

SHORT STORY NIGHT



INTERVIEW WITH
AUTHOR LYDI CONKLIN!
(TIN HOUSE, PARIS REVIEW,
AUTHOR OF THE COLLECTION
"RAINBOW, RAINBOW")

Pioneer

LYDI CONKLIN

READ THESE STORIES AND JOIN NEENAH PUBLIC
LIBRARY STAFF AT LION'S TAIL BREWING
MONDAY, NOVEMBER 11TH AT 7:00 PM
FOR A ONE-HOUR DISCUSSION FEATURING TRIVIA,
LAUGHS, AND OTHER SURPRISES. 21 AND OLDER.

Lydia Conklin — Chapter House Journal

 chjournal.com/lydia-conklin/

Pioneer

Originally published by The Southern Review

The Oregon Trail ran from the back entrance of Bridge Elementary down through the school yard to the edge of the woods. Cones marked the journey. Not the satisfying rubber cones you could squish down with your body weight but hard plastic cones, prim and pointed like shark teeth. The cones looped around the tree line to the right, and that's all Coco and the rest of the Culver family could see from the starting point. Who knew where the trail went after that? There were dangers, she'd heard, though she didn't know exactly what.

Coco had not been assigned to the Culver family when Ms. Harper passed out the biography cards last week. Coco's card listed her as the matriarch of the Bell family. But she didn't want to be a matriarch. While the class wandered around collecting their families, Coco asked Devon, the Bell patriarch, if she could be a child instead.

"We already have two children," Devon said. "And there can't be children without a matriarch."

"Sure there can," said Coco. "The matriarch could have died." They could make up some woman who had long since perished. Recalling her benevolence could pass the time on the trail.

"You want to be dead?" asked Devon.

"No," Coco said. Not right now, anyway. "I just don't want to be the Bell matriarch. I want to be a Bell child."

"Why?"

Coco didn't want to say so to Devon, but she was uneasy in dresses and skirts, knowing the wind could disrupt the fabric and expose the part of her that she hated most, that felt wrong attached to her, and that she sometimes pretended she didn't know was there. In the role of a child, she could fake it, pretend to be an eighteen hundred's tomboy. As a matriarch there was no option. She would have to look like a woman. Ever since Coco's body had started to develop a few months ago, she couldn't take a bath without laying washcloths

over her torso and between her legs, so she could forget the wrongness of her body. As the cloth chilled it suctioned to her, stiffened like plaster around her form. Only then could she look down.

“I don’t have the right clothes,” she said.

“Ms. Harper said the girls could staple a sheet,” Devon said. “A long sheet. Like touching the ground.”

“Wouldn’t it get dirty?” Coco pictured herself as a bedraggled angel.

Devon shrugged.

At first Coco thought she wouldn’t travel the Oregon Trail at all. She’d never played sick before, and that seemed like the type of mischief every kid should try once. But missing the day would be a crazy move. First, because Coco loved Ms. Harper and would never lie to her. But besides that, the Oregon Trail was the culmination of the fifth graders’ hard work through Bridge Elementary. Her classmates had talked about the day since kindergarten, when they’d first glimpsed the wagons pulled through the field by what looked like small adults. The Oregon Trail would probably be reminisced about all through middle and high school as the pinnacle of their education.

The day before the Oregon Trail, Coco asked the other families in Ms. Harper’s class if she could join up with them.

“Do you need a baby?” she asked the Murdochs and the Hancocks, the Bakers and the Blackthorns. “Or an adolescent?”

“No,” they said, if they bothered with her at all. Even though it was still regular school until tomorrow, the families were already insular and protective, clumping around desks between subjects.

“Aren’t you a matriarch yourself?” the Blackthorn matriarch asked.

“I don’t want to be,” said Coco. “I want to be a kid.”

“That’s nonsense. You should accept your station.”

“Yeah,” said the Blackthorn son, who blew his nose on his math work sheets. “Matriarchy is an incredible honor. Women rule.”

“Want to trade?” Coco asked.

“That’s gay,” he said cheerfully, as though that might be a good thing. “But thank you very much anyway.”

None of the girls assigned as daughters were interested in becoming matriarchs. Or at least they wouldn't admit it to Coco. The best Coco could do was join the Culver family, who offered her the role of an ox.

"You can pull our wagon," said the Culver family patriarch. "If you can find another ox, we'll yoke you. It'll be super."

At home that night, Coco stuffed yellow triangles of felt with dry grass for horns and attached them to the cap of her headgear. She prepared a poncho that simulated the powerful shoulders of an animal and tied a piece of rope to her belt for a tail.

"Coco," her mom said. "I thought you were a matriarch?"

Lately Coco didn't like the sound of her own name, which had always sounded like a pet's name or like the name of a girl with bright makeup in a Western saloon. It was embarrassingly girlish, like someone had stapled balloons to her chest and she suddenly had breasts. She twitched like she'd been hit. "I used to be."

"You look . . . You look like . . . I don't want to say it."

"What?" Coco struggled to speak clearly. Even though her headgear was for night wear only, she'd hooked the mouthpiece into the metal tubes on her molars, because otherwise the cap didn't stay taut on her head. "What do I look like?"

Her horns flopped over her eyes. Her mother didn't answer.

The next day all four fifth-grade classes lined up at the head of the Oregon Trail. Each class was divided into six families of three or four members. Coco couldn't believe how meticulously people were dressed. The matriarchs wore full hoopskirts and aprons, bonnets and bodices with puffy sleeves, colonial dirt rubbed purposely on the hemlines. The fathers and uncles wore leather vests and hats; the boys wore britches. The families pulled red wagons and wheelbarrows to which they'd attached Hula-Hoops with sheets over them, so they looked like real covered wagons. How did they get all this stuff? Everyone must have started collecting when they'd first glimpsed the procession back in kindergarten.

Coco walked through the families in Mr. Bennett's class and Ms. Goldberg's class and Mrs. Hedgerow's class. Everyone stared.

"Are you a dog?" someone asked. "With headgear?"

"Are you an alien?"

"You look gay," said Devon, the Bell patriarch, who stood with a Radio Flyer and two motherless children.

“What do you mean?” Coco asked.

“Like a gay person? Ever heard of one? They’re actually real. It’s sick.” He chuckled, joking with himself. “See? Every girl here’s wearing a dress. Even the kids.”

“So?” She didn’t have to look to know he was right.

“You’re wearing stretch pants and a poncho and ears.”

“I’m an ox.” She tried to sound proud, like she’d chosen the role on purpose.

“An ox?” one of her ex-children said. “You’d rather be an ox than our mother?”

Coco’s ex-children were Peter and Marley. Peter was pale and smelled like the sawdust that the janitors threw down when someone was sick on the floor. But Marley was actually popular. Coco wondered why she hadn’t stepped into the leftover role of matriarch. She was wearing the short skirt of a child.

Last week, Marley said Coco was chubby and stupid. That the headgear tubes on her molars poked into her cheeks and made her look part robot. Marley accosted Coco at the water fountain with a mechanical voice: “Ro-bot Co-co is a big-fat dumb-bell.” Meanwhile, Peter orbited around Coco in a separate sphere. While Coco tried, and failed, to make friends with whomever she could hook, Peter seemed pleased to be alone. Whenever she talked to him he smiled the wan smile of a beleaguered teacher and nodded.

“Yes,” Coco said. “I’d rather be an ox.”

She found the Culver family at the end of the row. The Culver patriarch, a boy named Ryan, stood with the Culver matriarch, Victoria, at the front of a loaded wheelbarrow. They had no children, but still preferred Coco act the role of an ox.

“Where are your rations?” Ryan asked, indicating the bed of the wheelbarrow, which was filled with baskets. The baskets held naked loaves of supermarket bread, unshucked ears of corn, plastic containers of dry oatmeal. “I expect every member of the Culver family to contribute to our stock.”

“I brought flour,” said Victoria, who wasn’t the smiling type. She wore a dark dress and a bonnet tight around her face.

“Sorry,” said Coco. “I didn’t know oxen fed their families in colonial times.”

Ryan glared and passed the handles of the wheelbarrow to her. “I can see we need to break you.”

Mr. Bennett's class and Ms. Goldberg's class filed down the trail. The Culver family marched. The wheelbarrow, full as it was of grain, was exceedingly heavy. Coco had to rest the handles on her back and hunch over so she was nearly crawling. Other families, none of whom had oxen, shared the burden of their wagons and wheelbarrows. No one else had rations. Ryan swallowed handfuls of oatmeal and hunks of bread as he walked. Coco only hoped he'd keep at it and lighten the load.

Halfway to the woods, the weight of the wheelbarrow increased significantly, and Coco dropped to her knees in the grass.

"Mush!" Victoria cried. She had climbed on top of the wagon. Coco pushed back up to her feet and braced to bear the new load.

The first official obstacle on the Oregon Trail was disease. They arrived at a sign shaped like a gravestone that read disease. A ghost popped up from behind the sign.

"I am the Spirit of Multiple Diseases," said the ghost.

Some of the families screamed. But it was obvious by the Long Island accent and red plastic glasses worn over the eyeholes in the sheet that the Spirit of Multiple Diseases was Ms. Goldberg. She pointed a long finger at random family members.

"Dysentery," she said. "Yellow fever. Dysentery. Scarlet fever. Yellow fever. Scarlet fever. Dysentery."

The chosen family members grabbed their hearts. Both of the Bell children were picked. Coco was given scarlet fever. Victoria, in the wagon, was selected for dysentery.

"Now," Ms. Goldberg said. "If your name starts with a letter between *A* and *E*, your disease is mild. You survive to live another day. Congratulations."

Shrieks of laughter and manic clapping rose among the mild sufferers. Coco felt her heart lift, though she didn't join the cheers.

"If your first name begins with *F* to *O*, your disease is moderate. You live."

The group of moderates included Coco's ex-child Marley, the popular girl. She and the other moderate sufferers celebrated.

"Ah," said Ms. Goldberg. "But wait. You live, but unlike the mild sufferers, you do not escape unscathed. For the remainder of the journey, you must march with one leg dragging. The choice of leg is up to you, but it must always be behind you."

Marley said, "That's bull!"

"And now for *P* to *Z*," said Ms. Goldberg. "Are you children ready for your fate?"

“Oh God,” moaned Victoria from the wagon. “I don’t want to limp all day in the sun.”

Victoria wouldn’t be doing much limping anyway, perched as she was on the rations. Even if both her feet were struck down, Coco would just keep pulling her along.

“Severe sufferers,” Ms. Goldberg said. “You are dead. Please step forward.”

Victoria got off the wagon, lightening the load so fast that Coco’s back snapped straight. Coco’s ex-child Peter also marched forward, along with several other sufferers. They stood before Ms. Goldberg.

“Join the mass grave.”

The severe sufferers lay down in front of the gravestone sign, the bottoms of their feet wagging at the survivors. Coco tried not to rejoice at their fate. Smiling with her headgear hurt, anyway.

“March on, brave pioneers,” Ms. Goldberg said to the remaining party. “But march with heavy hearts.”

The Oregon Trail wound down to the rim of the woodlands. There the party turned and marched along the tree line. After the monkey bars and swing set was a creek that cut through the playground. The creek was three inches deep, and children were forever damming it up, opposed, for some reason, to its free flow. Full of rocks and pine needles, the creek was made even shallower than its already pathetic potential. Even so, parents regularly rallied against it, claiming children could drown in an inch of water. Coco had squatted at the creek before, placing her face as close as she could to the surface. The thin water slid over mud, blurring her eyes, and she’d thought, All I would have to do is push my nose in.

Mrs. Hedgerow appeared at the other side of the creek. “Halt, party.” Her breasts and stomach bubbled under a garment of blue rubber. She’d stapled toy fish to her outfit like a kind of Mother River.

“Kudos,” Mrs. Hedgerow said. “You have reached the Goodstone Waterway.”

“That’s just the creek,” Ryan said. “Big whoop.”

“It is indeed a big whoop, young man,” Mrs. Hedgerow said. “For you must find a way to cross it.”

“I know how to cross it,” said Ryan. “That’s so easy it’s stupid.”

He leapt on the wheelbarrow. Coco was ready this time. She didn’t fall.

“Mush!” called Ryan. “Mush, ox!”

Coco stiffened. The whole living fifth-grade class was staring at her. She hated when people stared at her. She always thought there was something they could see that she couldn't. Even so, she mushed forward. She put her feet through the Goodstone Waterway and dragged Ryan and the rations to shore. There, she turned the wheelbarrow to face her classmates. She tried not to feel pride. All she had done was what Ryan had forced her to do. That was not an accomplishment. From over her head he threw a chunk of bread at the unlucky souls on the far shore. The chunk landed in the creek, swelling below the surface like a decaying body part.

"Mr. Culver, please settle down," said Mrs. Hedgerow. "Remember, you are a pillar of this community."

"I am?" asked Ryan.

"Consult your biography card, young man, and you will find you are a member of the local council and a well-respected truth teller."

None of the fifth graders had read their biography cards. They were too hard. All Coco had read on hers was, "Eleanor Bell is a most curious and intriguing lady of the middling fiscal class," before she gave up.

"I regret to say that Mr. Culver has indeed chosen a legitimate route across the Goodstone Waterway. I did not know you children were issued oxen this year. Anyone else who has an ox may step forward at this time."

No one did, so Mrs. Hedgerow gave the sign for the crossing to begin. She narrated the travails of each family. Whole parties were sent back halfway through because their wagons buckled and their families drowned. The Blackthorn son was sucked dry by leeches. The Murdoch patriarch contracted giardia and perished when he was already on the other side, observing the Baker family crossing. Some individuals were singled out as drowners, like Coco's ex-child Marley.

"Your limp handicapped you," Mrs. Hedgerow said.

"Well, duh," said Marley.

"I mean to say it killed you."

By the end of the crossing Mrs. Hedgerow had killed thirty additional family members. She herded them away and left the depleted party to continue on. Coco wasn't sad to see Marley go.

Each family had lost at least one member. The peace of the insular groups had snapped and now they had to function as an unwieldy whole. Coco didn't know if they could manage. She wondered if, for the first time in the history of Bridge Elementary, the pioneers would

fail.

Ryan stood on the wagon, which waggled painfully over Coco's shoulders, the weight shifting as he sought his balance.

"Forward, party," he said. "We must press on."

The families lined up behind Ryan and Coco. Now that Ryan was exposed as an ox-owning pillar of the community, the party was eager to follow him.

Past the creek was a multipurpose field. Over the years, Coco had uncovered baby turtles in the field, a nest of condoms, and a gold ring. The grass was long. You could find anything in it.

"Keep to the tree line for cover," said Ryan, even though the orange cones ran a haywire path through the center of the field.

The families had not gone two hundred feet past the creek when Mr. Bennett jumped from the forest directly in front of the Culver family wagon. He wore grease paint smeared under his eyes and a suede coat with jangling tassels. He had a cardboard headband with stapled feathers. The feathers were each a foot long, and the most vibrant blues and yellows and scarlets. If they were real they would have been exceedingly valuable due to their size and color, but Coco recognized them immediately as craft feathers. Virtually worthless.

"You're under attack," Mr. Bennett announced.

"Who would dare attack us?" asked Ryan.

"The Feather Weather tribe," said Mr. Bennett.

Ryan's face twisted angrily. "Ha. Who is it, Ms. Harper?"

Mr. Bennett grinned as dead family members poured from between the trees. Each dead pioneer had their own headband and their own feathers. As they advanced, they stirred up the piney scent of the forest. There were more of them, Coco realized, than there were living pioneers. And they were armed.

Every member of the Feather Weather tribe carried a homemade bow fashioned from a stick and a string. The bows were serviceable for shooting kindling, though their power was dubious. Victoria led the pack, her face obscured by inelegant swaths of paint.

"Die, die!" she cried, shooting kindling from her bow.

"Anyone struck in the chest is considered dead," said Mr. Bennett.

The tribe poured onto the pioneers. Kindling bounced off their chests and backs. Coco dropped to four legs. Ryan tumbled off the wheelbarrow and rolled underneath. The crippled sufferers were felled first. Some pioneers leapt in front of the arrows, perhaps preferring to join the exciting band.

Coco prayed she wouldn't be shot. Even if the Feather Weather tribe was more fun, she didn't want to abandon her goal of completing the trail. Through the bright, dancing feathers and the twigs shooting through the sky, Coco peered west across the school yard. She felt like a true pioneer, going where no ten-year-old had gone before. One ocean behind her and another—one she'd never seen and may never reach—up ahead. She didn't want regular school to resume tomorrow. She wanted to survive, to stay in the game.

Mr. Bennett dragged dead bodies out of danger. Victoria pillaged the Culver family wagon, munching through half loaves of bread and shoveling dry tapioca and Wheatena into her mouth.

Marley and Peter, Coco's ex-children, surrounded her.

"So you won't be our mother?" asked Marley, aiming a deliberately sharpened twig at Coco's underside. "You're too good for us, huh?"

"Yeah. Huh?" asked Peter.

"You'd rather be livestock than our mother, huh? You'd rather be on your hands and knees and like, pooping in the grass, huh?"

Marley's eyes were wet as she stuttered out huh after huh. It seemed like Marley was actually asking, *Will you be our mother? Why aren't you our mother?* Maybe Marley wanted Coco to say, *I was wrong. I want to be your mother.* But Marley thought Coco was a fat, stupid robot.

Coco flattened down so her chest was met at every inch by grass and no one could strike her. She put her nose in the dirt so she couldn't see anything but a smudge of brown. A twig landed on her back so lightly it was almost loving. She told herself she would survive, no matter what.

When the massacre ended, all but a few had died. Ryan was alive, having avoided the tribe under the wagon. Devon, the Bell patriarch, was also alive, as were a few scattered matriarchs and patriarchs. All the children were dead.

The band met in the center of the field, which was littered with arrows. There were only seven pioneers left.

"How far do we have left?" asked Coco.

“Shut up, ox,” said Ryan. “Oxen don’t discuss.”

Coco shielded her eyes from the sun. The path swung through a patch of milkweed around to the front of the school. The markers were farther apart the longer you traveled the Oregon Trail. The teachers must have run low on cones.

“We need rations,” the Blackthorn matriarch said. “We’re starving.”

“Get out your rations then,” said Ryan.

“We don’t have any,” said the Blackthorn matriarch.

“Yeah,” said a kid in another class. “We don’t got none.”

“Well, you can’t have ours,” Ryan said. He turned to Coco. “Ox, guard the rations.”

“But they’re hungry,” said Coco. She didn’t get what the big deal was. She wasn’t hungry, but if the other pioneers were, they should eat. The Culvers had so much food, albeit food that no one would want.

“No,” said Ryan. “They’re fine.”

“We’re hungry,” said the Blackthorn family matriarch.

“We’re hungry,” said Devon.

Devon and the Blackthorn matriarch approached the Culver family wagon. “We’re hungry,” they chanted. “We’re hungry, hungry, hungry.” The other living party members joined the chant.

“Wait,” said Coco. “We’ll never eat all this.” Devon and the Blackthorn matriarch had been mean to her in the past, but so had almost everyone at Bridge, at one point or another. Coco tore off a chunk of loaf and held it out to Devon, who jammed it in his mouth. Ryan grabbed Coco’s wrist.

“That’s Culver family food,” he said. “Not ox food. Not community food.”

Ryan twisted Coco’s wrist as if he might snap it off her body and throw it into the wagon as an extra ration.

“You’re gay,” he said. He smirked at Devon and they laughed.

“I know, right?” said Devon.

“You’re worse than gay,” Ryan said. “You’re not even a person. You’re an ugly ox with ox balls. You’re a gross animal.”

The party chanted, “An-i-mal, an-i-mal.” Coco backed against the wheelbarrow as they approached.

Gripping the bread as a shield, Coco wondered if she actually was some kind of animal. That would explain things, in a way. She didn’t feel like anyone else at school. She wasn’t normal. She knew that.

The party got closer. Kids were holding rocks above their heads, the broken handle of a wagon, a bent length of Hula-Hoop, a torn white sheet flapping in the air. “An-i-mal,” they said. “An-i-mal.”

But Coco hadn’t wanted to be an ox, or any kind of animal. What she wanted to be was a boy. Like Devon or Ryan, but nicer. She wanted to wear short pants and follow behind a party, feed anyone who was hungry. She wanted to be a smooth-faced, shorthaired, colonial boy.

She scanned the mob. She wanted to tell them how she felt, but she couldn’t say it. The closest she’d ever come to knowing the truth was once when she’d seen a special on TV, while her mom was doing laundry. She’d just glimpsed the opening sequence, jarring music, a quick shot of needles, a chest with slugs of scar tissue under the nipples. The assault of images had scared her so much that she’d snapped the program off. She thought if her mom came in she’d immediately know the program was connected to Coco.

If she’d been able to be a boy on the Oregon Trail everything would have worked out. With all the funny costumes, the marshmallow wagons, no one would have noticed the difference. She’d change slowly after that. A baseball cap, a haircut, a nickname.

Devon’s fingertips reached for Coco’s chest. She screamed. The scream wasn’t a kid’s scream or a pioneer’s scream. It was wild and wet and injured. Like something you’d hear in the back of the woods, but only from a distance.

Devon and Ryan retreated on the lawn, terrified. “What’s your problem?” Ryan asked, sounding like he didn’t really want to know.

Then, a voice behind them said, “Greetings, party.” The moment she spoke, in that voice that could have been set to music, Coco knew she was Ms. Harper. The pioneers turned to face the final spirit.

“I am the Spirit of Personal Dissonance,” Ms. Harper said.

The Blackthorn matriarch backed up, spilling fists of flour like snow over the feet of the surviving party.

“Doesn’t sound scary,” Ryan said. “I don’t even know what that is.”

“Well,” said Ms. Harper. “I’m surprised you don’t know what dissonance is because you, young men, are the cause of it.”

“But I’m a pillar of this community,” said Ryan.

“Not anymore,” said Ms. Harper. She waved a twig in Ryan’s face. “Lie down. You were shot with a musket by the Bell patriarch.”

“Ha,” said Devon. “Gotcha.”

“Alas,” said Ms. Harper. “Not before the Bell patriarch was mortally wounded by the Blackthorn matriarch’s bayonet, which she then, in misery, turned on herself.”

Ms. Harper narrated the deaths of three pioneers from another class. That was the last of them; six pioneers slumped on the grass with their eyes shut. Coco couldn’t believe winning was this easy. But she didn’t feel proud.

“I’m not ready to die,” she said.

“It’s all right, Coco,” said Ms. Harper. “You don’t die.”

Coco took in a breath. “That’s not my name anymore.”

Ms. Harper looked confused, but then her expression settled. “The game’s over, honey.” She put her hand on Coco’s back to guide her back to school.

Really, the end of the simulation was just the beginning. Coco knew that now. Not even Ms. Harper could help her. Coco pulled away and turned to look across the yellow field, to the milkweed and the curved path of cones. The sun was a low white hole in the sky. She would go on her journey now. She would set off.