

DEIRDRE MAULTSAID

Washerwomen, Blessings

1.

I am a washerwoman standing on unstable
ground.
I see all in its proper place: aquifer, granite, dust,
sideyard, water pump,
a basin full, my own brawny arms,
my washboard-abraded hands still wringing.
Work is its own reward.
Be Careful: contemplation could bring grief.
The world is.
The world does not know me.

2.

Ada Williams, says of her work, "The summer I
was 15, I went up to Halifax and
earned a few dollars. I found a job doing
housework, where I had to wash a huge
pile of clothes every day while the mistress sat
and watched me. I stood it for one
week, and left. She refused to pay me anything
and was very angry. I went down to
the waterfront and got on Cat Weston's vessel
and started for home... I walked
down home in the thick fog, and went in the
house just as Papa was having his
breakfast. "I had to come home, Papa," I said.
"The work was so hard and I was
homesick." "Come in child. Come in," he said.
"We mine as well starve together."
(Beth Light & Joy Parr, Editors, *Canadian Women
on the Move, 1867-1920*, New
Hogtown Press, 1983).

3.

In pioneer communities, washing clothes
involved hauling water, a two day soak
with vinegar or buttermilk to take out stains,
rubbing the clothes vigorously on the
washboard, boiling them and hanging them out
to dry in all weather, Rumour has it
that Frontiersmen took baths at the laundry and
bathhouses, in the East Kootenay
Mountains, in the early 1900's, but would have
to wait days for their clothes to
dry. Women made their own lye out of wood
ash and bones, or animal fat.

Catherine Parr Trail, in *The Backwoods of Canada*
said that the process of making
soap was "mysterious" and a recipe that
required a certain touch. How sweet the
washerwoman with her Castile soap for the lace
and her hard-working lye for the
britches and rags and flannels.

4.

Statistics Canada has a study, "Households
unpaid work: measurement and
valuation" (Catalogue No. 13-603-MPE95003.)
www.statcan.ca
Laundry is subject to public scrutiny.

5.

Last century, a bride was instructed in *Mountain
Life and Work* to wash the clothes
thus: "1. bild a fire in back yard to heat kettle of
rain water. 2. set tubs so smoke
won't blow in eyes if wind is pert. 3. shave one
hole cake soap in bilin water. 4. sort
things, make three piles, one pile white, one
cullord, one work britches and rags. 5.
stur flour in cold water to smoothe then thin
down with bilin water. 6. rub dirty spots
on bord, scrub hard, then bile, rub cullord but
don't bile just rench and starch. 8.
spred tee towels on grass; hang old rags on
fence; pore rench water in flower bod;
scrub porch with soapy water. 9. turn tubs
upside down. 10. go put on clean dress,
smooth hair with side combs, brew cup of tee,
set and rest and rock a spell and
count blessins."

6.

What layered meaning in layered aprons.

7.

I perceive the world in its otherness,
its pulse, its it-ness,
its ellipses, waysides and vacancies,
broken shards and muscularity,
oh, its stomped thistles, its unrelenting waves of
wheat,
its crammed up sweaty pioneer dread,

anguished tears in the outhouse.
What can I give?
I separate darks from whites.
I scour.
Sweeten.

8.
Henry David Thoreau, in *Walden*, says "In the midst of a gentle rain while these thoughts prevailed, I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very pattering of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me, as made the fancied advantages of human neighbourhood insignificant, and I have never thought of them since. Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me."

9.
6:06 a.m., after the first load is sloshing in the washer, I walk along the familiar short piece of road, past the usual sight of the two men who unplug, then warm up their truck before heading to their shift at the lumber mill, past the same trailers with the all-year Christmas lights (red and green only), the same piles of real firewood and old lumber (second choice firewood), past the same grime and unloved gravel (no matter how sideways I look through my own snow-covered lashes at the new drifts that soften the view along the road), while I hear the undernourished dogs barking from the ends of their taut ropes, and hear the trucks from Alaska and Prince Rupert idling at the brake check, and I see the truckers relieving themselves into the ravine, where they carve the same caked snow, and the same barnacles of old ice, and then, I walk until I come—oh, the teeth-grinding lack of possibilities—to the familiar cul-de-dac

turnaround, with its same road-salt-sickened pine trees, (dry and forgotten and carport-threatening), the same tedium of scruffy volunteer rosehips in the ditches, the boring lack of wildlife, and the silence of God.

10.
Female nature is a truth hiding its own invention. Women's work is not natural, but becomes a burnt stew, a short walk on stolen time, a forgotten dishcloth on the clothesline.

11.
Assemble a decoration, a tiara, a clothespin animal of words;
hang out a long line of white laundry.
Sweeten this scene.
Wring this out.
Judge the sloshing and sluicing before it judges you.
Count blessings.

12.
Think of all the pioneer girls I miss.
Think of how they please me with their frippery.
Don't they make lace with such devotion?
Such white patterns
of closure and convergence and conformity.
Girls finish tasks; they have crafts and rituals
that will not bend, will not break,
that are doubled and comforting and encircling.
Inside out bags for the clothespins
Lists of detergent, pitiless soap, bleach, cleaner.
May they clean away the anguish.
Think of all the girls who pass.
Hold onto the jump rope.
Hold onto the fringe of your friend's skirt.
Hold onto the hair of that girl next to you in
your naked dream.
The lace cannot comfort you,
only language,
only the protein of love,
only the horizon toward which you run, strong-
thighed,

boots thrown down in a wet coulee, apron gone,
stockings discarded for a fox nest,
garter belt ripped off and still flying into the
blue.

A pioneer trail.
Monday washday.
Count Blessins.

13.

The world does not know me.
No pine tree sympathizes,
its scent a purposeful balm.
I wash.
The clothes will flap in the breeze.
The sheets make a schooner on a bay of golden
sheaves.
So?
I see and walk on.

14.

This is not my contemplation.
I do not spiritually
attune myself
to the irreducible
complexity
in each droplet of water.
The world is where I left it: clean, sullied, sorted,
unsorted,
with its tired cracked ice,
unblessed knuckles, random water sprays,
sometimes, sometimes footloose giddy
grooming.
The thistles grow, the lace becomes yellowed,
even if I do not reflect.
What do I know?
What do I know that I know?
Be careful of what I see in my knowing,
with its soured rationality,
deadened intuition.
How fragile are we, how will we endure, how
storied and truthful is the world, is
this drop of water.
Scoured is silence.
My soliloquy.

15.

All washing is servile.
All reliance is slavery.
Is all suffused with Nature's power?
Contemplation is a social practice that claims:
God is here if we listen.
I hear the rustle as the fox sniffs the girl's apron.
I hear the waves lapping.

Everything that rises.
All that knows.
Women are a sea of power,
not the long-suffering
points of power's application
against us.
We are not the rags to be wrung.
Water, we rise.

16.

Make my human experience break beyond my
skin.
The world travels on its moist blue arc; the bay
glows; the sheets flutter.
I inhale.
The girls have washed so many linens.
Make me thank them.
Bless their rough hands.
Only.
Hold.

Deirdre Maultsaid's work has been published in Other Voices, Zygote and a Rowan Books anthology, and on the Internet at: Conspire (U.S.), The Barcelona Review (Spain), The Southern Cross Review (Argentina), The Danforth Review (Canada), and others. She is currently revising a novel and writing a book of creative essays. She lives in Burnaby, BC.