

# GUARDIANS OF TRUTH

Whether fiction or memoir, about a life well-lived or a life that is just beginning, these five stories explore similar types of becoming. In them, women hold truth to heart and mine it for gold.



## ★ THORN

Anna Burke, Bywater Books (JANUARY) Softcover \$16.95  
(215pp), 978-1-61294-143-1

It is said that “the Huntress rides out when the sun is at its farthest and Winter has her jaws buried deep in the heart of the warm, green world,” but Rowan is skeptical about this—and everything else about village life. Her mother is dead, her father is on the run from his creditors, and Rowan is powerless to do anything but assent.

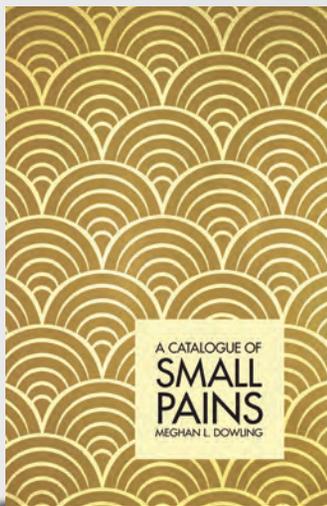
When the Huntress arrives on the heels of her father’s hunting party demanding a rose for a rose, what’s monstrous suddenly looks like freedom. But in Anna Burke’s *Thorn*, freedom isn’t the same as mercy, and Rowan must learn to bear its weight.

Burke is adept at imbuing a deep fairy tale with social relevance. Building on the tradition of *Beauty and the Beast*, *Thorn* gives young women all the leading roles: heroes, villains, and lovers. The story delves into clothing as self-presentation, the release from bearing children, the work of self-reliance,

reckoning with a family or past that no longer fits, the give and take of true partnership, and the inter-linked importance of self-knowledge and love. It does all of this within a framework of castles, rugged landscapes, and forbidding enchantments.

Rowan is a tonic. Her sharpness, anger, and pride have a depth that’s uniquely teenaged and completely human. The Huntress, Isolde, is Rowan’s opposite. Her inhuman inscrutability, power, and cruelty are explored with nuance, showing the fine, almost invisible lines between a person’s greatest strengths and their personal corruption. Their totality holds so much potential that it’s easy to root for both—each a thorn in the other’s side.

Thoroughly gratifying, *Thorn* is a perennial escape fantasy tangled up with a call to adventure. Burke turns one young woman’s release from drudgery into a beguiling disruption of conventional social roles, expected dichotomies, and personal power.



## A CATALOGUE OF SMALL PAINS

Meghan L. Dowling, University of New Orleans Press (JANUARY) Softcover  
\$18.95 (250pp), 978-1-60801-167-4

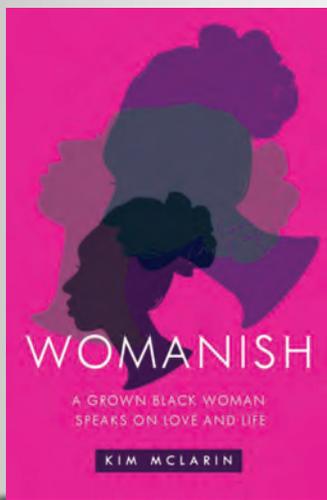
“Remembering is the lie of a thread pulled through time backwards,” yet Meghan L. Dowling’s protagonist, Catherine, is determined to reveal the multigenerational legacy of enmity between sisters in her New England family. Over the span of a century, these women have clubbed together and clubbed each other’s hearts with a brutality particular to siblings. A novel that reads like a prose poem, *A Catalogue of Small Pains* traces their story with such convincing humanity that its fictions could be mistaken for documentary truth.

In a novel that could easily venerate nostalgia, Catherine is suspicious of all memories. Memory’s skips, jumps, and reconstructions are captured through equal parts intervention and omission. Beginning with her own relationship to her older sister, she dismantles each generation’s stories, skipping through time, various perspectives, photographs, and other evidence to overturn accepted family mythologies and long-held silences alike.

Dowling constructs a historicity for these characters using narratives, photos, and excerpts of various outside documents, from religious tracts to educational pamphlets to movies. A photograph’s caption notes, “What is left unseen is left to the imagination,” and there’s a constant tension between the implications of a documented, “actual” past and the novel’s revelation of an imagined past’s emotional textures and weight.

As layers of family dysfunction are peeled back, it becomes clear these women exist in a sphere of hovering, unacknowledged, gendered violence, the looming shape of which alters them. Their “catalogue of small pains” has been sublimated and normalized because of their sex.

Beginning with its very title, Dowling’s novel undersells and, thus, perfectly captures the odious, everyday nature of its women’s trials and their attending violations. *A Catalogue of Small Pains* is a small, common story, and that’s the trouble of it all.



**★ WOMANISH**  
**A Grown Black Woman**  
**Speaks on Love and Life**

Kim McLarin, Ig Publishing (JANUARY) Softcover \$16.95 (252pp), 978-1-63246-079-0

*The first step of deprogramming is education, informing the person you are trying to free just how indoctrination works to hamstring a mind. But information alone will not free a believer from her beliefs, no matter how destructive, because belief is not intellectual.*

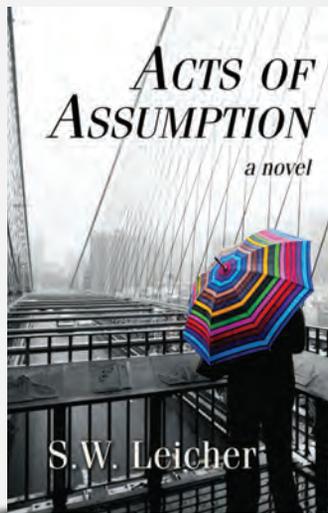
From this powerful opening gambit, Kim McLarin's *Womanish: A Grown Black Woman Speaks on Love and Life* confronts some of the most opaque and stubborn ideologies undergirding US culture in essays full of insights as precise as tactical strikes.

Derived from the black folk expression "womanish," a womanist is a black feminist or feminist of color—the opposite of the frivolous and irresponsible connotations of "girlish." A womanist is grown, and McLarin is a womanist at the height of her powers. McLarin's penetrating narrative voice is completely at home in itself, whether it's taking on the culturally related monoliths of beauty, blackness, white feminism, motherhood, mental illness, health, or class.

Integrating the work of formidable black intellectuals, research data, interview excerpts, and memoir, McLarin casts systemic issues in experiential terms, anchoring them in a narrative of friends, family, and self. Like James Baldwin, McLarin is equally concerned with the "lies we tell ourselves as Americans" and "the distortions and stories and justifications we tell ourselves as human beings."

Also like Baldwin, McLarin is smart as hell; this fact emanates off the page, from her invocation of Alice Walker and Audre Lorde to explain online dating, to the "misogynynoir" she uses to delve into the intersections of misogyny and colorism, to her reclamation of personal vulnerability as a necessary insistence of humanity and self-worth.

*Womanish* is the education the United States needs but doesn't deserve. Not only has McLarin done the homework, she's created an elegant cheat sheet in the form of thirteen perfect essays.



**ACTS OF ASSUMPTION**

S. W. Leicher, Twisted Road Publications (NOVEMBER)  
 Softcover \$19.95 (312pp), 978-1-940189-22-2

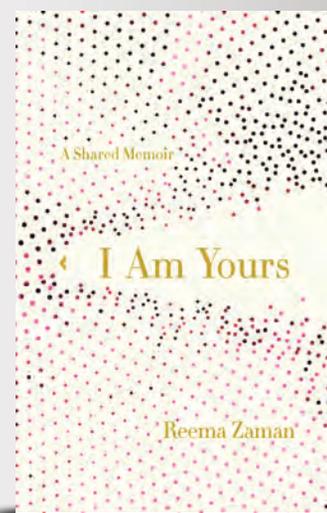
"Love is an earthquake ... It overturns all sorts of assumptions," and from *Acts of Assumption's* opening three-part definition of *assumption*, S. W. Leicher plays with its mental, physical, and cultural forms, chronicling what brings two women together from very different starting points until they're wholly taken in by their love for one another.

Raised in New York City's Orthodox Jewish community, Serach knows she's caught between the women's roles she feels disconnected from and her love for the rites reserved for men. The daughter of a Colombian single mother, Paloma grew up in the same city, but between her Catholic education and latchkey home life, she's become street-smart and tough.

When their paths converge in an oncology ward, the attraction is instant. Acting on that attraction changes them: Serach moves toward autonomy, and Paloma relaxes into attachment. Navigating their way into a relationship inevitably means unpacking the baggage of their respective religious heritages, childhood experiences, sexualities, and what it means to call each other family.

The novel is largely concerned with Serach's and Paloma's personal histories and their journey toward each other, but it ends with a coda for Shmuly, Serach's beloved only brother. Although there's a persistent interest in the bonds of family, a focus on Shmuly in the closing section gives him the final word in a way that recasts and undercuts the women's stories. Still, Serach's and Paloma's voices are so imminently engaging and alive that witnessing their well-being seems imperative.

In its broad strokes, *Acts of Assumption* traffics in familiar material, covering many of the expected beats. But in one aspect, the novel makes a radical departure: it always assumes Serach's and Paloma's wholeness, despite the toll of living against expectation, and their right to a happy ending—together.



**★ I AM YOURS**  
**A Shared Memoir**

Reema Zaman, Amberjack Publishing (JANUARY)  
 Hardcover \$24.99 (300pp), 978-1-948705-11-0

"Long ago I stopped trying to explain you to anyone," Reema Zaman says to her imaginary interlocutor, addressed simply as "Love." Caught "somewhere between formed and forming," Zaman archives a personal journey that's intimate and attuned to a wider cultural moment. A staggering work filled with presence, *I Am Yours* provides a profound explanation of love, delivered as an act of witness.

In Bangladesh, Zaman's family rose through the socio-economic ranks, from poverty to brushing shoulders with the world's one percent, due to her father's work at the UN. An astute, empathic observer by the time she graduated high school, Zaman witnessed a world of difference, inside and outside her home. For university, she embarked to the US to study acting, intending to use it as a form of activism. Inevitably, her path lead to New York City.

But these are dry facts. They don't begin to touch on the substance and meaning that Zaman finds in their scope.

An epistolary to love, Zaman's story is stunning. In a never-ending test to prove herself worthy, she achieves and achieves. Yet, frequently, her achievement feeds a punishing internal voice or makes her a target for external punishment. The sexism, assault, and fundamental violence she experiences because of fat phobia, race, misogyny, and patriarchy—all the shattering particulars of her life—are shown as no more than the warp and weft of any system that insists womanhood should simultaneously make and break a person.

Toward the end, Zaman determines that "sometimes, a scrap of sentence is the match that lights a flame. If I ever write a book, it will be to give all of us more than a hurried line of love." Powerfully vulnerable and eloquent, Zaman's voice is a fire—full-throated, wide-open, and roaring. ♥