

J. Robert Baker

“where the driveway meets the road”

Cary Holladay. *Brides in the Sky: Stories and a Novella*. Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 2019.

Brides in the Sky is a welcome addition to Cary Holladay’s six earlier volumes of fiction. Like those books, this new collection offers the pleasures and delights of reading well-made stories. Here, Holladay’s characters find themselves, time and again, out of their depth. Harried by life’s circumstances, they lack experience and words to grasp what befalls them. Holladay never judges their sparse understanding but treats it compassionately as an ordinary human experience.

The opening story, “Brides in the Sky,” sets up the bewilderment of Holladay’s characters and introduces a theme in many of the other stories—the unpredictability of the world and of other people, both of which are metaphors for the unknowability of the depths of one’s own heart. Left alone on the family farm at the death of their parents in the 1850s, Kate and Olivia Christopher don’t know what to do as the farm fails. When Martin and Andrew Sibley marry them, the four strike out for Oregon, but marriage and migration only increase Kate’s perplexity. “Kate and Martin rarely talked about bodily process. She didn’t know many words for them, and he didn’t either, except for the vulgar, childish ones.” Nor does she understand when Olivia tells her that Susan Edmiston has asked for help because Olivia’s husband “‘James won’t leave her alone.’” Olivia is unwilling to say more, so Kate remains unsure if James and Olivia are having sex, but she notices when they are both often absent. She is baffled by her own attraction to James and decimated by Olivia’s decision to go to California with the Edmistons. Kate never hears from her sister again, and for the rest of her life “she hated the trail and her younger self for not knowing how to hold on to the sister she loved so much.” She endures the incomprehensible loss of Olivia and transmutes the hurt. Just as Orion transforms the seven sisters into the shining Pleiades, Holladay lifts Kate—and all her characters—into the firmament of fiction to sparkle against the dark indecipherability of human experience.

Inscrutability is a constant in these stories, no matter the setting. In “Shades,” Roma, the president of a campus sorority, is disconcerted when Natalie, one of her sorority sisters, brings back a boy named Warren when she goes to pick up barbecue during rush

week. She has been equally unsettled by Natalie's willful stealing of the boyfriends of her sorority sisters. Worried that the police will investigate Warren's abduction, she really wants for the national officers to recognize how special the chapter is. None of the three characters has much grasp of what happens. Roma is constrained by her desire to be the best president of the best sorority. Limited in reason, Warren returns to his family believing that Natalie really is a queen and not just a young woman crowned at a hometown festival, and Natalie does not comprehend her motivations or her self-absorbed actions.

In "Comanche Queen," Nautdah, who was born Cynthia Ann Parker, embodies Holladay's great theme. Abducted as a child by Indians, she is repatriated to her family as an adult. The white women who wash her face and hair cannot fathom her resistance to being a white woman or her insistence on being called Nautdah. Her uncle cannot understand why she made no efforts to escape, and the Methodist preacher is perturbed that she is not overjoyed at being restored to white people. Ruth comes closest to recognizing Nautdah's predicament: "There was another emotion in her heart, too, a welter she couldn't parse." That inexplicability is true, too, of Nautdah's sister-in-law Katherine who takes up with a man while her husband is fighting the Civil War only to find he is cruel, even crazy. When her husband returns, she is surprised to find she now truly loves him. As a grandmother, Katherine wants to explain the difference between herself and Nautdah as luck. She misses, though, the apophatic nature of human experience.

In "A Thousand Stings," set in 1967, Shirley, a young girl in Virginia, is increasingly aware of a larger world, which she imagines begins "where the driveway meets the road: that's the edge of the world, amazing as the ocean." She is poised on the cusp of puberty, aware of but not sharing other girls' attraction to Ray West. During the Summer of Love, Shirley discovers that grown-ups are capable of things she didn't know they could do. Cal Mims, the new preacher, begins an affair with Ginger Ficklin and moves her into his home with his wife. She finds that morality is trumped by the adults' interest: "fascination with Cal Mims and Ginger Ficklin runs so high that people just can't stay away."

Ray West's lunch box with an astronaut on its lid becomes a metaphor for Shirley and for many of Holladay's characters. Despite her lack of knowledge, Shirley proves to be an astronaut, exploring the reaches of her life. If bafflement is the stock fate of Holladay's characters, her greatest admiration is for those, like Shirley, who tolerate the muddled welter and continue on.