Continuing with our series of “Best of 2020-2021” lists curated by the entire Entropy community, we present some of our favorite selections as nominated by the diverse staff and team here at Entropy, as well as thousands of nominations from our readers. The lists this year are especially meaningful as they mark the final time we’ll be doing them, and some of the last content that will be going up on the website. (Read the farewell post from our founder here.)

This list brings together some of our favorite novels & books of fiction published in 2020 and 2021.

(For last year’s list, click here.)

In no particular order...

1. *Intimacies* by Katie Kitamura (Riverhead Books, 2021)

   “*Intimacies* is a haunting, precise, and morally astute novel that reads like
2. Inheritors by Asako Serizawa (Doubleday, 2020)

Spanning more than 150 years, and set in multiple locations in colonial and postcolonial Asia and the United States, Inheritors paints a kaleidoscopic portrait of its characters as they grapple with the legacies of loss, imperialism, and war.

Written from myriad perspectives and in a wide range of styles, each of these interconnected stories is designed to speak to the others, contesting assumptions and illuminating the complicated ways we experience, interpret, and pass on our personal and shared histories. A retired doctor, for example, is forced to confront the horrific moral consequences of his wartime actions. An elderly woman subjects herself to an interview, gradually revealing a fifty-year old murder and its shattering aftermath. And in the last days of a doomed war, a prodigal son who enlisted against his parents’ wishes survives the American invasion of his island outpost, only to be asked for a sacrifice more daunting than any he imagined.

3. Search History by Eugene Lim (Coffee House Press, 2021)
Frank Exit is dead—or is he? While eavesdropping on two women discussing a dog-sitting gig over lunch, a bereft friend comes to a shocking realization: Frank has been reincarnated as a dog! This epiphany launches a series of adventures—interlaced with digressions about AI-generated fiction, virtual reality, Asian American identity in the arts, and lost parents—as an unlikely cast of accomplices and enemies pursues the mysterious canine. In elliptical, propulsive prose, Search History plumbs the depths of personal and collective consciousness, questioning what we consume, how we grieve, and the stories we tell ourselves.

4. Savage Tongues by Azareen Van Der Vliet Oloomi (Mariner Books, 2021)

It’s summer when Arezu, an Iranian American teenager, goes to Spain to meet her estranged father at an apartment he owns there. He never shows up, instead sending her a weekly allowance, care of his step-nephew, Omar, a
forty-year-old Lebanese man. As the weeks progress, Arezu is drawn into a mercurial, charged, and ultimately catastrophic affair with Omar, a relationship that shatters her just at the cusp of adulthood.

Two decades later, Arezu inherits the apartment. She returns with her best friend, Ellie, an Israeli-American scholar devoted to the Palestinian cause, to excavate the place and finally put to words a trauma she’s long held in silence. Together, she and Ellie catalog the questions of agency, sexuality, displacement, and erasure that surface as Arezu confronts the ghosts of that summer, crafting between them a story that spans continents and centuries.

5. **Bestiary** by K-Ming Chang (One World, 2020)

One evening, Mother tells Daughter a story about a tiger spirit who lived in a woman’s body. She was called Hu Gu Po, and she hungered to eat children, especially their toes. Soon afterward, Daughter awakes with a tiger tail. And more mysterious events follow: Holes in the backyard spit up letters penned by her grandmother; a visiting aunt arrives with snakes in her belly; a brother tests the possibility of flight. All the while, Daughter is falling for Ben, a neighborhood girl with strange powers of her own. As the two young lovers translate the grandmother’s letters, Daughter begins to understand that each woman in her family embodies a myth—and that she will have to bring her family’s secrets to light in order to change their destiny.

6. **Indelicacy** by Amina Cain (FSG, 2020)
Reminiscent of a lost Victorian classic in miniature, yet taking equal inspiration from such modern authors as Jean Rhys, Octavia Butler, Clarice Lispector, and Jean Genet, Amina Cain’s *Indelicacy* is at once a ghost story without a ghost, a fable without a moral, and a down-to-earth investigation of the barriers faced by women in both life and literature. It is a novel about seeing, class, desire, anxiety, pleasure, friendship, and the battle to find one’s true calling.

7. *Interior Chinatown* by Charles Yu (Pantheon, 2020)

After stumbling into the spotlight, Willis finds himself launched into a wider world than he’s ever known, discovering not only the secret history of Chinatown, but the buried legacy of his own family. Infinitely inventive and deeply personal, exploring the themes of pop culture, assimilation, and immigration—*Interior Chinatown* is Charles Yu’s most moving, daring, and masterful novel yet.
8. *Alice Knott* by Blake Butler (Riverhead Books, 2020)

Alice Knott lives alone, a reclusive heiress haunted by memories of her deceased parents and mysterious near-identical brother. Much of her family’s fortune has been spent on a world-class collection of artwork, which she stores in a vault in her lonely, cavernous house. One day, she awakens to find the artwork destroyed, the act of vandalism captured in a viral video that soon triggers a rash of copycat incidents. As more videos follow and the world’s most priceless works of art are destroyed one by one, Alice finds that she has become the chief suspect in an international conspiracy—even as her psyche becomes a shadowed landscape of childhood demons and cognitive disorder.

For years, Willa does her best to stifle her feelings of loneliness, drifting through high school and then college as she tries to quiet the unease inside her. But when she begins working for the Adriens—a wealthy white family in Tribeca—as a nanny for their daughter, Bijou, Willa is confronted with all of the things she never had. As she draws closer to the family and eventually moves in with them, Willa finds herself questioning who she is, and revisiting a childhood where she never felt fully at home. Self-examining and fraught with the emotions of a family who fails and loves in equal measure, Win Me Something is a nuanced coming-of-age debut about the irreparable fissures between people, and a young woman who asks what it really means to belong, and how she might begin to define her own life.


EXPOSITION is the first in a triptych of books by the award-winning writer and archivist Nathalie Léger that includes *Suite for Barbara Loden* and *The White Dress*. In each, Léger sets the story of a female artist against the background of her own life and research—a archivist’s journey into the self, into the lives that history hides from us. Here, Léger’s subject is the Countess of Castiglione (1837-1899), who at the dawn of photography dedicated herself to becoming the most photographed woman in the world, modeling for hundreds of photos, including “Scherzo di Follia,” among the most famous in history. Set long before our own “selfie” age, EXPOSITION is a remarkably modern investigation into the curses of beauty, fame, vanity, and age, as well as the obsessive drive to control and commodify one’s image.

THE WHITE DRESS is the third in Nathalie Léger’s award-winning triptych of books about women who “through their oeuvre, transform their lives into a mystery” (ELLE). In EXPOSITION, Léger wrote about the Countess of Castiglione, the most photographed woman of the nineteenth century; in SUITE FOR BARBARA LODEN she took up the actress and filmmaker Barbara Loden; here, Léger grapples with the tragic 2008 death of Italian performance artist Pippa Bacca, who was raped and murdered while hiking from Italy to the Middle East in a wedding dress to promote world peace. A harrowing meditation on the risks women encounter, in life and in art, THE WHITE DRESS also brings to a haunting conclusion Léger’s personal interrogation—sustained across all three books—of her relationship with her mother and the desire for justice in our lives.

12. Things We Lost To The Water by Eric Nguyen (Knopf, 2021)
When Huong arrives in New Orleans with her two young sons, she is jobless, homeless, and worried about her husband, Cong, who remains in Vietnam. As she and her boys begin to settle in to life in America, she continues to send letters and tapes back to Cong, hopeful that they will be reunited and her children will grow up with a father.

But with time, Huong realizes she will never see her husband again. While she attempts to come to terms with this loss, her sons, Tuan and Binh, grow up in their absent father’s shadow, haunted by a man and a country trapped in their memories and imaginations. As they push forward, the three adapt to life in America in different ways: Huong gets involved with a Vietnamese car salesman who is also new in town; Tuan tries to connect with his heritage by joining a local Vietnamese gang; and Binh, now going by Ben, embraces his adopted homeland and his burgeoning sexuality. Their search for identity—as individuals and as a family—threatens to tear them apart, until disaster strikes the city they now call home and they are suddenly forced to find a new way to come together and honor the ties that bind them.


On the day of their estranged father’s wedding, half sisters Cheyenne and Livy set off to claim their inheritance. It’s been years since the two have seen each other. Cheyenne is newly back in Seattle, crashing with Livy after a failed marriage and a series of dead ends. Livy works refinishing boats, her resentment against her freeloading sister growing as she tamps down dreams of fishing off the coast of Alaska. But the promise of a shot at financial security brings the two together to claim what’s theirs. Except, instead of money, what their father gives them is information—a name—which both reveals a stunning family secret and compels them to come to grips with it. In the face of their new reality, the sisters and their adopted brother each set out on journeys that will test their faith in one another, as well as their definitions of freedom.
Moving from Seattle's underground to the docks of the Far North, from the hideaways of the southern swamps to the storied reaches of the Great Offshore Grounds, Vanessa Veselka spins a tale with boundless verve, linguistic vitality, and undeniable tenderness.


Increasingly certain that their paths previously crossed—and beset by unexplainable flashes from different eras haunting her dreams—Lou begins to believe she may be an immortal sent here for a very important reason, one that only others like her can explain. Setting out to investigate the mystery of her existence, Lou must make sense of the jumble of lifetimes calling to her, just as new forces threaten the existence of those around her.

Immersed in the rich historical tapestry of Los Angeles—Prohibition, the creation of Route 66, and the collapse of the St. Francis Dam—*The Perishing* is a stunning examination of love and justice through the eyes of one miraculous woman whose fate seems linked to the city she comes to call home.

A livewire debut from Dantiel W. Moniz, one of the most exciting discoveries in today’s literary landscape, *Milk Blood Heat* depicts the sultry lives of Floridians in intergenerational tales that contemplate human connection, race, womanhood, inheritance, and the elemental darkness in us all. Set among the cities and suburbs of Florida, each story delves into the ordinary worlds of young girls, women, and men who find themselves confronted by extraordinary moments of violent personal reckoning. These intimate portraits of people and relationships scour and soothe and blast a light on the nature of family, faith, forgiveness, consumption, and what we may, or may not, owe one another.

16. *Imagine a Death* by Janice Lee (Texas Review Press, 2021)

In the face of a slow but impending apocalypse, what binds three seemingly divergent lives (a writer, a photographer, an old man), isn’t the commonality of a perceived future death, but the layered and complex fabric of how loss,
abuse, trauma, and death have shaped their pasts, and how these pasts continue to haunt their present moments, a moment in which time seems to be running out. The writer, traumatized by the violent death of her mother when she was a child, lives alone with her dog and struggles to finish her book. The photographer, stunted by the death of his grandmother and caretaker, struggles to take a single picture and enters into a complicated relationship with the writer. The old man, facing his past in small doses, spends his time watching television and reorganizing the objects in his apartment to stay distracted from the deterioration around him. A depiction of the cycles of abuse and trauma in a prolonged end-time, Imagine a Death examines the ways in which our pasts envelop us, the ways in which we justify horrible things in the name of survival, all of the horrible and beautiful things we are capable of when we are hurt and broken, and the animal (and plant) companions that ground us.

17. Verge by Lidia Yuknavitch (Riverhead Books, 2020)

The landscape of Verge is peopled with characters who are innocent and imperfect, wise and endangered: an eight-year-old black-market medical courier, a restless lover haunted by memories of his mother, a teenage girl gazing out her attic window at a nearby prison, all of them wounded but grasping toward transcendence. Clear-eyed yet inspiring, Verge challenges us with moments of uncomfortable truth, even as it urges us to place our faith not in the flimsy guardrails of society but in the memories held—and told—by our own individual bodies.

18. The Vegas Dilemma by Vi Khi Nao (11:11 Press, 2021)
The Vegas Dilemma, a collection of twenty-seven short stories, weaves a vision of contemporary America through the eyes of its outcasts. Set largely in Las Vegas, featuring a recurring character of a footloose, morose woman who likes to eat Cheerios in grocery stores, each story takes up quotidian concerns—staying in Starbucks past closing time, a visit to Hoover Dam, falling in love over Instagram—and mines them for their political and existential undercurrents, which fly off the stories like sparks from a pinwheel. A cycle of stories—“Pulverized Oat Wheels,” “Mother Nature is Belligerent,” “Symmetry of Provocation”, etc.—make use of a vignette style to suture seemingly disparate scenarios and emotions. Thus, in “Not Capable of Giving her Leprosy” we meet a sexually exploitative American professor at a South Korean University; a reading group who meet in Starbucks to discuss the ethics of eating meat while reading The Vegetarian; palm trees that are mistaken for armadillos; and Walmart identified as a nerve agent. Other stories, such as “Your Sadness is Salt on Salt” and “In My Youth My Father Is Short and Poor,” use a sparse first-person voice for more poetic effect. Connected by themes of alienation, bad romance, and microaggressions, The Vegas Dilemma combines the inventiveness of fiction and the richness of everyday life to show that such American tragedies as Trump’s ascendency and the Weinstein scandal aren’t divorced from everyday interactions, but arise from them.

19. *You Exist Too Much* by Zaina Arafat (Catapult, 2020)
Told in vignettes that flash between the U.S. and the Middle East—from New York to Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine—Zaina Arafat’s debut novel traces her protagonist’s progress from blushing teen to sought-after DJ and aspiring writer. In Brooklyn, she moves into an apartment with her first serious girlfriend and tries to content herself with their comfortable relationship. But soon her longings, so closely hidden during her teenage years, explode out into reckless romantic encounters and obsessions with other people. Her desire to thwart her own destructive impulses will eventually lead her to The Ledge, an unconventional treatment center that identifies her affliction as “love addiction.” In this strange, enclosed society she will start to consider the unnerving similarities between her own internal traumas and divisions and those of the places that have formed her.

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20. The Reconception of Marie by Teresa Carmody (Spuyten Duyvil, 2020)
Sexually curious and intellectually adventurous, adolescent Marie begins journaling about her life in Western Michigan’s Bible Belt during the rise of the Christian Right. Over the span of many years, her writing becomes a meditation on the ways in which language makes, unmakes, and remakes us. In The Reconception of Marie, Marie’s many voices coalesce in a reimagined bildungsroman, where coming-of-age becomes coming-into-awareness, a spiritual quest navigated with humor, fervency, and the multivalency of queer grace.

21. **Thick Skin** by N/A/ Oparah (Kernpunkt Press, 2021)

After Nneka, a young Nigerian-American, is dumped and abandoned by her partner Jacob, she undertakes a ritual of thickening her skin physically and spiritually—with mud, knives, tweezers, and a questionable form of therapy. Nneka’s healing process is as layered as the emotional abuse of her interracial relationship and embodies all the ways we hide, obsess, flail, fail, and finally carve our way toward feeling and healing. This heavily metaphorical novella, inspired by the author’s experience, mines meaning from memories and half-lived moments. Told in vignettes, from the perspective of a someone-turned-no-one, it grapples with the question: who’s responsible for the wreckage?

22. **Disappear Doppelgänger Disappear** by Matthew Salesses (Little A, 2020)
Set in a troubling time in which a presidential candidate is endorsed by the KKK and white men in red hats stalk Harvard Square, Disappear Doppelgänger Disappear is a haunting and frighteningly funny novel about Asian American stereotypes, the desires that make us human, puns, and what happens to the self when you have to become someone else to be seen.


In the Night Watchman, Louise Erdrich creates a fictional world populated with memorable characters who are forced to grapple with the worst and best impulses of human nature. Illuminating the loves and lives, the desires and ambitions of these characters with compassion, wit, and intelligence, The Night Watchman is a majestic work of fiction from this revered cultural treasure.
24. *If I Had Two Wings* by Randall Kenan (W.W. Norton, 2020)

In Kenan’s fictional territory of Tims Creek, North Carolina, an old man rages in his nursing home, a parson beats up an adulterer, a rich man is haunted by a hog, and an elderly woman turns unwitting miracle worker. A retired plumber travels to Manhattan, where Billy Idol sweeps him into his entourage. An architect who lost his famous lover to AIDS reconnects with a high-school fling. Howard Hughes seeks out the woman who once cooked him butter beans. Shot through with humor and seasoned by inventiveness and maturity, Kenan riffs on appetites of all kinds, on the eerie persistence of history, and on unstoppable lovers and unexpected salvations. *If I Had Two Wings* is a rich chorus of voices and visions, dreams and prophecies, marked by physicality and spirit. Kenan’s prose is nothing short of wondrous.

25. *Tokyo Ueno Station* by Yu Miri, Translated by Morgan Giles (Riverhead Books, 2020)
As a work of post-tsunami literature and a protest against the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, this novel is of utmost importance to this moment, a powerful rebuke to the Imperial system and a sensitive, deeply felt depiction of the lives of Japan’s most vulnerable people.

Kazu is dead. Born in Fukushima in 1933, the same year as the Emperor, his life is tied by a series of coincidences to the Imperial family and has been shaped at every turn by modern Japanese history. But his life story is also marked by bad luck, and now, in death, he is unable to rest easily, haunting the park near Ueno Station. It is here that Kazu’s life in Tokyo began and ended, having arrived there to work as a labourer in the run up to the 1964 Tokyo Olympics before ending his days living in the vast homeless villages in the park, traumatised by the destruction of the 2011 tsunami and enraged by the announcement of the 2020 Olympics.

A dream-like collaboration of fables and photographs, and a surreal and shifting deep-dive into clinical depression, *THE DEPRESSION* absurdly expresses the mind and life as we both know it and don’t.

27. *The Committed* by Viet Thanh Nguyen (Grove Press, 2021)

Traumatized by his reeducation at the hands of his former best friend, Man, and struggling to assimilate into French culture, the Sympathizer finds Paris both seductive and disturbing. As he falls in with a group of left-wing intellectuals whom he meets at dinner parties given by his French Vietnamese “aunt,” he finds stimulation for his mind but also customers for his narcotic merchandise. But the new life he is making has perils he has not foreseen, whether the self-torture of addiction, the authoritarianism of a state locked in a colonial mindset, or the seeming paradox of how to reunite his two closest friends whose worldviews put them in absolute opposition. The Sympathizer will need all his wits, resourcefulness, and moral flexibility if...
he is to prevail.

28. *Luster* by Raven Leilani (FSG, 2020)

Edie is stumbling her way through her twenties—sharing a subpar apartment in Bushwick, clocking in and out of her admin job, making a series of inappropriate sexual choices. She is also haltingly, fitfully giving heat and air to the art that simmers inside her. And then she meets Eric, a digital archivist with a family in New Jersey, including an autopsist wife who has agreed to an open marriage—with *rules*.

As if navigating the constantly shifting landscapes of contemporary sexual manners and racial politics weren’t hard enough, Edie finds herself unemployed and invited into Eric’s home—though not by Eric. She becomes a hesitant ally to his wife and a de facto role model to his adopted daughter. Edie may be the only Black woman young Akila knows.

29. *Appleseed* by Matt Bell (Custom House, 2021)
Hugely ambitious in scope and theme, *Appleseed* is the breakout novel from a writer “as self-assured as he is audacious” (NPR) who “may well have invented the pulse-pounding novel of ideas” (Jess Walter). Part speculative epic, part tech thriller, part reinvented fairy tale, *Appleseed* is an unforgettable meditation on climate change; corporate, civic, and familial responsibility; manifest destiny; and the myths and legends that sustain us all.

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30. *Artforum* by César Aira, Translated by Katherine Silver (New Directions, 2020)

*Artforum* is certainly one of César Aira’s most charming, quirky, and funny books to date. Consisting of a series of interrelated stories about his compulsion to collect *Artforum* magazine, this is not about art so much as it is about passionate obsession. At first we follow our hapless collector from magazine shops to used bookstores hunting for copies of *Artforum*. A friend alerts him to a copy somewhere and he obsesses about actually going to get
it—will the shop be open, will the copy already be sold? Finally he takes out a subscription, but then it never comes, so he hounds the mailman. There’s the day his stash of Artforums gets rained on, but only one absorbs the water. And interspersed is a wacky chapter about the mystery of the broken clothespins. “How weird.” “How crazy.”

31. *Failure to Thrive* by Meghan Lamb (Apocalypse Party, 2021)

“Failure to Thrive captures slow collapse like nothing else I’ve read. It is packed with heartbreakingly acute observation, and yet it is uncrowded and spacious, with a gauzy, hallucinatory quality. Both expansive and economical, it does more with the form of the novel than most books will ever attempt. It’s a gem glittering in the dark.”
—Lindsay Lerman, author of I’m From Nowhere

32. *Apsara Engine* by Bishakh Som (Feminist Press, 2020)
The eight delightfully eerie stories in *Apsara Engine* are a subtle intervention into everyday reality. A woman drowns herself in a past affair, a tourist chases another guest into an unforeseen past, and a nonbinary academic researches postcolonial cartography. Imagining diverse futures and rewriting old mythologies, these comics delve into strange architectures, fetishism, and heartbreak.

Painted in rich, sepia-toned watercolors, *Apsara Engine* is Bishakh Som’s highly anticipated debut work of fiction. Showcasing a series of fraught, darkly humorous, and seemingly alien worlds—which ring all too familiar—Som captures the weight of twenty-first-century life as we hurl ourselves forward into the unknown.

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33. *Black Sun* by Rebecca Roanhorse (Gallery/Saga Press, 2020)

Crafted with unforgettable characters, Rebecca Roanhorse has created an epic
adventure exploring the decadence of power amidst the weight of history and the struggle of individuals swimming against the confines of society and their broken pasts in the most original series debut of the decade.

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34. *This Close to Okay* by Leesa Cross-Smith (Grand Central Publishing, 2021)

On a rainy October night in Kentucky, recently divorced therapist Tallie Clark is on her way home from work when she spots a man precariously standing at the edge of a bridge. Without a second thought, Tallie pulls over and jumps out of the car into the pouring rain. She convinces the man to join her for a cup of coffee, and he eventually agrees to come back to her house, where he finally shares his name: Emmett.

Over the course of the emotionally charged weekend that follows, Tallie makes it her mission to provide a safe space for Emmett, though she hesitates to confess that this is also her day job. What she doesn’t realize is that Emmett isn’t the only one who needs healing—and they both are harboring secrets.

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35. *Margaret and the Mystery of the Missing Body* by Megan Milks (Feminist Press, 2021)
Meet Margaret. At age twelve, she was head detective of the mystery club Girls Can Solve Anything. Margaret and her three best friends led exciting lives solving crimes, having adventures, and laughing a lot. But now that she’s entered high school, the club has disbanded, and Margaret is unmoored—she doesn’t want to grow up, and she wishes her friends wouldn’t either. Instead, she opts out, developing an eating disorder that quickly takes over her life. When she lands in a treatment center, Margaret finds her path to recovery twisting sideways as she pursues a string of new mysteries involving a ghost, a hidden passage, disturbing desires, and her own vexed relationship with herself.


Darryl Cook is a man who seems to have everything: a quiet home in Western Oregon, a beautiful wife, and a lot of friends to fuck her while he watches. But as he explores the cuckolding lifestyle, he finds himself tugging at
threads that threaten to unravel his marriage, his town, and himself.

With empathy and humor, debut author Jackie Ess crafts a kaleidoscopic meditation on marriage, manhood, dreams, basketball, sobriety, and the secret lives of Oregonians.

37. Above Us the Milky Way: An Illuminated Alphabet by Fowzia Karimi (Deep Vellum, 2020)

Above Us the Milky Way is a story about war, immigration, and the remarkable human capacity to create beauty out of horror. As a young family attempts to reconstruct their lives in a new and peaceful country, they are daily drawn back to the first land through remembrance and longing, by news of the continued suffering and loss of loved ones, and by the war dead, who have immigrated and reside with them, haunting their days and illuminating the small joys and wonders offered them by the new land.

The novel’s structure is built around the alphabet, twenty-six pieces written in the first person that sketch a through-line of memory for the lives of the five daughters, mother, and father. Ghost stories and fairytales are woven with old family photographs and medieval-style watercolor illuminations to create an origin story of loss and remembrance.

38. Detransition, Baby by Torrey Peters (One World, 2021)
Reese almost had it all: a loving relationship with Amy, an apartment in New York City, a job she didn’t hate. She had scraped together what previous generations of trans women could only dream of: a life of mundane, bourgeois comforts. The only thing missing was a child. But then her girlfriend, Amy, detransitioned and became Ames, and everything fell apart. Now Reese is caught in a self-destructive pattern: avoiding her loneliness by sleeping with married men.

Ames isn’t happy either. He thought detransitioning to live as a man would make life easier, but that decision cost him his relationship with Reese—and losing her meant losing his only family. Even though their romance is over, he longs to find a way back to her. When Ames’s boss and lover, Katrina, reveals that she’s pregnant with his baby—and that she’s not sure whether she wants to keep it—Ames wonders if this is the chance he’s been waiting for. Could the three of them form some kind of unconventional family—and raise the baby together?

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Beginning with a story of an ex sex-worker drifting through a small rural town in the south, and ending with a young woman’s wedding night, who learns from her new husband what it takes to kill a man, Nash writes across the complications of working class women, rendering their desires with visceral prose and psychologically dissecting the fundamental root that threads her work: craving and the conflicts within.

40. How Much of These Hills is Gold by C Pam Zhang (Riverhead Books, 2020)

Both epic and intimate, blending Chinese symbolism and reimagined history with fiercely original language and storytelling, How Much of These Hills Is Gold is a haunting adventure story, an unforgettable sibling story, and the announcement of a stunning new voice in literature. On a broad level, it explores race in an expanding country and the question of where immigrants are allowed to belong. But page by page, it’s about the memories that bind
and divide families, and the yearning for home.

41. Dreams of Being by Michael J Seidlinger (Maudlin House, 2020)

A writer walks the entirety of New York City searching for a story, inspiration, anything to give him some direction. While navigating the busier blocks of Times Square, he stumbles upon a restaurant opening and an enigmatic man named Jiro protesting the grand opening. Believing it’s the only way to maintain Jiro’s interest, he claims to be a director, someone interested in developing a project that reveals to the world Jiro’s unseen culinary talent. Eventually, the truth comes out, and he comes face-to-face with what it means to be creative in a passionless world.

42. Tiny by Mairead Case (Featherproof Books, 2020)
Tiny is a poetic retelling of Sophocles’ Antigone. Instead of having two brothers who kill each other in a civil war, Tiny has one who kills himself after coming home from a far-away war. Our heroine mourns her brother, forever, but—with best friend Izzy, boyfriend Hank, and a collective dance night held in an old artificial limb store—she escapes freezing herself in grief, too.

43. Zorrie by Laird Hunt (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021)

Spanning an entire lifetime, a life convulsed and transformed by the events of the 20th century, Laird Hunt’s extraordinary novel offers a profound and intimate portrait of the dreams that propel one tenacious woman onward and the losses that she cannot outrun. Set against a harsh, gorgeous, quintessentially American landscape, this is a deeply empathetic and poetic novel that belongs on a shelf with the classics of Willa Cather, Marilynne Robinson, and Elizabeth Strout.

44. Daewoo by François Bon, Translated by Youna Kwak (Lavender Ink Press, 2020)
Inspired by the closing of three Daewoo factories in the Lorraine region of France in 2002, François Bon’s novel DAEWOO intertwines journalism, fiction and theater, to explore what actually happens in the lives of working people when they are abruptly stripped of their livelihood and, consequently, their sense of security, purpose, and dignity. In the early 2000s, Bon traveled to the Lorraine intending to do research for a play about the changed lives of the hundreds of suddenly unemployed workers, mostly women, who had assembled microwaves and television sets in the Daewoo factories. But when he arrived he discovered that research was not sufficient, that reportage could not achieve the kind of vigilant witness to events that he sought. To pay homage to truth, he needed fiction; and so DAEWOO was born - a novel combining elements of theater, fictional narrative, journalistic research, and imagined interviews, that together testify to the real damage done to people caught in the multi-national economic squeeze, discarded and forgotten like the buildings they once worked in and maintained.

45. *No One is Talking About This* by Patricia Lockwood (Riverhead Books, 2021)
As this urgent, genre-defying book opens, a woman who has recently been elevated to prominence for her social media posts travels around the world to meet her adoring fans. She is overwhelmed by navigating the new language and etiquette of what she terms “the portal,” where she grapples with an unshakable conviction that a vast chorus of voices is now dictating her thoughts. When existential threats—such as climate change and economic precariousness to the rise of an unnamed dictator and an epidemic of loneliness—begin to loom, she posts her way deeper into the portal’s void. An avalanche of images, details, and references accumulate to form a landscape that is post-sense, post-irony, post-everything. “Are we in hell?” the people of the portal ask themselves. “Are we all just going to keep doing this until we die?”

From multi-awarded poet, writer, artist, and editor Eileen R. Tabios comes a first novel, DOVELION: A FAIRY TALE FOR OUR TIMES. In this inventive myth that straddles the binary of traditional narrative and experimental fiction, poet Elena Theeland overcomes the trauma of her past to raise a family who would overthrow the dictatorship in Pacifica. She is aided by artist Ernst Blazer whose father, a CIA spy, instigated the murder of Elena’s father, a rebel leader. As her family frees Pacifica from the dictator’s dynastic regime, Elena discovers herself a member of an indigenous tribe once thought to be erased through genocide. The discovery reveals her life to epitomize the birth of a modern-day “Baybay” in the tradition of Pacifica’s indigenous spiritual and community leaders. Unfolding through lyrical and spare vignettes, DOVELION presents the effects of colonialism and empire, while incorporating meditations on poetry, art, orphanhood, and indigenous values. Glimpses are provided of spy warfare, internet-based rebellions, and the insidious effects of beauty pageants. Relief is provided through Elena’s love of Wikipedia and the world’s most simple but delicious recipe for adobo. Ultimately, DOVELION and Elena’s story bespeaks the unavoidable nature of humanity: a prevailing interconnection that can cancel past, present, and future into a singular Now.

47. From the Caves by Thea Prieto (Red Hen Press, 2021)

Environmental catastrophe has driven four people inside the dark throat of a cave: Sky, a child coming of age; Tie, pregnant and grieving; Mark, a young man poised to assume primacy; and Teller, an elder, holder of stories. As the devastating heat of summer grows, so does the poison in Teller’s injured leg and the danger of Tie’s imminent labor, food and water dwindling while the future becomes increasingly dependent on the words Sky gleans from the dead, stories pieced together from recycled knowledge, fragmented histories, and half-buried creation myths. From the Caves presents the past, present, and future in tandem, reshaping ancient and modern ideas of death and motherhood, grief and hope, endings and beginnings.

In these buoyant and inventive stories, Karen Tei Yamashita transfers classic tales across boundaries and questions what an inheritance—familial, cultural, emotional, artistic—really means. In a California of the sixties and seventies, characters examine the contents of deceased relatives’ freezers, tape-record high school locker-room chatter, or collect a community’s gossip while cleaning the teeth of its inhabitants. Mr. Darcy is the captain of the football team, Mansfield Park materializes in a suburb of L.A., bake sales replace ballroom dances, and station wagons, not horse-drawn carriages, are the preferred mode of transit. The stories of traversing class, race, and gender leap into our modern world with and humor.

49. *Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro (Knopf, 2021)
Here is the story of Klara, an Artificial Friend with outstanding observational qualities, who, from her place in the store, watches carefully the behavior of those who come in to browse, and of those who pass on the street outside. She remains hopeful that a customer will soon choose her. *Klara and the Sun* is a thrilling book that offers a look at our changing world through the eyes of an unforgettable narrator, and one that explores the fundamental question: what does it mean to love?

50. *Something Gross* by Big Bruiser Dope Boy (Apocalypse Party, 2021)

“This genre-defying account (novel? narrative poem?) of the troubled love of a young man for an emotionally stunted older one in the bars and apartments of megalopolitan Denver is written with such a spooking purity of line and with such an audaciously stark, grave wisdom that it already feels like a classic of its kind. Big Bruiser Dope Boy’s undecorated, indecorous sentences
“cut right through you and into the soul you might not have even known you still had. Something Gross is his most triumphant book yet. You are sure to wish you had written it.”
—Garielle Lutz

51. *Nightbitch* by Rachel Yoder (Doubleday, 2021)

An ambitious mother puts her art career on hold to stay at home with her newborn son, but the experience does not match her imagination. Two years later, she steps into the bathroom for a break from her toddler’s demands, only to discover a dense patch of hair on the back of her neck. In the mirror, her canines suddenly look sharper than she remembers. Her husband, who travels for work five days a week, casually dismisses her fears from faraway hotel rooms.

As the mother’s symptoms intensify, and her temptation to give in to her new dog impulses peak, she struggles to keep her alter-canine-identity secret. Seeking a cure at the library, she discovers the mysterious academic tome which becomes her bible, *A Field Guide to Magical Women: A Mythical Ethnography*, and meets a group of mommies involved in a multilevel-marketing scheme who may also be more than what they seem.

52. *Agadir* by Muhammed Khair-Eddine, Translated by Pierre Joris, Jake Syersak (Dialogos / Lavender Ink, 2020)
AGADIR is loosely based on the earthquake which devastated the Moroccan city of the same name in 1960, and Khaâr-Eddine’s experience as a civil servant assigned to investigate the aftermath of the cataclysm between 1961 and 1963. An unnamed narrator sent to the city “in order to sort out a particularly precarious situation” tells the story of a veritably razed Moroccan epicenter and a citizenry begging for reconstruction and reimagination. In a surreal, polyphonic narration that explodes into various tesserae of fiction, autobiography, reportage, poetry, and theatre, the narrator quickly discovers that in exhuming the city’s physical remnants he cannot help but exhume the complex social, political, cultural, and historical dynamics that make up postcolonial Moroccan society. The mysterious narrator, increasingly besieged by hallucinations of the past and visions of the future, comes to incarnate what Albert Memmi once called “the role of the colonized,” and to suffer “a magnified vision of all the ambiguities and impossibilities of those colonized.” To which Khaâr-Eddine appends his envisioned role of the writer: one who uses his magnified vision to transform his very life into “an investigation, a fight against all forms of oppression and repression” until his “literature is a beautiful weapon.”

53. *The Seventh Mansion* by Maryse Meijer (FSG Originals, 2020)
Maryse Meijer’s The Seventh Mansion is a deeply moving and profoundly original debut novel—both an urgent literary call to arms and an unforgettable coming-of-age story about finding love and selfhood in the face of mass extinction and environmental destruction.

54. Transcendent Kingdom by Yaa Gyasi (Knopf, 2020)

Transcendent Kingdom is a deeply moving portrait of a family of Ghanaian immigrants ravaged by depression and addiction and grief—a novel about faith, science, religion, love. Exquisitely written, emotionally searing, this is an exceptionally powerful follow-up to Gyasi’s phenomenal debut.
55. *I Will Die in a Foreign Land* by Kalani Pickhart (Two Dollar Radio, 2021)

*I Will Die in a Foreign Land* follows four individuals over the course of a volatile Ukrainian winter, as their lives are forever changed by the Euromaidan protests. Katya is an Ukrainian-American doctor stationed at a makeshift medical clinic in St. Michael’s Monastery; Misha is an engineer originally from Pripyat, who has lived in Kyiv since his wife’s death; Slava is a fiery young activist whose past hardships steel her determination in the face of persecution; and Aleksandr Ivanovich, a former KGB agent, who climbs atop a burned-out police bus at Independence Square and plays the piano.

56. *Harrow* by Joy Williams (Knopf, 2021)

Rivetingly strange and beautiful, and delivered with Williams’s searing, deadpan wit, *Harrow* is their intertwined tale of paradise lost and of their
reasons—against all reasonableness—to try and recover something of it.

57. *Never Have I Ever* by Isabel Yap (Small Beer Press, 2021)

Am I dead?” Mebuyen sighs.
She was hoping the girl would not ask.

Spells and stories, urban legends and immigrant tales: the magic in Isabel Yap's debut collection jumps right off the page, from the friendship and fear building in “A Canticle for Lost Girls” to the joy in “A Spell for Foolish Hearts” to the terrifying tension of the urban legend “Have You Heard the One About Anamaria Marquez.”

Nina is a struggling writer, a college drop-out, a liar, and a cheater. More than anything she wants love. She deserves it.

From the burned-out suburbs of Florida to the anonymous squalor of New York City, she eats through an incestuous cast of characters in search of it: her mother, a narcissistic lesbian living in a nudist polycule; Odessa, a single mom with even worse taste in men than Nina; Seth, an artist whose latest show is comprised of three Tupperware containers full of trash; Brian, whose roller-coaster affair with Nina is the most stable “relationship” in his life; and Aaron, an aspiring filmmaker living at home with his parents, with whom Nina begins to write her magnum opus.

Nina’s quest for fulfillment is at once darkly comedic, acerbically acute, and painfully human—a scathing critique of contemporary society, and a tender examination of our anguished yearning for connection in an era defined by detachment.

59. The Arsonists’ City by Hala Alyan (Mariner Books, 2021)

A rich family story, a personal look at the legacy of war in the Middle East, and an indelible rendering of how we hold on to the people and places we call home.

The Nasr family is spread across the globe—Beirut, Brooklyn, Austin, the California desert. A Syrian mother, a Lebanese father, and three American children: all have lived a life of migration. Still, they’ve always had their ancestral home in Beirut—a constant touchstone—and the complicated, messy family love that binds them. But following his father’s recent death, Idris, the family’s new patriarch, has decided to sell.

The decision brings the family to Beirut, where everyone unites against Idris in a fight to save the house. They all have secrets—lost loves, bitter jealousies, abandoned passions, deep-set shame—that distance has helped
smother. But in a city smoldering with the legacy of war, an ongoing flow of refugees, religious tension, and political protest, those secrets ignite, imperiling the fragile ties that hold this family together.

60. The Atmospherians by Alex McElroy (Atria Books, 2021)

Sasha Marcus was once the epitome of contemporary success: an internet sensation, social media darling, and a creator of a high-profile wellness brand for women. But a confrontation with an abusive troll has taken a horrifying turn, and now she’s at rock bottom: canceled and doxxed online, isolated in her apartment while men’s rights protestors rage outside.

Sasha confides in her oldest childhood friend, Dyson—a failed actor with a history of body issues—who hatches a plan for her to restore her reputation by becoming the face of his new business venture, The Atmosphere: a rehabilitation community for men. Based in an abandoned summer camp and billed as a workshop for job training, it is actually a rigorous program designed to rid men of their toxic masculinity. Sasha has little choice but to accept. But what horrors await her as the resident female leader of a crew of washed up, desperate men? And what exactly does Dyson want?

61. Peaces by Helen Oyeyemi (Riverhead Books, 2021)
When Otto and Xavier Shin declare their love, an aunt gifts them a trip on a sleeper train to mark their new commitment—and to get them out of her house. Setting off with their pet mongoose, Otto and Xavier arrive at their sleepy local train station, but quickly deduce that The Lucky Day is no ordinary locomotive. Their trip on this former tea-smuggling train has been curated beyond their wildest imaginations, complete with mysterious and welcoming touches, like ingredients for their favorite breakfast. They seem to be the only people on board, until Otto discovers a secretive woman who issues a surprising message. As further clues and questions pile up, and the trip upends everything they thought they knew, Otto and Xavier begin to see connections to their own pasts, connections that now bind them together.

A spellbinding tale from a star author, *Peaces* is about what it means to be seen by another person—whether it’s your lover or a stranger on a train—and what happens when things you thought were firmly in the past turn out to be right beside you.

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Lizzie Benson slid into her job as a librarian without a traditional degree. But this gives her a vantage point from which to practice her other calling: she is a fake shrink. For years she has tended to her God-haunted mother and her recovering addict brother. They have both stabilized for the moment, but Lizzie has little chance to spend her new free time with husband and son before her old mentor, Sylvia Liller, makes a proposal. Sylvia has become famous for her prescient podcast, Hell and High Water, and wants to hire Lizzie to answer the mail she receives: from left-wingers worried about climate change and right-wingers worried about the decline of western civilization.

63. Caul Baby by Morgan Jenkins (Harper, 2021)

Laila desperately wants to become a mother, but each of her previous pregnancies has ended in heartbreak. This time has to be different, so she turns to the Melancons, an old and powerful Harlem family known for their
caul, a precious layer of skin that is the secret source of their healing power. When a deal for Laila to acquire a piece of caul falls through, she is heartbroken, but when the child is stillborn, she is overcome with grief and rage. What she doesn’t know is that a baby will soon be delivered in her family—by her niece, Amara, an ambitious college student—and delivered to the Melancons to raise as one of their own. Hallow is special: she’s born with a caul, and their matriarch, Maman, predicts the girl will restore the family’s prosperity.

64. The Ancestry of Objects by Tatiana Ryckman (Deep Vellum, 2020)

A young woman meets a man at a restaurant. They exchange words only briefly, but by the end of the week he has entered her world with an intensity rivaled only by her desire to end her life.

Told with the lyrical persistence of a Greek chorus, The Ancestry of Objects unravels the story of the unnamed narrator’s affair with David: married, graying, and in whose malcontent she sees her need for change. Religion, the mystery of her absent mother, and the ghosts of her grandparents haunt her meetings with him. Memories start, stop, and loop back in on themselves to form the web of her identity and her voice—something she’s looked for her whole life. Nothing can fill the voids of time and loss; not God, not memory, not family, and certainly not love.

65. The Hole by Hiroko Oyamada, Translated by David Boyd (New Directions, 2020)
Asa’s husband is transferring jobs, and his new office is located near his family’s home in the countryside. During an exceptionally hot summer, the young married couple move in, and Asa does her best to quickly adjust to their new rural lives, to their remoteness, to the constant presence of her in-laws and the incessant buzz of cicadas. While her husband is consumed with his job, Asa is left to explore her surroundings on her own: she makes trips to the supermarket, halfheartedly looks for work, and tries to find interesting ways of killing time.

One day, while running an errand for her mother-in-law, she comes across a strange creature, follows it to the embankment of a river, and ends up falling into a hole—a hole that seems to have been made specifically for her. This is the first in a series of bizarre experiences that drive Asa deeper into the mysteries of this rural landscape filled with eccentric characters and unidentifiable creatures, leading her to question her role in this world, and eventually, her sanity.

66. Worsted by Garielle Lutz (Short Flight/Long Drive Books, 2021)
Fiction. WORSTED is a collection of fourteen new stories (214 pages) by the author of The Complete Gary Lutz. Some excerpts appeared in Chicago Review, Lake Effect, and South Carolina Review, as well as online at Hobart, Post Road, and Southwest Review.

67. Slipping by Mohamed Kheir, Translated by Robin Moger (Two Lines Press, 2021)

A struggling journalist named Seif is introduced to a former exile with an encyclopedic knowledge of Egypt’s obscure, magical places. Together, as explorer and guide, they step into the fragmented, elusive world the Arab Spring left behind. They trek to an affluent neighborhood where giant corpse flowers rain from the sky. They join an anonymous crowd in the dark, hallucinating together before a bare cave wall. They descend a set of stairs to the spot along the Nile River where, it’s been said, you can walk on water. But what begins as a fantastical excursion through a splintered nation
quickly winds its way inward as Seif begins to piece together the trauma of his own past, including what happened to Alya, his lover with the remarkable ability to sing any sound: crashing waves, fluttering wings, a roaring inferno.

68. *The Parted Earth* by Anjali Enjeti (Hub City Press, 2021)

Spanning more than half a century and cities from New Delhi to Atlanta, Anjali Enjeti’s debut is a heartfelt and human portrait of the long shadow of the Partition of India on the lives of three generations of women.

The story begins in August 1947. Unrest plagues the streets of New Delhi leading up to the birth of the Muslim majority nation of Pakistan, and the Hindu majority nation of India. Sixteen-year-old Deepa navigates the changing politics of her home, finding solace in messages of intricate origami from her secret boyfriend Amir. Soon Amir flees with his family to Pakistan and a tragedy forces Deepa to leave the subcontinent forever.

69. *Transmutation* by Alex DiFrancesco (Seven Stories Press, 2021)
Building on the success of *All City*, here is a wry, and at the same time dark and risk-taking, story collection from author (and baker) Alex DiFrancesco that pushes the boundaries of transgender awareness and filial bonds. Here is the hate between 16-year-old Junie, who is transitioning, and their mom’s boyfriend Chad when the family moves into Chad’s house on Lake Erie. And here is the love being tested between Sawyer and his dad, who named his boat after his child and resists changing it from Sara to Sawyer now. There is DiFrancesco’s willingness to enter lands that are violent and comfortless in some of these stories, testing the limits of what it means to be human, sometimes returning stronger and wiser and sometimes not returning at all as their characters surge forward into unknown spaces.

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70. *A Girl is a Body of Water* by Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi (Tin House, 2020)

In her thirteenth year, Kirabo confronts a piercing question: who is my
mother? Kirabo has been raised by women in the small Ugandan village of Nattetta—her grandmother, her best friend, and her many aunts—but the absence of her mother follows her like a shadow. Seeking answers from Nsuuta, the local witch, Kirabo learns about the woman who birthed her, who she discovers is alive but not ready to meet. Nsuuta also helps Kirabo understand the emergence of a mysterious second self, a headstrong and confusing force inside her—this, says Nsuuta, is a streak of the “first woman”: an independent, original state that has been all but lost to women.

Kirabo’s journey to reconcile these feelings, alongside her desire to reconnect with her mother and to honor her family’s expectations, is rich in the folklore of Uganda and an arresting exploration of what it means to be a modern girl in a world that seems determined to silence women. Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi’s *A Girl is a Body of Water* is an unforgettable, sweeping testament to the true and lasting connections between history, tradition, family, friends, and the promise of a different future.

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**71. *Include Me Out* by María Sonia Cristoff, Translated by Katherine Silver (Transit Books, 2020)**

Mara is a simultaneous interpreter who moves to a provincial town in Argentina in order to speak as little as possible for a year. Steeled with the ten rules of silence set out in her manual of rhetoric, she takes a job as a guard in the local museum. The advantages of her work are threatened when she’s asked to assist in the re-embalming of the museum’s pride and joy: two horses—of great national and historical significance—are disintegrating and must be saved. But her goal and her slippery grasp on sanity lead her to more anarchistic means to bolster her purpose. Bold, subversive, and threaded through with acerbic wit, *Include Me Out* is an homage to silence and the impossibility of achieving it.
72. *Lake Like a Mirror* by Ho Sok Fong, Translated by Natascha Bruce (Two Lines Press, 2020)

In precise and disquieting prose, Ho Sok Fong draws her readers into a richly atmospheric world of naked sleepwalkers in a rehabilitation center for wayward Muslims, mysterious wooden boxes, gossip in unlicensed hairdressers, hotels with amnesiac guests, and poetry classes with accidentally charged politics—a world that is peopled with the ghosts of unsaid words, unmanaged desires and uncertain statuses, surreal and utterly true.

73. *Ceremonials* by Katharine Coldiron (KERNPUNKT Press, 2020)

*CEREMONIALS* is a twelve-part lyric novella inspired by Florence + the Machine’s 2011 album of the same name. It’s the story of two girls, Amelia
and Corisande, who fall in love at a boarding school. Corisande dies suddenly on the eve of graduation, but Amelia cannot shake her ghost. A narrative about obsession, the Minotaur, and the veil between life and death, CEREMONIALS is a poem in prose, a keening in words, and a song etched in ink.

74. *The Book of Kane and Margaret* by Kiik Araki Kawagucki (FC2, 2020)

Kane Araki and Margaret Morri are not only the names of teenage lovers living in a World War II Japanese relocation camp. Kane Araki is also the name of a man who, mysteriously, sprouts a pair of black raven’s wings overnight. Margaret Morri is the name of the aging healer who treats embarrassing conditions (smelly feet and excessive flatulence). It’s also the name of an eleven-year-old girl who communes with the devil, trading human teeth for divine wishes.

In *The Book of Kane and Margaret*, dozens of Kane Arakis and Margaret Morris populate the Canal and Butte camp divisions in Gila River. Amidst their daily rituals and family dramas, they find ways to stage quiet revolutions against a domestic colonial experience. Some internees slip through barbed wire fences to meet for love affairs. Others attempt to smuggle whiskey, pornography, birds, dogs, horses, and unearthly insects into their family barracks. And another seeks a way to submerge the internment camp in Pacific seawater.

75. *Real Life* by Brandon Taylor (Riverhead Books, 2020)
Almost everything about Wallace is at odds with the Midwestern university town where he is working uneasily toward a biochem degree. An introverted young man from Alabama, black and queer, he has left behind his family without escaping the long shadows of his childhood. For reasons of self-preservation, Wallace has enforced a wary distance even within his own circle of friends—some dating each other, some dating women, some feigning straightness. But over the course of a late-summer weekend, a series of confrontations with colleagues, and an unexpected encounter with an ostensibly straight, white classmate, conspire to fracture his defenses while exposing long-hidden currents of hostility and desire within their community.

Real Life is a novel of profound and lacerating power, a story that asks if it’s ever really possible to overcome our private wounds, and at what cost.

76. Filthy Animals by Brandon Taylor (Riverhead Books, 2021)
In the series of linked stories at the heart of *Filthy Animals*, set among young creatives in the American Midwest, a young man treads delicate emotional waters as he navigates a series of sexually fraught encounters with two dancers in an open relationship, forcing him to weigh his vulnerabilities against his loneliness. In other stories, a young woman battles with the cancers draining her body and her family; menacing undercurrents among a group of teenagers explode in violence on a winter night; a little girl tears through a house like a tornado, driving her babysitter to the brink; and couples feel out the jagged edges of connection, comfort, and cruelty.

One of the breakout literary stars of 2020, Brandon Taylor has been hailed by Roxane Gay as “a writer who wields his craft in absolutely unforgettable ways.” With *Filthy Animals* he renews and expands on the promise made in *Real Life*, training his precise and unsentimental gaze on the tensions among friends and family, lovers and others. Psychologically taut and quietly devastating, *Filthy Animals* is a tender portrait of the fierce longing for intimacy, the lingering presence of pain, and the desire for love in a world that seems, more often than not, to withhold it.

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*The Gnome Stories* focuses on characters who are loners in the truest sense; who are in the process of recovering from mental, physical, or emotional trauma; and who find solace—or at least a sense of purpose—in peculiar jobs and pursuits.

A man whose wife has left him is robbed, so he decides to start doing his own breaking and entering, into his neighbors’ homes. When another man’s girlfriend is cryogenically frozen by her family after a car accident, he becomes a maintenance worker at the cryogenic facility, eavesdropping on visitors as they whisper secrets to their frozen loved ones. A woman serves as an assistant to the Starvationist, whose methods to help clients lose large amounts of weight are unorthodox, sadistic—and utterly failproof.
Another woman and her robot assistant have been hired to tinker with the troubling memories inside a celebrity’s brain.

With *The Gnome Stories*, Ander Monson presents eleven unforgettable stories about oddly American situations: as surreal as an urban legend and at the same time perfectly mundane.

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### 78. *When We Make It* by Elisabet Velasquez (Dial Books, 2021)

Sarai is a first-generation Puerto Rican eighth grader who can see with clarity the truth, pain, and beauty of the world both inside and outside her Bushwick apartment. Together with her older sister Estrella, she navigates the strain of family traumas and the systemic pressures of toxic masculinity and housing insecurity in a rapidly gentrifying Brooklyn. Sarai questions the society around her, her Boricua identity, and the life she lives with determination and an open heart, learning to celebrate herself in a way that she has been denied.

*When We Make It* is a love letter to anyone who was taught to believe that they would not make it. To those who feel their emotions before they can name them. To those who still may not have all the language but they have their story. Velasquez’ debut novel is sure to leave an indelible mark on all who read it.

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### 79. *Godshot* by Chelsea Bieker (Catapult, 2020)

Drought has settled on the town of Peaches, California. The area of the Central Valley where fourteen–year–old Lacey May and her alcoholic mother live was once an agricultural paradise. Now it’s an environmental disaster, a place of cracked earth and barren raisin farms. In their desperation, residents have turned to a cult leader named Pastor Vern for guidance. He promises, through secret “assignments,” to bring the rain everybody is praying for.

Lacey has no reason to doubt the pastor. But then her life explodes in a single unimaginable act of abandonment: her mother, exiled from the community for her sins, leaves Lacey and runs off with a man she barely knows. Abandoned and distraught, Lacey May moves in with her widowed grandma, Cherry, who is more concerned with her taxidermy mouse collection than her own granddaughter. As Lacey May endures the increasingly appalling acts of men who want to write all the rules and begins to uncover the full extent of Pastor Vern’s shocking plan to bring fertility back to the land, she decides she must go on a quest to find her mother no matter what it takes. With her only guidance coming from the romance novels she reads and the unlikely companionship of the women who knew her mother, she must find her own way through unthinkable circumstances.

80. *Speculative Fiction for Dreamers: A Latinx Anthology* Edited by Alex Hernandez, Matthew David Goodwin, Sarah Rafael Garcia (Mad Creek Books, 2021)
In a tantalizing array of new works from some of the most exciting Latinx creators working in the speculative vein today, *Speculative Fiction for Dreamers* extends the project begun with a previous anthology, *Latinx Rising* (The Ohio State University Press, 2020), to showcase a new generation of writers. Spanning diverse forms, settings, perspectives, and styles, but unified by their drive to imagine new Latinx futures, these stories address the breadth of contemporary Latinx experiences and identities while exuberantly embracing the genre’s ability to entertain and surprise. With new work for new audiences in their teens and up, and especially for Latinx people navigating their identities in the ever-shifting, sometimes perilous, but always promising cultural landscape of the US, this book is for dreamers—and DREAMers—everywhere.

81. *Parakeet* by Marie-Helene Bertino (Picador, 2021)

The week of her wedding, The Bride is visited by a bird she recognizes as her
dead grandmother because of the cornflower blue line beneath her eyes, her
dubious expression, and the way she asks: What is the Internet?

Her grandmother is a parakeet. She says not to get married. She says: Go and
find your brother.

In the days that follow, The Bride’s march to the altar becomes a wild and
increasingly fragmented, unstable journey that bends toward the surreal and
forces her to confront matters long buried.

A novel that does justice to the hectic confusion of becoming a woman today,
Parakeet asks and begins to answer the essential questions. How do our
memories make, cage, and free us? How do we honor our experiences and still
become our strongest, truest selves? Who are we responsible for, what do we
owe them, and how do we allow them to change?

Urgent, strange, warm-hearted, and sly, Parakeet is ribboned with joy, fear,
and an inextricable thread of real love. It is a startling, unforgettable,
life-embracing exploration of self and connection.

82. Black Water Sister by Zen Cho (Ace, 2021)

When Jessamyn Teoh starts hearing a voice in her head, she chalks it up to
stress. Closeted, broke and jobless, she’s moving back to Malaysia with her
parents – a country she last saw when she was a toddler.

She soon learns the new voice isn’t even hers, it’s the ghost of her
estranged grandmother. In life, Ah Ma was a spirit medium, avatar of a
mysterious deity called the Black Water Sister. Now she’s determined to
settle a score against a business magnate who has offended the god—and she’s
decided Jess is going to help her do it, whether Jess wants to or not.

Drawn into a world of gods, ghosts, and family secrets, Jess finds that
making deals with capricious spirits is a dangerous business, but dealing
with her grandmother is just as complicated. Especially when Ah Ma tries to spy on her personal life, threatens to spill her secrets to her family and uses her body to commit felonies. As Jess fights for retribution for Ah Ma, she’ll also need to regain control of her body and destiny — or the Black Water Sister may finish her off for good.

83. Beautiful World, Where Are You by Sally Rooney (FSG, 2021)

Alice, a novelist, meets Felix, who works in a warehouse, and asks him if he’d like to travel to Rome with her. In Dublin, her best friend, Eileen, is getting over a break-up, and slips back into flirting with Simon, a man she has known since childhood.

Alice, Felix, Eileen, and Simon are still young— but life is catching up with them. They desire each other, they delude each other, they get together, they break apart. They have sex, they worry about sex, they worry about their friendships and the world they live in. Are they standing in the last lighted room before the darkness, bearing witness to something? Will they find a way to believe in a beautiful world?

84. Sharks in the Time of Saviors by Kawai Strong Washburn (MCD, 2020)
In 1995 Kailua-Kona, Hawaii, on a rare family vacation, seven-year-old Nainoa Flores falls overboard a cruise ship into the Pacific Ocean. When a shiver of sharks appears in the water, everyone fears for the worst. But instead, Noa is gingerly delivered to his mother in the jaws of a shark, marking his story as the stuff of legends. Nainoa’s family, struggling amidst the collapse of the sugarcane industry, hails his rescue as a sign of favor from ancient Hawaiian gods—a belief that appears validated after he exhibits puzzling new abilities. But as time passes, this supposed divine favor begins to drive the family apart: Nainoa, working now as a paramedic on the streets of Portland, struggles to fathom the full measure of his expanding abilities; further north in Washington, his older brother Dean hurtles into the world of elite college athletics, obsessed with wealth and fame; while in California, risk-obsessed younger sister Kaui navigates an unforgiving academic workload in an attempt to forge her independence from the family’s legacy. When supernatural events revisit the Flores family in Hawai’i—with tragic consequences—they are all forced to reckon with the bonds of family, the meaning of heritage, and the cost of survival.

85. *Mexican Gothic* by Silvia Moreno-Garcia (Del Ray, 2020)
After receiving a frantic letter from her newly-wed cousin begging for someone to save her from a mysterious doom, Noemí Taboada heads to High Place, a distant house in the Mexican countryside. She’s not sure what she will find—her cousin’s husband, a handsome Englishman, is a stranger, and Noemí knows little about the region.

Noemí is also an unlikely rescuer: She’s a glamorous debutante, and her chic gowns and perfect red lipstick are more suited for cocktail parties than amateur sleuthing. But she’s also tough and smart, with an indomitable will, and she is not afraid: Not of her cousin’s new husband, who is both menacing and alluring; not of his father, the ancient patriarch who seems to be fascinated by Noemí; and not even of the house itself, which begins to invade Noemí’s dreams with visions of blood and doom.

86. *Wild Swims: Stories* by Dorthe Nors, Translated by Misha Hoeskstra (Graywolf Press, 2021)
In fourteen effervescent stories, Dorthe Nors plumbs the depths of the human heart, from desire to melancholy and everything in between. Just as she did in her English-language debut, *Karate Chop*, Nors slices straight to the core of the conflict in only a few pages. But *Wild Swims* expands the borders of her gaze, following people as they travel through Copenhagen, London, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and elsewhere.

Here are portraits of men and women full of restless longing, people who are often seeking a home but rarely finding it. A lie told during a fraught ferry ride on the North Sea becomes a wound that festers between school friends. A writer at a remote cabin befriends the mother of an ex-lover. Two friends knock doors to solicit fraudulent donations for the cancer society. A woman taken with the idea of wild swims ventures as far as the local swimming pool.

87. *One Kind Favor* by Kevin McIlvoy (WTAW Press, 2021)

Based loosely on a tragic real-life incident in 2014; *ONE KIND FAVOR* explores the consequences of the lynching of a young black man in rural North Carolina. After the lynching of Lincoln Lennox is discovered and subsequently covered up in the small fictional community of Cord; North Carolina; the ghosts who frequent the all-in-one bar and consignment shop take on the responsibility of unearthing the truth and acting as the memory for the town that longs to forget and continues to hate. A reimagined Kathy Acker; the groundbreaking literary icon; engages Lincoln in a love triangle and brings a transgressive post-punk esthetic to the mission. The down-the-rabbit-hole satirical storytelling of *ONE KIND FAVOR*; Kevin McIlvoy’s sixth novel; echoes Appalachian ghost stories in which haunting presences will; at last; have their way.
University sophomore Miwako Sumida has hanged herself, leaving those closest to her reeling. In the months before her suicide, she was hiding away in a remote mountainside village, but what, or whom, was she running from?

Ryusei, a fellow student at Waseda who harbored unrequited feelings for Miwako, begs her best friend Chie to bring him to the remote village where she spent her final days. While they are away, his older sister, Fumi, who took Miwako on as an apprentice in her art studio, receives an unexpected guest at her apartment in Tokyo, distracting her from her fear that Miwako’s death may ruin what is left of her brother’s life.

Expanding on the beautifully crafted world of *Rainbirds*, Clarissa Goenawan gradually pierces through a young woman’s careful façade, unmasking her most painful secrets.

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89. *Beautiful, Violent Things* by Madeline Anthes (Word West, 2021)
“Drunk ghosts, feral mothers—riveting obsessions and unbelongings and captivities—the fragmented texts in *Beautiful, Violent Things* seethe and grip and fluoresce without apology. In these eleven dispatches, Madeline Anthes carefully weaves desire and estrangement, reimagines power as a woman’s capacity for hollowing a man, the ability to deliver impossibilities from her misappropriated body. The speakers in this collection compose a primal song, reprise—with blood and feathers and new ferocity—the iconoclastic feminisms of Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Anthes is alive on the page, a writer to watch.”
—Tara Stillions Whitehead, author of *Blood Histories*

90. *Crooked Hallelujah* by Kelli Jo Ford (Grove Press, 2021)

It’s 1974 in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma and fifteen-year-old Justine grows up in a family of tough, complicated, and loyal women presided over by her mother, Lula, and Granny. After Justine’s father abandoned the family,
Lula became a devout member of the Holiness Church—a community that Justine at times finds stifling and terrifying. But Justine does her best as a devoted daughter until an act of violence sends her on a different path forever.

*Crooked Hallelujah* tells the stories of Justine—a mixed-blood Cherokee woman—and her daughter, Reney, as they move from Eastern Oklahoma’s Indian Country in the hopes of starting a new, more stable life in Texas amid the oil bust of the 1980s. However, life in Texas isn’t easy, and Reney feels unmoored from her family in Indian Country. Against the vivid backdrop of the Red River, we see their struggle to survive in a world of unreliable men and near-Biblical natural forces, like wildfires and tornados—intent on stripping away their connections to one another and their very ideas of home.

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91. *Nights When Nothing Happened* by Simon Han (Riverhead Books, 2020)

From the outside, the Chengs seem like so-called model immigrants. Once Patty landed a tech job near Dallas, she and Liang grew secure enough to have a second child, and to send for their first from his grandparents back in China. Isn’t this what they sacrificed so much for? But then little Annabel begins to sleepwalk at night, putting into motion a string of misunderstandings that not only threaten to set their community against them but force to the surface the secrets that have made them fear one another. How can a man make peace with the terrors of his past? How can a child regain trust in unconditional love? How can a family stop burying its history and forge a way through it, to a more honest intimacy?

*Nights When Nothing Happened* is gripping storytelling immersed in the crosscurrents that have reshaped the American landscape, from a prodigious new literary talent.

A young woman discovers a strange portal in her uncle’s house, leading to madness and terror in this gripping new novel from the author of the “innovative, unexpected, and absolutely chilling” (Mira Grant, Nebula Award–winning author) *The Twisted Ones*.

*Pray they are hungry.*


Following her successes from *All the Ghosts We’ve Always Had*, critically-acclaimed flash fiction writer, Jules Archer, returns to the dinner table with *Little Feasts*, her debut short story collection. The stories are a
table-long buffet of femininity, a lying tree, childhood innocence, toxic masculinity, and a 20-pound cast-iron skillet. Works within have been featured in *Five:2: One, SmokeLong Quarterly, Maudlin House, PANK*, and more.

94. *Cleanness* by Garth Greenwell (FSG, 2020)

Sofia, Bulgaria, a landlocked city in southern Europe, stirs with hope and impending upheaval. Soviet buildings crumble, wind scatters sand from the far south, and political protesters flood the streets with song.

In this atmosphere of disquiet, an American teacher navigates a life transformed by the discovery and loss of love. As he prepares to leave the place he’s come to call home, he grapples with the intimate encounters that have marked his years abroad, each bearing uncanny reminders of his past. A queer student’s confession recalls his own first love, a stranger’s seduction devolves into paternal sadism, and a romance with another foreigner opens, and heals, old wounds. Each echo reveals startling insights about what it means to seek connection: with those we love, with the places we inhabit, and with our own fugitive selves.

*Cleanness* revisits and expands the world of Garth Greenwell’s beloved debut, *What Belongs to You*, declared “an instant classic” by *The New York Times Book Review*. In exacting, elegant prose, he transcribes the strange dialects of desire, cementing his stature as one of our most vital living writers.

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95. *The Disaster Tourist* by Yun Ko-eun, Translated by Lizzie Buehler (Counterpoint, 2020)
Jungle is a cutting-edge travel agency specializing in tourism to destinations devastated by disaster and climate change. And until she found herself at the mercy of a predatory colleague, Yona was one of their top representatives. Now on the verge of losing her job, she’s given a proposition: take a paid “vacation” to the desert island of Mui and pose as a tourist to assess the company’s least profitable holiday.

When she uncovers a plan to fabricate an extravagant catastrophe, she must choose: prioritize the callous company to whom she’s dedicated her life, or embrace a fresh start in a powerful new position? An eco-thriller with a fierce feminist sensibility, The Disaster Tourist introduces a fresh new voice to the United States that engages with the global dialogue around climate activism, dark tourism, and the #MeToo movement.

96. Virtuoso by Yelena Moskovitch (Two Dollar Radio, 2020)
As Communism begins to crumble in Prague in the 1980s, Jana’s unremarkable life becomes all at once remarkable when a precocious young girl named Zorka moves into the apartment building with her mother and sick father. With Zorka’s signature two-finger salute and abrasive wit, she brings flair to the girls’ days despite her mother’s protestations to not “be weird.” But after scorching her mother’s prized fur coat and stealing from a nefarious teacher, Zorka suddenly disappears. Meanwhile in Paris, Aimée de Saint-Pé married young to an older woman, Dominique, an actress whose star has crested and is in decline. A quixotic journey of self-discovery, Virtuoso follows Zorka as she comes of age in Prague, Wisconsin, and then Boston, amidst a backdrop of clothing logos, MTV, computer coders, and other outcast youth. But it isn’t till a Parisian conference hall brimming with orthopedic mattresses and therapeutic appendages when Jana first encounters Aimée, their fates steering them both to a cryptic bar on the Rue de Prague, and, perhaps, to Zorka. With a distinctive prose flair and spellbinding vision, Virtuoso is a story of love, loss, and self-discovery that heralds Yelena Moskovich as a brilliant and one-of-a-kind visionary.

97. When the Whales Leave by Yuri Rytkheu, Translated by Ilona Yazhbin Chavasse (Milkweed Editions, 2020)

Nau cannot remember a time when she was not one with the world around her: with the fast breeze, the green grass, the high clouds, and the endless blue sky above the Shingled Spit. But her greatest joy is to visit the sea, where whales gather every morning to gaily spout rainbows.

Then, one day, she finds a man in the mist where a whale should be: Reu, who has taken human form out of his Great Love for her. Together these first humans become parents to two whales, and then to mankind. Even after Reu dies, Nau continues on, sharing her story of brotherhood between the two species. But as these origins grow more distant, the old woman’s tales are subsumed into myth—and her descendants turn increasingly bent on parading their dominance over the natural world.
98. *A Country for Dying* by Abdellah Taïa, Translated by Emma Ramadan (Seven Stories Press, 2020)

Through swirling, perpendicular narratives, *A Country for Dying* follows the inner lives of emigrants as they contend with the space between their dreams and their realities, a schism of a postcolonial world where, as Taïa writes, “So many people find themselves in the same situation. It is our destiny: To pay with our bodies for other people’s future.”


Set on a single day in 1927, *My Red Heaven* imagines a host of characters—some historic, some invented—crossing paths on the streets of Berlin.
The subjects include Robert Musil, Otto Dix, Werner Heisenberg, Anita Berber, Vladimir Nabokov, Käthe Kollwitz, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and Rosa Luxemburg—as well as others history has forgotten: a sommelier, a murderer, a prostitute, a pickpocket, and several ghosts.

Drawing inspiration from Otto Freundlich’s painting by the same name, *My Red Heaven* explores a complex moment in history: the rise of deadly populism at a time when everything seemed possible and the future unimaginable. A terrific read for fans of Richard Powers’ *The Overstory* and Colum McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin*.

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100. *Whiteout Conditions* by Tariq Shah (Two Dollar Radio, 2020)

Ant is back in Chicago for a funeral, and he typically enjoys funerals. Since most of his family has passed away, he finds himself attracted to their endearing qualities: the hyperbolic language, the stoner altar boy, seeing friends in suits for the first time. That is, until the tragic death of Ray — Ant’s childhood friend, Vince’s teenage cousin. Ray was the younger third-wheel that Ant and Vince were stuck babysitting while in high school, and his sudden death makes national news.

In the depths of a brutal Midwest winter, Ant rides with Vince through the falling snow to Ray’s funeral, an event that has been accruing a sense of consequence. With a poet’s sensibility, Shah navigates the murky responsibilities of adulthood, grief, toxic masculinity, and the tragedy of revenge in this haunting Midwestern noir.

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101. *Killer Unconquered* by Chris Lambert (King Shot Press, 2020)
Rideshare celebrity, sports psychology, technodepression, strange addictions, secret histories, an age of miracles, a killer on the loose. The future is as lonely as you imagined.

“Like a cross between a Don DeLillo serial killer novel and a script about human disconnection in a futuristic metropolis co-written by David Cronenberg and David Foster Wallace . . . bizarre literary fiction and noir with a touch of (techno)fantasy.”
–Gabino Iglesias, author of Coyote Songs

102. *b, Book, and Me* by Kim Sagwa, Translated by Sunhee Jeong (Two Lines Press, 2020)

Best friends b and Rang are all each other have. Their parents are absent,
their teachers avert their eyes when they walk by. Everyone else in town acts like they live in Seoul even though it’s painfully obvious they don’t. When Rang begins to be bullied horribly by the boys in baseball hats, b fends them off. But one day Rang unintentionally tells the whole class about b’s dying sister and how her family is poor, and each of them finds herself desperately alone. The only place they can reclaim themselves, and perhaps each other, is beyond the part of town where lunatics live—the End.

In a piercing, heartbreaking, and astonishingly honest voice, Kim Sagwa’s b, Book, and Me walks the precipice between youth and adulthood, reminding us how perilous the edge can be.

103. The House in the Cerulean Sea by TJ Klumne (Tor Books, 2020)

Linus Baker is a by-the-book case worker in the Department in Charge of Magical Youth. He’s tasked with determining whether six dangerous magical children are likely to bring about the end of the world. Arthur Parnassus is the master of the orphanage. He would do anything to keep the children safe, even if it means the world will burn. And his secrets will come to light.

The House in the Cerulean Sea is an enchanting love story, masterfully told, about the profound experience of discovering an unlikely family in an unexpected place—and realizing that family is yours.

104. The Secret Lives of Church Ladies by Deesha Philyaw (West Virginia University Press, 2020)
The Secret Lives of Church Ladies explores the raw and tender places where Black women and girls dare to follow their desires and pursue a momentary reprieve from being good. The nine stories in this collection feature four generations of characters grappling with who they want to be in the world, caught as they are between the church’s double standards and their own needs and passions.

105. Summer Fun by Jeanne Thornton (Soho Press, 2021)

Gala, a young trans woman, works at a hostel in Truth or Consequences, New Mexico. She is obsessed with the Get Happies, the quintessential 1960s Californian band, helmed by its resident genius, B---. Gala needs to know: Why did the band stop making music? Why did they never release their rumored album, Summer Fun?
And so she writes letters to B—- that shed light not only on the Get Happies, but paint an extraordinary portrait of Gala. The parallel narratives of B—- and Gala form a dialogue about creation—of music, identity, self, culture, and counterculture.

*Summer Fun* is a brilliant and magical work of trans literature that marks Thornton as one of our most exciting and original novelists.

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**106. The Girl with the Louding Voice** by Abi Daré (Dutton, 2020)

The unforgettable, inspiring story of a teenage girl growing up in a rural Nigerian village who longs to get an education so that she can find her “louding voice” and speak up for herself, *The Girl with the Louding Voice* is a simultaneously heartbreaking and triumphant tale about the power of fighting for your dreams. Despite the seemingly insurmountable obstacles in her path, Adunni never loses sight of her goal of escaping the life of poverty she was born into so that she can build the future she chooses for herself – and help other girls like her do the same. Her spirited determination to find joy and hope in even the most difficult circumstances imaginable will “break your heart and then put it back together again” (Jenna Bush Hager on *The Today Show*) even as Adunni shows us how one courageous young girl can inspire us all to reach for our dreams…and maybe even change the world.

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**107. Honey Mine** by Camille Roy (Nightboat Books, 2021)
Honey Mine unfolds as both excavation and romp, an adventure story that ushers readers into a lesbian writer’s coming of age through disorienting, unsparing, and exhilarating encounters with sex, gender, and distinctly American realities of race and class. From childhood in Chicago’s South Side to youth in the lesbian underground, Roy’s politics find joyful and transgressive expression in the liberatory potential of subculture. Find here, in these new, uncollected and out-of-print fictions by a master of New Narrative, a record of survival and thriving under conditions of danger.

108. Lakewood by Megan Giddings (Amistad, 2020)

When Lena Johnson’s beloved grandmother dies, and the full extent of the family debt is revealed, the black millenial drops out of college to support her family and takes a job in the mysterious and remote town of Lakewood, Michigan.
On paper, her new job is too good to be true. High paying. No out of pocket medical expenses. A free place to live. All Lena has to do is participate in a secret program—and lie to her friends and family about the research being done in Lakewood. An eye drop that makes brown eyes blue, a medication that could be a cure for dementia, golden pills promised to make all bad thoughts go away. The discoveries made in Lakewood, Lena is told, will change the world—but the consequences for the subjects involved could be devastating. As the truths of the program reveal themselves, Lena learns how much she’s willing to sacrifice for the sake of her family. Provocative and thrilling, Lakewood is a breathtaking novel that takes an unflinching look at the moral dilemmas many working-class families face, and the horror that has been forced on black bodies in the name of science.


In his first attempt at the epic form, Ngũgĩ tells the story of the founding of the Gĩkũyũ people of Kenya, from a strongly feminist perspective. A verse narrative, blending folklore, mythology, adventure, and allegory, The Perfect Nine chronicles the efforts the Gĩkũyũ founders make to find partners for their ten beautiful daughters—called “The Perfect Nine” —and the challenges they set for the 99 suitors who seek their hands in marriage. The epic has all the elements of adventure, with suspense, danger, humor, and sacrifice. Ngũgĩ’s epic is a quest for the beautiful as an ideal of living, as the motive force behind migrations of African peoples. He notes, “The epic came to me one night as a revelation of ideals of quest, courage, perseverance, unity, family; and the sense of the divine, in human struggles with nature and nurture.”

110. The Swank Hotel by Lucy Corin (Graywolf Press, 2021)
At the outset of the 2008 financial crisis, Em has a dependable, dull marketing job generating reports of vague utility while she anxiously waits to hear news of her sister, Ad, who has gone missing—again. Em’s days pass drifting back and forth between her respectably cute starter house (bought with a “responsible, salary-backed, fixed-rate mortgage”) and her dreary office. Then something unthinkable, something impossible, happens and she begins to see how madness permeates everything around her while the mundane spaces she inhabits are transformed, through Lucy Corin’s idiosyncratic magic, into shimmering sites of the uncanny. The story that swirls around Em moves through several perspectives and voices. There is Frank, the tart-tongued, failing manager at her office; Jack, the man with whom Frank has had a love affair for decades; Em and Ad’s eccentric parents, who live in a house that is perpetually being built; and Tasio, the young man from Chiapas who works for them and falls in love with Ad. Through them Corin portrays porousness and breakdown in individuals and families, in economies and political systems, in architecture, technology, and even in language itself. *The Swank Hotel* is an acrobatic, unforgettable, surreal, and unexpectedly comic novel that interrogates the illusory dream of stability that pervaded early twenty-first-century America.

111. *I Hold a Wolf by the Ears* by Laura van den Berg (FSG, 2020)
“The terrain of Van den Berg’s difficult, beautiful and urgent new book, *I Hold a Wolf by the Ears*, is an ecosystem of weird and stirring places you’ll want to revisit, reconsider, maybe even take shelter in . . . Van den Berg feels like the writer we not only want but maybe need right now . . . Van den Berg is so consistently smart and kind, bracingly honest, keen about mental illness and crushing about everything from aging to evil that you might not be deluded in hoping that the usual order of literary fame could be reversed: that an author with respectable acclaim for her novels might earn wider recognition for a sneakily brilliant collection of stories.” –Nathan Deuel, *Los Angeles Times*


A deeply personal work about identity and belonging in a nation coming apart at the seams, *Homeland Elegies* blends fact and fiction to tell an epic story
of longing and dispossession in the world that 9/11 made. Part family drama, part social essay, part picaresque novel, at its heart it is the story of a father, a son, and the country they both call home.

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Ayad Akhtar forges a new narrative voice to capture a country in which debt has ruined countless lives and the gods of finance rule, where immigrants live in fear, and where the nation’s unhealed wounds wreak havoc around the world. Akhtar attempts to make sense of it all through the lens of a story about one family, from a heartland town in America to palatial suites in Central Europe to guerrilla lookouts in the mountains of Afghanistan, and spares no one–least of all himself–in the process.

113. *Grievers* by adrienne maree brown (AK Press, 2021)

Dune’s mother is patient zero of a mysterious illness that stops people in their tracks—in mid-sentence, mid-action, mid-life—casting them into a nonresponsive state from which no one recovers. Dune must navigate poverty and the loss of her mother as Detroit’s hospitals, morgues, and graveyards begin to overflow. As the quarantined city slowly empties of life, she investigates what caused the plague, and what might end it, following in the footsteps of her late researcher father, who has a physical model of Detroit’s history and losses set up in their basement. She dusts it off and begins tracking the sick and dying, discovering patterns, finding comrades in curiosity, conspiracies for the fertile ground of the city, and the unexpected magic that emerges when the debt of grief is cleared.

Loie Rawding’s debut novel is a prismatic journey into the depths of one young person’s chaotic psychic and physical awakening. Part fiction, part poetry, part cabaret, Rawding sketches a surreal world that is at once historical and hauntingly modern; a place where to deep dive into love can save, and to stay silent will most certainly destroy.

115. Anne-Marie the Beauty by Yasmina Reza, Translated by Alison Strayer (Seven Stories Press, 2021)

“I was bored with my husband,” says Anne-Marie, the irrepressible voice of Anne-Marie la Beauté, “but you know, boredom is part of love.” Mostly she is speaking here of her more famous friend and colleague, the French actress Giselle Fayolle, in whose shadow she has spent her career. “My life was a near miss,” she adds, before explaining that she enunciated well because “I
loved to say the words.” A very short novel with the power and resonance of a much longer one, Anne-Marie the Beauty is a profound and moving act of remembrance, a clear-eyed assessment of the hard-edged nature of fame, a meditation on aging—and a wonderfully observant and comic exploration of human foibles. In short, another thought-provoking master class in how we perform life by the peerless Yasmina Reza.

116. Where the Sky Meets the Ocean and the Air Tastes Like Metal and the Birds Don’t Make a Sound by Mike Kleine and Dan Hoy (Trnsfr Books, 2021)

Detectives Michael and Daniel must try to solve a murder on planet Earth. The victim may or may not be named Jane from Yesterday. And the Man of One Thousand Years, cult leader of the Architects of Q’Noor, may or may not be responsible. As Michael and Daniel hurl themselves inexorably toward a final confrontation with the Man of One Thousand Years through a dreamlike landscape of exploding cacti, cultists, centaurs, spells, river gorgons, lobster enthusiasts, and undulating portals activated by prayer, they collide with a succession of randos and adversaries—Vampyre King, Man with Face Like Fire, Qyumoo‘un, Eater of Dreams, Excalibur, Prince Al-Wajeed, and dozens more—sparing few in their frenzied quest for the truth.

117. Subjects We Left Out by Naomi Washer (Veliz Books, 2021)
In Naomi Washer’s novel SUBJECTS WE LEFT OUT, a young American writer begins translating the work of a French poet whose book bears striking parallels to her own life. Diffident despite her talent and thoughtfulness, she struggles to understand and speak to the people closest to her, especially Alex: an exchange student from Florence whom she feels intimately connected to despite his elusive, almost aloof disposition. As she travels through Paris and rural northeast France to meet with the poet and pursue an idea for her own book, she reckons with the distance between herself and Alex and begins to speak of the life she wants for herself. A meditation on what is often said and unsaid between people—in silence, translation, interpretation, and miscommunication—and an account of an artist coming into her own, SUBJECTS WE LEFT OUT is a novel that sees the reader as correspondent, inviting us to hear and be heard, see and be seen, and summon the courage to speak clearly.

118. Walking on Cowrie Shells by Nana Nkweti (Graywolf Press, 2021)
In her powerful, genre-bending debut story collection, Nana Nkweti’s virtuosity is on full display as she mixes deft realism with clever inversions of genre. In the Caine Prize finalist story “It Takes a Village, Some Say,” Nkweti skewers racial prejudice and the practice of international adoption, delivering a sly tale about a teenage girl who leverages her adoptive parents to fast-track her fortunes. In “The Devil Is a Liar,” a pregnant pastor’s wife struggles with the collision of western Christianity and her mother’s traditional Cameroonian belief system as she worries about her unborn child.

In other stories, Nkweti vaults past realism, upending genre expectations in a satirical romp about a jaded PR professional trying to spin a zombie outbreak in West Africa, and in a mermaid tale about a Mami Wata who forgoes her power by remaining faithful to a fisherman she loves. In between these two ends of the spectrum there’s everything from an aspiring graphic novelist at a comic con to a murder investigation driven by statistics to a story organized by the changing hairstyles of the main character.

119. *His Name Was Death* by Rafael Bernal, Translated by Kit Schluter (New Directions)

A bitter drunk forsakes civilization and takes to the Mexican jungle, trapping animals, selling their pelts to buy liquor for colossal benders, and slowly rotting away in his fetid hut. His neighbors, a clan of the Lacodón tribe of Chiapas, however, see something more in him than he does himself (dubbing him Wise Owl): when he falls deathly ill, a shaman named Black Ant saves his life—and, almost by chance, in driving out his fever, she exorcises the demon of alcoholism as well. Slowly recovering, weak in his hammock, our antihero discovers a curious thing about the mosquitoes’ buzzing, “which to human ears seemed so irritating and pointless.” Perhaps, in fact, it constituted a language he might learn—and with the help of a flute and a homemade dictionary—even speak. Slowly, he masters Mosquil, with astonishing consequences… Will he harness the mosquitoes’ global might? And will his new
powers enable him to take over the world that’s rejected him? A book far ahead of its time, *His Name Was Death* looks down the double-barreled shotgun of ecological disaster and colonial exploitation—and cackles a graveyard laugh.

120. *The Subtweet* by Vivek Shraya (ECW Press, 2020)

“*The Subtweet* by Vivek Shraya (ECW Press, 2020)

“A beautifully crafted novel about race, music, and social media … In this timely novel, Shraya speaks to a modern audience with bold cultural insight, confronting the difficulties of being a brown artist and the drastic impact social media can have on pop culture.” — Booklist

“But the freedom that fiction provides, Shraya took The Subtweet deep into the topics of hate-liking, social media friendships, and Internet celebrities. And the plot, as fast-paced as life on the Internet, shows clearly the way that jealousy and obsession can take shape within the open borders of the online world.” — NPR Books

121. *A Children’s Bible* by Lydia Millet (W.W. Norton, 2020)
Pulitzer Prize finalist Lydia Millet’s sublime new novel—her first since the National Book Award long-listed *Sweet Lamb of Heaven*—follows a group of twelve eerily mature children on a forced vacation with their families at a sprawling lakeside mansion. Contemptuous of their parents, who pass their days in a stupor of liquor, drugs, and sex, the children feel neglected and suffocated at the same time. When a destructive storm descends on the summer estate, the group’s ringleaders—including Eve, who narrates the story—decide to run away, leading the younger ones on a dangerous foray into the apocalyptic chaos outside. As the scenes of devastation begin to mimic events in the dog-eared picture Bible carried around by her beloved little brother, Eve devotes herself to keeping him safe from harm.

122. *Phototaxis* by Olivia Tapiero, Translated by Kit Schluter (Nightboat Books, 2021)

In a city mysteriously overflowing with meat, a museum is bombed, a classical
piano player hooked on snuff films throws himself off a building, a charismatic but misled political organizer has disappeared, and a young immigrant navigates a crumbling continent. In the fallout of their friendship, Olivia Tapiero’s *Phototaxis* deploys a fugal language at turns surreal, scathingly comic, poetic, and revolutionary to dismantle our world and construct one even closer to its breaking point, or further along in its breaking. Here, voice and event surge up like reflux from the exhausted throats of nature and urban spaces, sounding out an architecture of failure within a suspiciously steady rise of fascism and its persistent counterpoints. A dystopic work of hope that carries its own disintegration, *Phototaxis* (translated by Kit Schluter) is Tapiero’s first novel to appear in English.

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123. *The Regal Lemon Tree* by Juan José Saer, Translated by Sergio Waisman (Open Letter, 2020)

One of the late Juan José Saer’s most beloved novels, *The Regal Lemon Tree* shows a master stylist at his best. Set during day and night of New Year’s Eve—building up a barbecue that takes on ritual significance—the novel focuses on a couple in the north of Argentina who lost their only son eight years prior. Wenceslao spends the day with his extended family and his memories while his wife—truly paralyzed by grief—refuses to leave their island, which is home to an almost magical lemon tree that blossoms at all times of the year. With the recurring phrase, “dawn breaks, and his eyes are already open,” the novel takes on a dreamlike quality, manifesting the troubles the couple has suffered under with an eeriness that calls to mind the work of David Lynch.
124. *Everyone Knows Your Mother is a Witch* by Rivka Galchen (FSG, 2021)

Drawing on real historical documents but infused with the intensity of imagination, sly humor, and intellectual fire for which Rivka Galchen is known, *Everyone Knows Your Mother Is a Witch* will both provoke and entertain. The story of how a community becomes implicated in collective aggression and hysterical fear is a tale for our time. Galchen’s bold new novel touchingly illuminates a society and a family undone by superstition, the state, and the mortal convulsions of history.

125. *Loop* by Brenda Lozano, Translated by Annie McDermott (Charco Press, 2021)

Recovering from an unspecified accident, the narrator of *Loop* finds herself in waiting rooms of different kinds: airport departure lounges, doctors’
surgeries, and above all at home, awaiting the return of her boyfriend, who has travelled to Spain following the death of his mother. Loop is a love story told from the perspective of a contemporary Penelope who, instead of weaving and unravelling her shroud, writes and erases her thoughts in her ‘ideal’ notebook. At once, funny and thought-provoking, her thoughts range from her stationery preferences to the different scales on which life is lived, while a cast of unlikely characters cross the page, from Proust to a mysterious dwarf, from a dreamy cat to David Bowie singing ‘Wild is the Wind’. Written in an assured, irreverent style, Loop is the journal of an absence, one in which the most minute or whimsical observations open up universes. Combining aphoristic fragments with introspective narrative, and evoking Italo Calvino and Fernando Pessoa in its playfulness and wry humour, this original reflection on relationships, solitude and the purpose of writing offers a glimpse of contemporary life in Mexico City, while asking what it really means to find our place in the world.


More bodies have washed up on the shores of a small island. Another overfilled, ill-equipped, dilapidated ship has sunk under the weight of its too many passengers: Syrians, Ethiopians, Egyptians, Lebanese, Palestinians, all of them desperate to escape untenable lives back in their homelands. But miraculously, someone has survived the passage: nine-year-old Amir, a Syrian boy who is soon rescued by Vänna. Vänna is a teenage girl, who, despite being native to the island, experiences her own sense of homelessness in a place and among people she has come to disdain. And though Vänna and Amir are complete strangers, though they don’t speak a common language, Vänna is determined to do whatever it takes to save the boy.

In alternating chapters, we learn about Amir’s life and how he came to be on the boat, and we follow him and the girl as they make their way toward safety. What Strange Paradise is the story of two children finding their way
through a hostile world. But it is also a story of empathy and indifference, of hope and despair—and about the way each of those things can blind us to reality.

127. Heading For Bilbao by Suzanne Ahn (Center For Basque Studies, 2020)

![heading_for_bilbao](image)

“In early 1937, a young Canadian journalist is disenchanted with life in Paris and accepts an assignment to go to Madrid. Friends offer advice. A Basque medical student tells him of the determined anticlericalism prevalent in Madrid; a German exile suggests he take an extra pair of glasses. In Madrid, the journalist is moved by the misery of the working classes but disturbed by the power wielded by the Communist Party. After his first air raid, he finds himself shaking at the sound of airplanes. Wounded by shrapnel, the journalist returns to Paris. Recovering, he suffers as much from shame of his fear as from the physical pain of his wounds. When faced with an unexpected request from a friend, his sympathy for the Basques’ plight challenges him to take action.” –from the Center for Basque Studies website

128. Correction by Gabriel Blackwell (Rescue Press, 2021)
Gabriel Blackwell’s CORRECTION is a book of recognition and reckoning, fiction in its newest form. These 101 short story-essays (what are they?) plunge out of the dizzying, devastating, truthy world of social media and into the depths of our daily lives. The result is relentlessly precise, ferociously ethical, damning, sly and essential. Blackwell is at the height of his powers as one of the most innovative prose writers working today. To this hyper-mediated world, its texts swollen with absent facts and bad intent, we offer CORRECTION.

129. Matrix by Lauren Groff (Riverhead Books, 2021)

Cast out of the royal court by Eleanor of Aquitaine, deemed too coarse and rough-hewn for marriage or courtly life, seventeen-year-old Marie de France is sent to England to be the new prioress of an impoverished abbey, its nuns on the brink of starvation and beset by disease.
At first taken aback by the severity of her new life, Marie finds focus and
love in collective life with her singular and mercurial sisters. In this
crucible, Marie steadily supplants her desire for family, for her homeland,
for the passions of her youth with something new to her: devotion to her
sisters, and a conviction in her own divine visions. Marie, born the last in
a long line of women warriors and crusaders, is determined to chart a bold
new course for the women she now leads and protects. But in a world that is
shifting and corroding in frightening ways, one that can never reconcile
itself with her existence, will the sheer force of Marie’s vision be bulwark
even?

130. *Kink: Stories*, Edited by R.O. Kwon, Garth Greenwell (Simon &
Schuster, 2021)

*Kink* is a dynamic anthology of literary fiction that opens an imaginative
door into the world of desire. The stories within this collection portray
love, desire, BDSM, and sexual kinks in all their glory with a bold new
vision. The collection includes works by renowned fiction writers such as
Callum Angus, Alexander Chee, Vanessa Clark, Melissa Febos, Kim Fu, Roxane
Gay, Cara Hoffman, Zeyn Joukhadar, Chris Kraus, Carmen Maria Machado, Peter
Mountford, Larissa Pham, and Brandon Taylor, with Garth Greenwell and R.O.
Kwon as editors.

The stories within explore bondage, power-play, and submissive-dominant
relationships; we are taken to private estates, therapists’ offices,
underground sex clubs, and even a sex theater in early-20th century Paris.
While there are whips and chains, sure, the true power of these stories lies
in their beautiful, moving dispatches from across the sexual spectrum of
interest and desires, as portrayed by some of today’s most exciting writers.