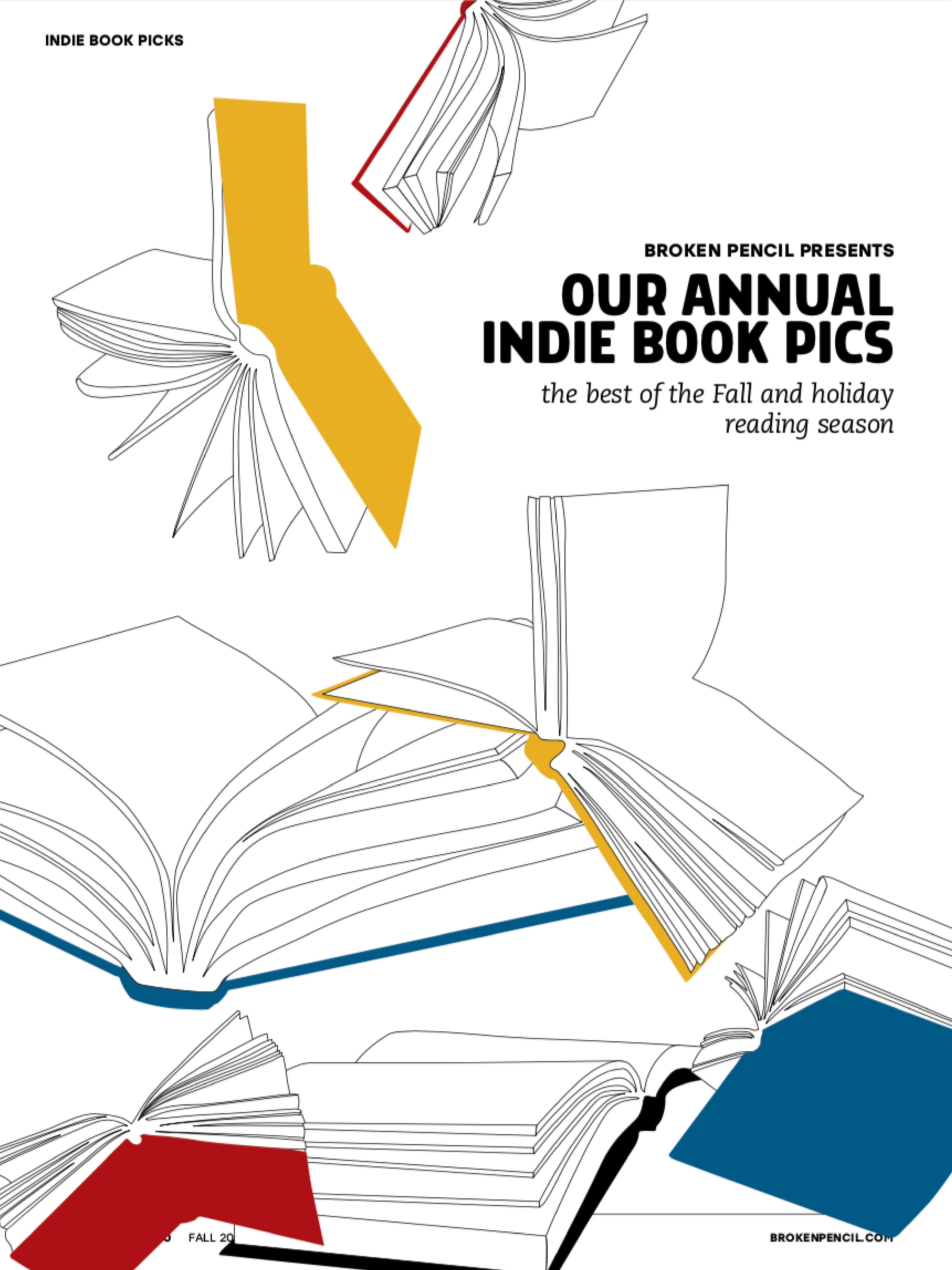


INDIE BOOK PICKS

BROKEN PENCIL PRESENTS

OUR ANNUAL INDIE BOOK PICKS

*the best of the Fall and holiday
reading season*



GRAPHICA

Helem

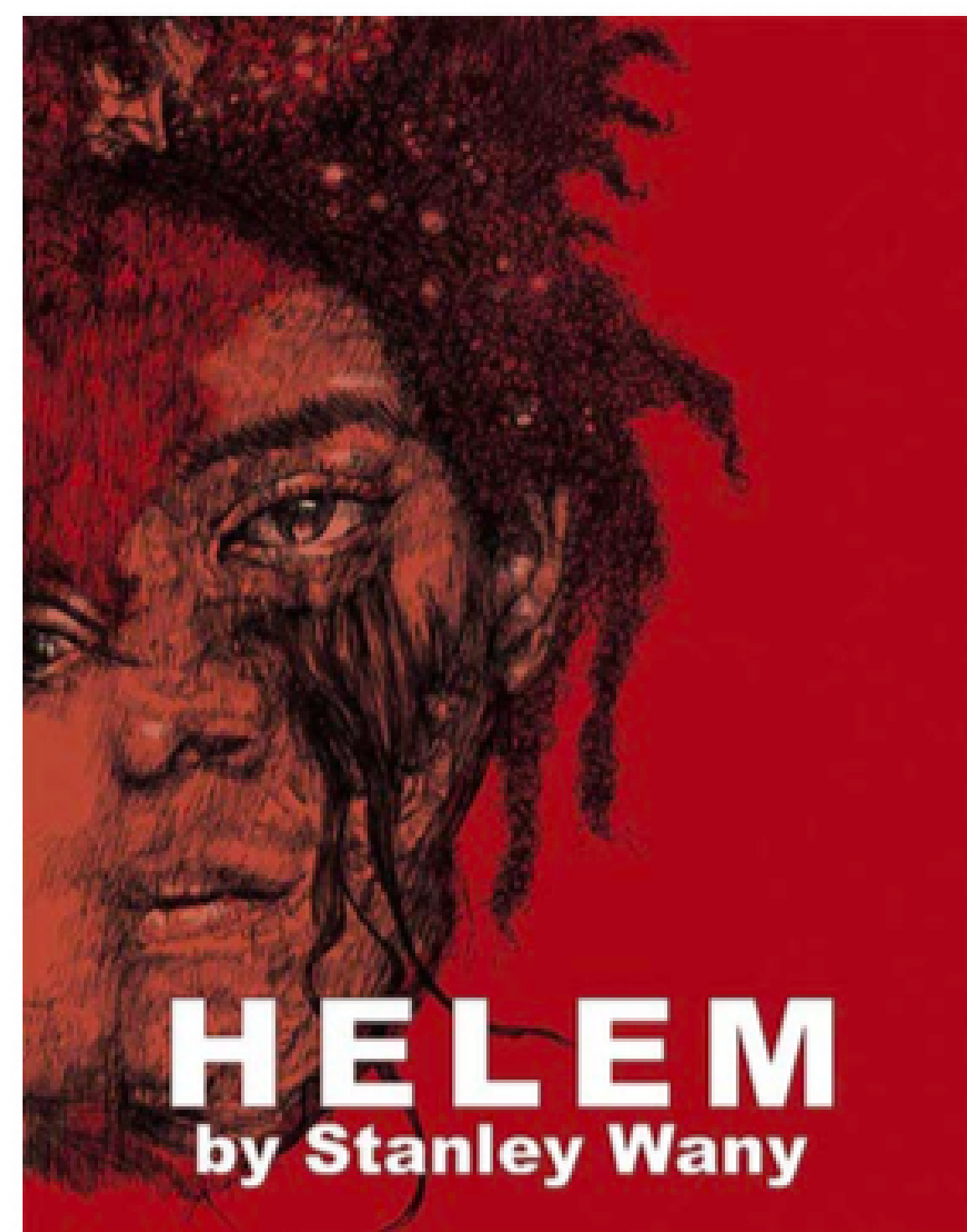
Stanley Wany,
Conundrum Press

Our innermost lives — our dreams, paranoias, fantasies, and nightmares — take place beyond language. It is difficult to communicate what they feel like, or why they matter so much to us in the first place. Stanley Wany's *Helem* stakes out this liminal territory as its own. It follows the internal lives of a woman grieving her sister's suicide and a man who has worked the same deadening call center job for a decade. Wany's inward fisheye is a series of surreal monochrome panels punctuated with only a handful of words.

The book's title is the Arabic word for "dream," but it is absolutely nightmarish. Haunting and hallucinatory, these

are reminiscent of Henri Michaux's sketchy, melting mescaline drawings. In tracking the bleed between fantasy and reality through bizarre sequences, jumpy lines, and sudden shifts in setting, *Helem* joins the tradition of works dedicated to capturing the strange logic of altered consciousness.

For readers who thrive with very little narrative, Wany will all but hand off these tangled, painful fragments, a grim gift. Leaving so much space unfilled or unclear, he is uncannily good at recreating profound alienation, and gives a new visual language for the repetitive, senseless ennui of being lost in the mundane. (Maria Cichosz)



GRAPHICA

Shame, Shame, Go Away

By Jess MacCormack
self-published

Some nightmares are real because they actually happen. These become a part of your psyche, or, for Jess MacCormack, they become parts, plural. Having taken shape in MacCormack's eerie and vivid personal memoryscape, a dozen or so eerie voices and personalities are the chaotic protagonists of this haunting visual memoir. The artist, who self-identifies as having dissociative identity disorders, uses intense watercolour to render each of these unhinged, discrete actors of their consciousness. Flamingo pink, smears of dark charcoal, and bright, blood-red darts collide to form



faces, faces, and more faces, and they all look directly at the reader. These figures seem to literally detach from the page, their eyes each a terrifying tunnel drawing ever nearer. Created by one of MacCormack's split selves (or, in another framework, through dissociation), these paintings illustrate MacCormack's gripping and disturbing memories. Each image is as lucid and unbearable as the



narrative text that goes with. This opus refuses to obscure any of the nastiest and most soul-crushing effects of childhood sexual trauma. This book is as impossible to unsee and richly challenging to undertake. *Shame, Shame Go Away* represents a groundbreaking visual text that is hypnotic, brutal, synesthetic, and utterly like anything that has come before it. (Jonathan Varelly)

excerpt from **Water Proof**
by **Aaron Bushkowsky**

We collect our bearings. The dread of the day sets in like a toothache. Anna's bloodshot eyes have bags under them. The kind you can pack a lot of anxiety into for a trip to Crazy Town, although to be fair, she rarely goes there except to visit friends.

On our second date we visited her cousin in Abbotsford, a tiny man with an old-fashioned film camera around his neck. A museum piece. His name was Tom, all sinew and bones and bloodshot eyes, wearing a white t-shirt with fast food stains on it, probably Arby's.

You're a brave man to take her on, he said with a grin, one bony finger on the shutter. She's the crazy one in this family, you'll see. Anna said, Back in your trailer, Crazy Tom. The cats miss you.

She pulled out her wrap-around sunglasses and used them to point to the broken-down Airstream gleaming in front of us; a convex mirror of a trailer reflecting sun in our eyes.

Love the facilities, she laughed, shielding her face. Love the facilities. We can see ourselves in this. Warped or what? Then she did a little dance, finishing with a big spin. This is my world, she gushed. This is it. It's so weird. I love it! Aren't you going to dance a little? Anna said. Let yourself go, Andy. Let it all go. We look like akimbo clowns, our legs stretching into stilts, our heads oblong in the reflection of the trailer. A little pathetic over here. I think that part I said aloud. Well, I don't care, Anna said. Watch me. Watch and learn! In this moment, she was genuinely happy. I could see the joy in her face. Tom snapped the shot mid-twirl.

Got it, he said. Got it good!

But now we're far from the pastures of Abbotsford, British Columbia. Far from any Arby's or McDonald's. Or Wendy's. The only air stream we have is off the water.

The ocean is quiet. Cold. Distant.

There are three red Kodiak boats out there with big numbers on them. They're dragging the bottom of the sea with chains or hooks of some kind. Police boats, I'm told. From the shore, they're just bugs on the water, crisscrossing in regular patterns, back and forth, forth and back. No waves. The sea is as flat as a bowling lane. Maybe even as shiny. Like I said, it's bright out. The sun scatters light across the water in shivers. It's probably a scene that will remain etched in our minds for decades.



FICTION

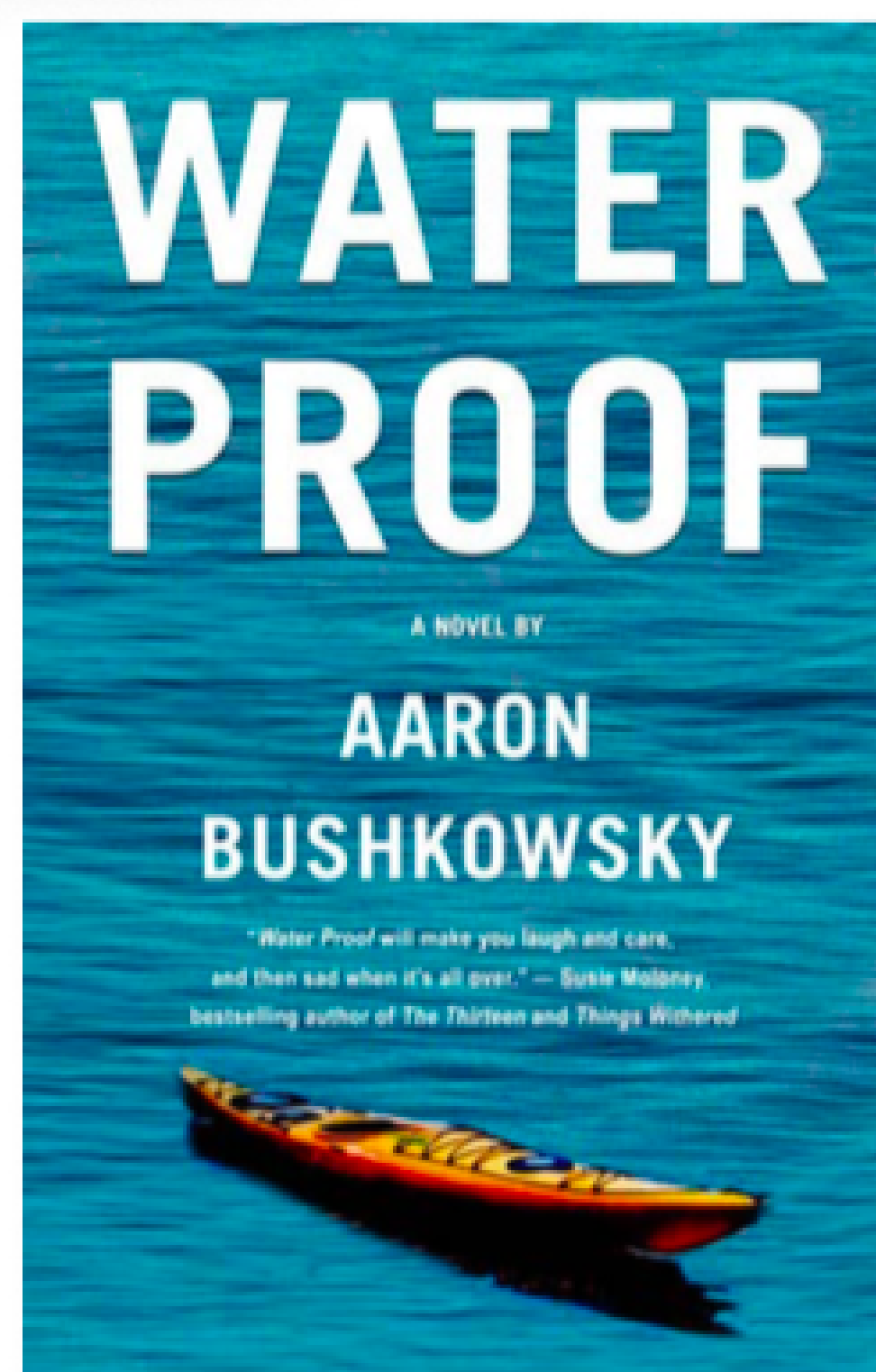
Water Proof

By Aaron Bushkowsky

Cormorant Press

In remote Desolation Sound, a small ripple of the BC coastline, Andy is kayaking with his long-suffering wife Ana and her best friend Sarah. Then, Sarah goes missing. Cut. A few years later, we're in Vancouver. Andy is a successful director of slick commercials. Naturally, he also hates himself. When things go hilariously awry on the set of a commercial for a self-driving car, Andy finds himself with nothing left to lose — time to fulfill his artistic dreams! (Actually, he still has a few things left to lose, but he hasn't figured that out yet.) Witches, stolen memory cards, BC Sunshine Coast hippies, and maniacal film producers all come out of

the woodwork to teach Andy lessons he should have learned long ago. Our anti-hero narrates with bemused fatalism — like the reader, he is a kind of dispassionate observer of his own mostly deserved downfall. That's the key to this book. Andy's a jerk and he knows it. He doesn't want to be such a jerk, but it's all he's ever been, and change is difficult. Veteran playwright and novelist Aaron Bushkowsky finds just the right comedic touch to convey the utter ridiculousness of a character somehow both pitiable and utterly undeserving of our pity. Meanwhile, what happened to Sarah? And how much does Ana know? (Hal Niedzviecki)



FICTION

The Pump

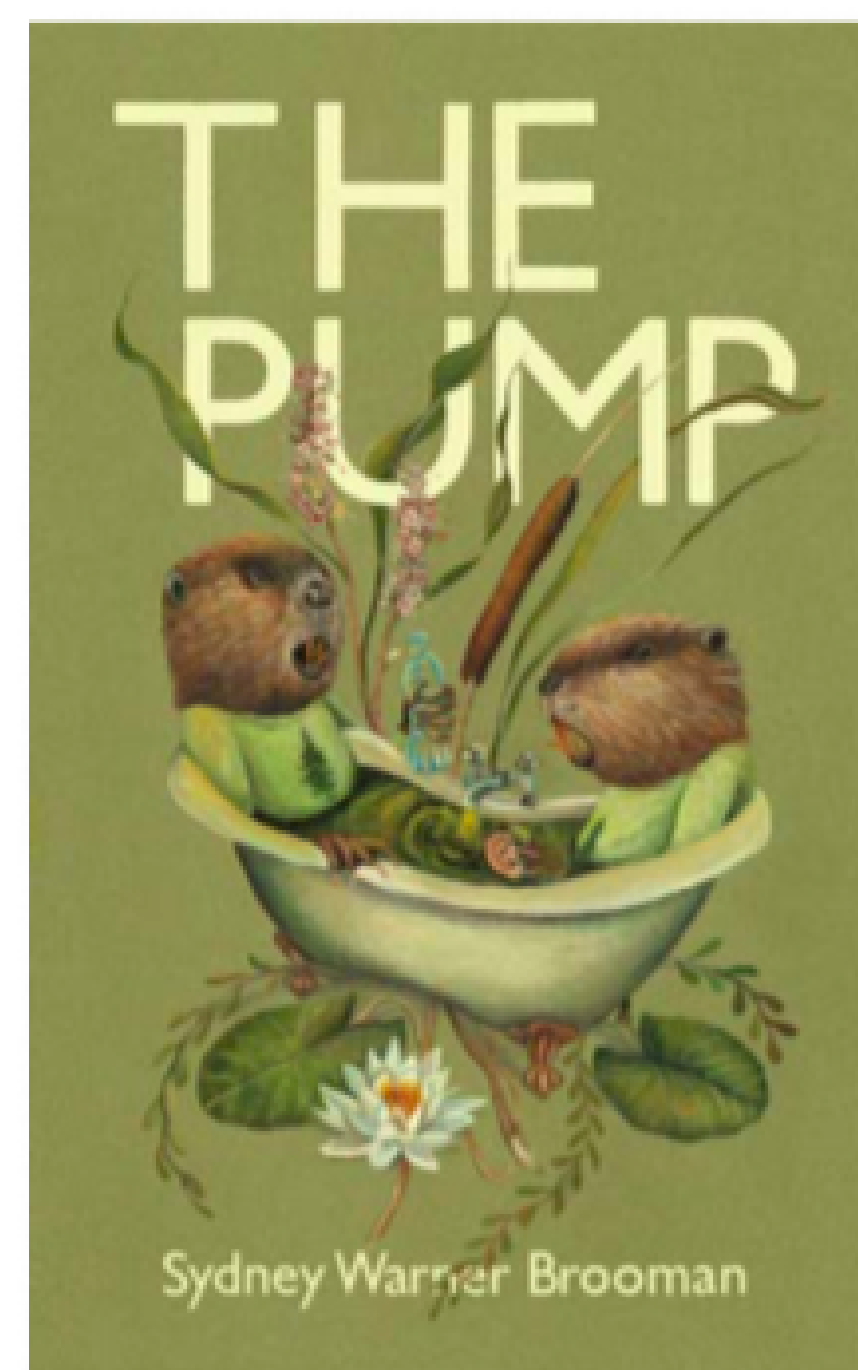
By Sydney Warner Brooman,
Invisible Publishing

You can't drink the tap water in the small city imagined by first-time author Sydney Warner Brooman in *The Pump*. You shouldn't bathe in it either. It'll give you rashes. If you go to the hospital to seek treatment, watch out for that emergency room hanger-on, Wren. His hospital intern girlfriend has turned him on to using out-of-towner blood as an all-purpose cleaner. And don't bother going to the municipal offices for help — the mayor is too busy falsely incriminating his only son and promising the townspeople that he will turn their beloved beaver hunting into a profitable endeavour. If you get caught up in the frenzy and find yourself taking to the polluted bog on the edge city's edge with an oversized butterfly net, be

sure and say hi to Danny. You'll find him knee-deep, patiently waiting for his dead brother's medium to lead him to his promised reward.

Other writers have used some form of matter-of-fact horror mixed with leaden comedy (and plenty of pollution) to conjure up the bleak landscapes of post-industrial Canada. There's Madeliene Sonik's poisoned town on the banks of the Detroit River in *Fountainbleau*, or the fictional Chicoutimi, Quebec in Kevin Lampert's explosive *You Will Love What You Have Killed*.

But Brooman's remarkably self-assured voice remains singular, authentic and wry. *The Pump* will stay with you, leaving its taste in your mouth: dread and mossy yellow water. (Hal Niedzviecki)



excerpt from **The Pump**
by **Sydney Warney Brooman**

When Jacob Jameson climbed out of his bedroom window, the beaver was waiting for him in the backyard.

Thick fluffy fur covered its pudgy skin. Its whiskers were white, clean, and straight like a housecat's. Its front teeth moved slightly with its breath, rising and falling over its little chin. Tiny eyes scanned the area outside and its ears flicked back and forth. It stood up on its hind legs and looked at Jacob calmly.

Jacob sat down cross-legged in the grass, soaking his PJ pants with dew. He asked the beaver if it had ever heard the song Barges. Do you sing to one another when you go to sleep? Can you even hear songs underwater?

The beaver scratched its nose then began to speak: What's a barge?

They're boats, Jacob said, but we have songs about other things too. Like Johnny Cake. Do you know Johnny Cake? The beaver shook its head.

Jacob cleared his throat. Johnny Cake ho, and Johnny Cake high, no one can catch me as I roll by. He's a cake that rolls out of the oven and the baker says You can't run away Johnny Cake and the Johnny Cake says I've outrun an old man, a little girl, and I can outrun you, too and then he rolls off through the town!

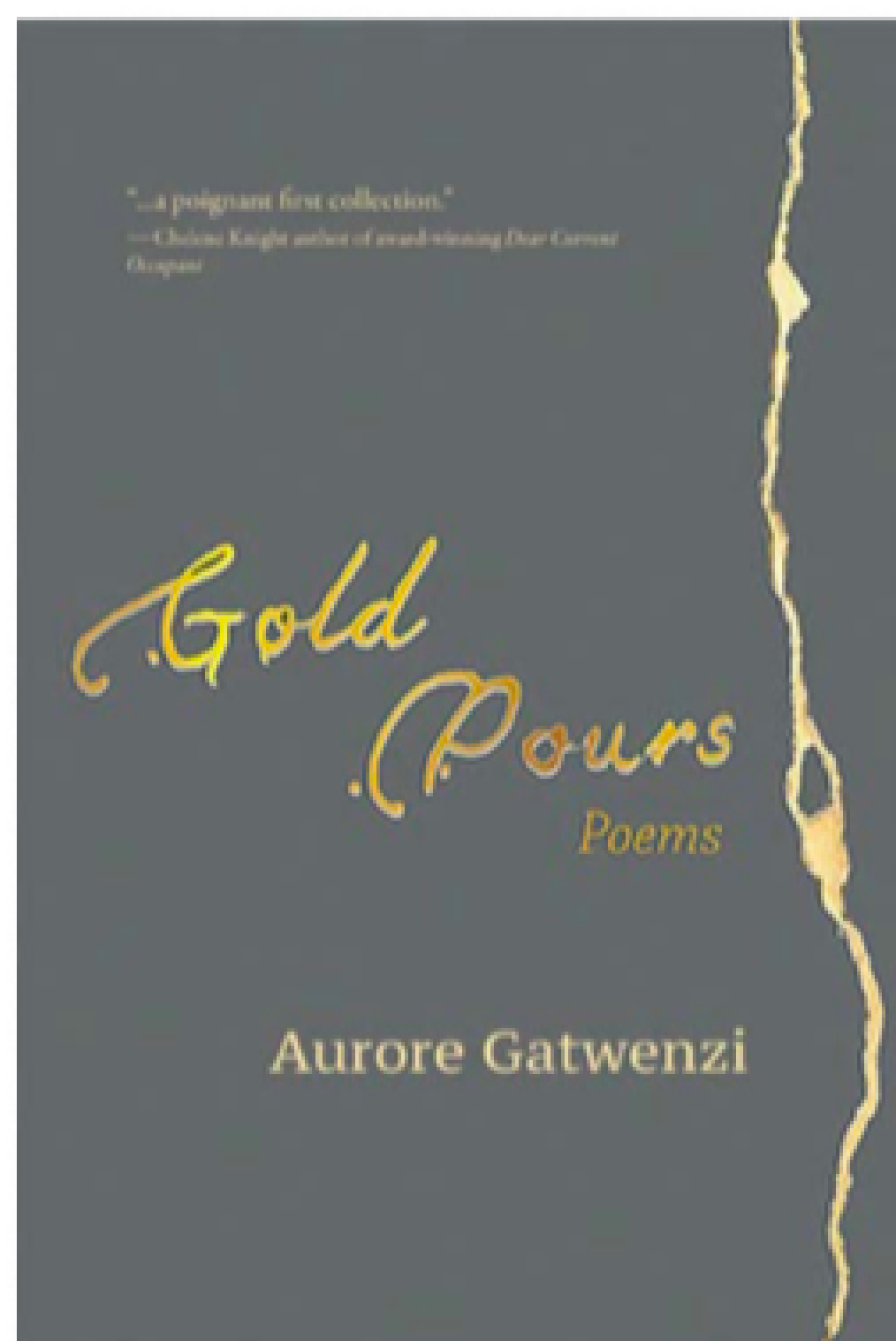
Jacob paused. I should go back now. Will you be back tomorrow? I can teach you the song. The beaver nodded. Jacob climbed back through his window and rolled the muddy bottoms of his PJ pants up to his knees.

He dreamt of cakes with thick fur, floating in the water of the Marshes.

Small Press Spotlight

LATITUDE 46

North, magnetic North. The earnest, if eerie pull that surrounds the upper latitudes also drives the work of Latitude 46 Publishing. Founded by Heather Campbell and Laura Stradiotto in 2015, this small but mighty press focuses on work by Northern Canadian writers. Too often is writing from this region celebrated as some kind of distant cultural inheritance rather than the vibrant and complex tapestry these books show is fully alive. If you're open to challenging your own expectations, you'll find that this pair of books leads a whole catalog that punches above its weight for a small outfit like L46. Check out latitudepublishing46.com to see what we mean.



POETRY

Gold Pours

By Aurore Gatwenzi
Latitude 46 Publishing

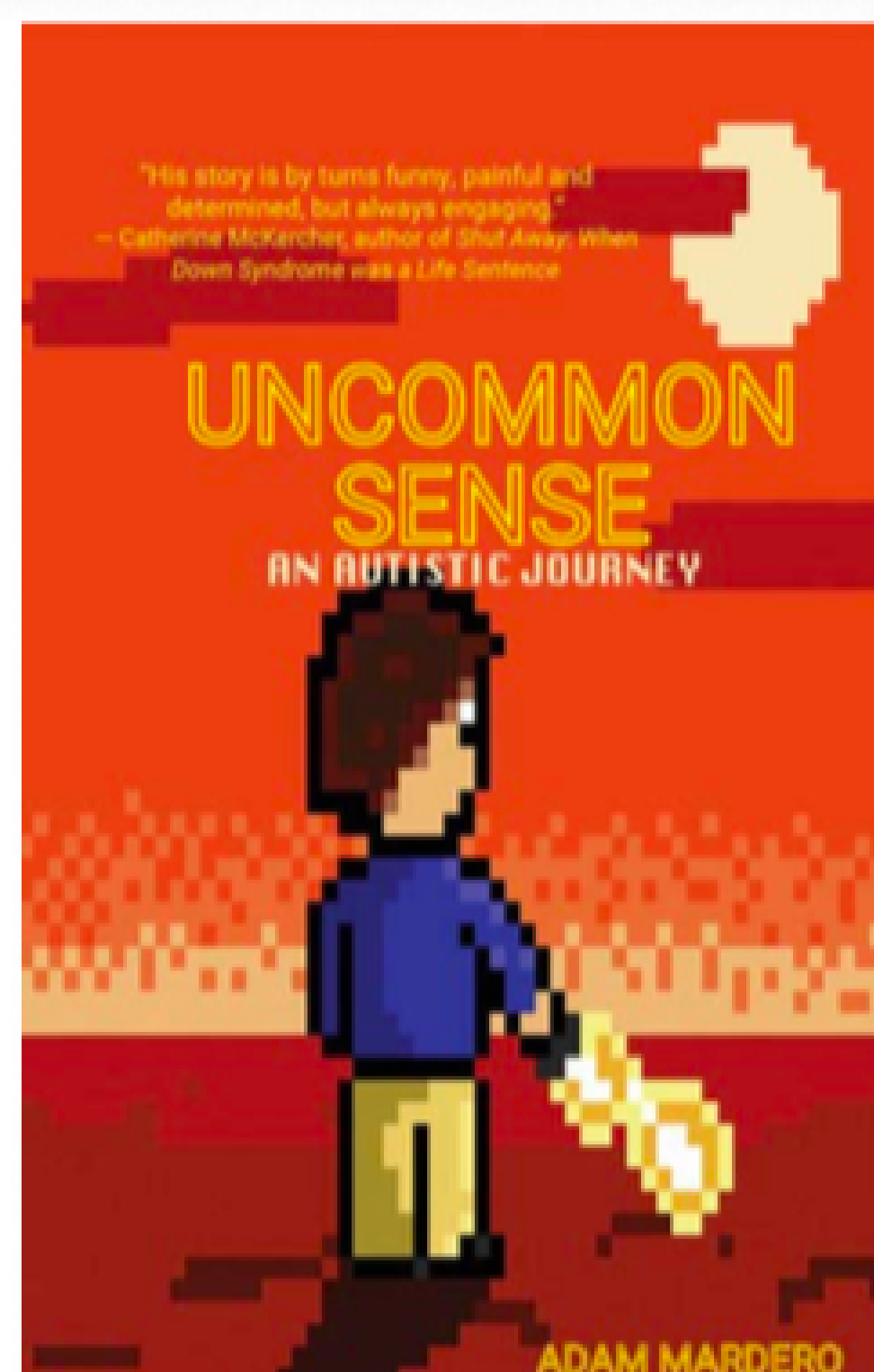
Casual, abstract, and sometimes heartbreaking, bleeding from the depths, Aurore Gatwenzi challenges her own reflection in her debut collection. Peer into an inner monologue of unobstructed, thought-provoking encounters with spirituality and religion. Listen into candid recordings of romance and grief. Gatwenzi gives more than she takes, opening up the reader's ability to see and not just look. Come into these poems to investigate small love, deep loss, and even obsession. With a thickness of language stewed in her home culture of Northern Ontario and the challenges of being Black there and anywhere, *Gold Pours* teaches us how to belong in the nuanced spaces that we can't help but claim. (Adel Franklyn)

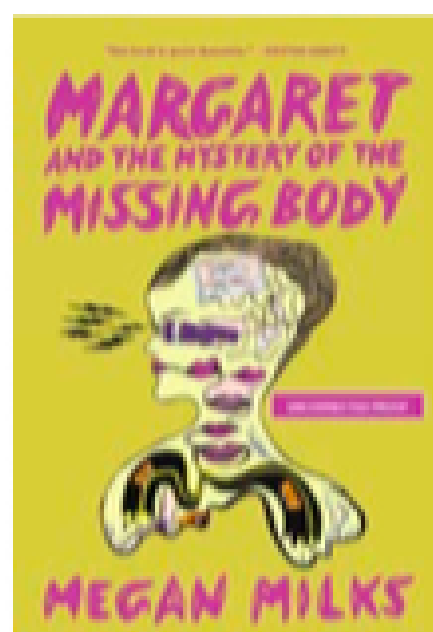
NON-FICTION

Uncommon Sense: An Autistic Memoir

By Adam Mardero
Latitude 46 Publishing

This memoir begins with the moment that Adam Mardero is diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome at the age of nine. Growing up with this diagnosis impacts virtually everything that follows. For years, Adam has been working against widespread misunderstandings about the autism spectrum. Mardero writes with an incredible closeness, the kind of vulnerability that makes you feel as if you are on this life journey with him. It's a privilege to bear witness to a voice finding its place and a talented man finding his voice as an activist for neurodivergent youth. (Parker Ducharme)





FICTION

Margaret and the Mystery of the Missing Body

By Megan Milks, *The Feminist Press*

Anyone who grew up in the 90s has since longed fondly for that golden, analog decade of mixtapes and after-school clubs. Megan Milks' writing harnesses this feeling deftly, only to then reveal nostalgia's tendency of "buffing over its rough spots, looking past lingering wounds," Milks writes. "For many of us who lived in the category of Girl, the nineties were kind of a mindfuck."

The novel follows Margaret Worms, former head detective of the Nancy Drew-esque Girls Can Solve Anything club. Beginning high school has sent our hero into a tailspin, her club now disbanded and her old friendships rapidly changing. Fearing impending adulthood, Margaret develops an eating disorder that lands her in a treatment center where she comes to terms with her body, desires, and blossoming transmasculinity.

This is a delightful, propulsive narrative and — like any 90s teen novel series worth its salt — a delicious page-turner. Milks models the thrill of reading as a young person. Margaret's dramas and insecurities lead us to root for her because she is so much like our own awkward high school selves.

It is also genre-bending, a YA coming-of-age story spinning a feminist treatise and topped with a heavy dose of zany Magic School Bus-style surrealism (including a genetically engineered butterfly woman, a journey through the human digestive system, and a literal ghost, for starters). The story is corporeal, investing meaty prose into capturing what it feels like to inhabit a body, in all its fleshy, sweaty, monstrous glory and imperfection. (Maria Cichosz)



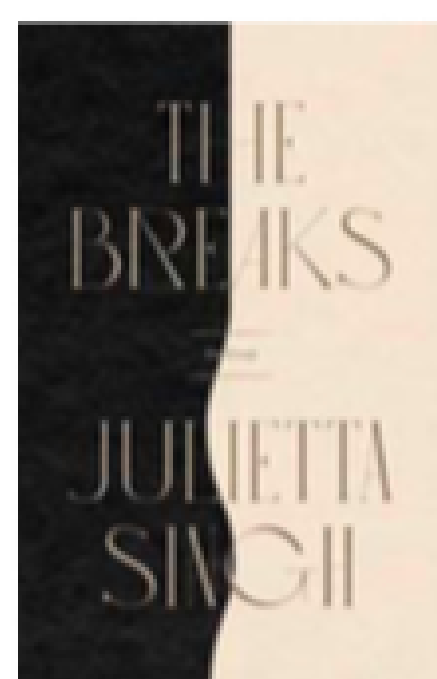
POETRY

A Small Homecoming

By Furqan Mohamed, *Party Trick Press*

The poems of *A Small Homecoming* are capsules of culture and context. This kind of preservation is a precious duty, and Furqan Mohamed proves her careful guardianship. Collectively, these poems model fleeting and fragmented sensations drawn from both life in Canada and the third culture with precision. They are gentle, yet complex, gesturing to unspoken elements of home, the mechanisms of migration, Somali tradition, and personal ways of being. Furqan's melodic approach to Blackness and femininity are nuanced, opening up a critique of societal expectations even in moments of celebration.

A Small Homecoming inquires about the way we are nourished by inheritance and identity, but also, how we deploy them to distance ourselves from understanding each other. Mohamed's lyrical vignettes of childhood will be familiar to many children of immigrants, diplomats and travellers, holding fondly to the scents, sights, and textures that shape the process of coming of age. Tender yet bold, writings like this one encourage us to honour our personal geographies and histories by remaining open to narratives outside of our own. To do so can fundamentally shift the way we experience the world. (Adel Franklyn)

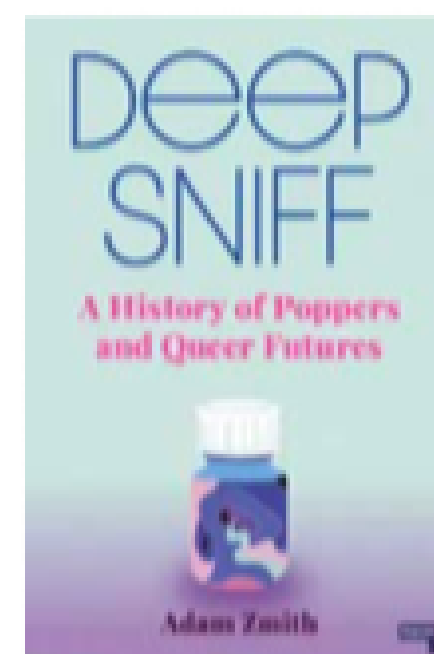


NON-FICTION The Breaks

By Julietta Singh, *Coach House Books*

The Breaks is a touching epistolary love song addressed to the writer's six-year-

old daughter, a multi-part letter envisioning a brighter future but grounded in the realities of race and parenthood. For the adult reader, the thesis is that through adopting children's radical belief in unlimited possibilities, we can move forward with optimism, however uncertain things may be. Despite various looming political and ecological crises, Singh asks us to shed any inherited notions that do not serve us, and move instead along "revolutionary paths" to set us free. Tenderly, Singh takes us on a journey of the now, threading together the interlocking forces that threaten us individually and collectively: capitalist exploitation, climate disaster, the violent legacies of patriarchy, racism, and colonialism. Through her letters, though, Singh ultimately takes these truths home in this timely meditation on inheritance, race, and queer mothering at the end of the world. (Parker Ducharme)



NON-FICTION Deep Sniff

By Adam Zmith, *Repeater Books*

Blue Boy. Locker Room. Pig Sweat. Rush. If these names don't mean anything to you, strap in. If they do, well, hey there, sister. Either way, you absolutely need to get a load of Adam Zmith's sensuous, time-bending, and explosively queer history of the world's most famous inhalant: poppers, or alkyl nitrates if you're fancy. In an intimate and sometimes psychedelic deep dive into the origins and brokers of these vapours and the little brown bottles that contain them, Zmith goes beyond mere data points and factoids. Rather, the book is a vibrant psychocultural tapestry that tethers together unsung queer heroes of the past to in the least expected ways. From the 19th century German courts to the underventilated dance floors of gay New York in the 70s and all the way up to futures as yet unhuffed, *Deep Sniff* is a wild rush like no other. Just don't lose your bottle cap. (Jonathan Valelly)