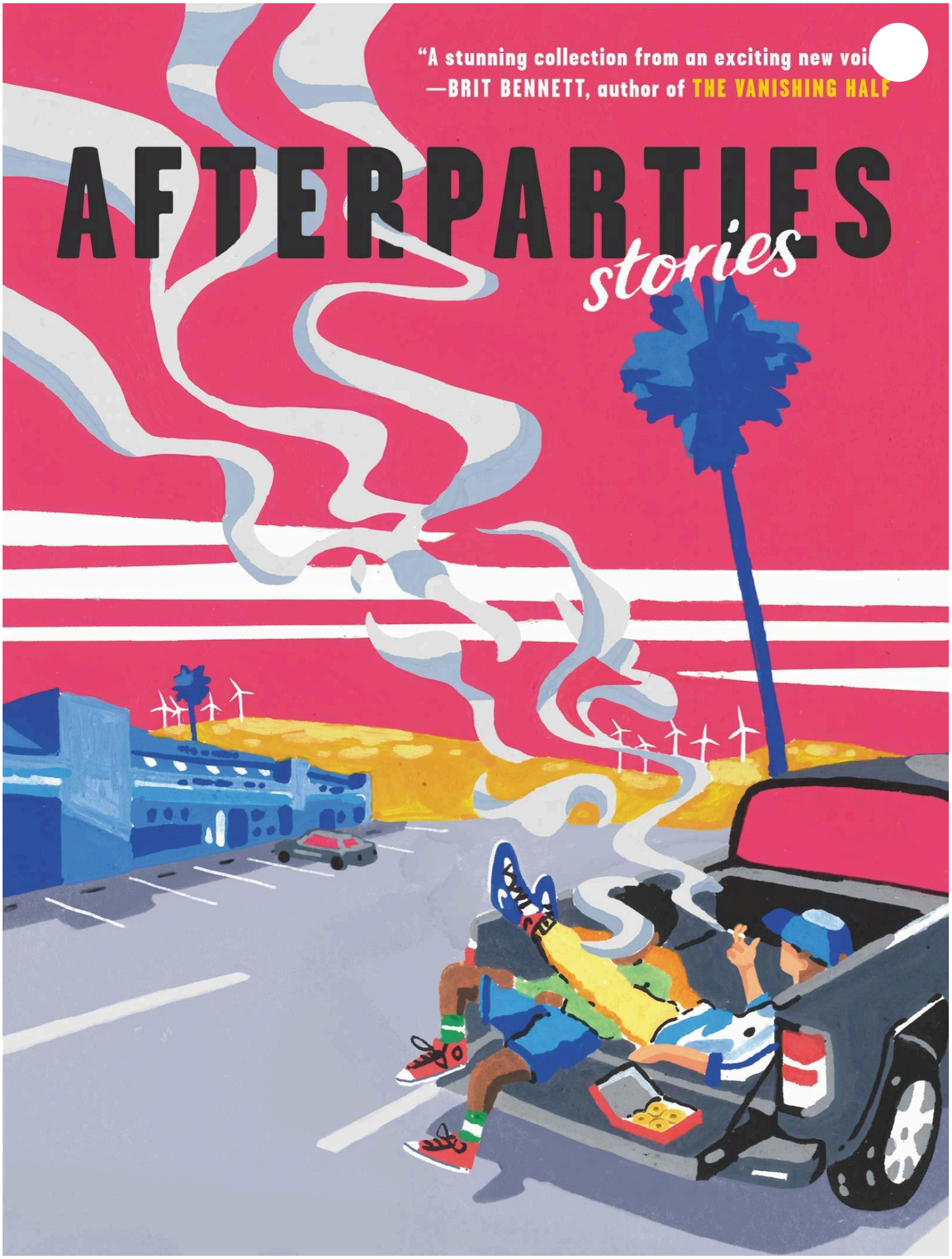
"A stunning collection from an exciting new voi
—BRIT BENNETT, author of THE VANISHING HALF
AFTERPARTIES
stories

Reviews

The Gift That Keeps On Giving

Book Review—Afterparties

Sky O'Brien
December 20, 2021

Afterparties, Ecco, 2021

Afterparties
by Anthony Veasna So
Ecco, $27.99

If the title of Anthony Veasna So's debut collection of stories, *Afterparties*, is a way of thinking about the stories themselves, then the party, the main event that his Khmer American characters are leaving, is genocide. It's an impossible departure. The Khmer Rouge's rampage, which murdered millions of Cambodians from 1975 to 1979 and led So's parents to California, haunts every character in the book. And as keen as they are to get away from the pain, to leave the party once and for all, trauma keeps them in remembered time.

Much has already been said about *Afterparties*. When So died of a drug overdose in December 2020, eight months before the book's release, the *New York Times* set the tone with a heady obituary: "Anthony Veasna So, Author on the Brink of Stardom, Dies at 28." The certainty of So's celebrity, cut short by his death, has been ever-present since then. "Anthony Veasna So Knew He

Was a Star" (Vulture). "A Young Literary Star Makes His Posthumous Debut With 'Afterparties'" (NPR). Even the *Times* came back for more: "A Rising Star's Career Was Cut Short. His Impact Is Just Beginning."

Not all of this limelight was preordained. So was good. So good he coaxed today's literary establishment into realizing geniuses *might* be okay, but only if they're not *white*. "His genius wasn't subtle," wrote Mark Krotov, the first to publish So's stories at *n+1*, "it was a beautiful onrush." Queer, second generation Khmer American, and raised by immigrants in Stockton, which one of his characters calls the "asshole of California," So's "genius" was his indifference to inheritance: Unbound by accepted ethnic and queer identities, his vision of Cambodian American life is unforgiving and his spare descriptions of gay desire make Garth Greenwell sound like E. L. James. From characters wrestling with legacies of Khmer Buddhism to the Communist regime to West Coast technologism, nothing was safe from his sardonic wit.

"We could do it on Buddha," jokes Rithy in "The Monks." He's talking about cumming. "You wanna get me kicked out?" says the monk who's masturbating with him. Until then, Rithy has been trying to honor the spirit of his recently deceased father by staying at the local wat. But all he's doing are chores, and he's sure the monks are using him (they didn't like his dad). "All I want is some guidance," Rithy says earlier. All he gets is a muddy truth that shows up again and again in *Afterparties*. "Look, traditions don't gotta be logical," a monk tells Rithy. "We aren't home, so why the hell would anything make sense?"

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Monks get another mocking in "The Shop." Toby's Cambodian dad owns an auto repair shop, but his kindness runs it into the ground (he won't fire his

bad "Cambo" workers and he gives too many discounts to "Cambo" folk). At one point Doctor Heng's wife, who visits everyday and won't shut up about her husband's success in America, brings a statue of Buddha to boost the Shop's karma. Soon the waiting room is overrun with Buddhas, but it's not enough and monks are summoned for a last-ditch blessing. After marching in behind Doctor Heng's wife,

> the monks walked around the Shop, examining the corners and crevices, sprinkling blessed water over the grease stained walls. When they finished the inspection, the monks lit their incense in every room, even the storage room, with those cases of flammable Mobil 5W-30. The aroma of burning flowers, I guessed, was supposed to create a force field that would thwart evil spirits while attracting customers.

Smoky like the incense he taunts, So's wit is never malicious. It's rooted in doubt, which his characters express in confessions of dislocation from the traditions they left in Cambodia. Contemporary America, less a land of the free, is a land free of spiritual belief, at least in the lives of So's young protagonists—sexy, sarcastic millennials and Gen Zers—who only have their parents' memories of a land where faith fortified the future, until it didn't. "What had we done to deserve such violence?" asks Toby. "How terrible it must have been, our country and culture's past karma." Severed from the genocide that severed their parents from their homeland, So's protagonists, like himself, can only wonder.

"He talks about the genocide by telling it aslant," Danny Thanh Nguyen wrote in a review for *GQ*, "focusing instead on the experiences of a new generation of Cambodian Americans, young adults raised and marked by those who survived catastrophe." Helen Atsma, So's editor at Ecco, voiced similar praise, in terms which are as much a celebration of So's brilliance as they are a celebration of the freedom he had, as the queer son of refugees, to host the afterparty of atrocity. "The community that Anthony was writing about has been underrepresented in fiction," Atsma told the *Times*. "This whole community is haunted by genocide, and yet you're also laughing out loud when you're reading some of these stories."

In the hype of So's death, Ecco, an imprint of empire (i.e., HarperCollins), printed a first run of 100,000 *Afterparties* and will release a second book of nonfiction in 2023. So's agent, Rob McQuilkin, has downplayed the celebrity post mortem. "The notion that this book was helped in some ghoulish way by the absence of the author is in error," he told the *Times*. But death is, inevitably, part of the story, and just as no one can deny that So was a gifted humorist—one of those rare storytellers like George Saunders or Lysley Tenorio who can tease laughter from the absurdities of human suffering—it's impossible to ignore the market's incessant appetite for famous dead artists. "Laughter permits man to prove his essential freedom," wrote Hannah

Arendt, "through a kind of serene superiority to his own failures." Anthony Veasna So was as serene—and serenely profitable—as they come.

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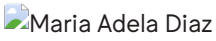

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