Hudson Review
Summer 2019
BRIDES IN THE SKY: Stories and a Novella, by Cary Holladay. Swallow Press. $18.95p.
Reviewed by Susan Balée

Of all the short story collections I read, my hands-down favorite is Brides in the Sky by Cary Holladay. It turns out two of the stories here originally appeared in this magazine, but I didn’t realize that until after I finished the collection and flipped to the page that showed me where the stories had first been published. Holladay does the historical narrative story better than almost anyone, and I’m including Claire Vaye Watkins and Emma Donoghue, who have written brilliant stories set in other times. The title tale of this volume follows two Virginia sisters who lose their parents in 1854 and find it impossible to farm the hardscrabble land they’ve inherited. Instead, they marry two brothers and head to Oregon with them. I used to love to read the journals and letters of pioneers on the Westward trail, and I believe Holladay must have too. But she’s taken her gift for fiction and made a compelling story out of all the hopes and fears those people lived with. To survive the journey, travelers needed luck as well as good management, and lots of the pioneers believed a higher power watched over them. “Kate believed they were charmed. To others came the mishaps and misfortunes—broken axles, capsized ferries, soured potatoes, and bouts of dysentery, typhoid, and measles. People often had themselves to blame for their perils, and illness could strike anywhere. Those who sickened might have done so at home. Her party enjoyed health and well-being.” At least, many of those religious pioneers believed their journey was charmed right until it wasn’t, and then they wondered if it was cursed.

Holladay channels the pioneer mindset wonderfully, and is almost as good with her story about Cynthia Ann Parker, an actual woman captured by the Comanche, then returned to her family years later. “Comanche Queen” is the name of this story, and a character, speaking to Cynthia, locates the conundrum at the heart of the situation: “‘You been took twice, Cindy,’ Lorna said, her voice hollow in the darkness. ‘First by Indians, now by whites, and you ain’t either one.’” Needless to say, Cynthia Parker did everything she could to escape from her white family and return to the Comanches. Having read Paulette Jiles’s novel News of the World with its identical theme, I’m curious to learn whose fresh take on Western history inspired both authors. Holladay’s original short story and Jiles’s novel both came out in 2016.

I devoured this collection on a transcontinental plane flight and only wished it were longer. Holladay has a sense of humor equal to her sense
of history, and I was drawn to the story “Fairy Tales,” which takes place near Culpeper, Virginia, an area I know well as my son spent four years just down the road in Charlottesville. In his college town, shortly before he got there, a girl went missing and was later found murdered. A missing girl powers this story, too, and animates my favorite character, the local crackpot Sandy Elder. Sandy’s exchange with her wealthy neighbor Jessica, a newlywed who’s recently moved into her husband’s childhood home, is priceless. When Sandy comes over, Jessica’s husband is in Thailand on business.

“Thailand,” she said. “Isn’t that where people go for plastic surgery?” She’d seen it on TV. “You can have a face-lift plus a vacation.” Jessica’s mouth went tight.

“What if Kurt comes back like this?” Sandy sucked in her cheeks and stretched her eyes with her fingers, “with the little bitty pixie ears. They do the ears too.” Jessica set her mug down with a thud, but Sandy couldn’t stop.

“A friend of mine married this guy she thought was rich,” she said, riffing, making it up, “and he got a face-lift, and it turned out all creepy.” She made a goofy expression, squinting and lolling her tongue. “And soon he was asking her for money. He didn’t have a dime. And she divorced him.”

There’s more to this exchange, and all of it is hilarious. Discovering Cary Holladay is the best thing that happened to me during my months of reading for this chronicle. Her stories take you in with vivid characters, compelling plots, humor and insight. I’m delighted to learn she’s published seven previous volumes of fiction, so I can spend longer than a plane ride spellbound by narrative.