorman and Walter-Brook's cleaner were also charged as accomplices. My boss let me have occasional days off work to go to court. I wanted to be there for

Alina. She looked smaller, like a caged rabbit being led to and from the stand by a large policeman. I wrote to her in prison. I'm sure they read my letters but I didn't care. I told her about the artworks I was selling and the boys I didn't date.

The day of the sentencing was the worst day of my life. I didn't sleep at all the night before, and turned up to the courthouse feeling like a corpse. It was this neo-Classical building which is ironic considering Alina was being punished for her love of culture. Punished by a jury of philistines. Alina was resigned to her fate by this point, she had taken a gamble stealing client data from work, and fed her addiction.

Alina served a five year sentence in a US jail and was deported back to the UK. She currently lives with her mother in Tower Hamlets. I call her occasionally, but she never talks about the old days, and she never talks about art.



THE TASTE
OF THINGS
TO COME
TELL ME

RUPA WOOD

I don't remember growing up. All I know is that you own all my pots and pans, and I never cook. When I die we will cook in heaven's kitchen together. One day. Until then there is only the taste of your body. God lets light in through the mouth. What if my heart can't catch up to my mind? What if my heart can't catch up to my mind and I accidentally feel this way forever.

When does forever end? It ends in heaven when we make food. In the pot you took from me and call yours. Until then I only have this honest corner. Salt on my tongue. I starve for you. One day you'll tell me to write a poem about it. And heaven will be in the light of the fridge.

I don't remember growing up. All I know is you're farther away than ever before. And every diet coke brings us a little closer. What if my mind catches up to my heart? What if my mind catches up to my heart and I'm no longer certain I've always wanted this.

When do I get what I've always wanted? When I write this poem you want me to write. And you tell me you don't remember growing up. As you're sitting behind me. Licking the back of my neck. Telling me to eat.

TELL ME

RUPA WOOD

I remember

the

taste of your body.

I remember

us

.

tell me you remember
Licking the back of my

neck. Tell me .



IMAGI EROS

JOE FOYE

“Do we have gin?”

“Gin?”

“Yes, gin,”

“Umm...”

“I asked him if he wanted a drink, like you said I should.” She looked perturbed; a little confused. She moved towards a cupboard on which the door hung a richter shy of straight. “He said gin. But...”she was rummaging now “...we don’t *have* gin.”

“No, we do. I’m sure we do.”

Her voice snapped a little. “Where?”

He inhaled carefully. “I don’t know, I’ll remember in a minute.”

Tal signed through her teeth. “He’s waiting”

“Take him something else?”

“But he asked for gin.” She was emptying the contents of the cupboard now. “If you say it’s in here, then -”

“- I said we had some. At no point did I say it was sat at the back of that cupboard like a mummy in a pyramid.”

“He’ll be glad for any drink. He’s here to see you...” Tal ignored him, continuing her evacuation of the cupboard “... what did he say?”

“When?”

“When he was here?”

“He said I had a nice room... nice to know, I suppose. I don’t think anyone has seen it before. Other than you, of course.”

“—under the sink! The gin, it’s under the sink” The trail through the depths of his memories had come up with lost treasure. The relief in his voice cut across her thoughts. Examining the contents of the cupboard below tentatively, she eventually pulled out a dusty white bottle with electric green lettering. She poured a little into a glass, then a little more, unsure when to stop. She poured final measure more, and taking a glass of water for herself in the other hand, made towards the door.

“Wait —”

She swung around. “Yes?”

“Did he ask for just gin — with nothing else?”

“Oh... no... he asked for gin and... tonic — do we have tonic?”

“No.” Came the flat reply, with barely even a pause for thought. This was, perhaps, unsurprising, given that neither of them had ever drunk tonic. Indeed, Tal wasn’t entirely sure what ‘tonic’ was — save that she had heard of it having some relation to gin. Tal walked over to the sink with her lips pursed and put the glass of gin on the counter with a smidgen more force than was necessary. She felt the water until it ran cold and filled him a fresh

glass. Gári's voice reached around the door after her. "He was never here to drink gin, you know" he said, his eyebrows flitting up and down.



YOU ARE MY
IGLOO

HANNAH

LEDLIE

You are my igloo

Hannah Ledlie

A found poem using only words and phrases from the 'ultimate safe chat' menu on Club Penguin, a now defunct online multiplayer game.

Girl

You are great!

You are...

Music

You are...

The Lighthouse

Come to my igloo

Girl

Let's act out a play together

I like...

Roleplay

You are...

The Stage

Let's work as a true team and win the game!

Yes

Girl

Good

Girl

Yes

Yes

Yes

Ready or not, here I come!

Wow, you're good!
Great performance!

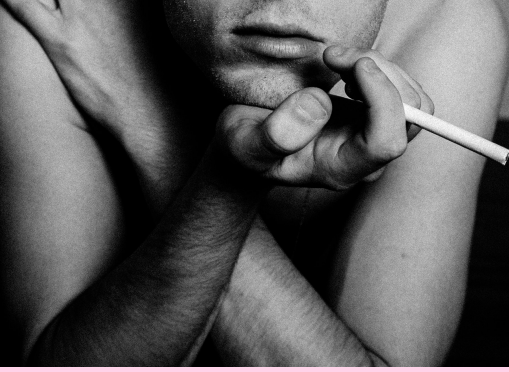
Girl
You are...
My igloo

Hurray!
I found you!

Hurray!
You found me!

You are...
My igloo
Girl

Today
Tomorrow
Tomorrow
Tomorrow



AND YOU
ARE ALL
THE
CANDLES

RUPA
WOOD

You are the ghosts that comb my hair. You are the train of a lost thought. You are lint that breaks apart and makes more lint. I am a bowl of stars on the clean table of an early dawn. Eat me with single cream and a great spoon. Wash me with cool water from a silver tap. I am cursed with a destiny that unwinds like cotton thread; *forever, forever, forever*. I want to wrap it back up, tie it to a parcel to give to myself as a prize, as though the deeds are done. You are the unmeasured pour. You are the AM radio. *You are all the candles*. I trace words for you like the laughter of a child without language. Like a room fallen into silence. Picking through shards for tiny prayers wrapped in small squares of velvet. Each the length of a single breath. Fastening them with my thread to the feet of street pigeons. They fly to the spires of gothic buildings and sit on the stone wings of angels in cemeteries. And they are for you. Though you never, ever hear my silent prayers. They are for you.

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ORIGIN OF
SPACE

GALIA

ADMONI

Wendy and I look at paintings with gaps / holes / cracks but there's nothing missing / lacking. We can't explain the three heads of the Allegory of Prudence any more than we could explain the magic here that makes hours liminal / how walking through centuries of brushstrokes turns almost-strangers to friends in mere minutes. How Michaelangelo's Baptist, who 'gazes inward in possible awareness of the future' makes us uncomfortable / why the probable-possible space in The Manchester Madonna appeals to us.

While we walk, I quiz Wendy on the names of paintings I instinctively know she'll like / withholding their true titles until she's tried several times. An orgasm of colour, she says. I point out how unlikely a 16th century painting entitled 'orgasm' would be and immediately hate myself for it. Wendy's love of body seeps into everything / morphs Juno into an invitation / and I see her picturing this painting on the wall above the bed where she meets with her lover who she doesn't know I know about. I imagine her orgasm in the breast milk that spurts into the centre of the canvas / The Origin of the Milky Way is sort of like the orgasm of the universe.

Watching Kehinde Wiley's The Prelude gives us both a backache that neither of us mention at the time, but we're so irrationally connected to the strangers on screen we can't move away.

Nature / changes / humans / change. Big screens with big ideas. But over coffee, Wendy asks me not about the white expanses of snow or the way in which the capital 'R' Romantic writing of Wordsworth's poem was recreated on screen, but about the performers' red make-up / do I think she could pull it off? It's an absurd question, I think to myself, because I can't imagine a single thing Wendy could say or do that I wouldn't think was perfection / I spend most of the day trying not scare her off with adoration. I also think that Wendy would paint her whole body period-red if she could / She'd swim in her mooncup.

In another room, later in the day, Renoir's brushstrokes mirror our conversation – feathery at first then reworked with harder contours. It's a new friendship / this. But I know it's going well when she likes Stubbs' horse as much as I do / when we see it leaping from the far wall as we round a corner / just like I remembered. She gets it like she gets me. Though it's obvious in its alone-ness, it's not empty of rider / background / equipment. It is / in fact / free.



SOPHIE

EMILY GREEN

EMILY GREEN

SOPHIE

Are you lonely? Unfulfilled? Just too busy to fit in a relationship right now? Galatea has the solution! Meet S.O.P.H.I.E.: our Social Onanistic Personal Helpmate (Intelligence Engineered). Prefer different ‘accessories’? Try SOPHIE’s male counterpart, A.R.C.H.I.E. Active Romance Companion Helpmate (Intelligence Engineered)! The perfect lover isn’t born – it’s made.

*

SOPHIE rushes eagerly to the door when John calls, and kisses him on the cheek. She’s holding a steaming mug of nettle tea in her hand, which she offers to him in exchange for his dripping coat to hang up on its peg by the door. John takes a cautious sip and sighs as the steam warms his face. Wordlessly, she takes his hand and gently leads him to the armchair in the centre of the flat, settling him in it so that she can ease the shoes off his wet feet. She tuts mildly to herself at the state of them, sticking a critical finger through the hole in the side of one. Even though she hasn’t said a word, John feels like the sufferings of his day have been understood.

John had liked the ‘Onanistic’ touch – so much more civilised than the ‘seXXXbots’ that you could pick up for a handful of credits for soulless pumping in the glass, pink-neon-lit cubicles that lined the entertainment district, with worn-out moan-tracks and movement so piston-like you might as well be making love to a steam-engine from the museum. John had heard dark stories about them: glitches that made them twitch and spark at odd moments; limbs suddenly falling off mid-coitus; metal vaginas cutting through their latex covering, slicing and peeling their client’s penis like a carrot while the seXXXbot kept going, regardless. Stories whispered with gleeful horror around the purified-water-cooler or yelled over the din of a microbe-brewery by a half-drunk acquaintance, his breath furred with booze, jerking his hand in humorous illustration – as if one was needed. John shied away from those streets on the entertainment district like a frightened sheep.

SOPHIE was different.

He had dithered for some time when they had first come out. It seemed an extravagance, a shameful indulgence, especially when there were still live-girls to be had for free.

What ethnicity style did he prefer? Height? Body-shape? Hair-colour?

John hesitated over each one, and nearly goaded himself into simply asking the pretty assistant for her own measurements to replicate, but veered away at the last second, suddenly fearful of that clinical, breezy demeanour, like cut crystal. Hip-width? Nose-shape? Breast size? Did he have a preference as to nipple-style? He flushed bright red at that, but the assistant merely smiled composedly and showed him a few options on the visualiser's feature-wheel.

Then came the personality questions, which felt to John unnervingly like a personality test for himself, rather than options for an automaton.

But that's what made SOPHIE so much more than just a seXXXbot. She could be funny, kind, flirty, serious – she could care.

She arrived in a crate, the Galatea logo discreetly printed on the side, a white stylised sketch of a seated woman's naked back, one hand resting demurely on her shoulder. When he, with shaking hands, levered off the lid to look at her, he felt his throat tighten at the sight of her face; she was just the way the assistant had said she would look. Perfect.

She lay in the box like a princess. Golden hair pooled beneath her head, her eyes closed as if she were sleeping, both hands gently clasped around the pale-green, glowing orb of her battery pack. Tentatively, almost as if daring a sacrilege, he reached out to touch

EMILY GREEN

SOPHIE

her cheek. It felt smoother, sleeker than the tenderest spot of his own skin. He leant in, scarcely daring to breathe, hovering just millimetres above her untouched, pouting lips. She even smelled perfect, a fresh apricot scent rising from her flesh (“Breath of Life” ©Galatea). He kissed her. She did not move. John groped in the box for the instruction manual.

Ten minutes later, and they were having their first, shy conversation. Two months later, and he could barely remember why he had hesitated in the first place. She was incredible. She cooked, she cleaned, she reminded him of his mother’s birthday, she laughed at his jokes, listened when he needed to talk, and was silent when he needed to think. And the sex... well, it was like nothing he’d ever experienced before.

SOPHIE was never embarrassed, or shocked, or disgusted. He began dreaming up wilder and wilder scenarios, just to try to elicit something other than her ready willingness to do whatever pleased him, but everything he could conceive of was met with the same, blue-eyed obedience.

She was sweet too, and gentle, and, at times, John was sure there was more to that than simply a pre-programmed set of responses or a database of counselling advice. There were times she looked at him and he’d swear she not only had thoughts of her own, but a soul too. It was the way she said she loved him.

A year went by. Two. John went through life in a contented haze. At work, his colleagues spoke of the latest models, with new, exciting features; there were rumours of households that contained, two, three, even five different SOPHIEs and ARCHIEs, used simultaneously in hedonistic orgies.

John couldn’t understand it. He felt a queer kind of pride in his monogamy with his SOPHIE. It was like those people who programmed their SOPHIEs to be jealous, or clinging, or controlling, who revelled in the series of automated messages

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SOPHIE

threatening dire consequences if the loved one did not come back right NOW!!! Not him. He liked the quiet domesticity of returning home to his SOPHIE; her low voice, her calm, soothed him like warm milk.

“It’s creepy, isn’t it?”

John started, guiltily, turning to the voice that had spoken to him. It was a woman in her early thirties. She had freckles and hazel eyes. The new girl, his mental record-keeper proffered. Works in the Census Department – or is it the Censors’ Department? While John desperately searched his memory for her name, the girl continued. “This whole SOPHIE thing - picking a person off the shelf like they are a Vital-min supplement. A doll-being, made to order.”

John bristled a little. “Everyone’s got one, these days,” he said, mustering all the chill he could into his voice.

“I don’t,” she said, cheerfully.

The girl thrust out a hand. “Suzy.”

That night, John wondered about upgrading SOPHIE: he could give her hazel eyes, or something. Just to give her a little interest.

It started gradually. A joke over instamessage; a shared groan over the latest terrible offering in the office-block-canteen; sneaking out of the office a few minutes early, sniggering like truant children. The coffee-shop became their place, a secret John hugged to himself in the mornings and treasured before he fell asleep. Soon, John was seeing Suzy in everything: hearing her name in songs on the stream, picking out his shirts thinking about what she’d like, devising excuses to see her outside of the office. He whistled while he shaved in the mornings, picturing her standing in her own bathroom, eight Blocks away, cleaning her teeth, or brushing her hair. His imagination endowed these daily rituals with a kind of glamour, a frisson that tingled. Behind him, in the flat, SOPHIE made breakfast.

EMILY GREEN

SOPHIE

Suzy made the first move. John had been flushed with success, a joke that had made her laugh, the kind of laugh where her nose crinkled up and her eyes glittered. Then she'd leant in and kissed him. SOPHIE always waited for him to initiate. That moment, of dazzling, glittering surprise, John decided he had to tell SOPHIE.

She took it perfectly, of course. Just sat there on the sofa, nodding at him with those limpid, blue eyes and squeezing his knee, understandingly. She got quite willingly back into her crate, taking his hand as she stepped over the side, cradling her battery-orb under one arm. He felt a strange, uneasy pang as she closed her eyes, ready for him to replace the lid. She had wanted to know if she was going to be returned to the warehouse, but he couldn't bear the thought of her being dismantled, bits of her peeled off or used for parts, put into other, broken SOPHIEs returned for maintenance. He hid her instead, in the back of the cupboard, behind the boxes of his old things from home and flattened packaging for household equipment he'd never thrown out. the SensaScreen, the LUKE-It: All-In-One SmartChef, the LipoBlast3000. Suzy never found her.

Being Suzy's boyfriend (partner, she insisted, but John liked to call himself her boyfriend, at least to himself) was a rush. John gloated as he walked down the street, hand in hand with her, feeling her pulse through her fingers, that here he was, with a live-girl. She was wild, unpredictable, uncontrollable as a hurricane, and she swept him up with her. They went out to the Fringes, where the black water heaved itself over the crumbling shore-line, licking hungrily at the rocks, and Suzy danced in the spray, sweeping up armfuls of thick-scummed water to fling at him, and John laughed and didn't even mind that he was now wet and dirty and that the new shirt he'd bought just to impress her was now ruined.

After four months of living together, the cracks began to show. They were like itches under his skin. She chewed loudly. She went out with the girls after work when she knew he'd made them

dinner at home; she spoke over him in company and sometimes even seemed embarrassed by him; she got snappish, curt when Census time rolled round, and even (though he only said this to himself) cruel. She poked his belly, teased him that he was getting fat, which he was not: it was just a little winter-weight. She complained about his performance in bed, pointing to her girlfriends with ARCHIEs, who never were too tired, or came too quickly or were floppy – she sneered the word – making them unfit for use. John hadn't dared to voice his own objections in this regard, for fear of how it would sound, but he found it hard to get aroused by Suzy's body. It was just too... unstable. Hair sprouted and spread, like a dark fungus, all over – even in places where he hadn't thought girls got hair – and then, abruptly, disappeared again, on Suzy's whim and will. It swelled and shrank, and oozed; smells and noises he hadn't associated with the glowing dawn of his fantasies burst or seeped slowly from its warm, wobbling surface. Sex with her was like entering the rainforest: dark and wet and threatening. He was almost afraid, even as it thrilled.

The end came with blood. Suzy had just got a promotion and came home with a bottle of champagne, giggling. Her old boss had promised to send her a congratulatory gift. John's head was thick and muzzy with the bubbles when the door went. He had stared blankly at the crate, seeing, but not recognising, the little, white logo printed discreetly on the side. When they levered it open, Suzy shrieked with laughter. Inside, one hand cradling his battery orb and the other resting on his gift-card, was an ARCHIE, modelled on a SensaScreen star Suzy admired. On her knees next to the crate, Suzy looked up at him, her eyes sparkling.

“Shall we take him for a test-drive?”

John cringed, shuffled, coughed.

“I thought you said they were creepy?”

“Oh, don't be a prude!” Suzy said, dismissively, her eyes skimming the instruction manual. “It's here now – what's the harm? It'll be fun.”

EMILY GREEN

SOPHIE

John scrambled. "Isn't it your period, though?"

"You think he's going to object?"

What could he say after that?

If someone had asked John, before that night, what his most humiliating experiences had been, he would have proffered something weak about wetting himself when he was six. Now, though, he knew that it would forever be the memory of holding his own flaccid penis, streaked with blood, and listening to his girlfriend yowling with pleasure as she rode, reverse-cowgirl, atop the sculpted form of her new ARCHIE.

He unpacked SOPHIE the next day.

He still sees Suzy, from time to time, in the awkward way that sometimes exes who work in the same office-block do. He's heard she has a new partner – although, the gossip goes, she's kept the ARCHIE as well. He doesn't begrudge her this. Everyone deserves to be happy, he thinks, as he gets into bed next to SOPHIE, her battery-orb glowing, like a night-light, on their bedside table.

"Goodnight, darling," he tells her, kissing her cheek. She closes her eyes, obediently, though one eyelid no-longer fully shuts, giving her the appearance of spying on the ceiling. He needs to take her in to get tuned up, get that fixed. He could have her entirely upgraded, of course, her memories and data-base of all their conversations, his likes and dislikes, migrated across to another, newer model, but John has become sentimental about his first choice, even if the others at work tease him for being out-of-date. He looks at her fondly, watching the slight glow from under her eyelids that tells him she's updating. With a contented sigh, he settles himself on his pillow, listening to the rain pelting the widows of the block outside. Soon, he is asleep.

EMILY GREEN

SOPHIE

On the pillow next to him, electricity blossoms and glitters along the pathways of SOPHIE's brain. If the human mind is nothing but a storm-cloud of firing synapses and surging chemical codes, why shouldn't SOPHIE dream? Perhaps she does. Perhaps she dreams of John, of life with him; perhaps she dreams of the box, of the in the back of the cupboard, of the darkness. Or, perhaps, she dreams of the torrid affair she's been having with the LUKE-It: All-In-One Smart-Chef every day when John leaves for work.

Or perhaps not.



JOSEPHINE
DuPUY

WATER
BEARS
ON
MAY DAY

Water Bears on May Day

Josephine DuPuy

As the red sun arose on May Day
We were half insane with shared truth forms.
A fury released of relentless soul essence
Sweaty hands tickling the kundalini serpent rising
The candle tongue flicking
Our naked consciousness merged into a singular fire.

About the pale earth we walked amongst ravenous monsters
Their frantic soulless grimaces of fear emerged
Constructing cultural cages for our beaten free-thoughts.
The corporeal materialism of desires gained
Lost in a fertile valley of petrol infused dinosaur dead
Time travel seemingly possible when staring into the sterile abyss
of Cern.
Here we sit at the center of the universe becoming unified
consciousness
Phallic water bears from outer space realms
A queer quantum manifestation of creation puppeteers.

Reality was minutiae compared to this moment.
A luminous life force raining on divine nakedness
An inferno of sacrifice within the wet womb
Obey thy command-consume, bomb, and flee.
Internal struggle of intrepid insurrection
Engorged eyeballs of aged tears
Eliciting orgasms of crystallized fears
Make us eternal.



SUNDAYS

THEMBE

MVULA

Sundays

Thembe Mvula

was there ever a time
in which i didn't crave

your taste? i traced every inch
of my body, all i find is

residue of days where
the world ceased asking after us

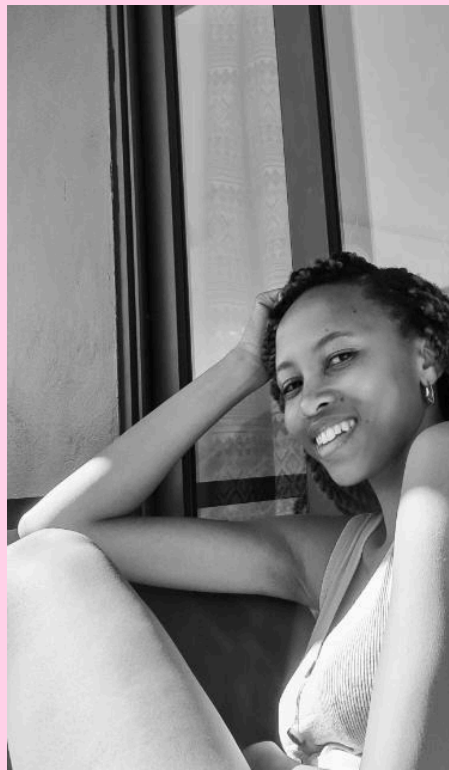
skin to skin, intertwined
on the bed or sofa, hungry

bless your chest hairs, soft
as spring blossoms on my cheek

bless the small slit where wet
of your tongue ends and mine begins

bless those sundays of sun rays
radiating through venetian blinds

our shadows shifting on your white walls
indivisible as they dim



THE BALLAD
OF THE
VAMPIRE
AND THE
HEDGEHOG
TOM
SANDERS

The Ballad of The Vampire and The Hedgehog
Tom Sanders

My fangs are retracted; they ache in my head
The wounds are still healing from the last time I bled.
You're pointy like me, oh Love of my Life,
With a little pink belly and a tongue like a knife.
We hurt other people, they leak on our beds
We fill up our pens and make poems instead.
As the sky's bleeding ochre and blushing maroon
We'll steal all the cider and howl at the moon
We'll rustle the hedges like hogs in the night
And set all the farmers apoplectic with fright
We'll tear down their fences, we'll go where we please
We'll tumble down mountains and make love under trees
Oh, life as a vampire is tiring and tricky
The costumes bizarre, the blood far too sticky
There's love here inside me, and it keeps leaking out
It pools in my eyelids, it drips from my mouth
And I'm only as clever as the last thing I said
Sometimes I wish I was a hedgehog instead.



ISSUE #4

SUBMISSION

CALL

“He lived then before me, he lived as much as he had ever lived--- a shadow insatiable of splendid appearances, of frightful realities, a shadow darker than the shadow of the night, and draped nobly in the folds of a gorgeous eloquence. The vision seemed to enter the house with me---the stretcher, the phantom-bearers, the wild crowd of obedient worshipers, the gloom of the forests, the glitter of the reach between the murky bends, the beat of the drum regular and muffled like the beating of a heart, the heart of a conquering darkness.”

— Joseph Conrad

Vanquish the conquering darkness, the wolves are howling;
step into the thicket: the FOREST issue

The Vanity Papers is looking at short fiction, poetry, art and essays for its next issue. Send us stories from the deep in the woods:
Essay: 1500 - 3000 words / Fiction: 1500 - 4000 words / Poetry:
send up to three poems / Art: send up to 10 images

rupa@thevanitypapers.com / jamie@thevanitypapers.com

Submissions are open to members of the University of Oxford

Until Tuesday 28th of February 2023

Please send a short bio with your work e.g:

J. WINTERSON studies English at St Catherine's. She is sure
Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit.

