

**Hilary 2023**



# The Vanity Papers

**Forest**

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**THE  
VANITY  
PAPERS**



# The Vanity Papers

find sticks to build a fire  
and stake the dying orbit  
and your phoney spells  
your prophecies come true  
forget to water the white petals  
the moon can't save them  
and the sun will not  
evil spirits, robbers, and bad harvests  
skin them and roast them over the fire  
the passage of time ahead  
stimulates some primordial need  
branching out in jasmine possibilities  
a canvas sheet stretched between  
frosty meadows across the valley  
I took a child to the woods  
a unicorn mixed with a mermaid  
what a strange thing  
to come back in your second life  
as the howls of mad wolves  
stay tuned and follow orders  
you will find the vistas again  
I beg of you do not trust this world —

**Welcome to the forest**

# The Vanity Papers

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# The Vanity Papers

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# The Vanity Papers

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# *THE VANITY PAPERS*

**The Sticks**

**Roland**

**Fischer-**

**Vousden**

## **The Sticks**

Somehow it started like two children, finding sticks to build a fire. They made the sticks into a pyramid and pushed scrunched-up bits of paper through the side. But the sticks were from the bottom of the garden and they were all wet and the construction didn't burn right. They were disappointed and kicked the pyramid and she began to walk away and he covered himself in sticks and said: being a stick man is fucking great.

**Roland Fischer-Vousden**

**Living With Trees**

**Biddy**

**Vousden**

# Living with Trees

In winter the trees withdraw, sap sinking down into the roots. They drop their leaves, divest their cells of water, alert to the danger of bursting through freezing. Deep underground the root tips retract, holding themselves apart, preserving their integrity, latent and uncommunicative.

We are walking in the forest. The child beside me wants to break the silence, finding questions to ask: why is it cold? when are we going back? But the trees are Gods and they want quiet. I don't answer. The child wades in his rubber boots through layers of detritus, sticks and leaves and dirt. The ground is hard as stone.



I told him there might be deer. Our cottage garden, at the edge of the forest, provides easy pickings for the deer. They steal in before daybreak and leave before we are awake. Once or twice, I have seen them leaving. I'd like to stop them really; I'd like to have more of our vegetables, but I don't know how.

The hawthorn thicket is just the sort of place they would hide out. I tell the child to be quiet, finger to my lips. He copies me, laughing. I know there's no chance; if they were there before, they'll be a mile off by the time we get there. Do you want to see them? I say, Because you have to be quiet. But he's got a stick and is hitting the trees with it as he passes them. Bump, bump, bump. Knobbly bark and clack of the stick. Tick tock, tick tock. Do they feel it through their sleepy miasma? Trees have their own ways of fighting off predators, toxic chemicals released into the air, coating their bark. Is there a subtle change in the scents of winter around us? A faint rustling as they stir, their roots flexing and stretching, joining into the tangle of mycelia that connect them to their neighbours, alerting the network?

The stick tangles in some brambles and breaks. The child stands still and opens his mouth, ready to bawl, but I've found another stick, tell him quickly it's a better one. He looks, appraises, then takes it. The brambles are brown and brittle but the spikes are lethal. I steer him away.

Even the stream is still, caught by the freeze. I show him icicles at the edge of the bank. I want him to be filled with wonder at their fragility, but he hits them with his hand, laughing, and they shatter and fall. I take off his woolly mitten so he can feel the coldness of the frosty filigree ferns, feel them brush his hand. But he pulls it away and starts to cry. His cheeks are red and his nose is streaming.

In a matter of weeks, a light wind, filled with drizzle and spores, is playing with the grass at the edge of the forest. And where it has touched, there is gold. Aconites, bright as sunshine, march in under the trees and swathes of snowdrops mark the spaces around the beech trunks. Soon the trees will be lightly brushed with green. The paths are muddy and the child is content, splashing in puddles. The voice of the stream, freed from its grip of iron, reaches as far as our garden.

Slowly the trees begin to stretch their limbs. Hear them, drinking after their long sleep, feel the strength coursing through them, listen to their whispering, dancing with the breeze that teases their topmost branches. Root tips reach out again, soaking up nutrients, fattening the leaf buds. In the soft earth, white fibrous ligaments touch.

We are in the garden, listening to the sounds from the forest just the other side of the fence, inhaling a potpourri of wet earth, wood, fungus, growth. I'm raking the vegetable bed and the child wanders out through the gate. When I look up, he is standing under a tall birch on the forest fringe. He has a small heap of stones and he is standing with his back to me looking up, golden curls around his shoulders, arms raised in the air towards the trailing hair of the drooping branches. And he is chanting.

I move closer to hear the words and he half turns, aware of me, and smiles. He is holding a stone up to the tree like an offering, and chanting: Trees-a, take-a, Trees-a, take-a. He drops the stone at the foot of the tree and offers up the next, still chanting. He picks up another, moves closer. Closer. He stumbles, tries to right himself but can't, sways a bit and then falls onto his knees and lands on his side. His voice when it comes is breathless, but more surprised than upset: 'I...I fell over' he says. As if unable to comprehend the sudden and absurd end to his worship ritual.

I go and take his hand and lead him back into the garden. When I ask him what he was doing, he ignores me and runs off to do something else. The trees shiver under a spatter of rain.

**Biddy Vousden**

**Jasmines**

**Elijah Wong  
Man Shun**

# Jasmines

What they could not save, they counselled—  
staked on the dying orbit, celestial martyrs for the unborn  
to name, to superimpose meaning onto

empty spaces. The super  
market jasmines my father bought spent their  
first weeks at home

dying. He forgot to water them and the white petals  
crinkled inwards like a mother's scowling countenance before surrendering  
to  
gravity. The moon could not save them and the sun did not

care. In the summer of my teens, I blamed father for birthing a  
pain he could not bear the responsibility of. In this way, the jasmines and  
I hung impaled to separate crosses together, like Jesus and the thieves.

White as lying incisors and inescapable as truth, they mocked me with  
fragrances of a self-sustained family, with stems and anthers altogether  
separate,  
yet emerging from the same hermaphrodite seed.

Thief of my contentment, blood of my blood, I hated them for  
living as they did in my family's house.

Then, time froze in the Singaporean winter where  
rivers and blood ran hot. How capricious it had all seemed!  
But the body knew that time had passed, and the soul

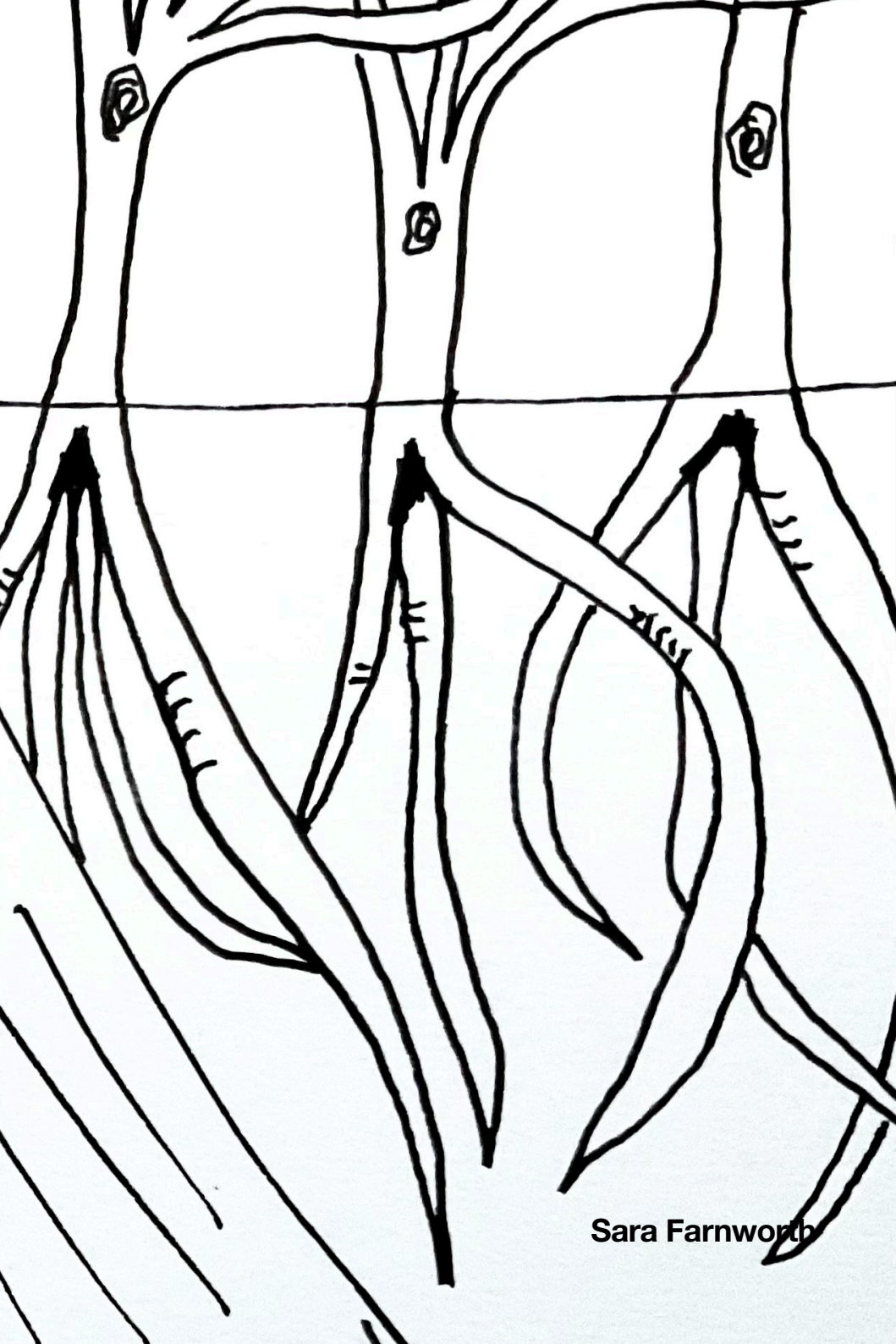
the counsel of the natural, the jasmine taunting in the living  
room where my father sprawled on the couch before sleep  
walking to his room. They could not save me, try as they did to

sprint through their perennial marathon. Slow as a mother playing catch with  
her children,  
I shared their grief in waiting for the time to pass. Glacial as an aging mother  
catching up to her teen child.

The fragrance from the living room summons me back to now, when my  
dreaming  
father lays on leather and the passage of time ahead branches out in jasmine  
possibilities.

**Elijah Wong Man Shun**





Sara Farnworth

**Bears**

**Catherine  
Digman**



# Bears

My room is green, a sage green which is fashionable nowadays, but I like it because I find it calming. It stimulates some primordial need, giving me the peace which I feel in the forest. The envelope of green, the glow of natural light from the windows reflects off the sage leaves.

Once, when I was working as a nanny, I took a child to the woods. He had been labelled as “challenging” by the teachers, but in the forest he was calm. We talked about bugs, jumped over streams, and sang songs with the other children. The light seeping through the canopy made him happy and docile.

My green room gives me the same tranquility. My bed is at the far end, next to the window which looks out onto the street below. In the vestibule by the landing there is an automatic light which comes on when you stand near it. This is an old building with crooked stairs. The man who renovated it put in these safety features. The crooked stairs are my only fire escape if the timber-framed maze catches alight.

Everyone who visits compliments me on how nice the room is, it's homely, and friends often come and study in here with me. It has a nice spirit.

Not long after I moved in I started finding small shards of glass on the floor near the vestibule. One day I was alone late at night and the vestibule light came on, I thought one of my friends had called by to talk, but when I looked no one was there.

It happened again. I often worked late into the night, and once or twice each night, around eleven, the light would come on.

Then over Christmas, I was babysitting some plants for a friend, I put them on the shelf by the vestibule. One night as I turned on the lamp, I saw their shadow, in the shape of a bear. I sensed that the ghost was very young, but I couldn't tell if they were male or female. Perhaps it was a child who had been chased through the forest by a bear.

I didn't mind them being there, I found them comforting, and I never felt lonely in the room. I wasn't sure why the glass was appearing: was it a gift, did the child think they were giving me diamonds, or had they jumped through a window — or a sheet of ice — to escape the bear?

I put a love spell on a boy and he came over to my room.

I told him about the ghost. "You're crazy," he said. I explained that I wasn't frightened of the ghost, and I felt that they sometimes helped me with my work. I pictured the ghost walking home through the forest, hearing the growl in the distance, running, and jumping through the window of an ancient chapel to escape the beast.

The boy looked sideways at me. We stayed up all night swapping stories instead of making love.

He told me about the atomic bomb, and I told him a story I remembered.

My good friend had grown up in Croatia. Her country had many names over the years and shifting borders. It had been taken over by Communists after the Second World War. I remember the night we were sitting in the kitchen of her house in Kent, in a liminal space between the town and the woods.

We drank wine from stoneware cups, and a traditional spirit made by a friend of hers in Croatia. She mentioned off-hand that her mother, Petra, had lived in the woods for a while, semi-feral, hunting rabbits and drinking from streams. Her mother was a refined woman, who was cultured, educated and immaculately dressed. She had a second stove on the balcony so she could cook fish without making the apartment smell.

She had a rifle, to shoot food and Communists if they got too close. “Why did she live in the forest?” I asked. My friend explained that although they were not rich, her mother had some aristocratic ancestry, which made her a target for the Communists under Tito’s regime. So as a young woman, it had been safer for a while for Petra to live in the forest, even with the bears.

She had her rifle. I could see her alone, under a canvas sheet stretched between branches to make a tent, hearing a sound in the distance. The dry leaves rustled with a footstep, maybe human or maybe not. She fired a warning shot in the direction of the sound, and heard a low moan.

The next morning she saw a trail of blood, where some injured bear or Communist had dragged itself away. She shot a rabbit, skinned it, and roasted it over the fire with some herbs, and a sauce made from berries.

Bears are mostly frightened of humans. Only mother bears protecting their babies are dangerous. As long as you stay away from the bear-babies, you're safe. In Kent there are patches of forest, remnants of an older forest which covered the whole area once upon a time. It used to be full of bears and wolves, but the large animals had died out, leaving just birds, rabbits, mice, and insects.

The bears were re-introduced, but they needed a chain-link fence; perhaps to protect us from them, or them from us. My mother took my younger siblings to see them, but she didn't count on the bear-mother's ferocity to protect the new-born cubs. The she-bear jumped up against the chain-link and growled at the perceived threat of human children. The children screamed and ran away. But in reality we were all safe. The children were safe, and the bears were safe.

**Catherine Digman**

x

**Rupa Wood**

# X

1. Even here, at the beginning of love, even here.
2. Language fails me. I want to tell you more than this.
3. You are Action-Man plastic, rain-washed glass, sparkly hair clip, Optimus Prime, lightsabre, bathwater. These are the clues you give me.
4. You press your tongue to the horsehair bow, talking in small confessions, explaining the taste of violins. The oils and rains of Hollywood tropes. You ran away from music.
5. In the vastness of your horizons you descend from Genghis Khan. This land was once yours, as far as the eye can see. Kings swim in your bloodline. You declare I have no parents, that you envy me.

6. In the beginning, you cut a lock of my hair and hid it away, under your bed or in your mattress. You haunted my dreams and I walked to school listless and strange. I imagine this is how it must have happened.

7. Read my thoughts. I don't know how to tell you more than this. Lie down with me.

8. I'm going to work on my laptop now and I am going to forget you. I am a distant flowering mountain in some primal scene. You are a tiny blue flower.

9. Drinking down milk in one gulp, to wash away the lump in your throat, you sit before the bowl of emerald trees. A paperback in hand, listening to the cello's sound in the morning light, it is a different beast. The ends of your eyelashes reach out and tightly grip my being.

10. You ask me why my stories lack characters and dialogue, why I am always alone, why I exercise daily and find it hard to eat. If something happened to me. All the time, all the time, something never stops happening.

11. You steal a car and climb onto the roof under stars. Sometimes there are only drugs and strangers. If only I were you for a day, or an evening, or two. You'd climb through your window and take off your clothes with my teeth. We would never leave the house.

12. An omniscient hand spells out your name with a golden sparkler. The feverish fire. I press your hot palm as we watch the flames lash out. You crawl around on your hands and knees, thanking the earth that I am yours.



13. Let's master the art of small things, like the mad will of God. With the light in your eye you forbid me to work. Idly I take your name. You give me these clues.

14. You are a spell I've fought to get away from. A mist rises. I am covered with Hammer Horror movie blood. A vapour rolls up over us.

15. You inject stories into the veins of non-existent time. If not for the body, you would live forever. The men who will clear your apartment will steal all your gold and bring me packets of syringes in a plastic bag.

16. Gothic buildings and fortunes  
hidden in our hands. Bed of roses.  
When was the last time we lay down  
on stone? Dearly departed, what will  
you do when you are gone? I may be  
the only one who ever knew you,  
and I may forget.

17. I wear your clothes but their  
warmth is futile, for warmth has not  
yet been invented. I leave the light  
left on, and on, so you can find your  
way back.

18. I don't know how to write. Put  
your head against mine.

19. The truth is, if you look too  
closely, I am a ghost, and you are a  
ghost. Our eyes met above a  
trapdoor.

20. The ends of your eyelashes were like a blade. I think to myself, I never want to want this again. Please listen to the silence please... if you can hear me.

21. Language fails me. I want to tell you more than this.

22. Even here, at the beginning of love, even here.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> $\neg(C(X,I) \wedge B(L))$

It is not the case that X can be fully expressed in language.

C(X,I) represents "X can be fully expressed in language,"

C is conveyed,

B(L) represents "here at the beginning of love,"

$\wedge$  "and."

$\neg$  "not."

This statement would evaluate as true if X cannot be fully expressed in language, at the beginning of love.



**Jennifer Nolan**

**The Wolf Head**

**Tom Sanders**

# The Wolf-Head

(An outlaw) ... wears the head of a wolf from the day of his outlawry and  
can be killed without fear of penalty.

—11th Century English Law

#

Then Cain carried out an unwise deed with his hands, slew his kinsman, his  
brother, and spilled Abel's blood. The earth swallowed up the slaughter-  
blood, after the deadly blow, woe reared up, the progeny of sorrow. For a  
long time since then, cruel fruit has grown from this branch - hostility. The  
branches of strife have reached widely across the nations of men. The harm-  
branches have touched the sons of multitudes severely and sorely - as they  
still do. From these broad leaves, every evil began to sprout.

— The Elder Genesis

I passed many stone ruins on the path to the forest. I had seen them before, when I was a child. My father used to take me here, to this cold and desolate place. He told me they were made by proud men, long ago. He told me they were not just builders, but warriors too, half-giants, and when he told me stories of their feats of battle and bravery my heart quickened.

Now, those ruins are empty, frost-covered, beaten by the storms of winter, crumbling and abandoned. When I pass them, my coat tight against the wind, I do not look, but hasten toward the woods, to safety. With each step, night descends, the ground grows softer, the trees become forest. My breath is a rasping whistle, and my boots are gathering mud, each step heavier than the one before.

#

I ran for a reason, but I can no longer recall it. There was a woman of raven hair, a man with fire in his eyes, a blade flashing in the night. I call out her name, and the leaves quiver with laughter.

My father told me a bog is ground too soft to hold the body of a man. That's how we measure this world, he said. By the weight of a man. He told me the world was better once, but that the slaughter of kings and princes, the treachery of queens and commoners, and the rebellion of children against their parents had brought the judgment of the Lord upon us, and that the misery of our world was the prelude to a fate beyond poetry or imagining.

#

My father told me many things. He told me a bog is more than a floating place. It is where the water meets the weald, where the weald meets flesh, and where flesh remembers the water it came from. The bog is what you were, what you are, and what you will be once more.



A tongue of lightning splits the sky, and the wolf's-head looms up in my mind. I drown it out with a shout. I cry the name of the wolf, and the name of my father, and my father's father. I feel hot salt simmer in my eyes. Give me a sword, a spear, a shining lance! Give me a fight, and muscle, and sinew to carve. But I run to the step of the wolf, and mercy is not mine to receive. The forest. The hunt. The judgment. My birthright.

#

A weapon is no good, nor muscle, or spit. Only the light is worth having, the pale glow of the clearing. Another mud-booted step into the eye of the woods. Rearmice rustle the branches, grass-steppers chatter in the dark, but there is another noise, the noise of a pack, fur-clad men carrying axes carved from the flesh of the trees, and blades that sing as they cut the air.

Or just the rustle of the bark.

#

Insects rise up from the bog,  
a black and brown bee-gang,  
biting and speaking. They say:

The weight of the forest is the weight of the world  
And you, the world-eater, where have you found?  
It's lonely and cold, out here in the night  
It's wet and it's dark and it's—

#

“\_\_\_\_\_!” I push the words out from my lungs, so hard the words rattle in my ribs, like a prisoner begging for escape. “\_ \_ \_\_\_\_\_!” The trees chew my words and echo them; they feast and grow taller still, their heads high as the clouds.

#

The clearing is broad, the light a grey disc. I reach the centre, the daisy-eye, and stare up at the cold burnished sky, a man at the bottom of a well. Now when I call her name, it is in the voice of the birds, and when I look at my arm, the hairs are stained elm-bark, and brown.

#

This place was made for me. I look up, up at the dēap-bēam, the death-tree, Tree of Knowledge. It is tall and black, fruits the size of my hand.

#

The first bite is the sun, the second is the moon, the third is death.

#

I put on the wulfhēafod, and climb the  
gallows at last.

I feel the rope against my neck,  
the floor falls away,  
I hang at death's gate until my soul breaks,  
my bloody bone-chamber dies,  
the dark-cloaked raven takes my eyes.

#

My life is gone, I am stretched on the mist,  
pale on the beam,  
hanged on the tree.  
I attend my fate without feeling,  
I wait without hope for my life.

#

I feel the hate-branches close in on my body,  
pierce my heart,  
feel the mottled case grow over me,  
my bark-skin cracking and creaking.  
I will live on in the branches,  
my eyes will be red berries,  
my skin as bark,  
my head the head of the wolf.

**Tom Sanders**



**Joanne Malone**

The Orchard

**Elijah Wong**  
**Man Shun**

# The Orchard

The world smoothed over like a waxed  
moon as all pains lent themselves to the balm of night, of  
forgetfulness as when stagehands loose the curtains of consciousness  
and disbelief nurses the cheated heart.

Pavement story-peddlers,  
we lived like a poor theologian's Adam; where sin callused the  
virginity of untoiling hands, and an apple lodged itself in  
smooth, deferential throats.

Uncared for, our hands would heal;  
the inherent gravity drawing one to a complacent trust in this world—  
like an ash urn sat in a columbarium square.

I beg of you: do not trust this world.

The theatre of nature affirms the goodness of time, of the butterfly moon  
and his ostentatious phases, of the innamorati summer courting the  
abashed winter, of apple trees and the inevitable orchard.

This world will betray us.

Shall the sunrise be the bastion of our hopes?

Or by dusk will the balm of forgetfulness allay the day's pains?

There is life in us yet to ignore dramatics of the  
natural, to bet in the greying of our tongues and the wrinkling of our  
noses over the solar horse-race of the sky.

Life yet to sin, to shirk away from the passage of inevitability, and  
to trust in the timeless orchard of the human soul.

**Elijah Wong Man Shun**





**Renaissance**

**RW & AI**

## Renaissance

So, apparently, there's this guy who thinks he's the next Hemingway or something. He's all like, "Oh, my writing is so deep and meaningful," and I'm like, "Dude, your writing is like a soggy piece of bread." But he keeps trying to impress me with his words, like he's some kind of literary Casanova. And I'm like, "Honey, I've read more books than you've had hot meals."

But let's talk about me for a second. I'm killing it right now. I'm like a unicorn mixed with a mermaid, only more fabulous. I'm the Beyoncé of my own life. And this Oxford guy, he can't handle it. He's all like, "Oh, I have so many deep thoughts," and I'm like, "Bro, I have a deep thought every time I order a latte." But seriously, this guy needs to step up his game if he wants to be in my orbit. I mean, I'm the Mona Lisa of modern times, and he's like some random painting in a thrift store. Sorry, not sorry.



**The Adventures of  
Zeit Hinterland**

**Catherine  
Digman**

# The Adventures of Zeit Hinterland

I walked for years and came finally to house among the trees. The wood of the forest outside had been used to build the panels and bookcases inside, squared off and varnished a dark brown. There was only one lamp in the hall but it felt cosy rather than dingy. The rings in the wood were like eyes; eyes that had seen a thousand years in the forest and four hundred years in the house. They looked at me. Who is this girl? Why has she come here.

So many moths in the house. Those tiny brown fragile ones, pale taupe and so delicate. I found them crushed and dying on the window sills. What a strange thing to come back in your second life as a moth, to be so vulnerable that even a breath could kill you. An incarnation that lasts only a few days. Or perhaps a purgatory for those who have committed minor sins. Pausing to contemplate one last time in this world before going on to paradise.

I walk though room after room. The house has been changed and added to. It is a mess of shapes. The original floor plan was completely lost. What was once symmetry was long destroyed.

Is this a hall, a dining room, a library, who knows. Perhaps it is just a shape, a trapezoid in wood and plaster. Do they spell out some incantation? Do the gods looking down read some hidden message?

I walk down a gallery which feels older than the others, and push open a door. In a dark red room there is a mirror at the top of a short flight of stairs. I thought it would be a door, but it wasn't. It was a mirror, just a mirror. I stood and looked at myself.

I was here because I was a murderer. But I did not know who I had murdered. "You are Vlad the Impaler," they had told me —

"No, I'm not, I'm just a girl," I replied, but they did not believe me.

"His spirit is in you," they said. I was dangerous to them. So I was thrown out of the village and left to walk the forests, ever bitter at the Wicca Woman who had cursed me to this fate. She looked deep into my eyes, seeing flecks of colour which were not meant to be there, marking me as "other".

I touched the young face in the mirror, it did not frighten me because it was the face of a girl, an average girl. It was me, but it could have been anyone else. I looked for traces of Vlad in those features and saw none.

Later I slept on a couch in what had been a parlour, surrounded by paintings of people I did not know. The wood of the house kept out the cold of the forest and the howls of mad wolves echoing in the distance.

Three nights later there was a scratch at the door. I ate bread and cold gruel and tried to ignore it. It came again and I wrapped my head in a shawl to muffle out the sound.

I barricaded myself in the house for a week. I ate potted apples and drank vodka until the supplies ran out. The sounds of barking and sniffing drove me mad. “Who are you?” I yelled at the animal. No reply came. There was only silence and the feeling that someone was stalking the house.

Desperate for firewood and for food from the orchards, I fashioned myself a weapon. I sharpened a broom handle into a stake and walked across the yard. I am not afraid of you, I said to the wolf. Inside my mind I repeated the words until they felt real. Perhaps the wolf was just a phantom, or a small dog with a gift for noise. I laughed at my own folly and my own cleverness.



The animal came at me, leaping above my head as I came to the apple trees. I held up my stake and impaled it as gravity brought its weight down on me as we fell to the ground. We lay in a bloody puddle of fur and twitching teeth as it expired. It scratched at my face but left hardly a mark as the life and blood drained from its body. It made the pathetic scratches of a small dog.

Three days passed as I paced the house like a spirit and washed myself in the fountain-pool. The smell of blood never left me and I covered myself in garlands of flowers from the wood. The body of the wolf rotted slowly. I found lilies to cover the stench. I looked at my face in the mirror again, looking for some sign of hardness, but found none.

I gave the wolf a christian burial, and thought about who it had been in its other lives. I smoothed over the earth of the grave, but the flowers wilted and the ground around the body turned to ash.

So I planted an apple tree so that the spirit could climb out of the ground. The wolf was my antagonist but I remembered the words of a Sadhu who had told me that fierce creatures are not necessarily beings of bad-spirit, they are just base and hungry in this incarnation. "Be free," I said to the wolf.

The tree blossomed and bore fruit. I did not eat it because I was afraid. One day a messenger came to the house. He told me “the Wicca Woman is dead,”

“How?” I asked, surely the Wicca live forever.

“She just disappeared into the forest one day,” he said. I thought about her and her wolf-like eyes and her phoney spells and her prophesies which never came true.

“You’re free to return if you wish,” said the messenger. He handed me a sash of crimson and gold. We drove away in a donkey cart, and he spoke of the village, and how it needed a messiah, someone to save them from evil spirits, robbers, and bad harvests.

Behind us, the stones of the yard were still dark with blood. Years of scrubbing had not removed the stains. And a tall stake was driven into the ground. The entrails dried and clung to the wood. It was a warning to other wolves. A talisman to protect the house for a hundred years.

**Catherine Digman**



**OFFICIAL LINE 2046**

**Maciek  
Saturnoff  
Duszyński**

# OFFICIAL LINE 2046

## **incoming-msg-24-feb**

This is just a special military operation. This is just a special military operation. All residents must remain calm. The incidents on the streets will be under control shortly. Rebels will be brought to justice and their sentences will be severe. There are no food or water shortages, and cash is available at all ATMs, as usual. Please refrain from unnecessary usage of electricity. Residents from the few areas heavily affected by demonstrations may skip their work and school obligations citing government decree. Avoid the forests and parks as the rebels may be hiding there.

Praise the highest Leader!

## **incoming-msg-1-mar**

Contrary to rebel-spread rumours, martial law will never be Imposed in the Empire. The current situation is under total control. This is not a crisis. Offices and banks will reopen soon. There were no civilian casualties in the recent demonstrations. Our police forces acted professionally, as usual.

# OFFICIAL LINE 2046

## **incoming-msg-6-apr**

The government requests that all residents stay home for the next 48 hours. Full obedience is mandatory. Disobedience implies support for the provocative rebel forces, which will be punishable by death. Martial law may be imposed.

## **incoming-msg-13-may**

The government is forced to impose the strictest of martial law regulations. Stay tuned and follow orders. The crisis mode is on. Praise the Leader and his generals!

# OFFICIAL LINE 2046

## **incoming-msg-24-jun**

The government reassures residents there is no widespread hunger at the residential blocks. Hunger only exists in rebel propaganda. In their forest. Continue to stay at your shelters, wherever you are. Make all your resources and food available to the tireless military and the professional police. Limit your daily water intake. All remaining men and male teenagers are requested to join the military. Praise the Leader, follow the generals!

## **incoming-msg-31-jul**

The government asks residents to refrain from joining groups plundering the Government District and official residences. Stay away from the Leader's palace. Perpetrators will be executed. Praise the generals!

## **incoming-msg-1-dec**

The Government of the Empire will prevail. Fight the rebels. Praise the  
[error-msg-truncated]

**Maciek Saturnoff Duszyński**



**Oliver Harman**



**The Consuming Forest**

**Sara**

**Farnworth**

# The Consuming Forest

Even at that very moment, standing in a crowd of people, all I wanted to do was to strip off and start again. That was impossible though. I continued to stand in the pouring rain, knowing deep down that all that was probably a bad idea. As I looked around at the other wet bodies about me I also knew something else, I was too much of a coward to just throw in the towel and leave.

Everyone around me was listening, but I had been slowly consumed by the sounds of the forest around us. It would have been relaxing if not for the woman next to me who kept randomly shifting her foot around in the dirt. I looked ahead to where the endless forest trees stretched out far beyond where I could see.

My heart pounded. That was just how I was, all the time. I should have eaten more. A loud bang echoed through the trees — the start gun. There was a sudden rush of bodies all around. I was pushed and bumped from all sides and would have remained perfectly still till the rush passed, but someone grabbed my arm and dragged me with them.

I did not fight the motion, the pull to join in was now upon me. I was running too. I just ran as they ran hoping that someone, somewhere knew where they were going. Then the rush was over and Mary and I sat down in the mud. We had hardly said three words since the start. Just our names.

She was so confident. We were strangers with random supplies and one map. The noise was a mix of cries and song mingling together randomly before drifting away on the wind. The bushes rustled with the movement of air, people and animals.

When I opened my eyes again Mary and Nancy were standing over me. I looked up at them dazed by the sunlight streaking down between their bodies. I think there was a split second when I had almost decided I would just stay in the mud and lay there forever.

We walked, and walked and walked. I just dragged myself along. My back felt broken.

The sun slowly dipped out of view for the first time and the canopy above lit up as if a spotlight had been pointed at it. The forest cooled in the encroaching darkness. The trees floated in a sea of white mist and I swam around them. Three bodies moved into the sunset on a hill.

The trees shook unnaturally and shadows cast long and wide. Strange noises could be heard with every step.

I had never slept outside at night. Except for that one time in the city when I drank too much and fell over near the park. It had been one of the best nights of my life. I had tried to stagger home, but had passed out on

the green grass of the park. Safe. I do not think I had ever really considered what that word meant.

It was dark. Mary did not look scared, but then again she had been eating non-stop since dusk. She kept her unwavering focus on the map. Our map. The shared map. I did not dare ask her as I had no idea how to read a map. We were probably lost.

The ground was wet, and we could not get a fire started. I laid awake all night dreaming of hell, hoping there was light there or at least that it would be warm. The devil did not come for me. I wanted to feel the burn of a fire, any fire. I did not want to wake them. Not because I was being nice, no, I was too selfish for that. I just wanted to lie there. Something moved in the brush nearby and startled me. They moaned and swore in unison.

Four days later. One, two, three, four. We all looked like we had been vomited up. Mary ate through most of her food and kept trying to convince me to give her more of mine. I tried to remember why I was here. All those things didn't matter to me. All I could think about is surviving.

I asked Nancy today if I could have the map. I pulled at it a bit and a bit harder and before I knew what was happening we were all tugging at the paper. It ripped. She fell to the ground and started to cry on her knees. We all fell silent for a time. Two standing and one kneeling in a great forest filled with life and yet we were not feeling alive at all, but dead.

Nancy sat back on the ground and drank. I sat next to her. This was not the end. We were all to blame in some way or another. All the things which had gone wrong up to that point now seemed meaningless. I may not have known it before but I was here to find myself.

**Sara Farnworth**



**Night Rain**

**Elsie May**

# Night Rain

Night rain lasts longer than any other rain  
The world so still,  
rich smells of water on earth,  
this gentle war of cracking light and thunder  
I am safe in bed  
cooled from watching in an open September window  
And in a moment of such heavy,  
soaking natural madness,  
I am reduced to wonder when I might have the extraordinary privilege of  
being alone in a storm,  
in the peaceful chaos of night rain,  
with you

**Elsie May**



**HMC Literary Society**

# **Works In Progress**

**Charlotte DeMaria**

**Heather Kayton**

**Catherine Digman**

**Joe Foye**

**Rupa Wood**

oranges in a bowl /  
peeling off the pith /  
citrus sticky fingers /

cold window /  
condensation droplets /  
frosty meadow /

orange jelly boats /  
cocktail sticks and sugar paper /  
gift of sweet smiles

**Charlotte De Maria**

a vista of opportunities / leaving school /  
idylls across the valley of the future /  
but for many / a lack /  
the benefits of learning / impossible to find /  
opportunities obscured / hidden behind walls of poverty

**Heather Kayton**

oysters / memories unlocked by smells/  
whitstable / salty / tide in and out / alive – eaten alive /

I sit with my father at peace – at rest /  
oysters / the smell and the taste of whitstable /

large ladies / cyclical goddesses heralding in the new year /  
the moons and tides / would it even start without them/

something seemingly lost at sea / but tethered to the ocean floor /  
bones / ancient / shade / evil men within a crypt /

de shurland buried in consecrated ground /  
while the sad suicide is not permitted there /

astrological / cain / saint / destiny mapped in the stars  
we think we have free will

I sit with my father at peace – at rest /  
tide in and out / alive – eaten alive

**Catherine Digman**

they set out beyond the four walls of childhood / towards the sun /  
raised and fallen away / glasshouses cracked and damaged /  
lead stencilled windows / her childhood bedroom /  
the ceiling down / crumbled / left wing /  
beneath lay the lock of hair / taken from him / that day behind the  
shadow /  
she saw him / gone for months / different /  
his eyes not his own / glassy and distant /  
looking any way but hers / he spoke like a memory /  
in dreams / she found their vistas again

**Joe Foye**

planets / shade our light /  
our vast lake / our tree line / the rest of what we know /  
changed by moons / we became many /  
lake of the mind / body of the forest /  
of what we knew / lake / our vast tree line / rest /  
planets

**Rupa Wood**



**#05**

# **Submissions**



# Submission Call

The age of sunlight and the plant world's aromas. Silver pills, distilled aromatic waters and essences. Mythological spirits and the ravings of genius. The protective forces of magical charms. The Ancient East and medical books. Beneficence and non-maleficence. Amalgamations and elixirs. Poisons and theriacs. Honey, blood, flower, water.

The Vanity Papers is looking at short fiction, poetry, art and essays for its next issue. Send us stories from the depths of the medicine cabinet. Essay: 1500 - 3000 words / Fiction: 1500 - 5000 words / Poetry: send up to three poems / Art: send up to three images.

experts in the healing arts, light the lamps and  
prepare the potions for: the MEDICINE issue.

[rupa@thevanitypapers.com](mailto:rupa@thevanitypapers.com)  
submissions are open to members of the University of Oxford  
until Monday 1st of May 2023

Please send a short bio with your work e.g: O. WILDE studies literae humaniores at Magdalan. He knows the importance of being earnest.



**THE  
VANITY  
PAPERS  
THE FOREST  
ISSUE**