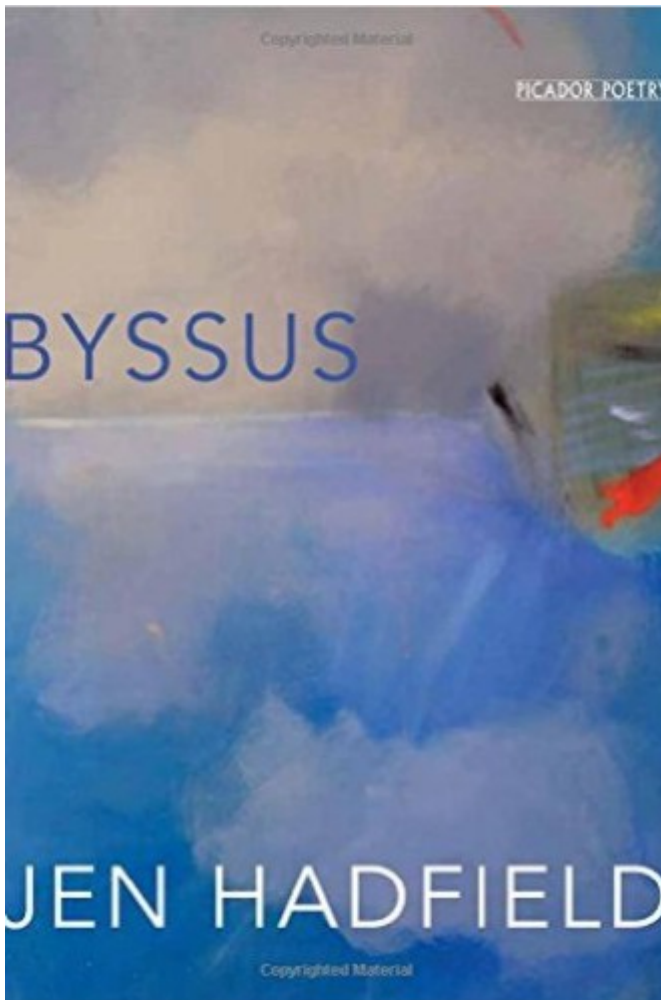


Chris Wiman's Christmas picks

selected by [Christian Wiman](#) in the [December 9, 2015](#) issue

In Review



Byssus

by Jen Hadfield

Picador



Bedouin of the London Evening

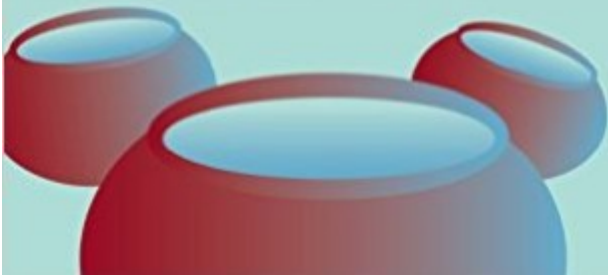
by Rosemary Tonks

Bloodaxe

 EYEWEAR PUBLISHING

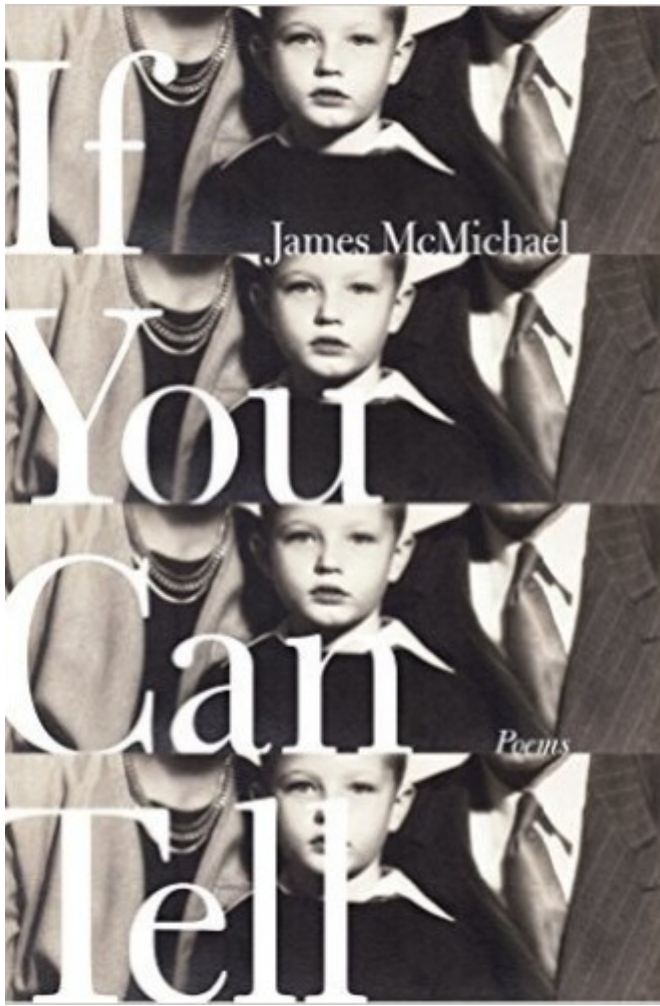
HESTER
KNIBBE
HUNGERPOTS
NEW & SELECTED POEMS

TRANSLATED BY
JACQUELYN POPE



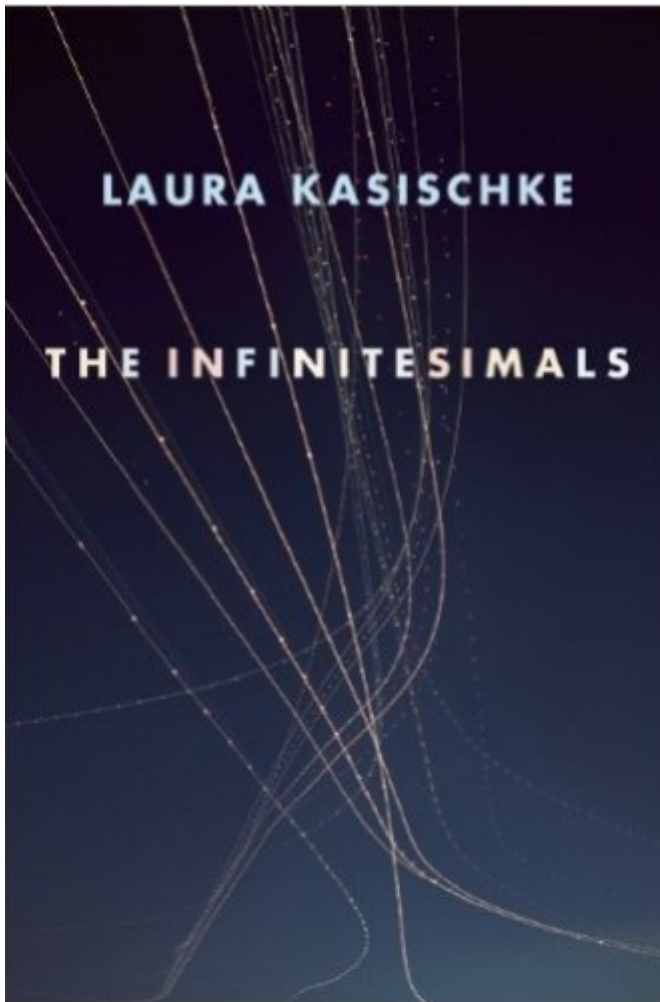
Hungerpots

by Hester Knibbe
Eyewear Publishing



If You Can Tell

by James McMichael
Farrar, Straus and Giroux



The Infinitesimals

by Laura Kasischke
Copper Canyon Press

A couple of years ago I ordered a book by Jen Hadfield on the strength of a vividly disgusting couplet I came across somewhere or other: “Under the broiler / turned sausages ejaculate.” (That’s *turned* as in forgotten and rotting—Hadfield’s idiom is Scottish, as are her eye and ear.) The book was strong, but *Byssus* (Picador), her new collection, is even stronger. “Are we taking up the first language / or must we coin / a new one?” she asks in one poem. The answer is both, a task that Hadfield is managing brilliantly. Rosemary Tonks gave up poetry for God in her fifties and spent the rest of her life evangelizing on street corners, poring over the Bible like birds’ entrails, and basically erasing herself from existence. Before that she wrote novels, criticism, and two volumes of strange, difficult, and utterly singular verse that, since her death in 2014, has finally been rescued from the oblivion she wanted for it. “I have been young too long, and in a dressing-gown / My private modern life has gone

to waste.” It hadn’t, actually, as her new collected poems, *Bedouin of the London Evening*, demonstrates (Bloodaxe). Hester Knibbe’s latest collection is called *Hungerpots* (Eyewear Publishing). What is a hungerpot? I suspect we all know, even if we choose not to. “They’re steeped to their lips in bronzed silence. O / let their bellies chime like clocks, whack / with ladles and sticks, drive devilish / death out of those pots!” Knibbe is apparently well known in her native Holland, but poetry is locked in its language of origin until another poet discovers in herself exactly the right musical key. Poet and translator Jacquelyn Pope has done exactly that with *Hungerpots*, and in the process conjured an entirely new voice for American readers. James McMichael’s new book, *If You Can Tell* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux), reads like the work of a man who has had a conversion—a difficult, credible, and apparently permanent conversion. Just about every moment of this book proceeds from that rift, or gift, or both. Here are the lines that most moved me: “I need one / cranny in faith / not claimed by the Resurrection.” I wish I didn’t understand this so intimately, but I’m grateful to have it (and so much else) expressed and explored so lucidly here. It’s impossible to convey in this small space just how weird and mercurial are the poems of Laura Kasischke. If you’ve never read her before, Google a poem called “O elegant giant.” It isn’t in *The Infinitesimals* (Copper Canyon Press), but there are plenty of signature moments, like the mushrooms that all night long are “spun . . . out of thought and nothingness” until God “grants them teeth and tongues” (and, wary reader, a sadness so ordinary it will break your heart).