Spring Cleaning

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by

BETTY LARTIUS

Distributed Studies 4

WINNER OF

THE FOCUS POETRY AWARD, 1976

When you were sure winter had finally receded,
you would tie a scrap of apron over your hair
and stand at the screen door hollering
at my conscience
  until I'd come
  out of the woodshed
  where I'd hid
  because I knew what you were up to
and I would claim
  innocently
I hadn't heard you
  though I knew you knew.
And then you would stand on a chair
  and hand the curtains down
  carefully
because it was the depression
And you would holler at me for poking my finger
  through the lace
because it was the depression
And I would sneeze at the dustiness of them
  while we tooted them to the washtub
and smell the clean wetness of them
  when we lugged them
dripping
heavy
to the pear tree side of the house,
me complaining because bees swarmed there
and you pulling the lace tight
over the stretcher pins
then stopping
to daub spit mud on my bee stung arm
while I asked if it were true bees die
when they sting.
And then we'd bare beds
and fill sun hot lines
with blankets and rugs
flapping
as you beat the dickens out of them
and seeing your strength
I knew I didn't want you mad at me
and hurried in for the broom
when you asked for it
even though I didn't want to.

And then you would scour the naked windows
with bon ami
and polish them
until the sun shone through
  bright
  stark
  clean
glorifying dust motes
resurrected
after a year cloistered by bedsprings.
And then you'd scrub woodwork
to purity
except for the pencil marks on the kitchen doorway
And you'd say "Stand up tall.
  Let's see how much you grew over winter."
And you'd make a new mark
  above the others
  and I'd be proud
because I'd grown three inches.
And then we'd bring blankets and rugs
back to bed and floor
and hang curtains
carefully
because it was the depression
and the house would smell of pear trees
and we'd be careful
  hoping it wouldn't get dirty again,
but it always did
and I always grew every winter.