Momma taught us to keep a clean house

Ashley D. Hairston

This piece, included in the *drift* special issue of *continent*, was created as one step in a thread of inquiry. While each of the contributions to *drift* stand on their own, the project was an attempt to follow a line of theoretical inquiry as it passed through time and the postal service(s) from October 2012 until May 2013.

This issue hosts two threads: *between space & place* and *between intention & attention*. The editors recommend that to experience the drifting thought that attention is paid to the contributions as they entered into conversation one after another. This particular piece is from the BETWEEN SPACE & PLACE thread:

April Vannini, Those Between the Common * Laura Dean & Jesse McClelland, Ballard: A Portrait of Placemaking * Amara Hark Weber, Crossroad * Isaac Linder & Berit Soli-Holt, The Call of the Wild: Terro(i)r Modulations * Ashley D. Hairston, Momma taught us to keep a clean house * Sean Smith, The Garage (Take One)
Momma taught us to keep a clean house. Dust the wood furniture every two weeks. Clean the bathrooms once a week. Wipe down the baseboards once a season (Those damn baseboards. I still got bruises on my knees from scrubbing those things). Sweep away the cobwebs—and pray that those spiders are either dead or delirious (Livin in the country don’t mean you like bugs, especially the ones with too many legs).

Didn’t matter that the house was full of stuff: Great-Grandma’s heirloom dresser, that weird Mammy salt shaker and matching Uncle Tom pepper grinder (Where the hell did Momma get those P.O.S.’s?), the outdated drapes from Belks, Dad’s favorite wooden TV tray, and that ununnugly love seat that some crazy uncle thought was a glorious find from the Salvation Army (Momma tried to make it pretty with some pillows, but no amount of love could help that seat). Spring Cleaning meant pullin all that furniture away from the walls and holdin your breath to see what time collected in the crevices. Then you gotta be careful not to breathe out too heavy cause the dust would go flying fore you got a chance to catch it. If you didn’t, you’d quickly find out if you’re allergic to dust.

Quarter cup of lemon Lysol in a bucket of steaming water and an old wash rag. Maybe two. A dust towel and citrus-scent Pledge. Me and my brothers would fight over who cleaned what. Somehow the twins always got the easy stuff: vacuuming or moving dirt around with the feather-duster. Finishing in enough time to fly down the street on their bikes with the neighborhood kids. Older sister never got off that easy. Each of my stubby fingers morphed into plump, lemon-fresh golden raisins by the time that whole damn house was done. I would finish just in time to sit with Nadine on the porch, counting the seconds till the sun turned off and the fireflies fluttered on.

The craziest thing: despite all that cleaning, the house still smelled like Momma’s cookin. That Old House. Might have been some of Grandma’s and Great-Grandma’s cookin mixed in there too. Pork chops. Ham hock soaked in collards. Pinto beans and mustard greens. Corn bread and my Auntie’s famous macaroni and cheese. Didn’t matter if the oven was cold and the valve of the gas stove had been shut for days. A stranger woulda thought someone’d been slavin away in that kitchen for a week straight. No Sweet Citrus & Zest Fabreze back then. Lysol would mask the odors for a little while. Not long enough to overpower the 50 years of goodness marinated in buttermilk, kneaded with lard, and fried in Crisco that’d been embedded in the wallpaper and window treatments.

All that grime—dead skin, hair follicles, Carolina clay, carpet lint, yippee-little-dog fur—was evidence of life. We were a socially-awkward newly-minted teenager, two rowdy twin boys, a multi-tasking mother, and a road-warrior father. Eventually a strangely-feline Yorkie was added to the mix. And don’t forget about the stray distant relative stopping by unannounced. No corner of that damn house
was unmarked. Hand-sewn pillows in the living room that we were forbidden to breathe on somehow had tiny burnt orange paw prints on them (sneaky little dog). It drove Momma crazy. And tore up my fingernails. They still won’t grow back right.

Wipe all that shit off just for it to build up again.

But that house was inherited and fully paid for. No reason to move.

I did move.
I was ready to move on. Move up. Move out. Over that small town.

Into the big city.

Here the streets take on the smells of Momma’s house.
Plus piss, shit, and unbathed skin.
A hot day means everything cooks and stews in its own juices, making the stench 10x more intense.

The apartment is another story.

11 floors up. Big, east-facing windows.
Great view of the skyline dotted with some green foliage.
And the great lake.

Immaculate.

Odorless.
Not even a trace of tobacco from the previous tenant’s bad habits.
No lingering scent of lemon Lysol.
No street stench seeping through the window panes.

No stray cat hairs.
Or dog fur.

Not a speck of dust.
Futon.
Throw pillows.
Photos.
Knickknacks.
Bowls of fresh citrus.
Cursedly-assembled desk set from IKEA.

Yet the void is too big to fill.

Too clean.