



TT Summer 2023



# The Vanity Papers

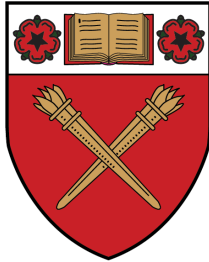
Medicine

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Trinity Term Summer 2023  
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**THE  
VANITY  
PAPERS**

How does one ~~swallow~~ pills  
LOVE



MA TI STA  
UCCIDENDO!!  
HAI PERSO  
LA TESTA?

DAMMI  
DI PIÙ.  
AAHH.

Freya Ziyang Lu

# The Vanity Papers

Stir the cauldron with a blackthorn wand  
drape yourself with gold chains  
put on your Versace bodycon dress  
the gods must be appeased  
you are between things  
this world and the next  
rush in and wrap me in the plastic curtain  
glove me for a dangerous art  
to feed depths I know not  
the world is filled with people doing what they love  
take the pomegranate rind  
and a velvet pink blouse  
with a rose on every card  
whilst the doctor  
rider of the white horse  
feels jealous and whispers the tales of survival and evolution  
beneath the flower pattern of the expanding universe  
makes me think of you  
and the last time I saw you smile  
faithful and true  
and returned to the Meadow's infinite glow  
and if I admit I didn't understand  
will you come back  
will you join me  
in the looking glass  
and the page of my body  
as gently you are loved  
as the most alive person on this planet —

**Welcome to Medicine**

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Rupa Wood

EDITORS

Roland Fischer-Vousden and Bidy Vousden

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[rupa@thevanitypapers.com](mailto:rupa@thevanitypapers.com)

The Vanity Papers, Harris Manchester College,

The University of Oxford, Mansfield Rd, Oxford OX1 3TD



## The Vanity Papers Contributors

EESHANI BENDALE is an Ayurvedic physician and has studied Nanomedicine at Swansea University. She is studying Evidence-Based Medicine at the University of Oxford and is a sucker for great stories.

instagram: @eeshani\_bendale

x: @EeshaniBendale

JOHANNA BÖTTIGER studies English at HMC and believes she may have become a madwoman in her room.

instagram: @johannaboettiger

JAMIE CAMERON was born in Swansea, Wales and grew up in the East Midlands. His poetry has been published in Anthropocene, Wet Grain, The High Window, Aesthetica Magazine and is forthcoming in Broken Sleep's Masculinity: An Anthology of Modern Voices. He won the 3rd prize in The London Magazine Poetry Prize, where he now works as an editor. Away from writing, he spends time playing and coaching basketball.

x: @JamiePCameron

MADHAV CHOWDRY is an orthopaedic surgery resident, passionate about learning, teaching and discovering. Driven by the laws of physics and motivated by the desire for their implementation in healing.

instagram: @madhavmanu/

linkedin: @dr-madhav-chowdhry/

x: @bone\_afied

EMILIANO CRUZ VILLANUEVA

Emiliano Cruz Villanueva studies Creative Writing. He is an illustrator for the *Oxford Blue*, and strongly believes in storytelling as a source of hope and connection.

instagram: @emi.c.vllnv

CHARLOTTE DE MARIA is a passionate Secondary English Teacher, but outside school besides her love of oranges, enjoys swimming, reading and cheese.

instagram: @charlottedemaria

CATHERINE DIGMAN is reading History at Harris Manchester. In her heart she knows that History is the greatest fiction of all time.

instagram: @catherinedigman

SEBASTIAN KOGA is a neurosurgeon in New Orleans. He understands people from the inside out. He studied poetry at Oxford graduating with an MSt in Creative Writing.

SARA FARNWORTH is attempting a Masters in Literature and Arts while refreshing her mind with random bits of writing, drawing and photography.

JAMES HOLMES is currently studying an MSc in English Local History with a focus upon the Social History of Architecture, at Kellogg College. He is also busy writing a book on Leadership Theory.

MARY JANE HOLMES alumna of Kellogg College, is embroiled in a PhD in Creative Writing at Newcastle University, UK  
mary-janeholmes.com

FREYA ZIYAN LU is an aspiring Egyptologist among many other things.  
instagram: @freya\_zl

ELISE MAY is just another old heart in a young body, wishing she could fall for a man instead of a boy.

MADELEINE LAMM is a current Creative Writing MSt candidate. Her poetry has been published in *Chargé d'affaires*, *Wet Grain*, *Marin Poetry Journal*, and elsewhere.

JENNIFER NOLAN is reading for a DPhil in Archaeology at Kellogg. She enjoys exploring museums, stone circles, collecting dusty old tomes and sailing on the open sea.

RAPHAËL RIVIÈRE studies Evidence Based Medicine at Kellogg College. He is concurrently an anaesthesiology resident at the University of Toronto.  
instagram: @Raphael.nahar  
x: @RNRiviere

DYLAN SQUIRES studies Engineering at University College. He is part of the committee for the *Percy Shelley Poetry Society* and enjoys procrastinating studying by going rock climbing.  
instagram: @percyshelleypoetrysoc

RUPA WOOD is a multi-disciplinary artist exploring the philosophy of commonplace magic. She is published by *The Oxford Magazine* and *The Oxford Review of Books*.  
rupa@thevanitypapers.com

# *THE VANITY PAPERS*

Poison

**Catherine  
Digman**

# Poison

## I.

Melissa and I, bored with studying, went shopping at a ridiculously expensive store in Oxford. We tried on these gaudy 80s-esque pieces: aggressive handbags, cropped jackets, and slinky dresses, draped with chunky gold chains — the sort of thing Versace and Gucci used to sell in their heyday.

Melissa held up a black Balenciaga bodycon dress with big gold buttons, “this would look amazing on me,” she laughed. We had this running joke, a look we called “Italian widow” and the kind of things you could wear to the funeral: padded Chanel bags, big sunglasses, silk scarves with horse-bit designs.

Melissa held up a pair of huge gold-plated earrings. “You look like your husband just died under very suspicious circumstances,” I said. The salesgirl was sweet and let us try things on, maybe because we were “rich-passing”. We walked back to college through the Covered Market, picking up Taste of China dumplings, soy sauce and avocado for our lunch.

I was planning on having a baby and naming him Simeon. We went into the crystal shop and I bought a coral necklace for my future child, an old protection spell. Afterwards we went back to my room and looked at books on Manicheism. The Christian cult centres on the divide between black and white. It is based on the idea that dark and light are in some kind of eternal battle, and that is what gives the universe its energy: the eternal fight between the bride and the widow.

I scrolled on my phone, and joked to Melissa that viral ads were appearing for lavish engagement rings, funeral services, and expensive shoes.

We scrolled the dating apps, but we got bored. “People don’t have as much sex as they used to, it’s all Netflix, rollercoasters, alcohol, pottery...” Melissa said. We ordered some food. The Deliveroo guy had a coke nail. I wondered if they sold coke via Deliveroo, or if people needed stimulants to survive that sort of job. Perhaps it became a cycle, working to afford coke and needing coke to get through the shift.

The next morning, I went to a hospital appointment in Cowley. I was five minutes late due to a problem with the traffic, and the car not turning up. Three surly staff sat behind a desk and said they couldn’t see me. I insisted on staying, *can the doctor see me if someone else is a no show? I don’t mind waiting.*

The décor was horrible, neon lights and chairs in mismatched colours, like a bad nightclub. The foyer was shades of grey with a blobby metallic cluster of a light feature which looked like polyps.

A larger man spoke with an elegant lady in the waiting room, he had just come out of a scan and looked nervous. She was saying something reassuring to him. “Take my number ... it’s nice to make a new friend,” he said to her.

I was unsettled by how close the hospital was to the cemetery.

It was an ancient cemetery, so I guessed the closeness must have happened organically as the cemetery grew over the centuries. The hospital compound grew also and they gradually intertwined and engulfed one another, like lovers.

Eventually the doctor saw me. He probed and scanned me with some alien device. It’s nothing serious,” he said, “I’ll email your GP, they’ll refer you on to a specialist.” I wondered how long the chain of bureaucracy would last, an eternity maybe, perhaps longer than my own lifetime.

I walked back, hoping to clear my head. It was mostly downhill and there was a slight chill in the air.

I bought a coffee at the kiosk outside the hospital, and watched as a robot lawnmower trimmed the lawn of the new hospital building. I pulled my hoodie up around me and set off home down the Cowley Road, passing barbers’ shops, and grocers with giant melons, plantains, and artichokes in crates outside. I crossed Between Towns Road, an oddly prosaic place name which triggered a moment of existential dread. I passed a mosque and a place called Temple Street. The ground felt holy. I knew I was between things, this world and the next.

At the bottom of the hill I found a vintage shop full of fur coats, old pennies, soft second-hand cashmere, and Italian printed silk scarves. A rack of old military dress uniforms, like the ones worn by Sergeant Pepper stood in the back.

I thought about what people said about Karl, my ex-boyfriend, the soldier, *is he who he says he is, he’s such a man of mystery*. People wondered if he was just a fantasist or a liar. I wondered how easy it would be for a man to buy a dress



dress uniform in a vintage shop and take it to a tailor's to have it fitted, how easy it would be to order some old medals off eBay, and pass oneself off as a military hero.

There were a few diplomats and military people at college. It was a running joke that certain people didn't use their real names because they didn't show up on the directory of the college email. People often asked, half joking, *who is Karl really, is he even in the military at all? he may just be a delusional sociopath.*

But is anyone who they say they are?

I think everyone here creates a persona.

That's why we come here, to play in this fantasy world.

I bought a copy of Wyatt's poems from a shelf of Penguin Classics. It's funny how in Tudor times many of the poets were also spies, or vice versa. They both were jobs which required literacy and an appreciation of foreign culture, and perhaps the ability to lie for money.

I missed lying in bed with Karl, listening to stories I didn't quite believe, wondering if his faintly Germanic accent was phoney. Perhaps he was from some suburb outside Halifax. Perhaps his dad was an electrician, and his mum was a dinner-lady.

Maybe he did a gap-year on the continent when he was eighteen and learnt to mimic, to reinvent himself as a glamorous European agent.

I felt better here, there was something down-to-earth about Cowley. I hadn't realised how stressed I was by the class system. I thought about buying a fur coat, and how nice it would be to have a sugar daddy. I only applied for Oxford because I was at rock-bottom in my life. I needed a denouement, to prove to myself that the world was not meaningless. But I arrived and found that everyone in Oxford is either a grandiose narcissist, or a nervous wreck, or vacillating between both.

I liked Cowley, the energy was different, more relaxed. Even the run-down shops and houses with paint faded to a lighter shade of the same colour, the unkempt gardens, the cracked pavements — things which some would consider

shabby or sad — were wholesome and calming to me. It reminded me of a chilled council estate on the side of a hill where you could visit a friend for an afternoon and eat rocket lollies while playing on their swings.

A couple of days later I went on a date with a PhD student who yammered on about his research. I'd seen him a few times and honestly I found him pretentious and dull. He talked about early American Punk, which is frankly overrated, and seemed to think it was somehow avant garde to hate everybody and everything, as though people haven't been feeling that way for centuries.

He explained how the generational thing had shaped him to be nihilistic, and that I wouldn't understand because I was a millennial. "Stop using the Cold War to justify your shit personality," I said.

I lost touch with Melissa after we graduated, she moved to London, and I stayed in Oxfordshire. I think she worked at a media firm and hated it.

## II.

Five years had passed. It was a breezy day in late summer. I was now Mrs Bianchi.

My House, My Pleasure, My Rules...

A lot had changed, I had learnt how to cook. The table was laid with cheeses, and olives, and bruschetta when Melissa arrived at my house.

I had dressed Simeon in black, and she commented on how handsome he was. The coral necklace was hidden in his inner pocket, some of the family did not appreciate witchcraft.

My mother-in-law adored me as I had embraced her Catholicism. The family had the house in Oxfordshire, as well as a house in Knightsbridge, and one on Lake Como.

Melissa pulled me to one side. I wondered if she had spoken to the handsome policeman who had called round as a formality after the autopsy. Melissa remembered our jokes about marrying a rich man and the time we spent cross-referencing the dating-app profiles with LinkedIn and the Companies House website to see who was eligible.

“Where did you meet your husband?” she asked.

“We met by chance, at a book-signing in Cowley,” I said.

“Oh,” she sounded surprised.

“He proposed six months after we fell in love, and then we had Simeon,” I said.

Mr Bianchi fell sick a few months later, after endless appointments at a private clinic in Switzerland. They couldn’t figure out what was wrong with him. He gradually faded away...

I mingled with the guests, keeping Simeon away from the room with the open casket. My Catholic mother-in-law had insisted upon it, presumably so she could weep over her son like the Pieta.

Melissa came back from the bathroom clutching a small brown glass bottle, “did you poison him?”

“It’s just some of my Xanax,” I said.

I was trying to wean myself off them, with limited success.

Extra dry martinis were the only real substitute.

Melissa swallowed a couple of pills. “God I hate my job,” she said, “it’s nice

We reminisced about how much we missed the 80s and how much we loved Gianni Versace and his peroxide blond sister.

They had such a romantic story, growing up poor, learning tailoring. He created endlessly, with her as his muse.

“Come and live with us,” I said to Melissa, “Simeon likes you, and we can travel to the lake for the summer.”

“I’ll think about it,” she said.

I knew she would never take that step.

But she stood with me and Simeon as we lowered Mr Bianchi into the ground. In that moment the three of us felt like a perfect family.

After the funeral we parted ways, she went back to her job in London, and I travelled to Italy with Simeon. I bought a run-down villa in Liguria and converted it into a painting studio.

When Simeon was older, I found a boyfriend. He was younger than me. I think he was a gold-digger. He enjoyed it when we drove to Monaco to shop in the Versace store. But I didn’t mind because he was sweet-natured and made me laugh. I’d rescued him from a waiting job and hired him as an assistant.

We bought an old castle near Portofino, which we converted to a hotel. Most of the clientele were American tourists who didn’t understand the language or the culture, but they paid well.

One day, standing on the terrace overlooking the sea, I heard Melissa’s voice behind me.

“You haven’t aged a day,” she said, “I can’t wear black, it ages me terribly, but it suits you.”

We spent a few days together. She told me she’d just broken up with her boyfriend, some loser musician. The boyfriend before that, had been badly injured in a motorcycle accident, paralysed and brain-injured.

“I hated that bike,” she said. “It wasn’t even that serious with him, we’d been dating about seven months. The last time I saw him before the accident, we’d had a fight and I told him I didn’t think it was working, I said I’d call him in the morning. He’d not told his family we were on the verge of splitting up. They called me from the hospital to tell me he was in a coma. His mum wanted me to become his full-time carer. She said that was the right thing to do because I was his partner. I don’t even think we were exclusive so I have no idea where that came from. I helped out for a few months, and eventually plucked up the courage to leave. His family think I’m a cold-hearted bitch for leaving him, but the truth is we were barely together in the first place.”

She started to get her life back after that, but her boss was being a dick and had passed her over for promotion, favouring someone who went to school with his son.

“You’re a good person Melissa,” I said to her, hugging her tightly.

I was jealous of her goodness.

I could feel it radiate from her like a saint. I would never want to be like her.

I asked the staff to waive her bill. She was embarrassed.

As she was checking out I slipped a chunky gold chain into her luggage. It was the sort of thing we used to buy as costume jewellery, to wear with outlet Gucci and blazers from Zara, when our blond hair came from bottles.

However, this time it was heavy and it was real.

**Catherine Digman**



**Catherine Digman**

The Gods

**Jamie  
Cameron**

**&**

**Rupa Wood**





**Jamie Cameron**

# The Gods

*"The Aztecs were right to believe the gods must be appeased..."*

— Emil Cioran

Sometimes I discover I've been thinking about the night  
I slipped and split my temple on the spot the basin  
and bath meet. How I lay there like an aquarium emptying,  
watching my blood thread a course along the grout.  
How later you rushed in, embarrassed suddenly to see me naked,  
and wrapped me in the plastic curtain, an Aztec priest  
preparing my body for unspeakable ceremonies:  
*the weight of a heart... a fragment of the sun's heat*  
I wanted my life in your hands. In the tub the bubbles pinked.

**Jamie Cameron**



**Emil Cioran**

# The Gods

"The Aztecs were right to believe the gods must be appeased, to offer them human blood every day in order to keep the universe from sinking back into chaos. We long since ceased to believe in the gods, and we no longer offer them sacrifices. Yet the world is still here, no doubt. Only now we can no longer explain why it does not collapse on the spot."

— Emil Cioran  
*The Trouble With Being Born*



Rupa Wood

# The Gods

With your life in my hands  
the night on the bathroom floor  
increasing the distance between us  
held only by threads  
of a bleeding language

beneath the flower pattern  
of the expanding universe  
came a sign  
that I will lie down with you  
under some future stone

wrapping the plastic sheet  
I clutched your body

possessed by a world

with nothing more

than this tacit agreement

doubtless the world is still here  
for I have played the Gods and won

**Of Bane and Healing**

**Eeshani  
Bendale**

# Of Bane and Healing

she leapt into the water  
with a fiery rage  
would the water calm her fire down?

she flew across the skies  
with a dark desire  
would the wind then hush her agony?

she rode along the cliffs  
with a yearning so deep  
would the valleys rivet her torment?

and yet in the arms of her own musings  
did she find bliss

for who can heal the mind  
but the mind itself





**Eeshani Bendale**

A Palmful of Truths

**Emiliano Cruz  
Villanueva**

## A Palmful of Truths

I've got a heart disease / that comes and goes with the breeze /  
It prevents me from being happy / since I was a kid living in the Valley /  
I've got this voice in my head / that says I am so fucking wrong /  
It rings like a song /  
I've got a sad pet and an empty bed / waiting for me at home /  
So I must pretend / I've got a job that I love /  
'Cause I haven't felt the glow / for the past weeks or so /  
I've got a cup full of stars / but no coffee or cigars /  
I've got a pain that says / I'm doing okay just now /  
But I'm sure, it ain't gonna last /  
I've got a head full of tears / but they only come on-demand /  
I've got a dead fish on my mind / since it ran down the pipes /  
And I don't know why / so please, don't ask me why /  
But it makes me think of you / and the last time I saw you smile /  
I'm so bitter about saying goodbye / but never mind, 'cause I can't help but lie

**Emiliano Cruz Villanueva**

**Mushrooms Will Sprout  
From Our Sleeping Vessels**

**Jennifer  
Nolan**

# **Mushrooms Will Sprout From Our Sleeping Vessels**

Those jilted boats in Port Meadow / with roaming feline guardians / I want to liberate them all / to make them loved again / draped with wisteria and roses creeping from the deck / we shall sail without our demonic devices / fleeing the limboed crossroads of the railway portal and dining hall / until our frames fatigue from suspended responsibility / and return to the Meadow's infinite glow / to collapse in the field once again like caterpillars / the moist sod squished into our cocoon / mushrooms will sprout from our sleeping vessels / nourishing the truth seekers / and lovers of all that is forsaken.

**Jennifer Nolan**

**Nature's Medicine**

**Sara**

**Farnworth**

# Nature's Medicine

Buzzing constantly, insane inducing NOISE circling, hover around each and every flower, desiring too much to stop seeking, capturing sweet nectar dip deep, dripping goodness so WET medicine beyond compare, no pill or tablet to equal DISSOLVE my pain and feed depths I know not, nothingness transformed to FULFILMENT resistance impossible if my reach extended to gathering, against my lips touch, coat and cover sticky GOLD I need more my head buzzes now with equal desire, wanting, waiting, till smoothness SLIDES down my throat into dark and ragged depths within me, relief, pure as light feelings releases me from TORMENT, oh forsaken liquid, secret magic be mine alone, I will not share, let others despair, consume me as I CONSUMED thee.

**Sara Farnworth**

**Indoors**

**Rupa Wood**

















Rupa Wood

**Sun Bear**

**Elsie May**



## Sun Bear

There is no medicine for the man  
artful romancer of time  
he takes his perjury seriously  
a bible of half truths  
and cunning sanity  
what woman would dare to touch it?  
flagrant and slow  
a familiar kind of evil  
you know the world is filled  
with people doing what they love  
I am the sun  
and you are only a bear  
so I will not play chess with you  
I will not write you a letter  
there is no medicine for the good,  
quietly cruel man

**From Forces To Fixations**

**Madhav  
Chowdhry**

# From Forces To Fixations

Physics ~ the architect of laws, governing atoms and galaxies

Biology ~ the maestro of life's symphony

Where physics quantified precision  
biology thrived on adaptation

The charter of the cosmos' grandeur

The storyteller  
whispering the tales  
of survival and evolution

In the medical school, an unseen force beckoned him towards  
the intersections of science and healing

A fractured bone was not just a break  
in the continuity of cortices  
but a three-dimensional canvas  
governed by tensions and compressions  
awaiting restoration

the pendulum and the angular momentum  
graceful arcs of motion

As he walked into the operation room, to perform his first  
independent surgery,  
he looked up to the sky  
and remembered the young boy  
who saw the cosmos in bone

**Madhav Chowdhry**



**Madhav Chowdhry**

The Doctor  
**Dylan Squires**

# The Doctor

And there, helpless,  
sunk in the darkness,

as shadow-cast death  
cloaks the walls,

stood behind it all,  
the father scarcely

notices the scattered  
paper spat across the floor,

of past prescriptions or  
the emptied bowls and jars...

the mother in a hallowed  
nest of praying arms

finds dawn whisper in  
on softening feet

whilst the doctor,  
rider of the white horse,

faithful and true,  
looks upon the child's face,

pale as she slips through,  
given to Sheol.



Dylan Squires

North

**Madeleine  
Lamm**



# North

Games of the bones  
reindeer skeletons, antlers intact

guard the gates. Soundless mouths  
homemade map without echo

chest sunstiff in crystalline air  
footfalls cry triskelion. Beg tree of life

december valley its own language  
breath of paper. Possibility of leaves

if I admit I didn't understand the misery  
will you come back. Will you join me

**Madwoman**

**Johanna  
Böttiger**

# Madwoman

— delicate wale:bones  
filigree and fragile  
winding in  
snails and circles, a  
fibonacci spiral of gold  
like an ammonite  
of eternal continuity and  
perfection, an envelope  
that dresses the body in  
haute couture of its own  
anatomy —

— but instead of  
its own uniqueness  
it is caging its own  
anatomy in determining  
ideals of confinement —

— madwoman, madwoman  
madwoman, they scream  
banishing her into an  
asylum of glass  
coffins, of bell  
jars, of caves  
like Antigone once  
an attic in wonderland  
transcending its own  
captivity through the  
looking glass —

— the page of my body  
of my heart, contrasted in  
black and in blue  
like writing of the x-ray  
building roads that lead  
to confinement —

— the STEMI  
of my hand —

— is caging the ink heart  
in my body that is  
racing like the  
pulse of a madwoman in  
the attic, that is writing  
with the body —



**There Is No Cure**

**Anon**

# There Is No Cure

There is no cure  
for what you feel

dreamt flashes  
buried  
locked  
the silent killer  
eclipse  
lost keys  
a disease

something grows  
unlearning  
by the hour  
hopeful words  
not wisdom  
photographs leave

you breathless

butterflies mid flight  
dissolve  
and you've watered  
but the beds don't flower

the poison thief  
face into the sun  
to feel the warmth

paralysed by day  
not a friend  
but gently there

you are loved

**Anon**



**Neurosurgery**

**Sebastian Koga**

# Neurosurgery

The touch of death and madness  
hands old with work and worry  
they have opened closed places  
    the chest and cranium  
each morning I glove them for a dangerous art  
    I remember them younger  
        throwing javelins  
        skinning animals  
    carrying freesias  
they are warped by years  
    of holding strange instruments  
        trained never to touch the wrong thing  
    hands old with the touch of hope and desire  
they would hold you gently as crystal lace:  
    move your hair  
    the atoms never touching

**Sebastian Koga**

Candy Jar

**Freya Ziyang Lu**

# Candy Jar

Grandpa stopped taking his medicine again.

I go, “We’ve talked about this, Grandpa. We’ve agreed on you taking your meds.”

Doctors conclude that no surgeries are necessary, now that the cancer has spread to his bones. As the eldest sibling, my mother arranges all the hospital visits and medication deliveries. I wish I could help more with the situation but I am away for studies and work abroad most of the year.

Grandpa goes, “We’ve agreed on nothing.”

A sigh comes from Grandma, “I told you, he never listens.”

Mother exchanges a glance with Stepfather. She had a lot to say earlier on the drive and whenever Stepfather suggested giving the old man the freedom of choice she harshly shut him down. Now she is awfully quiet.

I too lack the right words to say.

“I am sitting here and I am breathing, you see? I am not dying,” he goes, “and it is not because of your western medication...”

“Modern medication.” I interrupt.

“No, no, it is because of my strong will to live.”

Stepfather laughs, “True that. Some century-old Eastern wisdom right there.”

But he stops talking immediately, as my mother gives him a contemptuous look. I check the wooden clock on the wall. It’s half past eight. This old-fashioned clock was mounted on the wall before I was born, and has always been in the same spot. It suddenly stopped working properly. Grandpa got it fixed but its second hand had to be removed. It still tells time perfectly.

“Oh you children let him be, just let him be.” Grandma waves her hand twice in the air, “At least this old man still takes his traditional herbal supplements.”

By herbal supplements, Grandma means the few exquisitely packed substances orderly laid on the round end table in the corner of the room. ‘Five Elements Vegetable Soup’ and ‘Caterpillar fungus’. This refers to a type of

caterpillar infected by parasitic fungus which lose their minds and are eaten from the inside out. The caterpillars crawl upwards uncontrollably until they almost reach the surface of the soil and die in their zombie form. People dig them up in late spring by looking for the fungus that grows out of their heads.

“Enough now,” Grandpa shakes his head and closes his eyes, “no more pills.”

“Grandpa, where’s the candy jar?” I ask.

“What jar?”

“The candy jar, you know, the one that’s always on the end table.”

“That empty jar? It occupies so much space and no one uses it.” says Grandma. “Do you need it? I’m sure it’s somewhere.”

“It’s okay. I stand up. “I have to go catch the 9 o’clock subway anyway.”

I meet Yifan for shaved ice at the new dessert place in the city mall.

She hugs me and looks straight at the menu, as though I have not just returned from many summers away.

“It’s an unusually late time for you to be out, I must say.”

“The longer I can stay away from home, the better.” Yifan keeps her eyes glued to the menu, “Mother scolds me all day. She wants me to have a boyfriend and get married by next fall. Can’t deal with her.”

“Does she still not know what happened?”

“Nope, you joking? She will kill me if I tell her,” She shrugs.

“Yifan,” I reach for her hands.

She finally lifts her eyes from the shaved ice, and I see them bloodshot. I can hardly hear her hoarse voice.

We have been texting a lot and doing voice calls, a lot more often than we used to. Yifan, my best friend since primary school, was in a three-year long secret relationship, one she didn’t tell anyone about, not even me.

Recently she found out her lover is in fact married with a ten-month old son. She broke down and confessed that though she found it extremely painful and shameful to be ‘the other woman’ in someone’s marriage, but still she could not cut him off. I made sure to check in with her on a daily basis. One day she did not respond at all, I almost called her mother.

She did mention the thought of suicide though, which got me worried again. Her support network seems thin, if existent at all. I talked to her extensively those days about getting therapy and potentially antidepressants too. Before I got on my flight back to China, she finally agreed to go see a doctor about her struggles. I asked her to meet with me after I settled in with my family.

She stares at a big bowl of mango shaved ice in front of her and goes, “My heart is dead. I am dead. I won’t come back to life again.”

“Yes you will, Yifan, you are alive.”

“My body is alive, perhaps, but what’s the point?” She tamps down the pile of ice with a thin long spoon, “Three years — I kept waiting for him to want to go public with our relationship. He was always busy with his work. He promised to take proper care of me... I believed him. I really did.”

I wait for a few seconds, then I go, “Yifan, all this — the guy, the love, the pain, the lies — all this will be nothing one day. You will look back on it and laugh. Terrible things happen. Terrible people happen.”

“I never felt this way, and I won’t ever again. I won’t, I know it for sure. I wanted to tell you about him earlier. But I always held back because I was afraid that it was all too good to be true.”

“How can I live life without him? Now that I know what love feels like? No one understands. Certainly not my mother. My dad never loved her, that’s why he ran away with his secretary, like in a soap opera! Yet she still can’t wait to set me up with some much older man.”

“Yifan. How can someone lie to you like this purposely from the beginning, if they love you? You know he’s not worth it, I mean, you told me that yourself.” I look at her silently stabbing a melting pile of ice, “Maybe you need some distractions. Tell me, have you been eating? Did you go see a doctor?”

“Jeez.” Yifan pushes the desert aside, “Remember when you said I should go get some antidepressant? I went to the hospital and I said to the doctor I need some antidepressant urgently. So she gave me some... tablets and said I would start feeling better after a few days.”

“What did she give you? SSRIs? Lexapro?”

“I don’t remember the name of it, some kind of SSRI. I took it and — bloody hell — the doctor said nothing about side effects. I felt so nauseous and dizzy the first day. I tried to continue for two more days and it was not getting any better. Worse than hell. I was scared for my life. What kind of medication is this? I don’t even know why you suggested it!”

“Well, I told you this might happen, remember? Side effects vary from person to person. It’s important to gradually build up the dosages and get your body through the initial stage of feeling bad...”

“Yeah, but not this bad!”

I frown, “It’s just that you sounded like the world was truly going to end. Everything was **TRULY** going to end for you. I’ve known you since we were children, I never heard you say anything like this. I didn’t want you to suffer. At least when I was struggling — when I was struggling about something in the past — antidepressants helped me raise my mood to the baseline, to where I can get out of bed and deal with things.”

“What were you struggling with?”

I only now realise that I have not let in Yifan, or even my family, into my darkest days. I remember lying in a small bed in a noisy, shared department in Cologne, shaking ever so slightly with tears washing down my face.

I didn't eat for three days straight because of how nauseous I felt on SSRIs. I hid away from my toxic housemates.

I imagined a red button which I could press to stop myself from existing, wiping away all memory and emotion.

I lay on my bed all day long, waiting for the magic of the pills to finally kick in. When they did, I felt I was the most alive person on this planet.

But there is no point in explaining any of the details. I go, "It's just a culmination of bad choices, abusive relationships, an unhealthy corporate environment, things like that."

"It can't possibly be worse than me right now, the love of my life has a wife, and a baby, he is ten months old, think about it."

I sigh. "It's ten thirty, Yifan, the mall is about to close." The candy shop is the most colourful place in the entire mall.

I am mesmerised by the sheer varieties of sweets and their plastic packaging and so is Yifan. The cashiers are tidying up the counter as they prepare to close for the day. For such a colourful place to be so dead and quiet, it feels almost sinister, like an empty amusement park with all the lights on and facilities running.

Soon enough we arrive at the wall of candy jars in the innermost part of the store.

"I didn't know they still sold candy jars," Yifan goes, "I am not really in the mood for sweets after the shaved ice."

"No look," I interrupt her, "do they remind you of anything? Do you remember the time we were kids and would always meet at the little shop outside school? They used to sell snacks and sweets kids were into. Hot strips, lollipops, crackers, bubble gums, everything."

"You mean the one beside our primary school? Yes, I remember it. A shabby place really, now that I think about it."



“I know, I know, but it was a magical place to me, to us all. Remember the day we pulled together our pocket money to buy something special there?”

“Graduation day.”

“Yes! We went through the whole selection of snacks and settled on this big beautiful glass jar of candies, that jar, you remember? It was bigger than any of these jars. It had so many different sweets in it, and chocolate even. It looked like it could have lasted us forever.”

“Sure, your favourite were the White Bunnies.”

“The White Bunny, yes!” I can still taste that milky flavour on my tongue, even though I’ve not had them for years, “I remember you deliberately didn’t eat those from the jar so I could have them.”

We brought the jar every time we went out after Graduation Day, and took turns bringing it home at the end of the day. We used to really savour the sweets. It was hard, because we both had a sweet tooth. But it was like a little something to look forward to each morning.

“Yes.”

“Even when the jar was empty in the end we would still buy new sweets to fill it. We did that, remember? And we kept doing that for a while. Can you imagine us doing it now? Two grown adult women sharing a big jar of candies?”

“That jar must be long gone. It was left at yours in the end, no?”

I think of the empty candy jar that used to sit on my grandparents round end table in the living room. I must have left it there. I used to live with my grandparents when I was a child before my mother got remarried with my stepfather. I saw it at its original place on the table every time I visited them, empty and alone, until Grandpa got sick.

Yifan continues, “I don’t remember having it, I never saw another candy jar like it again. That little shop close to our primary school closed down years ago.”

“I really thought the candy jar would survive, Yifan. I thought it would always be filled with sweets no matter where we moved to. I thought that was the beginning of greater joy and adventures for us in life.” I take a deep breath, “But it was happiness, right then, right there.”

Grandpa is sitting at the dinner table alone when I get home.

The wall clock shows it's almost midnight. I check my phone again to confirm the time. It's hard to tell how long he has been sitting there.

I go, “Grandpa, were you waiting for me?”

Grandpa stands up, slowly walks into the kitchen, and when he reappears he has a glass jar of little white pills in his hands.

“My candy jar!” I gasp, but I immediately cover my mouth because Grandma is already asleep. My mother didn't want me to stay with my grandparents for the weekend as I could disturb them by coming back late.

Grandpa puts the jar down on the table, and sits down, “The jar was empty and useless, but I did not throw it away. You all think I flushed all the Casodex tablets down the toilet — wrong.”

It is really a very ordinary jar with a clear glass body, and a fitted top lid with a yellowish plastic seal. The seal probably appears more yellow now because of its age. I would not give it a second look if I saw it somewhere in a store.

Grandpa continues, “I have not taken any of the pills your mother sent me, even when you all thought I did. You see, here is the proof. I want you to see it for yourselves. You should take the jar back to your parents' house. Show them. They will finally believe me.”

I can tell how proud my grandpa feels about this little surprise. I can almost see a smirk on his face, the same one he must have had when he pretended to swallow his pills in front of my grandma, but the jar of pills is his way of saying,

*you see, I never need medication!* All the check-ups my mother took him to showed the results of his health without the influence of these medications. Even the doctor hadn't suspected he wasn't taking Casodex.

“So?” Grandpa pushes the jar a little further towards me. He sounds firm and ready for any opposition about to come.

“So.” I nod. “It's late. Let's get some sleep.”

I stand up, walk around the table and give Grandpa a quick hug. I gather my belongings but I do not touch the jar on the table, nor do I look at it again. I return to my room and quietly close the door behind me.



Freya Ziyen Lu

**Friendly Greetings**

**James  
Holmes**

# Friendly Greetings

Peter was feeling particularly good today.

After finishing breakfast, he left the kitchen table and took a walk over to the fish pond, where his friend Paul, was doing a spot of fishing from beneath the shade of a tree.

“Hello Paul,” he said with bright enthusiasm, “a glorious day today!”

“Paul, do you think that pointing out that it is a glorious day is a good greeting? One could be referring to the weather or one’s mood. The joy of the former can be shared with someone who is also experiencing the day, whereas the latter might result in the person being greeted feeling jealous that they are not also experiencing the same feelings.”

Peter took a second to consider his friend’s words but he was in too good a mood to care. It must be the former he thought.

“Have you not caught any fish Paul?”

**James Holmes**

**Venus Comb**

**Catherine  
Digman**

## Venus Comb

I had a breakdown working in a cubicle job. I was on Prozac and the pill which was why I was making crazy choices in my love-life.

I came off the drugs and the scales were lifted from my eyes. I noticed for the first time the snail in the nine of pentacles. I dumped my boyfriend and quit my job, which was dumb because I was still broke.

“You’re being a fool Lorne,” he said.

Maybe he was right. But nothing worth having comes fast. The stability we crave must be built over centuries, like Troy, layer upon layer. The bedchambers of our grandparents become the foundations of the newest iteration of the same city. The red grapes on the vine, planted by our mothers’ mothers become the communion wine in the white alabaster church newly built by the doge. The fortified wine stains the white stone, bringing it to life, with the faces of angels and saints, idols of a lost religion.

My parents were away in Asia somewhere, I would guess buying more furniture for the house with money they don’t have, and my brother was drifting.

So I went to their old house on the Sandwich Bay Estate, riding my bike up the toll road. The warm wind from the sea on my skin, and the dense green of the fields and bird sanctuary engulfing me, a hint of sand in the air from the flats, and not a human for several miles.

I found the key under a plant pot and let myself in. Grapevines grew up the front of the house, green grapes plump and sweetened by the sun. Global warming taking us back to the old Roman climate.

I found some tinned food in the larder. We were too far out and no one would deliver here, so I would have to forage. It was a modern house which would have looked good in Italy or California, angular and white, the concrete and stucco were slightly decayed, but the overgrown garden lent an air of the romantic. I sat on



the roof terrace and mixed myself a martini, scraping mould off a briny olive from the jar I found in the fridge. My brother Ben came home, he'd been at the recording studio down the road, making some album, or perhaps just smoking weed. I told him I'd quit my job.

“I hate my life,” I said.

I was twenty-seven.

Ben took me to see The Druid and his wife out on the flats. We walked through the estate, a patch of fecund land which had risen out of the sea in 1287. The farmers scattered seeds and left them. Semi-wild golden corn swished in the wind, swollen sunflowers worshiped the sun, reaching ever upwards, their leaves like fans. The brambles and briar-roses tangling through the hedgerows, hummed with bees. The sky was blue. I could smell the salt. We knocked on The Druid's door. I hadn't seen Father Thyme and Lady Thyme for many years; would they still recognise me, the strange child who used to play feral on the estate, taking photographs of adults through the dirty windows with an old polaroid camera.

“You haven't aged a day, Lorne,” said Lady Thyme as she opened the door, which was kind. Inside I felt a hundred years old.

There was a tumbledown fireplace in the hedgerow next to their shack, which was all that remained of an older cottage.

“A Dutch woman with a funny hat used to brew beer here,” said Lady Thyme, “she lived alone out on the flats after they blamed her for the sweating sickness in the town. She came here as the sands were shifting and the bay was silting up.”

I looked at the vast blue sky and thought how alone I felt here.

I saw on the kitchen table the Celtic spread. Arthur Waite, had spoken with ancient ladies in France, prying their secrets of cartomancy from them.

Lady Thyme was collecting plants, wicker baskets surrounded her, with cuttings from the garden and the estate, and some from the hothouse.

She held up a tarot card, one of Pixie's, and examined it closely under a magnifying glass. "Your eyes are younger than mine...is that a pomegranate?" she asked me, holding up The High Priestess. "Yes," I said. The white rose was on the back of every card, set against a powder blue background, with a hint of green like the surf.

Lady Thyme glanced back and forth between the cards on the table, and the baskets, talking to herself as she picked plants and crushed them with a pestle, tossing them into an iron cauldron over the fire.

*Significator: The Nine of Pentagrams, Lady Prudence, her hawk, and the wild vineyard.*

*Covering: The Fool, with his white Pomeranian, looking out from his cliff-top, his white rose, and the blooms on his tunic.*

*Obstacles: The Six of Wands, trouble sprouting, and the laurel wreath, ambition, enemies at the gate, the outside.*

*Crowns: The Empress, in her field of corn, her laurel wreath, her gown of pomegranates, Persephone, her crown of stars.*

*Foundations: The Queen of Wands, with her black cat and sunflowers.*

*What is behind us: The Three of Cups, three muses, peaches and pumpkins, and crowns of vines.*

*What is before us: The Hanged Man, mistletoe, the parasite that strangles us.*

*Himself and his attitude: The Six of Cups, childhood nostalgia, five pointed white stars, white jasmine.*

*His house: The Ace of Cups, water lilies float on the calm surface, the Prince of Peace.*

*His hopes and fears: The Star, vervain.*

*What Will Come: Temperance, yellow irises growing at the water's edge, sucking the moisture through their green stems, refreshing.*

Lady Thyme sent me to the seashore to collect water from The Healing Pool, when I got there it was filled with rocks. I could only scrape a little. It would be my fault if the elixir didn't work. The sky was blue like the robes of Mary and Mary Magdalene washing the feet. I contemplated the empty tomb... *we went to find the body but it wasn't there.* I took the small amount of water back to Lady Thyme, and she added it to the caldron.

"It'll do," she said.

She stirred the cauldron with a blackthorn wand borrowed from the mayor.

"Don't worry, I'll give it back," she said as I caught her eye.

The wand was a gift given to each new mayor at the mayor-making, it protected him or her from the evil spirits which drifted across the flats. Probably the ghosts of disgruntled druids, who had been hunted by the Romans, and driven into this place between land and sea.

Lady Thyme told me about Brigit, "we see her sometimes," she said, "but she's not real, she's the Anku, just a shade, the last person to die last year, their spirit has to hover and collect souls and guide them to the next world, it's a dull job."

Brigit used to sit on the shore and comb her hair with a Venus murex, the spiky shell pulling the tangles from her crazy hair.

Outside was a hothouse where oranges and peaches were grown, a suntrap. But it always looked prettier by the light of the moon. Father Thyme liked to work in there, late into the night, and on into the morning. I could hear him humming to himself as we sat in the kitchen. He shuffled in, looking grey, and helped himself to some grapes and sunflower seeds which his wife had laid out in Spode dishes on the table. He took a blister-pack of pills from his pocket and swallowed a couple of them with his food. I sensed a tension.

Ben and I went out into the garden, "Father Thyme is very sick," he said, "he's getting radiotherapy... but Lady Thyme thinks Pixie's drawings hold the key, the elixir of life."

They had fought about it late into the night, "nature has everything we need to heal us," was Lady Thyme's motto.

"Light and lasers are part of nature," said Father Thyme, holding up The Sun card. But he ate the sunflower seeds.

She poured some of the elixir into a chalice, borrowed from a church. He sipped it, and pulled a face. "This place is cursed," he said, "it's haunted by the ghost of Robert de Shurland, the man with the septic foot, that's why I'm sick."

I told him about my breakdown, the cubicle, and how the pills had made me more crazy. "I don't like who I am on the pills," I said.

My energy was lower without the Prozac but I felt a sense of clarity. Lady Thyme gave me some of The Elixir of Life in a tiny brown bottle. I mixed it with vodka. It tasted foul but made me feel better.

I wished I could absorb Father Thyme's cancer and free him. *I need to stop feeling sorry for myself, stop drifting, find a path.* Leaving their house at dusk, I took a detour to the beach, and saw the healing pool had filled with water as the tide came in. I called out to Brigit, the Anku, in my spell. I promised her I would live the fullest life, if the gods would only spare him.

**Catherine Digman**

**Trousseaux:**

**Medieval Iberian Glass Flask**

**Mary Jane  
Holmes**

# Trousseaux: Medieval Iberian Glass Flask

Small enough  
to be slipped into

a purse of siglaton silk  
to be a bride's listed

nuptial gift as miscellaneous  
beside cups for bloodletting

imperfect enough  
to be discarded

but once, it held the volatile  
oil of myrtle

calumus, lentisk  
pomegranate rind

once, a new wife  
keeping vigil over the sick

let fall  
a few drops of its contents

onto the brow of a husband  
mother, new-born child

and watched how fever retreats  
how life rebounds

**Mary Jane Holmes**

**Resuscitation**

**Raphael Riviere**

# Resuscitation

The doc then said,

“If everyone is ready  
let’s take a moment  
to remember this lady  
she lived in a house  
did groceries  
‘round the corner  
a velvet pink blouse  
she wore  
as we mourn her  
she’s got a son  
who she loves very much  
she’ll be remembered  
for her kind touch  
to us,  
no she wasn’t  
just a patient  
a citizen,  
a woman  
a member  
of our nation.”

thanks for the pause  
I know it wasn’t required  
but to be remembered  
is all I ever desired

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<sup>1</sup>Previously published in the *Canadian Critical Care Society Creative Expressions Contest*, March 2023.



#06

# Submissions

# Submission Call

In the fevered fight for truth, propositions about the nature of reality rise up to impose order on the world. Objects bend to fit our concepts. Fetish alters us to fit an object's strange reality. Constructions displace things rather than unveil their essence. Significance is hostage to the words which set it free. The faulty lens of interpretation distorts as much as it reveals. The ordered system of signs, symbols and grammar betrays our classifying minds while intuition of ontological truths remain concealed in the heart. Layers of interpretation obscures as much it reveals.

If we can't sneak up on the world directly, we can negotiate with it critically — in smoke and in darkness, from slight errors and wildly inaccurate prediction, to non-linear dynamics and gestalt — from a flock of birds to a school of fish, from Plato's forms to Descartes' method and Hegel's dialectic — *Say manoeuvre, yacht and vomit, next omit, which differs from it, bona fide, alibi, gyrate, dowry and awry* — set down the plastic ruler of mathematical paradigms, the hydrocarbons of deductive reasoning, and the acetate sheet of abstract universals. Untie the perpetually inadequate theory of meaning.

The Vanity Papers is looking at short fiction, poetry, art and essays for its next issue. Send us stories from the underworld. Essay: 1000 - 3000 words / Fiction: 1500 - 3000 words / Poetry: send up to three poems / Art: send up to three images. Submissions can contain classical or historical references but should make connection to contemporary or alternate worlds.

Flowers bloom in the desperate earth,  
guide us through the realm: the CHAOS issue.

[rupa@thevanitypapers.com](mailto:rupa@thevanitypapers.com)

Submissions open until October 22nd 2023

Further details and competitions at [thevanitypapers.com](http://thevanitypapers.com)

Please send a short bio with your work e.g. CLIVE STAPLES LEWIS studies classical philosophy and history at University College. His four loves include the lion, the witch, and the wardrobe.

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