

Barbara Froman

The River Flows

2023 Short Story - Winner

The River Flows

1921

My hand was against my nose, sniffing my palm as I walked across the Oregon City suspension bridge. I smelled like a barnyard. The earthy musk of animal, straw, and dung clung to my hair, clothes, and skin. No matter how often I'd bathed, the aroma stayed in my pores.

Beside me, construction had begun on spans of a new arching bridge. Above me, multi-storied houses with wrap-around porches sat on the cliff, overlooking the Willamette River. A rich woman was probably looking down right now, watching me sniff myself. I bet the wealthy never smelled like sheep.

Below me, twenty feet, men scurried along the river bank. Two police cars parked on the road, and seven men climbed down the steep rocky embankment to the water's edge. Then I saw the body floating in a slow back eddy. Face down. Her skirt ballooning around her legs.

When they pulled her from the water, her long brown hair plastered against her face. Her body was stiff like the broken limbs forever floating in the river. They strapped her on a hand truck and struggled to pull it up the stony embankment. When the five-minute whistle shrilled across the water, I had to hurry away, crossing the bridge to the Oregon City Woolen Mill.

The large brick building had been crafted on a tall base of hewn rock to raise it above floods. Its battering walls tapered inward, offsetting the two stories of bricks on top of it. Large windows, capturing morning and evening light, lined the east and west sides. The four-story tower in the middle, made it seem like a castle. Each time I came to work, I felt proud.

I blew through the door of the main offices. My designated handbasket was already full of deliveries. I quickly sorted them by department, not speaking to anyone. I wanted to appear efficient and business-like. It had taken months to move from my old job into this one which was cleaner, allowed me to walk around, didn't cause a rash, and didn't make me stink.

With my basket on my arm and shawl close to my neck, I walked to an outbuilding and dropped off a clipboard at my old job in the Picker House. Shepherd, the Picker Boss, sighed when he saw the poundage he was supposed to fulfill today. He handed me his completed form from yesterday.

He was an odd man. It appeared his bones had been wired together, making him move like a skeleton in jerks and jumps. His gentle eyes peered from a narrow face. He rarely spoke,

and instead he'd show what he wanted done. When the pile in front of a picker was low, he pointed to the wool cart. When someone was moving too slowly, he'd reach over their shoulder, his long fingers blurring as they tore open locks of wool.

At the moment, he was helping at the rag tables. He was a master detangler, unraveling used odds and ends so the "shoddy" wool could be reused and blended with the virgin wool for our yarns. When he had too much shoddy, it was sold to other mills. His department created a steady source of income.

I paused next to Kathryn, knowing Shepherd wouldn't mind as long as she kept working the scoured fleece in front of her. "I saw a dead body," I whispered.

"I know!" she exclaimed. "I heard it was one of the drawing-in hands. A girl named Betsy."

My face fell. I wanted to be the first to share the news. "Who told you?"

"One of the weavers. Betsy didn't show up today, and they're really missing her tiny fingers threading the needles." Kathryn pushed aside a cloud of fluffed wool.

"I hope it's not her," I said. "Would you ever consider being a drawing-in hand? It'd get you out of this oil and dirt." Yellow wax had built up and hardened beneath Kathryn's fingernails. The lanolin drenched the tables, floor, even the air. Working here was like being dipped in wax. It had saturated my skin, leaving my hands and arms itchy.

Her face screwed up. "We're sixteen! They only hire children for those jobs, and they favor the weavers' kids so they'll eventually take over their parent's job. My ma works in a laundry, and yours ..." She didn't finish the sentence.

My ma and pa were dead. Neither of us said anything. I grabbed a lock of wool to twiddle, keeping my fingers busy. I missed that part of the picking job.

Across the room, Shepherd patted the table three times. I'd worked in the Picker House long enough to know it meant he was moving to the next project. "See you later," I said. "I'll tell you what I hear about Betsy." Shepherd glanced at me. I nodded and moved on.

The spiral climb up the four-story tower of the main building still made me pant. The handrail, welded three feet from the center post, kept feet from treading on the narrow inner parts of the steps, but it was a squeeze to pass others on the climb. I finally entered the carding and spinning floor.

Immediately, I crammed the wool I'd taken from the Picker House into my ears. The clearspan room had no columns to support it. The floor hung suspended from the attic beams and trusses above. Before me was an open expanse of whirring, clanking machines. Holes in the plank floors allowed belts to rise from the basement and drive the machinery in each room. In the corner, the carder growled and tore wool into fluffy clouds of fibers.

I handed the Spinner Boss his clipboard and envelopes. He held up a finger, signaling me to wait as he completed paperwork. Mostly women worked on this floor, each wearing a black apron or dress to disguise oil and grease stains. I shifted from one spot to another, getting out of the way of the doffers. The eleven-year-olds carted baskets through narrow aisles, removing and replacing bobbins on the spinning machines. It was one of the easiest and lowest paid jobs, forty cents for a ten-hour day, but the children got to work alongside their mothers.

I sidled next to Dorothy, pointing to her daughter and raising my hand, indicating how much she'd grown. Dorothy nodded. Talking was impossible here. Everyone in the room had learned to lipread. They held whole conversations without uttering a word, even at lunch. I leaned next to Dorothy, mouthing, "They pulled someone from the river this morn."

She nodded, her hands clutching her throat. "Murder!"

"NO!" I shouted, my eyebrows arching to my hairline. "From here?" I circled my hand around the room.

She shook her head, jabbing her finger downward. I figured she meant the girl in the river worked on the next floor.

Bang! I jumped, then rolled my eyes. A small girl laughed at me, holding up her basket, showing me she'd just dropped filled-bobbins to the floor below and let the trap door slam shut. The imp. At least she hadn't seated a bobbin so it would fly off and bean me today. I couldn't blame them for their jokes. It had to be boring being trapped in this room all day.

When the Spinner Boss tapped my shoulder and held out papers, I snatched them and hurried out. Pausing on the tower steps, away from the noise, I rearranged my basket. Actually, I was gathering my wits. I hated the second floor. The noise rattled me. And despite weekly cleaning, thick lint clogged the air vents. It clung to the brick walls and encrusted the ceiling beams like gray moss, giving the room a cemetery-feeling.

Besides that ... there were ghosts.

I'd been told that during the 1903 fire, the security man had dashed to the top of the tower to ring the bell, but found the rope pull had been cut. Flying down the stairs, he spotted three fires in the spinning room, but a section of fire hose had been removed. The remaining hose wouldn't reach the flames. Worst of all, Tray, his watchdog, was discovered in the yard, poisoned.

No one knew exactly why the fires had been set. It was rumored that malcontents were upset because the mill had hired several Chinese workers.

None of it made sense to me. But when spinners and carders worked through the night so there was yarn for the first shift, strange tales flourished about shadows moving between machines. A pale dog was often seen out of the corner of one's eye, dashing along the river bank. Old-timers said it was the watchman and Tray, still trying to put out the fire. As long as the spirits stayed off the stairs, I didn't care. I straightened my spine, braced my shoulders and went down to the Weaving Room to face the queen.

It was a noisy room with twelve-foot-high ceilings, but not as rackety as the second floor. The *clackety-clack* of looms and *bang-bang-bang* of shuttles echoed off the exposed brick walls. Tall windows made the space bright and airy, even on cloudy days. I pulled the wad of wool from one ear, but left the other ear plugged. Blankets in dazzling colors stretched on looms in front of me. On a different day it would be tartans, tweeds, and herringbones designed by the Boss Weaver, a Scotsman. Taking credit for all of it was Mrs. Quackenbush, a vinegary old woman.

I handed the clipboard and documents to the Scotsman who quickly disappeared before Mrs. Q. told him how he should fill them out.

My friend James was eating lunch by his machine. It was early, but he'd stopped the four looms he was in charge of so the loom sweeper could remove loose fluff from the driving mechanism—a weekly necessity. He tapped his foot, encouraging the sweeper to work faster because a still loom wasn't a producing loom, and the weavers were paid piece-rate.

I stood next to James, wondering how much fluff was floating through the air and onto his sandwich. "They pulled someone out of the river this morning," I said.

“Betsy. I heard. She was just a slip of a thing,” he mumbled as he chewed. “It’s heartbreaking. She was apprenticed to Emma, but not a relative.” He glanced at looms in the back which sat idle.

“Have you heard what happened?” I asked.

“Pregnant!” Mrs. Quackenbush boomed over my shoulder.

I gave the crate-shaped woman a long-suffering stare. “She was only twelve.”

Mrs. Q. slatted her eyes at me. “If you don’t know that twelve is old enough, then you and me better have a talk before you get into trouble.”

I blushed and cleared my throat. “How do you know she was in a family way?”

“Heard her crying.” The woman folded her arms over her ample bosom, her black apron covering her form like she was a bale of wool.

“Crying doesn’t mean she was pregnant.” My voice carried an edge.

“The girl wouldn’t tell me what was wrong, but you know it’s a man.” Her lantern jaw jiggled as she nodded. “It’s always a man causing problems. Like there!” She pointed at brown stains running down the brick walls. Her nose wrinkled as she nudged the sweeper. “Men spit their tabacky juice like we’re in a barn, and there it stays.”

“Not my job. I only clean looms,” he said and worked a little faster.

Mrs. Q. sucked on her front teeth, wagging her finger. “We got a hundred women here, and not enough toilets or dressing rooms for all of them. Often, we gotta go out back to the outhouses, where the hoboes harass us. There’s getting to be more ‘n’ more tramps every day. And there’s no place for us to wash up. Unlike men who dive in a dung pile, then eat with those hands, we ladies clean up.”

James waggled his sandwich. “Don’t look at me. I wash before and after I eat. No oil on my yarns.”

Mrs. Q. patted his shoulder. “You’re one of the good’uns. It’s not your fault we hafta drink outta one bucket and use the same dipper. You’re not one of the tabacky slobberers.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be working Emma’s looms today?” James gave her a squint-eyed frown.

Mrs. Q. waved his words away. “Emma’s making arrangements for Betsy. We all chipped in.” She looked at me, holding out her hand. I patted my pockets, then shook my head.

“Betsy’s mom is in love with alcohol,” Mrs. Q. went on. “Coffin varnish is all it is. She won’t be back in her head till tomorrow, so Emma, bless her heart, is taking care of the particulars. It’s always women who put the world back together. But now, I have to do her work *and* mine.” She rubbed her face. “I’m good ‘n’ fast, but I can’t push like I used to.”

“I don’t think it’s right to say Betsy was pregnant.” I stared at her. “And even if it was true, Betsy wouldn’t want folks talking about it. Would you?”

“You’re the one gossiping and asking questions about her.”

Irritation grated my voice. “I only want to understand what happened. You don’t really know if Betsy was pregnant or murdered, do you?”

“Murdered?” Mrs. Q.’s voice shot up an octave as she walked away. “Well, well, well. That’s news.” Her foot slipped on the flooring but she caught herself. “Lookit here!” She rapped the sweeper’s shoulder. “The lubricating oil has dripped on this planking for weeks. Do we need to nail baseball cleats to our shoes to keep from rolling on our backsides?”

“I’m a tattler. I only work on looms.” He brushed the last of the fluff into a bag and packed his equipment.

Mrs. Q. continued, “Speaking of looms, the floor planks are splintered by the machines in the back. I have to tiptoe when I go back there, hoping I don’t stab my foot and crucify myself.”

“Still, not my job.” The sweeper nodded goodbye, ignoring Mrs. Q. scolding him with a glare as he left.

I chewed on my bottom lip. “Mrs. Q, I didn’t mean to say Betsy was murdered. I don’t think it’s true. Please don’t spread rumors, ma’am.”

“Me?” Her jaw clenched and voice sharpened. “Don’t you accuse me. I been here ten years. Everybody here is like family to me. I’m not the one waggin’ tongues. I pitched in for her funeral.”

“Whose funeral?” the Boss Weaver said, as he returned.

“This gal is spreading gossip about that poor child they found in the river,” Mrs. Q. said. ‘I told her we don’t have time to stand around flapping our lips. But she—’

I whirled, facing him. “Honestly, sir! I didn’t—”

He held up his hand. “Take these swatches ta the owners’ offices.” I nodded, staring at my feet.

Mrs. Q. had walked away but stopped and called to him. “Did you put my complaints on your clipboard?” Now that we women finally got the vote, I want to be heard.”

“Indeed, Mrs. Quackenbush, so ye shall be.” The Scotsman wore a strained smile as he walked me to the stair tower. “Some say there’s too much family here. T’is true, but not for that lady. The mill is all the kin she has. If she’s brassy, we forbear it. She has naught else to straw-boss. Do ye understand?”

I nodded. I would’ve expected no less patience from a man who had stood ten hours a day, five and a half days a week in front of a loom for ten years, making the good wage of thirty-seven cents an hour.

I pulled the cotton wad from my ear. Huffing a long breath, I hurried down a flight of stairs to the finishing room.

Light bulbs hanging from ceiling cords cast shadows on short-legged tables. Only two women were working in the first basement. “Not a lot of orders? I asked.

Ruth stopped pressing cloth between paper to improve the fabric’s luster. She shook her head. “No international orders since the war ended. Our business is all from retail, and that’s slowing down.” She nodded toward about fifty shirts and twenty suits her partner was finishing in the corner. “If the mill hadn’t opened five hundred stores, I don’t know what we would’ve done. They’re our main income.”

“I bet our Christmas party and bonus checks will go to pay for all those Saturday Evening Post ads they’re running,” Virginia grumbled. The lights dimmed and flickered. The basement became dusk. Both women groaned.

“It’s the rag picker.” Ruth said to me. “When it gets overloaded, the grinding machine in the Picker House draws off most of the mill’s electricity, and we suffer down here. “Did you hear about the girl they pulled from the river?”

After my run-in with Mrs. Q, I didn’t want to talk about it anymore. I pulled out my hank of wool, braiding it into a bracelet, keeping my fingers busy as I waited. The kids like Betsy had showed me how to do it. They made them for each other to fill the long hours.

The lights continued to be fitful, and I wondered if the ghost of Betsy was joining the watchman and the dog in hexing this place. Virginia buttoned the plackets on a row of shirts,

then paused, rubbing her thumbs. “What I heard was that the girl was bathing in the river and drowned.”

“Good grief! That’s a cold place to take a dip.” Ruth switched off her pressing machine and flipped the lights off to lessen the draw on power.

“Hey! I’m still over here. Working in the dark now!” Virginia griped. “And for your information, the river is the only place some folks have to clean up, Lady Astor.”

“I’ll pick up your clipboard on my afternoon round.” I hurried out the door, remembering bathing in the river before I got a mill job. The cold wasn’t the worst part. It was the nerve-racking, ever-alertness, fretting someone would take advantage of my naked situation. I hoped I’d never have to do it again.

The lowest tier of stairs took me to the second basement. The scouring room was a wet, dirty, steam-filled area that smelled like a barnyard.

Beads of water always dotted Frank and Eddy’s beards. Both men were lanky and had been exposed to lanolin, grease, and dirt for years. They had a wet cough and a raw sense of humor, but they created snow-white fleece.

Frank looked at the clipboard, snorted, then handed it back. In the weeks I’d been doing this job, he’d never filled it out or sent samples to the office. “You tell those Jacob brothers that the last fleece they bought is so poor, I’m putting it on the train to a second market. All of it. We’re not even scouring it. They need to buy wool from California since the Oregon herders think their short-haired fleece is made of gold.” He pointed at me. “You know any cusswords?”

“Dang?”

He let loose a string of swear words. “You give the Jacobs my message. Every word of it, and throw in a few of them cuss words. That’ll let them know I’m serious.”

“I can’t do that, sir. I carry messages back and forth between departments, but please don’t shove me under a sledge hammer so I’ll lose my job.”

Eddy squinted at me. “Didn’t you used to work for Shepherd?” I nodded. “How did you abide that strange goose?”

“Because he does his job and doesn’t talk much?” It came out as a question.

Frank laughed as he coiled a hose. “I remember an old lady sent an Oregon Mills shirt back to the company. She said her husband wore it, then as each of her three sons grew into it,

they wore it and passed it to the next. She didn't have the heart to destroy it, because it was so 'finely made.' That was back when we didn't blend so much shoddy with the virgin wool to save money. So, this old woman sent the shirt back to us to patch the elbows, and maybe we could sell it again.

"I reckon it was sent to the rag pickers' house to reclaim the wool, but I swear, I seen Shepherd wearing it. That man can make wool last forever. He's probably got wool from Moses' robes tucked away somewhere." Frank and Eddy laughed, I didn't.

Frank frowned at me. "That girl's suicide got you down?"

"Suicide!" My voice wailed like a horn. "Why would a twelve-year-old kill herself? We're all talking about her. Why didn't anybody help her? What's the matter with all of us?"

"Whoa!" Eddy waved his hands. "That hit a sore spot. Maybe it got a little close to home? We didn't mean to rile you. I got a quart of tarantula juice in my truck. It's pretty calmin'."

Frank wiped his hands, grinning at his partner. "I wouldn't say no a nip. It's almost lunch." I turned and trudged to the administrative offices.

"You all right?" Ephraim studied my face. He was a bit crack-brained from breathing the acids in the dyes. Lunch had passed. After being in the office, I'd spent an hour at the top of the tower, next to the bell that had no rope to ring it. I tried to take in the view and calm myself, but I stared at the envelope clutched in my hand. I didn't remember circling down the stairs. I must've walked to the Dye House, which sat away from the mill because of its combustible chemicals. I had no memory of going there.

Wooden vats, eight feet across, brimmed with dark liquids. The electric lights reflected off their surfaces. There were only a few windows in the wet cold building. "You don't look so good. You eaten yet?" Ephraim held out a hunk of cheese between stained fingers. His kindness and his colors were the brightest beacons in the room.

"I was just let go," I whispered, staring down into the dark liquid in a vat, imagining the unseen ropes of wool swaying under the surface. The fumes made my nose burn. What would it be like to close my eyes, stick my head in and let my troubles float away?

Ephraim tugged my arm. “Let’s git outside. Since Kaiser Bill started invading countries, we can’t get the German dyestuff. The chemicals in the new U.S. dyes make most people lightheaded—a little crazy like me.”

We pushed through the door, his hand on my back, guiding me to the bench. He was right. The cool breeze rolling off the river cleared my head like opening a window.

“Now let me get this straight.” He stared into my eyes. “You were fired, but you delivered out here anyway?”

“They paid me for a full day, but I only worked ...” My words faded as I held up the brown envelope. “As I left, the secretary asked me to drop off your messages. She seemed sorry, they had to move people around. They’re making spots for men coming back to their jobs after the war.”

Ephraim fired cuss words at the sky, most of them about Kaiser Bill. He stood and hurled the clipboard into the river. After a moment he ran his fingers through his hair several times and sat down. “Sorry. My son’s still billeted over there.”

“I hope he’s okay.” Not knowing what more to say, both of us stared at the water. A limb floated by and he shook his head. “Poor little girl. She was just trying to rescue a kitten.”

“What?” I frowned, my head snapping toward him.

He hooked his thumb toward the entry gates. “Bill, the security man, works part time for the police, he told me about the drowned girl.”

When Ephraim shared the details, I didn’t mean to take off running, but I didn’t want him to see me cry.

Through blurry eyes, I spotted Shepherd, fishing next to the mill. When folks finished early, they often fished or picnicked or simply sat and watched the river. I stopped beside him, not speaking, but not wanting to be alone with the fears chewing through my head.

Shepherd’s steady casting and retrieving slowed my breathing. Tears silently slid down my cheeks. When I thought I could speak without my voice breaking, I asked, “Could I have my old job back?”

He surveyed my hands and arms as he pulled in the line. For weeks I’d coated them with pink calamine and wore loose sleeves to hide my picker’s rash. They were not as red and swollen

now. “I’ll do the rag table, cutting off buttons and ripping out zippers. Anything. I know I’ll still break out a little from the lanolin in the air, but—they cut my job.”

He cast into the current, tending the line until it became taut. Then he shook his head. “There’ll be a lot of folks not working next week. We can’t get good fleece. Big mills are buyin’ it up. No fleece. No weaving. It might take a month to buy up enough good local clips for a run.”

“They told me it was because of returning veterans.”

“That, too.” He nodded. “Partial work is what they’re coming home to. Not just this mill, but everywhere.”

“How can this stand?” Anger edged my voice. “The girl that died, she saw a kitten in the river. Somebody had tossed it in. It was wet and shivering and clinging to a boulder near the bank. When she tried to rescue it, she slipped down the bank and cracked her head on a rock. The police saved the kitten, but it was too late for her. A drowning kitten isn’t her fault. War isn’t my fault. Not having fleece isn’t your fault. Tramps can’t help it that they don’t have a bed or place to bathe. How is any of this fair?” I yelled.

Shepherd retrieved and cast his bait out again, letting the breeze carry away the heat of my words. After a moment, he pointed with his chin. “See that wide beach down there? The Upper Chinook tribe used to winter along this river, hunting, weaving, and trading. Hundreds of years they got on with their lives, never expecting anything to change.” He let out a long breath. “Families, communities, all gone now.

“What folks don’t understand is that the river carried their tears mixed with rain out to sea. You can bet there was plenty of heartbreak along these banks. Still is. The waves stir it. The sun bakes it. The clouds bring it back. It pours across the land and into the river again. Some of the water passing us right now has been back twenty, maybe thirty times, looking to see what’s changed.”

I pulled my wool from my pocket, working the braid, keeping my fingers from clenching or scratching my arms. “What’s that got to do with what’s fair?”

He shook his head. “There is no fair. There’s just change. When the tears you’re dropping in the river float back again, you or I probably won’t be around. There’s a good chance something different will be here.”

“Then why bother?” I stared at the current. “Why go through this struggle?”

His gentle eyes locked onto mine. “We can’t walk on water or stop greed or war. The only thing in our power is to make our little corner of life better. It doesn’t seem like much, but it takes all our life to do it. That’s all we gotta do. So, we keep at it.” He drew in his fishing line. “The girl who died was saving a living creature. She died, making her corner of the world better. It doesn’t balance the scales, but it may help you or others keep up what she started.”

“Then nothing lasts. Not jobs or families.”

“Maybe a few of those blankets we churn out will endure time and moths?” He glanced at me, with a slight smile. “The river,” he finally said. “Here before we were. Here long after we’re gone. The river abides.

He pointed with his fishing pole. “On weekends I work for the family that lives in that big white house on the cliff. They got a farm I manage, but the lady of the house may need help here in town. We could go up there and ask.”

“A house maid?” I grimaced, smudging away tears. “Why would you help me?”

“We’re on a long journey. Friendship helps.” He walked away. “I’m headed up the hill. Catch up if you wanna see if there’s work for you.”

“I’ve never heard you talk so much,” I yelled.

He kept walking.

I dropped the wool bracelet into the river. “Goodbye, Betsy.”

It floated like a tiny flower. The current carried it out of sight. Above me, breaks in the gray sky showed the sun still shone above the clouds. No human could count the number of dawns and sunsets there’d been, but even among my worries, I felt gifted to see new days. I ran to catch up with Shepherd.

Behind me, the river moved on.

Brittany West

Clackamas County- Innocence, Trauma, and Redemption

2023 Essay - Winner

Innocence, Trauma, and Redemption: My Life in Clackamas County

I am an Oregon native and have lived most of my life in Clackamas County. This county holds so many memories and pivotal moments of my life. It's safe to say that the person I am today is due to the circumstances and events that happened while living here. I have had many joyous moments that shaped my childhood, but there were also traumatic events that destroyed that feeling. As I look back on those years, I wonder, "Is redemption possible or am I doomed to live a life in fear?"

I was born in Portland in a small single-family home with my young parents and humble grandparents. My parents tried their best but, being 16 and 21 years old, high school dropouts, they were naïve about raising a family. So, our livelihood depended on my grandparents supporting us. My grandfather was thin, wore big metal-framed glasses and was over six feet tall. He always dressed in slacks with a nice button-up shirt tucked into the waistline of his pants when he wasn't working. He worked in the reserves for the police department in Clackamas County and always came home eager to play with me; I was the only grandchild. His laughter was contagious, and he had a childlike personality.

My grandmother had black curly hair and was constantly humming or singing a song. She would never leave the house without her hair fluffed into big curls that were held tightly by massive amounts of hairspray, her face covered in Avon makeup. She was a woman who always accessorized with jewelry, such as beaded necklaces with matching earrings that dangled lightly from her ears. I loved trying to reach my tiny hand out in hopes of grabbing one.

She handmade clothes and blankets for me on her Singer sewing machine. My grandmother cooked homemade meals daily and her baked goods always left a sweet lingering flavor in the air. My favorite was her fresh gooey cinnamon rolls and mint chocolate chip brownies that melted in your mouth. I felt safe and rich in comfort. This was my home.

Eventually my parents added another member to the family—my brother who is two and a half years younger than I. Shortly after, my parents realized the small single-family home was no longer big enough for a family of four and so we moved to our first place in Clackamas County. It was off 82nd Ave; called Pineville Apartments. These apartments were single level and

each one mirrored the other with its white painted exterior. The neighbors were just an arm-distance away. The location of our apartment was great; there was a Winco adjacent to us that we walked to for groceries. Pineville had a small metal playground in the back corner of the complex, with a narrow silver slide, and two small rubber swings connected by metal chains. None of the apartments had a backyard, there was only a small rectangular pad of concrete meant for a porch. The daylight made the apartments look appealing and welcoming.

Our apartment was simple with white walls and two small bedrooms. The kitchen had old grungy black and brown appliances and old cabinets that were lined with parchment paper. There was no washer or dryer, but a coin operated laundromat was within walking distance. The apartment had a musty smell, probably from the smokers who lived there before. This apartment felt like the opposite of my grandparents' house. I wasn't sure if I would like this new place. I was mostly excited to no longer share a room with my parents and to make new friends.

Once we moved in, we decorated the house with furniture. We had a velvety dark couch set in the living room, heavy brown box shaped TV, black VCR player, a glass coffee table that was supported by a large blue dolphin figurine. The shelves were filled with black accent décor and sculptures my father loved that he bought from a store called Levitz that screamed 90's. My brother and I shared a room. We had a special sibling bond and enjoyed spending time together. We didn't have much and, so our imagination would transform the most ordinary things, such as a wooden spoon, into a sword. We didn't have many toys. The few toys you would find in our bedroom would be from our favorite movies or TV series such as Star Wars, Pocahontas and Looney Tunes. My favorite was Tweety bird. I owned many t-shirts that were plastered with the character's face and wore them proudly.

The first time I learned how to ride a bike was at the Pineville apartments. I remember my grandfather visiting and teaching me how to move the small pedals around and around until my bicycle accelerated. I always kept my eyes on him to ensure he wouldn't let me go. He taught me how to steer in hopes of not running into an obstacle and how to balance to avoid skinned knees. Eventually, the bicycle was out of my grandfather's reach. I was riding freely into the wind. I rode circles around his tall lean body while we both laughed until our bellies hurt. These visits were always the highlight of my day since my grandparents now lived in Eugene. They were not as freely available to visit anymore.

I then learned that making new friends made my life more fun. I quickly became best friends with the neighbor boy who was around my age. We would ride our bikes together for hours on the sidewalk within the loop of the apartments, until the sun would disappear into the clouds and the moon would be the only glimmer of light. Our signal to come home would be when our parents' voices called our names. It was a time when adult supervision was rare. A time when children roamed free without a fear of strangers lurking in the shadows.

One day my neighbor friend moved away. The apartments were no longer fun and exciting. They were filled with strangers who I never paid any attention to before. They were older than my parents and their faces looked unwelcoming and serious. The sounds of children laughing in the street were replaced with sounds from more mature voices that were argumentative and deceiving. My father became the manager and eventually drugs, and alcohol were flowing into the apartments. The strangers would throw parties and I wouldn't see my father for days. This was the first time I saw what alcoholism and drug abuse looked like. The was the first time my father was arrested for drinking.

The years passed and we moved multiple times, some apartments were better than others. It was an average of once per year. Anytime there was a rental special my father would eagerly move us. There were times when the first month of rent was free, the security deposit was free, or there was a special move in rate. We moved to "The Woods Apartments" off Sunnyside Road, then "Townhomes with a View" that was down the block from the previous apartments and then a few others. There was no consistency except for a new place to call home. At times, there were unpacked boxes that never saw daylight. I never felt rooted or like I belonged due to constantly changing schools and addresses.

My mother did her best to give us an outlet to pretend that we were somewhere else. She took us to anything that was free, and always tried to keep us outdoors to enjoy the fresh air. We always rode public transportation as we didn't own a car. It usually took us awhile to arrive anywhere. The Trimet buses were filled with smells of urine, overpowering perfume and body odor. My mother's arm was our seatbelt. She held us tight and close, as if at any moment we would fall out of our seats due to the motion of the bus. Eventually, the bus came to a stop, and it was our turn to climb down the metal stairs onto the empty sidewalk. We waved goodbye to the bus driver, and my mom hurried my brother and me along, to find the path to the park.

This is when I first fell in love with Clackamas County parks. My favorites were Mount Talbert and Mount Scott Nature parks. I learned to explore the wilderness by looking for “rollie pollie ollies” as I called them, also known as potato bugs. We would gently catch ladybugs for good luck and watch as their tiny bodies explored our fingers until eventually their tiny wings would lift them into the air and they would glide effortlessly away. We chased multicolored butterflies in the fields of wildflowers and captured slimy salamanders from their muddy terrain. I loved looking at all the different colored leaves in fall. The beauty of brown, orange, green, red and yellow-colored foliage falling from the trees made for perfect mounds to jump in. The wildflowers blooming in spring were perfect for picking. The dandelions were my favorite to pluck off the ground and blow my life wishes into. The outdoors was my escape and my place to explore.

When I was nine years old, we moved out of Clackamas, and into a place called Berry Hill Townhouses in Oregon City. I attended Gaffney Lane Elementary, a small school with about 350 children in kindergarten through fifth grade. I learned to play basketball on our small dead-end road with my brother and neighbor boys, who were older than I was. It was a simple black beat-up and weathered basketball hoop that only had remnants of the string hoop that was once attached to its sides. On the opposite side, there were multiple green metal trash dumpsters for all the townhouse residents to empty their garbage into. It made for a great barrier to recover our basketball when it bounced out of reach. Rain or shine, we spent hours playing games such as Bump, HORSE or Around the World. Sometimes we would get daring and play while fiercely rollerblading.

But my favorite place to escape the world was the forest. It was walking distance from my house. Our home was the last tall building on the end nearest the open parking lot for visitors. It was on a hill that was covered in loose rock gravel. I would glide my bike down the gravel hill and ride off into the forest. There were lush trees, muddy man-made pathways and endless opportunities for fun. I rode to a mucky pond that only grew bigger when it rained. My friends, brother and I took turns catching slimy salamanders to see who could catch the most. I ended up bringing home the fattest one. Who we later found out was pregnant and also ate her offspring. My mother no longer allowed us to bring home amphibians.

I never felt like a normal child due to responsibilities at home and trauma from my childhood. I was the one who had to grow up quickly in order to help take care of my mother and brother. At times I was a shoulder to cry on, a babysitter and a cook. My brother had a learning disability that he fooled most into thinking didn't exist. We both had hand-me-down clothes that sometimes were torn on the knees. We would get bullied in school at times. I was always my brother's defender and protector and tried my best to keep him out of harm's way. Even through the ups and downs I was genuinely a happy child who felt invincible to the world. But nothing prepared me for what happened next ... the first time I no longer felt safe as a girl in my neighborhood.

I finally connected with kids my age at school and had a few girl friends from class. Those friends always had sleepovers at each other's houses. They would stay up late laughing about the boys they had crushes on, binge eating all the junk food possible and listening to things our parents didn't approve of such as Eminem, and Limp Bizkit. I looked forward to finally joining this inner circle. I finally felt like I belonged among my peers.

I was invited once to a girl's house who lived on the same street as me. My friend's sister knew this girl well and said they had the best sleepovers there. I begged my mother to let me go but her answer was always "NO." She insisted on meeting the parents first. The dad was divorced and most of the time he wasn't home. There was no time to arrange this meeting and so I missed the popular sleepover.

The next day my friends told me how much fun they had and all the shenanigans they did. They prank called their crushes, watched scary movies and played paper fortune teller made from a paper origami. I was envious of the memories they shared without me. I was furious with my mother for not letting me go. I wanted to hide under my fluffy pillow on my twin sized bed until I no longer felt embarrassed about having such strict parents.

The energy at the school dramatically shifted within the days after the sleepover. There was a lot of crying and terror filled eyes. I thought to myself, what is happening? Do I need to move again? Why aren't my friends talking to me? Why are the teachers being so secretive? Am I in trouble?

Walking down the eerie Gaffney Lane hallway I found one of my friends and was given the truth behind the sudden sinister feeling of school: a girl was missing. That girl was my friend's sister who was at the sleepover. She was only three years older than I was. She had beautiful blonde hair, a thin pale body and was always friendly. The sisters seemed to have a great relationship.

The following days were a whirlwind. The nonstop hovering from the helicopters overhead at school and above my house, the media outlets covering the sidewalks with their cameras, and constant foot traffic from strangers made us stay indoors for as long as possible. Over the course of weeks, the focus shifted, and the intrusion of outsiders becomes less and less.

A couple of months passed, and life seemed to be normal again. My friend's sister was still missing, and her parents removed her from school to focus on the search as they had not received any worthwhile leads on the case. Then suddenly, another girl went missing. This girl was in the same circle of friends, lived in the same apartments and used the same bus stop as the previous missing girl. There were too many similarities. The police came to the conclusion that someone abducted both missing girls. But there were still no leads on who could be the perpetrator. This lingering fear of a monster freely roaming our city and mysteriously abducting girls my age was beyond frightening. Scary thoughts roamed my mind: Would I be his next victim? Would anyone find me if he did? Do I know this person? What is happening next door?

Months later the whirling helicopters returned. This time there were many more. They were circling and hovering over my neighbor's small house. Suddenly, "woo woo woo woo" could be heard in the distance as police zoomed down the vacant Beavercreek Road blaring their sirens and lighting up the neighborhood with blue and red. They came to a screeching halt at my neighbor's house. Multiple officers ran up his concrete driveway in unison with guns pointed in the direction of the house, shouting for the man to come outside with his hands up.

Breaking news flashed on my TV announcing a 19-year-old girl had been seen running into the local Payless shoe store naked and wrapped in only a plastic tarp screaming for help. She had just been tragically raped by her boyfriend's father. Her boyfriend was enraged by his father's actions. He then told the police officers his father's deepest secret. His father had confided in him that he killed the missing girls, and their remains were hiding on his property.

A temporary metal link fence was rapidly installed around the chilling house to keep onlookers out but the investigators in. There were flocks of people who would stand close to the fence to cry, pray and stare. They would leave handwritten notes that said, “I love you” and “come home”. Some notes had prayers, scriptures and well wishes written. There were flowers, toys, and stuffed animals shoved into the metal link fence. I wrote my own “Come home safe” letter and left my special teddy bear in hopes it would provide comfort and peace for when Ashley Pond and Miranda Gaddis were found alive and safe.

I watched as the house was ferociously searched by K9 dogs and their handlers. Ward Weaver III was brought out in handcuffs. He was an older white man who hung his head while being quietly escorted to the police car. The police drove him away while the onlookers glared daggers into his eyes. This same man had recently been appearing on TV shows and giving full access to his house to reporters to prove he was innocent. He laughed with reporters and made jokes. He put on the perfect façade of being a family man.

After the search warrant was served, the house became a crime scene. There were many detectives coming and going from inside the house. The news finally broke; they had found something. Inside a shed on his property lay Ashley Pond, and under a recent slab of concrete--supposedly for a new jacuzzi, was an oil drum barrel where Miranda Gaddis's remains were found. I watched as the girls' moms dropped to the ground in complete emptiness and shock when they finally received the news; their baby girls were no longer alive. This was the moment I no longer felt safe as a girl in this damaged world. I no longer trusted strangers.

This beautiful county that was filled with so many wonderful memories of my childhood was instantly demolished by a gruesome murder. This no longer felt like home. I wanted to escape; I wanted out of this nightmare. Slowly the news faded, and the house was demolished. The land was put up for sale, but no one ever developed on it. In a sense my innocence was left on that property, and no matter how many times I drive past it, it will always be a gravesite.

I am now a grown woman with a husband and daughter of my own. These memories of my childhood have formed the person I am today. The times when I was a carefree child are what I envision for my little girl. I don't want her to see the ugliness or the monsters that I grew up knowing. I want her to experience the good in people and how this world is full of amazing opportunities and adventures.

I am now my mother. I am extra cautious with where my daughter is allowed to go and with whom. I meet people to learn their characteristics. I research locations in which we decide to live, in the hope of avoiding further trauma. I don't give away my trust as easily as before. I am vigilant with my surroundings and always on the defense. The county that I once thought was gigantic is not so big anymore now that I have seen what true monsters look like.

This is the time in my life that I am ready to move on and focus on what truly matters. I am back in college after a ten-year hiatus. I attend Clackamas Community College; it is located in Oregon City exactly one mile from the house that took my innocence. I am wiser and more resilient than I was before. I am here to give back to my community and to help others heal from the trauma that still haunts them. This is why I am passionate about becoming a licensed therapist and majoring in psychology.

My dad and I have reconciled, and we have healed from the wreckage of the past. He took ownership of the wretchedness that he caused. He has worked hard to regain my trust and affection. He is done with the late-night drunken parties but instead he works hard to make ends meet. He gave up drugs long ago and has avoided troubles with the law. This is now my father's new chapter in life: redemption, the period of being the best first-time grandfather. He is clear-minded and is a man of his word. He is now an amazing Papa to my little girl, and they look forward to their adventures together. He is gentle and playful. They both beam with light whenever they see each other. He is the father I always dreamed of having as a little girl.

I have buried this trauma of my life deep to avoid re-living it and feeling the emotions that come with it. To move past these traumatic events, I have been in mental health therapy undergoing EMDR treatment with my therapist. EMDR therapy is defined by APA.org as "A structured therapy that encourages the patient to briefly focus on the trauma memory while simultaneously experiencing bilateral stimulation (typically eye movements), which is associated with a reduction in the vividness and emotion associated with the trauma memories." This therapy has helped me re-live in vivid detail the times I didn't feel safe. It has helped me to no longer feel alone, fearful and dejected. I can now talk about these past torments on a deeper level without becoming a sobbing mess. It has given me back my sense of worth and freedom to enjoy what the future holds with my daughter.

My daughter's first home is here in Clackamas County where we purchased our house in 2020. This is where my husband finally came home from a yearlong deployment in Qatar and met his daughter for the first time when she was two months old. This is where she learned to take her first steps, how to ride her bicycle with training wheels and that her imagination thrives in the outdoors. She has experienced the joy of fresh snowfall, the wonders of rainfall and the warmth the sunshine brings during long summer days. She shines with passion for the outdoors.

I love watching my daughter experience Clackamas County and the fascination in her eyes when she rides a pony at the fair in Canby, how she splashes down a water slide at the aquatic park with a loud squeal in her father's arms, and the excitement on her face when gliding through the water in the North Fork Reservoir on our 1974 Tri-Hull boat. It shows me that we are not doomed after all. This place is still magical, and the people are still kindhearted and welcoming.

My house holds memories that I will always cherish of my daughter's childhood. Yes, there are valid dangers lurking in the shadows, and some people commit inexcusable crimes. But we have it within us to grow and overcome the unimaginable. We can't let fear control our happiness and future. This county offers the most beautiful surroundings and adventures yet to be explored. My hope is that for my daughter's generation and the generations to come, their innocence will last longer, and the wonder will stay in their big magical eyes forever.

Cathi McLain
Send in the Clowns

2023 Short Story - Runner Up

Lou surveys his paltry start at sorting and selecting the furniture, knickknacks, and art that he wants to take with him to his new apartment at Springridge Retirement Community for Active Seniors (with Continuing Care). No easy task. The house he shared with Hannah for 48 years, where they raised their two children, and lived a good life until cancer took over and she slowly faded away into death, is large and filled with their lifetime of belongings. He was six years older than Hannah and still can't understand how he has outlived her. He picks up a book, still sitting next to her side of the bed, the last book she read before she no longer had the strength. A folded sheet of paper falls out. It's a poem by Roger Fanning that he's unfamiliar with, but Hannah has underlined, *Who and what will I outlive? There's more here than one body's rocket ride and one hope for more life.*

He wonders what she was thinking when she noted that single line. Maybe she was leaving him a message, to keep on living. Without her to share it, it's hard to hope for more life, but he knows Hannah would have wanted him to keep up the effort, and he's trying. Mostly it's the memories that sidetrack his progress. So far, he's only managed to pull a few paintings from the living room wall and set them next to the furniture he will take with him.

He always refers to the new place as "The Home," knowing it will cause his daughter Julie, to retort, "It's not a home, Dad, it's a community of active seniors with continuing care. You'll have your own apartment and all your own belongings."

"I know, I know," he usually replies, knowing Julie is defensive about sticking him in an old folks' home. Lord knows they looked at enough of those country clubs for old people to know what all it offers. He chose Springridge because at least there seemed to be a few more men than at the other places, and his friend Hank is there, so their regular pinochle games can continue in the "nicely appointed game room. And the golf course at Charbonneau might entice him to pick up a golf club again. Hank's wife is still alive, so he's spared the inevitable onslaught of widows and divorcees who populate these communities and who seem to have built-in radar systems for single men over 75. Even during the walk-throughs the flirting was blatant and made Lou's skin crawl. He's already become adept at deflection. It started even before Hannah was cold in her grave. First it was the women from the Senior Center with their casseroles and invitations to dinner, then the women from Hannah's church, which they only attended a few times in the past decade. He politely accepted the casseroles that he could heat up and eat in front

of the TV—by himself—but resisted the invitations to dinner. “No sense getting their hopes up,” he always thought, unable to imagine being with another woman so soon after losing Hannah, or ever, if truth be told.

He shakes his head and laughs to himself when he thinks about Julie and her effort to fix things she can’t fix by taking charge and trying to change his world. Hannah always joked about Julie and her know-it-all, “maven” mode. “Do you really think you can win this fight?” she always said, no matter what the topic. Unlike her brother Chuck, who lives in California and doesn’t care to return to Oregon except in an emergency, Julie lives nearby, and they have Sunday dinner on a regular basis. She can’t stand the thought of him rattling around this big house, missing Hannah. “You need to get out more, Dad. And we worry about you having to deal with all the maintenance, and what if you were to fall, blah, blah, blah...”

He had managed to humor her for the past year and a half by nodding his head and saying he’d think about it. But it soon became a broken record and he realized there was no winning this one. And besides, it *was* getting kind of silly to maintain this big house when he mostly lived in the kitchen and den, falling asleep in his recliner more often than in his own bed. The grandkids have outgrown their interest in sleepovers at Grandpa’s, and it isn’t as much fun to visit without Grandma here.

Now that the decision has been made, Julie and her husband Mike will manage the heavy lifting and packing, but they’re leaving it to Lou to decide what he wants to take. Then they’ll add a new coat of paint, re-arrange what’s left and put the house on the market. Julie says it needs to be “staged,” so it’ll be more appealing to buyers, whatever that means.

Back in the living room, he looks down at the largest of the paintings he has selected, their pride and joy, inherited from Hannah’s parents and the first original they ever owned. It’s a clown painting by comedian Red Skelton, worth a lot now, but less pricy back in the early 60s when Hanna’s parents bought it. Its depiction of a smiling clown, holding a giant candy cane, caught their eye at a gallery and they ate casseroles and hot dogs for months to afford it.

Lou and Hannah loved clowns. They met when she came into the jewelry store where he was assistant manager, to buy a china clown figurine the store had advertised on sale. She was wearing a royal blue scarf that highlighted her blue eyes and set off her blonde hair. To his eye, she radiated light, and he rushed to wait on her before the other salesman could even look up. They struck up a conversation and he admitted that going to the circus wasn’t part of growing up

Jewish in Brooklyn, but that he had been drawn to the bright colors and whimsical styles of clown art when he started ordering for the store. They got together later for coffee and discovered they had a few mutual friends and more than clowns in common. She invited him to attend the Ringling Brothers Circus when it came to town, and he was hooked—on the circus, and most certainly on Hannah. She introduced him to grits and other Southern style foods from her mother's Georgia childhood, and he took her to the only Kosher-style restaurant in Portland to experience matzo ball soup and kosher corned beef. They delighted in the differences in their upbringing and agreed it would just make life interesting. They were inseparable from the start and married three months after they met.

He tries to remember when their love of the circus turned into a bit of an obsession, turning their collections into a decorating style. It started with their honeymoon, in 1963. They didn't have much money, and just the weekend off for their honeymoon. They drove his old Plymouth to Seaside, 60 miles from their new little house in Oregon City and splurged on two nights at a low-end but clean motel. On their way back to Oregon City, they spotted posters advertising the Jensen Brothers Circus, a fundraiser for the Rotary Club in McMinnville.

"Oh, do you think we could go?" Hannah had asked.

"Sure, why not?" Lou replied.

It was a small circus company compared to Ringling Brothers, but it had the requisite trapeze artists, a few wild animals and clowns. As they left the big top, they purchased one of the show's posters, showing a carload of clowns, for \$1.00. They had it framed and it became the nucleus for their collection. He has already added it to the small stack of things he wants to take.

Over the years Hanna became the perfect partner, scrimping and saving, always upbeat, and urging him to take the risk when he had a chance to buy into the jewelry store. It all generated the success that allowed them to buy this house and live a comfortable life together for 58 years. They must've had their ups and downs like every other couple, but as he sorts and reflects, he can't think of a single "down," except for the last years when Hannah was plagued by a bad back that made her a little cranky, and of course the pancreatic cancer that overwhelmed their last year together.

He moves over to the curio cabinet, filled with their collection of circus and clown pieces. Music boxes shaped like circus tents, ceramic clowns piling out of tiny cars, clown heads, clown hats. He and Julie have agreed he'll select a few favorites and she'll sell the rest on eBay.

“Brave new world,” he thinks, wondering if anyone even collects clowns and circus memorabilia anymore.

He locates the clown Hannah bought the day they met. He reaches for it carefully. *Made in Japan* is printed on the bottom. He sets it on the end table near the other items he’s taking to “The Home,” marveling at how the world has changed since the clown was made, when *Made in Japan* often meant “cheap” and the store could afford to advertise this nicely made piece at a bargain price. He goes back to the cabinet, wondering what else he can take that means as much as that first one. He picks out two more ceramic clowns, ones the kids saved up to buy them for an anniversary or Christmas. He sighs, heads down to the basement, always referred to as the “Circus Room” by family and friends.

Flipping on the lights, he notices that the neon sign behind the bar advertising “Lou’s Bar and Grill” is flickering and the “R” in grill has burnt out, so it reads “Lou’s Bar and G ill.” He looks at the rest of the room, decorated over the top in circus motif. Red shag carpeting, red and white stripes on the bar, with a circus tent canopy over it. The end tables are circular, painted with red, white and blue stars and stripes, originally part of the animal act in a circus that closed down. Circus posters line the walls. He closes his eyes and can almost hear the laughter and clinking of glasses from long-ago cocktail parties and kids’ sleepovers. When he opens his eyes he realizes it all looks faded and tired now, and frankly ridiculous. But it seemed perfect at the time.

He surveys the space, realizing there’s nothing down here that will fit into his new place, and turns to head back upstairs to face more sorting and more memories. As he reaches the top of the stairs, he hears Julie coming through the kitchen.

“Dad? Where are you? I brought more boxes. Is this all you’re going to take?”

“Down here, Julie.” Just seeing if there’s anything down here that I want to take. I don’t think any of this will fit.” He slogs up the stairs, where Julie is looking at his paltry pile with dismay.

“Jeez, Dad! Is this all you’ve pulled? We’ll never get done at this rate. Do you want me to help you with this?” Lou is sure she’s itching to put it all in the donation box, but he appreciates her restraint.

“Sure, honey. I could use some help. I keep tripping down memory lane and can’t seem to get going. At least I’ve made a stab at it. You can try to sell the rest of the stuff in the curio cabinet on EBay and whatever doesn’t sell we’ll just find a place for at the “Home.”

“Dad, don’t call it that. It’ll be your home, but it isn’t a rest home.”

“I know, I know. I’m just messing with you. Give an old man a break. If I can’t have a sense of humor about this, I’ll slit my throat.”

“Oh, come on. Won’t it be good to get away from all the memories and start something new? You know Mom would want you to move on and be happy. And that’s all any of us want, right?”

“Sure, honey. I’m sure I’ll like it once all this sorting and packing is done and I’m moved in. Let’s work on the kitchen. I won’t be doing much cooking, but you can help me decide what I might need and what you want from Mom’s stuff.”

Together they finish sorting and packing, and Julie carefully boxes up the rejected clown and circus figurines to prepare them to sell on EBay. They fill boxes and bags with items to go to the Salvation Army, who will send a truck to pick up the excess furniture and boxes of stuff he can’t use in his small apartment. “Whole House Clean-out,” they call it, and he grits his teeth as he contemplates their removal of the remains of his life in this house.

By the end of the week, the house is emptied to the basics, and the movers come a few days later. Before he knows what’s hit him, he is ensconced in his new apartment. Julie has left him with the last boxes of his unsold figurines, which he has insisted on unpacking and arranging himself.

“Knock, knock!”

“Just a sec,” Lou says, kicking away the last of the boxes as he makes his way to the door, which is propped partly open with a box filled with newsprint from the ones he’s already unpacked. He pulls the door open, girding himself for yet another widow bearing food.

“Sorry to bother you, but I just wanted to bring you a little welcome gift. I haven’t been here that long myself and I know what a hassle it is to move. They’re oatmeal chocolate chip. Oatmeal is healthier, and who doesn’t need a chocolate fix, right? I’m Laura Grant, from apartment 321, across the hall.”

“Oh, thanks. I guess I’m about ready for a break and oatmeal chocolate chip is just the ticket. I’m Lou Gordon,” he says, offering his hand.

She sidles around the box, placing the dish of cookies on the kitchen counter and returning his handshake firmly. “Your apartment is shaping up nicely. Just a few boxes left, huh?”

“Yeah, my daughter and her husband were here all weekend hanging pictures and helping me get organized, but I wanted to save these last boxes of knickknacks for myself.”

“Oh, my gosh! Is that an original Red Skelton clown painting?” she asks, sidestepping the last box to reach the wall where Lou’s pride and joy hangs in the place of honor over the mantle of the little fireplace. “I have a signed print of this same painting! I can’t believe you have the original!”

“Yeah, this was a big splurge for my late wife’s parents. They found it in a gallery and couldn’t resist it. They said they ate a lot of casseroles and beans to be able to afford it. Someone offered me \$20 grand for it when I had it appraised before I moved. My in-laws paid a couple of thousand, which seemed like a fortune back then.”

“I know...we could never afford an original, but thought we’d really scored when we found our signed and numbered lithograph. It looks like you and your wife were into clowns,” she says, eyeing the ceramic clown Lou was in the process of unwrapping when she knocked. “Me too! My husband mostly tolerated my fascination with clowns, but I think he got into it after a while. At least it made it easy for him to pick out gifts, right? He loved to find clown music boxes for me and I have at least a dozen. Small world, yes?”

“Yeah, Hannah and I were into clowns. We met when she came into the store I worked at to buy this piece on sale. She took me to my first circus and got me hooked... She had that effect on people.”

“How long has she been gone?”

“A year last February. She died of pancreatic cancer. You?”

“Two years. Bob had Alzheimer’s and was in memory care for a couple of years before that. Hell to watch someone you knew and loved for over 50 years forget who you are.”

“Yeah, thank God Hannah never had dementia, but it was a bitch to watch her waste away. It’s hard no matter how they go, if you had a happy marriage ...” Wanda notices Lou’s eyes tearing up and moves over to the curio cabinet he’s almost finished filling with clown figurines.

“You have a nice collection. Each one different. I always loved that about the old-fashioned circus clowns. Each had his own distinctive make-up style and personality. No two alike. Some smiling, some frowning, some fat, some thin. Just like your paintings and knickknacks. I hate the way Steven King and his ilk turned clowns into something for horror stories, to be feared instead of bringing joy and laughter.”

“I know. The younger generations don’t seem to get it at all. My daughter tried to sell some of my collection on eBay and barely got a nibble on most of them. I had her pull them from the site, didn’t want to just give them away. I’m looking for a circus museum that might want them after I die.”

Lou leans over to pick up the last of the newsprint and stuffs it into the box, which he drags out to the hall for pick-up. Wanda starts toward the door and he notices for the first time how attractive she is, with dark eyes and olive skin, so different from Hannah’s blue eyes and fair skin. “Say, I think I still have some coffee left in the pot. Would you like to join me for a cup to go with these cookies?”

“Hey, that’d be great. I’d love to hear more about your circus collection.”

Leslie Hayertz

After Lunch One Act

2023 Playlet - Winner

AFTER LUNCH
A One-Act Play

Cast of Characters

HANNAH.....60+ years old. She wears gardening garb.

GUSabout the same age, HANNAH'S neighbor,.

Time

Contemporary

Place

The English-style country garden—in other words, overgrown, messy and chaotic—of an older home in Oregon City, Oregon. The sidewalk is all but impassable. There is a garden bench or porch steps.

After Lunch

HANNAH stands in her garden. After careful deliberation she goes to a plant that's obviously out of control and snips one leaf or dead-heads one flower. It's the final touch. She stands back and admires.

GUS enters.

GUS

Jeez Louise, Hannah! Where's my machete? Seriously, you should have an umbrella stand right here full of machetes so that passer-byes could, you know, pass by.

HANNAH

You're not going to get a rise out of me.

GUS

Have another one at the other corner of the property, so they could drop it off for the next poor bastard.

HANNAH

Not today.

GUS

What's so special about today?

HANNAH

It's an absolutely beautiful, perfect day.

GUS

Are you feeling ok?

HANNAH

Perfect.

GUS

What you got growing here?

HANNAH

Foxglove, lady's mantle, campanulas, lavender...

GUS

I meant which ones are you smoking?

HANNAH

I know what you meant. Excuse me, Gus. I don't have time to argue with you today.

GUS

Who's arguing? What you and I are having is a creative exchange of ideas.

HANNAH

Not today. I have an appointment.

GUS

What kind of appointment?

HANNAH

After lunch.

GUS

What is it, a date or something? Is that why you look like the cat that's been at the cream? What did you do, go on I-Heart-Harpies.com?

HANNAH

Not that it's any of your business—but I have a date with myself. Now if you'll excuse me?

GUS

Are you sick or something?

HANNAH

I'm perfect.

GUS

Enough with the perfect crap. I look out my window and see you out here in this overgrown weed patch you call a garden...

(He waits for a reaction, but there is none.)

I come over here to share some piss and vinegar with you, and you're acting like you're lady of the manor or something.

HANNAH

(Smiling beatifically, and with the signature wave of parade royalty.)

Good-bye, Gus.

GUS

Now cut that out. How come you're being all boring and polite all of a sudden?

HANNAH

(Beaming at him.)

Time for lunch.

(She turns to go inside.)

GUS

Hey, you win the lottery or something?

HANNAH

Well, you could say my number is up.

GUS

What? Oh no, Hannah. Jeez. What you got?

HANNAH

Nothing. I'm perfectly healthy.

GUS

You are? Well then... Where do you get off scaring people like that?

HANNAH

I'm not responsible for your jumping to conclusions.

GUS

Well, are you dying or aren't you?

HANNAH

I am. I've decided.

GUS

Decided what?

HANNAH

I'm through.

GUS

You're not making any sense. Through with what?

HANNAH

Life, you idiot. I'm not going to wait around until... You know.

GUS

No, I'm an idiot. You better spell it out for me.

HANNAH

Fine. I'm going to off myself. Yes, "off," as in not "on." I'm not having any more of it.

GUS

You're seriously telling me you're going to...? For no good reason? Like it's some kind of a lark? 'Ho, hum, lovely day, what? I think I'll off myself? Of all the harebrained ideas. Most women get bored, they buy a pair of shoes, get a tattoo, I don't know...

HANNAH

I'm not most women.

GUS

You can say that again. What about what happens next?

HANNAH

You mean, in some alleged afterlife?

GUS

No in this life, damn it.

HANNAH

I don't care. I'm done.

GUS

Hell, Hannah, I know you've had a rough time, what with your daughter and all, and, those last couple years with your Johnny, but...

HANNAH

Gus. Don't tell me how...

GUS

I've buried two wives.

HANNAH

You've buried two wives.

GUS

Well, I have.

HANNAH

I know. And I'm sorry, but the way you say it borders on bragging.

GUS

I never... How can you say that?

HANNAH

I'm sorry.

GUS

OK. Say the worse happens—and I'm not saying it will, mind you—and you hit bottom, don't you want to see what that bottom looks like? And if you do hit bottom there's always the satisfaction of things turning around.

HANNAH

Who says there's a bottom? Who says it just doesn't get worse and worse and worse again?

GUS

Of course there's a bottom. I've seen it several times.

HANNAH

That doesn't surprise me. But I'll pass, thank you.

GUS

Hell, if you're not curious about yourself, don't you want to know what happens to me?

HANNAH

You die.

GUS

Geezus, Hannah. OK, but how? When? Before or after dinner? What will be my last words. They might be real humdingers.

HANNAH

Idiot. You haven't said anything worth hearing in years.

GUS

Now that's more like it. You really had me going.

HANNAH

You are the same irritant as always. Which has nothing to do with my decision. I'm still going to off myself. ...Humdingers!

GUS

Yes, humdingers. I can't promise they'll be profound. But it will be the way I say them.

HANNAH

Good-bye, Gus.

GUS

Wait. What if my last words were about you?

HANNAH

Me?

GUS

Sure.

HANNAH

Why would they be?

GUS

Hang around and find out. Give me a few years, a decade or two, to work up some real doozies. I won't disappoint.

HANNAH

You're full of hot air.

GUS

Of course I am. Dust to dust—but we're aerated dust, we're soil that...

HANNAH

Bullshit.

GUS

Sure, that too, some good rich fertilizer for growing stuff. You should know. All that organic crap you're always ranting on about.

HANNAH

Just for today, couldn't you leave me in peace?

GUS

We're dust—earth, clay, matter, whatever—but aerated with the divine breath. You know what space is, outer space?

HANNAH

I don't have time for this.

GUS

I'll tell you: it's dead. A vacuum. Cuz there's no oxygen out there. But here on earth, we've got air, breath, oxygen, the stuff of life.

HANNAH

The stuff of life? Not me. I'm a genetic dead end. I've served my purpose in the greater scheme of things.

GUS

You talking about babies? I never took you for one to put all your eggs—so to speak—in the maternity basket.

HANNAH

I'm only taking up room, using up valuable resources. Why should I wait around for some disease or other to get me? At this point, life is like those romance novels you read. I don't have to slosh through every cliché on every page to know how it ends.

GUS

How do you know about my romance novels?

HANNAH

From my kitchen window I can see the stack of them on your dining room table. And there are piles of them in the back seat of your car.

GUS

Some people should mind their own business.

HANNAH

Your lousy taste in books is hardly a secret.

GUS

Well, those novels are highly underrated. They end good, happy. What's wrong with that? Besides, there's all the twists and turns to get there.

(GUS takes her hand.)

HANNAH

What are you doing?

(HANNAH pulls away. GUS grabs her hand again.)

GUS

Shh. I'm proving you're curious.

(GUS runs his other hand gently up her arm. He stops on her upper arm.)

GUS

You going to tell me you don't want to find out what this hand is going to do next?

(HANNAH pulls away.)

HANNAH

Let's say, due to some twist or turn, I don't get a hideous disease. Instead I get hit by a car. Do I really need to know if it's a red car or a blue car, if the driver has long hair or short?

GUS

If you do this terrible thing, I swear I will come back with my machete and hack every single stalk in the garden. Then I'll borrow Old Man Swensen's rototiller and turn it under, and then, then I'll... I'll sow it with salt.

HANNAH

You wouldn't dare.

GUS

Whose going to stop me?

HANNAH

You son of a bitch.

GUS

That's more like it.

(HANNAH steps back and composes herself.)

HANNAH

I don't believe you. For all your faults, and I don't have time to list them now, you've never been a vindictive person.

GUS

Maybe you don't know me as well as you think. Every person's a bit of a mystery, don't you think?

HANNAH

No.

GUS

Well, I'll do it. I'll do it while they're burying your sorry ass.

HANNAH

I still don't believe you.

GUS

But you can't be 100 percent sure, can you?

HANNAH

If I'm wrong, it won't matter. I won't know about it.

(GUS grabs a nearby stalk and throttles it.)

HANNAH

Stop that. Please. I'm feeling good, Gus, really good. What would be a better time to bow out? At the top of my game, so to speak? A nice tunafish salad sandwich, a cup of cream of tomato soup, and a slice of chocolate merengue pie. Then with the afternoon sun on my face, a graceful exit. You must be able to understand that. I'll never ever again dread the empty night ahead. I wouldn't have told you if I didn't think you'd understand.

GUS

OK. OK. I do understand. Tunafish sandwich, sun, feeling good...

(GUS kisses her on the cheek. HANNAH smiles with relief that he understands. They gaze at each other a moment. GUS kicks her in the shin.)

HANNAH

Ow!

GUS

Ha! Take that.

HANNAH

Are you crazy?

GUS

Not so perfect now, huh? You aren't going to exit very gracefully with a limp, are you?

HANNAH

I'm not limping, you idiot.

GUS

Oh yeah? I can solve that.

(GUS makes to kick her other shin. HANNAH, limping, shrieks and dodges. GUS chases her about the garden. HANNAH turns on him, throws anything she can get her hands on.)

GUS

Come on. You couldn't hit the broad side of a barn. That's it. Now your blood's a-pumping.

(GUS and HANNAH end up, winded, sitting next to each other on the bench or porch step. HANNAH inspects her shin.)

HANNAH

You son of a bitch. Look. It's already black and blue. And you broke the skin.

GUS

Any time, Hannah. What are neighbors for?

HANNAH

Damn you. I was feeling so good.

GUS

Yeah. It was creepy.

(Beat)

Gave me an awful start back there when I thought you were dying.

(GUS gets to his feet, pats her on the head. HANNAH swats his hand away. GUS limps away, stiff from sitting.)

HANNAH

Old fool. I'm still going to do it. You'll see. Soon as this shin heals.

GUS

Nah. I'll be on the watch. Anytime you get too pleasant, I'll be Johnny on the spot. I'll make your life miserable.

HANNAH

Oh yeah?

GUS

Yeah. I got all kinds of ways to get under your skin.

HANNAH

You think so, do you?

(GUS Nods.)

HANNAH

Always something to look forward to?

GUS

Always.

HANNAH

(Beat)

Want a tuna sandwich?

GUS

God no. Can't stand them.

(To himself as he exits.)

Tunafish sandwich. I ask you, what kind of lame-brained last meal is that? Roast beef, maybe...

(HANNAH is left nursing her leg.)

(GUS re-enters.)

GUS

Did I hear you say something about chocolate pie?

The End

Nancy Slavin

Mothering in the Time of Fire and Ice

2023 Essay - Runner Up

Mothering in the Time of Fire and Ice

1. Labor

Labor Day, 2020, strong warm winds we’d been warned about bowed the tops of roadside trees as I drove home after running a quick errand with my daughter. A minute later, I noticed the first fire next to a municipal warehouse. Orange flames coursed from the building, along the grass. Fire caught in trees, lit up trunks, then continued south, toward a new apartment complex. Traffic crawled as drivers gawked. “Here we go,” I whispered and gripped the wheel.

Blue and red lights swirled the twilight. My tween, who’d been scrolling on her phone in the backseat, looked up and said, “Mom, what’s burning?” Her voice carried the disturbed annoyance only a teenager can have.

“Maybe a transformer blew and sparks caught in the grass?” I guessed, “But firemen are on it.”

The air smelled of smoke and metal. Firetrucks huddled near the blaze. I couldn’t see any water.

At home, the inside of our house was too dark for a late summer evening. I walked past the kitchen table to the sliding glass door that leads to the backyard. Hundreds of giant five-pointed green leaves pressed against the big glass panes like human hands.

“Oh my,” I said, as breath swept out of my body.

My daughter came to look. “Mom,” she said with more fear than annoyance now. She grabbed my forearm.

I patted her hand, “It’s probably fine, honey,” I said as I opened the slider and walked outside.

A giant trunk-like limb from our big-leaf maple had cracked and fallen against the back of our house. The limb remained attached to the tree at its high break, while the rest of the trunk spiked into the ground and rutted a ditch into the grass. The limb bent the fence of an unused dog run and put a dent in a gutter; otherwise, the damage to the house appeared minimal. But the acute angle of the trunk attached to the tree up top reminded me of the few times I’ve seen pictures of a compound fracture, the unnatural break protruding from the skin but still connected to the body. Fear needled along my forearm.

High easterly winds swirled smoke and ash through an eerie twilight sky. I downloaded an emergency app, checked local group chats on social media, and refreshed a digital map tracking the growth of several fires all around us. Conspiracies theories about the fires in our county also swirled. As the wind blew and the sky turned dark so did my mood. Our neighborhood went to a Level One, “Get Ready,” evacuation order. Air quality plummeted. We don’t have air conditioning and the inside of our house smelled of smoke.

I walked into my daughter’s room. “We need to pack up our car, but you’ll have to make choices because we only have the Prius.”

“I don’t know what to take,” she said and then broke down crying on her bed, her head in her hands, big tears rolling down her cheeks.

“I know it’s hard to know what to choose when you love everything.”

That night, for the first time in years, my tween slept with me in my bed. Not that I slept. I refreshed maps. I called my husband, who works away from our house in summer. I was mad he was not home to help me with all this emotional and physical labor.

By morning, our neighborhood went to Level Two, “Get Set.” Everything that was scheduled canceled. My daughter and I stood in my bedroom, and I could sense her disappointment about the cancelation of her activities. She petted one of our two old cats, who, by some miracle, happened to be resting together on my bed.

“You know, I could sweep these cats into the crate and we could go to your grandparents’ house, which has air conditioning. We could relax a little and get some rest.”

“Okay,” my daughter said, with a monotone voice not of typical teenager apathy, but letdown.

My heart cracked, but we needed to press ahead.

We loaded into our overstuffed car and drove, cats mewling in the crate on my daughter’s lap. While waiting in a line of cars also evacuating, I took a picture of our child for my husband to see. She’s leaning on a faded pink pillow with a lavender scrunchie on her wrist, her face halfway buried in her crossed arms. Outside is a backdrop of ashy smoke. My girl’s eyelids look down, half-bored, half-contemplating what we could lose if the fires came to our neighborhood.

I once wrote a line of a poem, “motherhood is nothing but loss,” feeling as I was then the effects of separation as mother from child. But now, my feeling of loss felt more acute, more like a painful break than a separation.

The word acute comes from the Latin *acus*, or needle.

2. *Liver*

A body’s liver produces bile, also called gall, to help break down fats and hard-to-digest foods. In humans, extra bile is stored in the gallbladder, which trickles out bits of the bitter fluid as needed. The Greek word for gall is *kholē*, or *chole-*. The Greeks believed there were two kinds: black bile caused anger (or choler), yellow bile caused sorrow (or melancholy).

After my daughter’s birth, my body experienced many complications, including a failing gallbladder. I tried to heal the organ by eating a low-fat diet, which messed with my breastmilk and made our newborn wail in hunger all hours of day and night. I ate more fat and suffered more excruciating attacks. When she was finally done breastfeeding, I tried to pass the gallstones through fasting, but after another attack practically cracked me open, my doctor did an ultrasound and proclaimed gallbladder was “chock full of stones.” I surrendered and had a cholecystectomy and asked the surgeon to give me my gallbladder, which she wouldn’t—*the gall!*—so I begged her to take a picture so I could see what came out of my body. She took two pictures; in one the little sack stretched to bursting, in the other, she cut open the sack so I could see the pile of black and yellow stones, a bushelful of calcified anger and sorrow.

Many mothers develop gallbladder and liver problems and, though I can’t speak for any of them, for me there has been a connection between the decline of my liver function and motherhood, as if birthing a child stirred up a well of feelings I’d stored away for much of my life—and I didn’t become a mother until I was almost forty years old.

Since I was my daughter’s age, I’ve been a fighter for the underdog, mad and sad about injustice and inequality, that sense a teenager has that the world isn’t fair. But as I got older and saw and learned more about sexism, racism, violence and then wealth mis-distribution, the existence of billionaires, resource extraction and labor exploitation, especially in America that preached so hard during my childhood how our country was the home of the free, I stored more and more gall, more anger and sorrow. For two decades, I worked as a violence prevention educator, trying to get kids and adults to be kind to each other. I’ve organized with mothers and grandmothers whose loved ones have died from gun and police violence. I’ve stood in streets, in front of courthouses, in front of city council meetings and judges’ podiums working to take back the night, stop child abuse, shelter domestic violence victims, and change law enforcement

procedures that so often led to more harm. I don’t think I’m alone in holding unexpressed anger and sorrow in my body as a mother. I have seen this truth time and again, especially with mothers who also hold the immediate grief of having lost a child to police and/or domestic violence or poor health care. The tightness and darkening of their skin due to overburden of cortisol, the decline of their health in the graying of their faces. Grief is stressful, crazymaking, mother breaking. Grief is a form of love so acute it hurts. My own mother has said to me, “Oh honey, your empathy is going to kill you.”

When our daughter was four years old, I got her ready to be an angel in a community winter dance production on the eve of the Newtown murders at Sandy Hook Elementary School. I bobby pinned a halo made of silver tinsel on her blonde head and smoothed out her glittery wings. I was a parent-helper backstage and ushered out the line of small angels tiptoeing past the heavy curtain, their tiny hands raised up like ballerinas. Tears ran down my face. I could not keep hidden my sorrow for the dead children in Connecticut and the rage those parents must have felt at their immense loss. I thought perhaps my empathy might kill me that night, but I had to be a mother. I tried to hide the tears that streamed down my cheeks as my little angel, and many others, disappeared into the shimmering stage lights.

But ultimately, my mother was right; because gall with no storage receptacle is a dark thick river that can take over a body. Daily onslaughts of children suffering or dying from more school shootings, excessive police violence, wars, famine, drought, fires—or school boards taken over by people who never had any children—continued no matter what I would do and do and do. My liver needled my side, telling me *you cannot live with such gall much longer*. I drank cassia seed tea, avoided fats again, fasted and took tinctures, meditated and prayed. I tried to find joy in friendships and community, but still sometimes I walked around with my hand pressed under my right ribcage like an old grandmother full of sorrow.

3. *Mother*

Pain never kept me from fighting. By 2020, besides attending Black Lives Matter protests, I worked as part of an executive team to recall the mayor of our town, a man who had racked up many ethical claims against him and who’d spread misinformation about police and Black people on social media. The recall taught me how much work direct democracy takes. Getting people to sign a petition, all while wearing masks and keeping our social distance, was

no easy task. Our team put in hours of phone calls, tabling, meetings, social media engagement, and fundraising. After the wildfires finally turned to embers, we even knocked on doors to gather the last signatures needed to put the recall on a special ballot. The vote won. We’d elect another mayor.

Then, in early 2021, an Arctic storm blanketed our city with a three-inch sheet of ice. The weight of ice knocked out powerlines for miles. Tree limbs fell every second, night and day. The big-leaf maple in the backyard lost more limbs, a constant racket of crack and shatter, pop and crash. Each break needled my nervous system where I still stored trauma in my body from the fires a few months prior.

For eight days, our block had no electricity. I could light the gas stovetop with a match to heat water and food, but our house turned frigid. The wood we had outside was wet and gave us only smoke when we tried to ignite it in our fireplace. Our neighbor offered for me to come get some of his dry wood, which I did, wheelbarrowing a few loads over to our house to chop with an axe, but still our fireplace did little to make heat. Another friend lent us her generator, which I set up outside under a tent, and used to plug in our chest freezer. I sat by the heatless fire and pressed on my liver which hurt every day. I could taste my own bile. The bitterness was acute.

As ice on the street melted, my spouse suggested we go to his parents’ house, as we’d done during the fires, for power and warmth and a hot shower.

“You two go,” I said to him and our daughter.

“Really?” he asked.

“Yeah, I need to stay. I want to keep an eye on our tree.” He cocked his head, perhaps thinking I was too dramatic, but they finally got in the four-wheel drive truck and braved the icy patches on our street. The second they rounded the corner I buckled over and sobbed. Wailed, really. My body shuddered, big tears fell and noises howled forth from dark places inside my body. I stood then and shook out my arms and legs, twirled in circles and danced in the waning winter night.

I worried I was having a mental break, but as my sobs abated, I felt more as though I mothered my liver that afternoon. I let go of a lot of stored choler and melancholy. For at least the afternoon, I released my fear of our children’s broken future on this changing earth, my sorrow for cracked trees and lives and livelihoods, exhaustion from what it takes to be an active American citizen who believes we need to reckon with our past, that all lives can’t matter until

Black lives matter, too, that we must face ourselves as we also face the scorching loss of security and predictability and the disappointing freezing over of compassion. I broke and burst and cried and cracked and yet remained intact. For the first time in months, maybe years, I felt relief.

4. Matter

The word matter comes from the Latin word, *māteria*, meaning wood and timber, derived from *māter*, which means mother (the woody part of a tree was seen as the source of growth).

Many white people get upset about the Black Lives Matter movement. I saw those reactions a lot in Oregon, a state founded as a white homeland, the only state that included an Exclusion Law in its constitution, which banned Black people from living, working or owning property, and said any new Black or “mulatto” settlers could be whipped with “not less than twenty nor more than thirty-nine stripes” for every six months they remained. The language of that law was not wiped from Oregon’s founding document until 2002, though the law was repealed some decades earlier.

The Oregon city where I live dubs itself the “first main street West of the Rockies” and a few years ago it was named one of three “Best Main Streets” in the nation. But this city is also the only known place in Oregon where the constitutionally ratified Exclusion Law was formally enacted. A white business owner and a white judge forced a Black man, Jacob Vanderpool, a competing business owner, to leave the state. No one knows for sure what happened to Vanderpool after that, possibly he moved to San Francisco. What I know is after we’d worked so hard on the recall effort, by the following election, our next mayor was a Black woman, the first person of color to ever hold the position. She is also a mother.

But with this history, it’s no surprise Proud Boys are active around here. They wave flags on street corners, demonstrate against school superintendents who work for diversity and equity, demonstrate against business owners who hold Drag Queen Bingo nights. Several of those Proud Boys stormed the US Capitol two years ago, as well as the Oregon State Capitol the same year, breaking in and threatening lawmakers.

Last year, I spoke at a nearby city council meeting, concerned about a business owner friend and the leniency some police and city councilors seemed to give to the Proud Boys as they violated county and city ordinances. As I walked to the table to speak, four large Proud Boys sat in the rows behind me. They were emboldened by then to wear their full colors, which are black

and yellow. I felt scared and anxious in their presence, but also, I understood what it feels like to be chockfull of gall.

5. *Ancestor*

During the fires, before our town moved from “Get Ready,” evacuation orders to “Get Set,” I called my mother, who lives across the country, because I knew she’d be concerned watching images of the burning homes and trees and charred cars on the national news. I told her we’d been packing up.

I also told her, besides my essential identifications like passports, birth certificates, etc., I had stood in the middle of my home office, surprised, unlike our daughter, at how much I didn’t care about much of my stuff. I ended up only packing a few books and journals, and the one particular watercolor my mom had painted of my daughter as fifteen-month-old.

When, a few years before, I had opened up the box, unraveled the tissue paper, and found the most ethereal portrait of my only child staring out with her dark intense eyes and pink rosebud lips open just enough to taste the air, I cried and laughed because my mother had captured with such elegance and beauty our daughter’s fierce innocence. Mom had matted the painting in a thin gold frame and surprised me with it for Mother’s Day.

“That painting of your granddaughter is the only thing I really want to take with me,” I said to my mom on the phone.

“Oh honey, I love you,” my mom said.

The word ancestor comes from Latin *cēdere*, to go, withdraw, yield. There’s relationship with the root of that word, *kēd*, the prefixed and suffixed form, *ne-ked-ti-, with the word necessary, as in inevitable, unavoidable. Since the ice storm, I realize my labor is to re-member my ancestors, especially the mothers and grandmothers, the woody parts of the tree that make the tree grow. I yield my fear and pain for the future to their care. I understand gall, mine and perhaps even that of the Proud Boys, is necessary, inevitable in this time of transition and breaking. But even those boys have a mother and, so, perhaps I was wrong: motherhood is not nothing but loss; motherhood is yielding to growth.

For I too am a battered tree with broken limbs whose roots are grounded in all those ancestors who came before me. I no longer have a place to store my choler, so to heal my liver—to live and continue to grow—I surrender to the fire and ice as a small but integral part of matter.

I love my mother who helped me grow up into an adult woman who feels the humility of mothering a fierce-eyed, rose-lipped child who I love as fiercely as all the mothers. I labor in the world as I grieve the world's losses. A tree trunk snaps and catches fire, ice thaws and another limb cracks, a heart breaks and we all disappear into the light.

Paul Lyons

The Forgotten Garden

2023 Poetry – Winner

The Forgotten Garden

The dark rock walls, so old.
Hold many stories of another time.
Tiny white flowers shine light
Into the cracks that is their home.

Brick and moss hold each other softly
To guide footsteps to a quiet place.
Small hedges, long overgrown
Stand in line with no place to go.

A small wooden bench waits patiently
For the company of lovers, but none are near.
Swollen bark bears the wounds of many
Who carved their young love here long ago.

Rain gently washes an old maple above.
Leaves turn and twist and fall.
Below, one past rose petal holds on
For one more day of sun.

A song bird prays a litany of this day.
A tarnished wind chime answers.
It rings on and on and I wonder
If anyone else is listening.

Suzanne Pearce
Our Old Farmhouse

2023 Poetry - Runner Up

Our Old Farm House (page 1)

I woke up this morning thinking of you.
Safe and warm wrapped in my flannel sheets.
I must have been dreaming of times long gone,
Lulled in that place only sleep entreats.
We lived in that old, cold farmhouse,
Drafty windows and faded linoleum over creaky floors,
Walls blackened from years of wood smoke,
No hallways, but every room had at least two doors.
That jumble of rambling rooms was home,
And we washed and swept and cleaned
Like countless families before had done.
The house made us its own it seemed.
There were pink camellias and blue hydrangeas in the yard
Loved by someone long before we lived there
Who knew those gnarled old fruit trees when they were young,
And in the spring, there were daffodils everywhere.
Beyond the barn and pasture lay the woods
Where we pretended to be pioneers.
We built our fort down by the creek.
I had not thought of that place in years.
There was a little clearing in the trees,
Down a narrow trail.
It was our secret hidden place.
Somehow, I remember it now in detail.
This morning when I awoke, I remembered
Our little meadow covered in snow.

Our Old Farm House (page 2)

We laughed and danced in circles
With the joy only children can know.
Then we ran back home to tell you
Our excited voices rang like bells on the frozen air.
You must have heard us coming
Because at the kitchen door you met us there.
With a thermos of hot chocolate,
And a scarf over your head loosely thrown.
You followed us back to the clearing,
And saw the magic even though you were grown.
This morning I woke up thinking of you
As if I heard some distant voice calling.
I felt so comfortable and warm,
And when I looked outside, snow was falling.

When the snow came it seemed like magic
We fell into silence we stood in our flocked meadow
Then we ran laughing back home
Our jackets and hats caked with wet snow
You must have heard us coming
Our excited voices rang on the frozen air like bells

The first time it snowed
We ran to our meadow
And danced in the silent fall flakes

Faded out buildings sat in disrepair.

Where we played house and pretended, we lived in pioneer days

And the big old stumps lead down the lane to the pasture

Sentinels of a time we did not know

with the red barn out back