Better Times

Sara Batkie
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Moving from the recent past into the future, Sara Batkie's short story collection *Better Times* traverses lives that are subtly or drastically twisted away from what is familiar. Mystery and surrealism underlie the mundane, their charges lingering in the air.

Divided into three sections—"The Recent Past," "The Modern Age," and "The World to Come"—the collection strikes a continual balance between anticipation and nostalgia for a time that never quite materializes. It lingers on thresholds. Within and between sections, stories exist in times that are not definitely stated or clearly chronological; the structural utility of the divisions becomes unclear. Whether they are set in the present, the future, or the past, though, the stories' emotional complexity is the same.

Like a painter executing a landscape study, Batkie creates atmospheres, layering emotional textures and moods upon one another from story to story. Each is "just one part of a silence so full and complete it was as if it was waiting to be heard." The stories dip into everyday lives, from a Japanese family during World War II to a woman trying to get rid of her ghost breast to half of a polar village that wakes up to discover that they're adrift. These characters are besieged. Distance and alienation are a prevailing theme.

From addressing its characters' heartbreaks to their grief to their deep, unrelieved uncertainty, *Better Times* sets an unhurried pace. There's both tension and a distinct lack of urgency in these narratives—a controlled lethargy that feeds, rather than diminishes, the emotional stakes. Each situation is suffused with an air of hopelessness. The promise of better times is revealed as a platitude; moments refuse to pass.

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (November/December 2018)

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