



The Butter House

Sarah Gerard

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In Sarah Gerard's spare and elegant novella *The Butter House*, a woman seeks solace and contemplates her future while she settles into a new home with her boyfriend and two cats.

The woman and her boyfriend leave Brooklyn for an "idyllic" town in the semitropics where he has a one-year assignment to observe and document white ibis for the state's wildlife agency. The couple considers having a family someday; for now, the woman studies, rests, and wonders how she can use her graduate degree in psychology. While her boyfriend spends his days observing tropical birds, she frets over their pet cats, as well as the stray cats in the neighborhood, whose habits she tracks while feeding them plates of kibble, rotisserie chicken, and salmon skin. She also cultivates a garden in the untended, "in need of love" backyard.

There are occasional touches upon the couple's relationship: she flits around their rented bungalow like a "nesting bird" and admires her boyfriend's "tendency to follow hope, foreign to her." But the book's focus is on the woman's close observations of the cats, which she sometimes worries are mere "props" on the set of her life, and her efforts to bring the garden to life. Its prose is poetic, haunting, and pensive. As the girlfriend digs into the resistant earth and coaxes life from what is dying, she finds healing and a tranquil purpose, "a hidden grammar beneath consciousness, older than any language." Quiet and wounded, she discovers a sense of "peace with her cosmic insignificance" and realizes that she is less "human, more being."

Meditative, wise, and worth revisiting, *The Butter House* is a novella about finding meaning in one's connections with animals and in the cultivation of a garden.

KRISTEN RABE (May / June 2023)

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