Clotheslines

GALE TYLER

Une corde à linge révèle les secrets de la vie d'une famille.

Every week on a windy day that did not threaten rain, women on Spencer Street hung their family's laundry out to dry in the back yards behind their houses. Mr. Tyson, the bachelor, was the only exception to this rule and because of the huge hedge that encircled his back yard, we did not know if he hung a wash or not. Mothers in post-war Vancouver were judged by their clotheslines: how well it was hung and how clean the wash looked. The whiteness of their wash was public evidence of their ability to "keep house."

One Spencer Street family wash was a disgrace: so said our mother and her neighbour friends. They expressed pity for the Dalgleish children whose clothes, when finally washed, hung grey from the clothesline. Once a neighbor invited us to stand on the back of her chesterfield and peer through her window into a bedroom window in the Dalgleish house. We were warned to never go inside that filthy house.

Each clothesline told a story. If you examined it you would learn how many men and women and boys and girls lived in the house. You could guess the ages of the children by the sizes of the clothing. By counting, you learned how many times a week each person changed their underwear. The quality and kind of clothing and linens told about the family's heritage and how much money they had. You could tell what kind of work the man of the house did by the colour of the shirts and trousers on the line and the kind of men's socks hung there. Our father was a physiotherapist and one of only three men on our street who wore white shirts and fine socks to work. Our father's work trousers never hung on the line because they had to be dry-cleaned.

Wash day was the major weekly event in our house. The dirty clothes piled in a basket by the manual wringer washer in the basement would be sorted: then the whites washed, followed by the coloureds. Several rinses and much hand wringing later, the heavy basket of damp clothes would be carried from the basement up the outsides stairs to the back porch where the cloth bag holding clothespins hung from the clothesline pulley. After wiping the length of the line clean with a damp cloth, our mother expertly pegged the sheets folded in the middle to stop the wind from filling them like sails carrying them to the branches of the big walnut tree. Then in order she pegged pillow slips, towels, shirts, trousers, dresses, blouses, skirts, socks and, finally, closest to the back door and farthest from the prying eyes of neighbours, the underwear.

Gale Tyler, with her first dog, Spottie, taken in 1945 on Spencer Street.

When our father left, our clothesline told the neighbours before our mother did. The missing shirts, socks, and underwear became a new kind of gossip for the families on Spencer Street. A neighbour child asked me if our Dad was gone. Thinking she was asking if her was dead, I told her he was still alive, but just not living in our house anymore.

Struck with grief and shame, our mother went on with life and chores as before but kept to herself for many

months. She word dark glasses every day for a year until one day a friend yanked them off her and said it was time to get on with living. She began inviting neighbours in for tea as she had done before our father left. She surprised us by starting to take night school courses.

One was day after the clothes had been hung, a neighbour came in for tea and looked out our kitchen door at the clothesline. Hanging close to the door was a set of pink silk Van Raalte lingerie our mother had bought for herself with her first paycheck earned as a kindergarten teacher. Matching panties, bra, and slip had been hand washed and hung to dry discretely over the porch. "Jane, whose lingerie is that?" the neighbour asked.

"Mine of course," replied our mother.

"Well, what possessed you to buy those?" laughed the neighbour. "You've no man in your life."

I heard my mother's starched reply, "A woman doesn't need a man to buy herself nice underwear."

Neither my mother nor the neighbour realized the Van Raalte lingerie hanging in the breeze were flags of independence.

Gale Tyler is a retired public school teacher born and raised in Vancouver. She is a University of British Columbia graduate who majored in Primary and Special Education.A lifelong feminist activist, she worked to end the rigid sex role stereotyping in BC *curriculum, textbooks, and Government and School District policies that restricted girls and women in Education in* BC .

JEANETTE LYNES

What I Knew Of Pigeons

What I knew of pigeons came from a book on Paris
in the school library. Pigeons were everywhere, there –

moulting teal-plum feathers on stones, puddling
doorways to underground trains, bobbing for crumbs

flung by beret-headed crones – pigeons, I concluded,
were French – which must make ours some fallen,

anglicized sub-species. Pigeons bore messages –
I'd forgotten that until bursting in from school

early one Monday, the Sunday china spread
before my mother. She was picking a tiny carcass

clean. Pigeon, she said, swirling homemade wine
in her crystal wedding goblet. She'd caught it herself –

her mother, in lean times, did the same. The bones'
look of a small empress' fan clamped shut my own

growling gut. I was too stunned to probe her method:
butterfly net? My skipping rope as lasso? I suddenly

found myself famished, far from France. The lower cultures
will gather what they can – she'd saved me a diminutive

drumstick. She poured me a glass. My first real drink.
What my father would eat she'd no inkling.

I raised my goblet to her, to own my birth
into a long line of predators.

Jeanette Lynes, a York alumnus, is the author of three collections of poetry. Her regular position is Associate Professor of English (and Women's Studies) at St. Francis Xavier University. However, she is currently on leave as a Writer in Residence at the Saskatoon Public Library. Jeanette's third collection of poems, Left Fields (Wolsak and Wynn, 2003) *was short listed for the Pat Lowther Memorial Award). Jeanette is Poet Laureate for the Nova Scotia New Democratic Party.*