

Clothesline
By Sandy Carlson

Our clothesline stretched
Between the back porch
And the oak tree
Twenty yards down
Our gently sloping backyard.
The oak stood eternal and vast
Beside the 1920s stone hearth
We used for a barbecue only once
Because it required so much charcoal.

Our socks and underwear flapped
Over the picnic table stained red
On the brick patio between
The back porch and the Bilco doors,
Under which we stored firewood
For the basement woodstove
During the many years of Dad's
Lone war against OPEC.

On the other side of the laundry,
Our widowed neighbor wanted
The peace of trees in the wind,
Privacy, deep dark, solitude.
Thanks to her acre-square wilderness,
Our laundry dried unseen though we lived
On a very busy road.

When I think of that clothesline on pulleys,
I think of my mother's hands, raw and red,
Pulling our laundry from the washing machine
Balling it into a wicker basket,
Carrying it upstairs and through the kitchen
To the back porch, where she had to stand on her toes
To reach the line. I think of her shoulders
As she bore the heft and wet of our bed sheets
As she pinned them to the line to dry.

How intimately she knew her family,
How humbly she bore our weight:
Every week she took our clothes, towels, sheets
And made them bright white,
Fragrant, and filled with sunshine.

She knew us well.
She made things right.
She seemed not to mind
That it might take us decades to notice,
That she might not be here for that moment
Of our awareness and the joy of it,
That our embrace—our gratitude—would have to wait.