

From blue barrettes to orange shirts

The girls clustered in the toilet
beside the rusty sink
with the cold tap dripping;
under a small broken mirror.
The girls whispered quickly
to each other ignoring
the stench from
the trough that carried
waste and disinfectant
flushed out daily.
I can smell it now
in the back of my nostrils.
Mary showed off her
new barrettes, her pair of bows;
one in pink said
YES in black letters:
the other in blue said NO.
Mary spoke out, they don't like them
but I'll wear them anyhow.
Marie defiant, agreed,
I will wear mine too.
Another Mary in tears added
I am afraid to wear mine now,
I got bawled out, I wonder why.
Josephine, the smallest of all,
with an owl-wise face
too old for her so tiny body
she could barely see into
into the fragment
of mottled mirror,
whispered softly,
they don't like the blue one,
they don't like it
when we say NO.
When the bell clanged
the girls dispersed
and scuttled away.

Years later, my mother and I
heard on the radio the bishop
of our church diocese
had gone to prison.
The same bishop who confirmed
my sister and me was guilty
of sexually abusing girls
in a residential school.
We sat silent in horror
until my mother said, to think I had
that despicable man in my home.
while I thought of Josephine.

The call came from Unistoten women
Send red dresses, many are needed.
We want to hang them
along the pipeline route,
the pipeline that goes
though our traditional land.
Red dresses, symbols of
wise elder women, become
symbols of so many
murdered and missing
women and girls.
Anywhere near a man-camp
they are not safe: pipelines,
mines, dams, highway construction,
where men freed from social
restriction, full of lust, do
their foul deeds, then tear
the dresses of the trees.
Red dresses now are everywhere,
on my city street, waving beside
country roads and lining church walls,
messages we can no longer ignore.
They speak on the wind:
No more murdered and missing
indigenous women and girls.

A little girl named Phyllis had to go,
her parents were ordered,
they had no choice.
They gave her new clothes,
including an orange shirt.
The first day at the residential school
on September 30, her new clothes
were taken from her.
Years later when a mature woman
Phyllis told her story; September 30
became the day to remember
all those who were dragged away
from family, community, culture.
They were Incarcerated
in ugly buildings whose thick walls
deafened cries and screams
form the world. We remember
together in shame, horror and love.
Orange shirts are now worn
by survivors and supporters.
So many deigns, so many stories
from cultures that
could not be extinguished,
grace these shirts.

This year news shocked
but did not surprise;
215 children's bodies found
in unmarked graves beside
a closed residential school.
Grief and anger ask: Where are
the missing ten thousand
who never came home?
The steps of our settler
government building are covered
with symbols of lost childhood,
stuffed teddy bears, tiny shoes,
small shirts; 215 orange T-shirts,
lovingly arranged, fading in the sun.

But I can see on them
in bold black letters: Every child matters.
I stand silent and think of Josephine.

*Tjw 2021
color photos by Caa*



St, George Residential School near Lytton, BC photo from internet (destroyed by 1st Nations to create a housing development about 20 years ago) internet photo



Legislature, Victoria BC, July 2021



Red dresses, Victoria BC