

The washing machine

Ann Meskens – January 14th 2020

Column 3: Week theme ‘Green City’

The Neverending Park. De Grond der Dingen.

Whoash. Whoash. My washing machine washes for me. My coffee machine makes me coffee. My computer and I write. I am still very much needed with the computer. He provides the form, I the content. Well, sometimes he searches for content for me. "Bleached meadow," I ask. And he surfs and answers:

"A bleached field or meadow is a mowed grass field used to bleach laundry. The word goes back to 1520, but bleaching is older. Sunlight and oxygen remove odor and yellowish color from the linen as it dries spread out on the lawn. At the end of the 18th century, people started to bleach chemically with chlorine, but the textile industry continued to use bleaching meadows for a long time. Ordinary people laid their household linen in the garden or on urban bleaching meadows. "

You can say that suddenly, the century-long tradition of bleaching was suddenly over. Since the previous century, from the fifties on, almost everyone had their own washing machine and dryer, so goodbye to the meadows. If they weren't available, there was the shared laundry room, without the fresh air, of course.

From then on, the remaining bleaching meadows were desired plots for construction promoters. One meadow became a beautiful park and another the city square of the Place des Martyrs in Brussels, but the greenery of the meadows mostly just disappeared.

In Mechelen, our city, the old meadows of the cloth weavers were located at the current ‘Bleekstraat’. Near the Onze-Lieve-Vrouwestraat, by the old guesthouse and later Diependael, there was a public ‘blijk’ (bleaching meadow) at the Dijle. The still existing staircase by the water served to rinse the laundry. To the northwest of the Groot Begijnhof, too, there were bleach meadows that continued to exist long after the beguines were gone. There were old bleaching meadows by the water of the Tinel and by the Stompaertshoek, nearby, of course, the ‘Kattenbleekstreat’.

The meadows provided an open space, I read somewhere. They were open green zones where women and children came together. Women repaired clothes, children played, the household linen dried and bleached naturally because of the sun and wind ...

It sounds idyllic, but washing was a laborious chore: soaking, cooking, wringing, rinsing, bleaching, drying... mangle, stiffening, ironing, folding. The ribbed washboard, only invented in the 17th century, eased the hard work, but only slightly.

'Long live the 20th century!' I want to shout now, while the laundry is washing itself calmly behind my back. Whoosh. Whoosh.

Of course last century people exclaimed: Long live electricity! Long live the washing machine! And the dryer! And washing powder with bleach so bleaching in the sun was no longer necessary! Long live long-awaited progress!

Yes, and also 'Long live the woman!', historians and feminists exclaimed. The washing machine and dryer have freed, more than the pill or any other invention, women from slavish toil in the household.

Remembering my grandmother, that is true, I know. Monday was washing day, she told me, but only because the laundry soaked all weekend, and the rest of the week was needed to dry the laundry long enough to put in the cupboard again. Not for me, thank you.

For years now, I have been drying my laundry on a line or rack again, because those modern dryers are huge energy wasters. And yes, I use ecological detergents without bleach because the traditional soap proved to be immensely harmful to the environment. And even with the latest purchase of an A-class washing machine, I know that we need progress again. And that for the entire world.

Where is progress when you need her?

While reading ecological internet tips, I fear that those environmental-friendly guidelines will send both the new man and the eternal woman back to laborious work.

"The best alternative to the washing machine is to do the washing again by hand!"

"Washable diapers - no dryer, no stain removers! - best bleached in the sun - horizontally! "

Help. It won't be long until we will ask for green bleach meadows again out of guilt and environmental awareness.

Not me.

I prefer a forest or a park.

I want dog meadows, flower picking meadows, aikido meadows or whatever. But I don't want bleach meadows. Our grandmothers have put more than enough time and energy into the daily laundry, and they have spent enough time on those poor bleaching meadows. And I believe, not because they were so happy there, but because they had no other choice.

I want green in the city. Of course, the more the better.

But also and most importantly, I finally want a true green washing machine.

And that from design to recovery.

I would like to share them - but easily, close by and with not too many fellow users.

It is possible. If the industry would cooperate a little more. If the politicians would try a little harder. And if there were a more users who would ask for it.

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