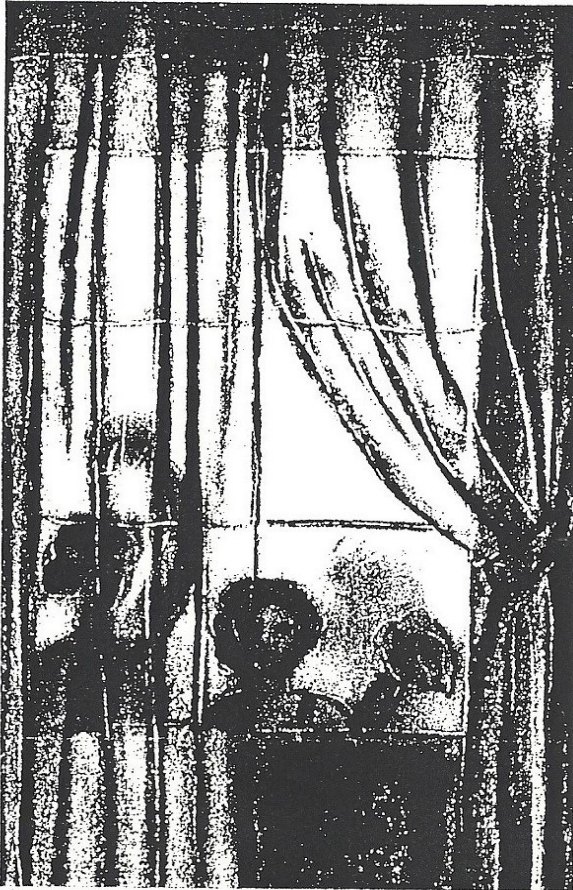


Letting in Light



THE WINDOWS WERE a gift or maybe a bribe — or maybe a bonus — for falling in love with such a dotty old house. The place was a wreck. A showoff, too. So it tried real hard to be more. But it lacked so much — good heat, stable floors, solid walls, enough space. A low interest rate.

But it had windows. More glass and bays and bows than people on a budget had a right to expect. And in unlikely places — like the window inside a bedroom

Patricia Raybon is an associate professor at the University of Colorado School of Journalism and Mass Communication in Boulder.

closet, its only view a strawberry patch planted by the children next door.

None of it made sense. So we bought the place. We saved up and put some money down, then toasted the original builder — no doubt some brave and gentle carpenter, blessed with a flair for the grand gesture. A romantic with a T-square.

We were young then and struggling. Also, we are black. We looked with irony and awe at the task now before us. But we did not faint.

The time had come to wash windows.

Yes, I do windows. Like an amateur and a dabbler, perhaps, but the old-fashioned way — one pane at a

time. It is the best way to pay back something so plain for its clear and silent gifts — the light of day, the glow of moon, hard rain, soft snow, dawn's early light.

The Romans called them *specularia*. They glazed their windows with translucent marble and shells. And thus the ancients let some light into their world.

In my own family, my maternal grandmother washed windows — and floors and laundry and dishes and a lot of other things that needed cleaning — while doing day work for a rich, stylish redhead in her Southern hometown.

To feed her five children and keep them clothed and happy, to help them walk proudly and go to church and sing hymns and have some change in their pockets — and to warm and furnish the house her dead husband had built and added onto with his own hands — my grandmother went to work.

She and her third daughter, my mother, put on maids' uniforms and cooked and sewed and served a family that employed my grandmother until she was nearly 80. She called them Mister and Missus — yes, ma'am and yes, sir — although she was by many years their elder. They called her Laura. Her surname never crossed their lips.

But her daughter, my mother, took her earnings from the cooking and serving and window washing and clothes ironing and went to college, forging a life with a young husband — my father — that granted me, their daughter, a lifetime of relative comfort.

I owe these women everything.

They taught me hope and kindness and how to say thank you.

They taught me how to brew tea and pour it. They taught me how to iron creases and whiten linen

and cut hair ribbon on the bias so it doesn't unravel. They taught me to carve fowl, make butter molds and cook a good cream sauce. They taught me "women's work" — secrets of home, they said, that now are looked on mostly with disdain: how to sweep, dust, polish and wax. How to mow, prune, scrub, scour and purify.

They taught me how to wash windows.

Not many women do anymore, of course. There's no time. Life has us all on the run. It's easier to call a "window man," quicker to pay and, in the bargain, forget about the secret that my mother and her mother learned many years before they finally taught it to me:

Washing windows clears the cobwebs from the corners. It's plain people's therapy, good for troubles and muddles and other consternations. It's real work, I venture — honest work — and it's a sound thing to pass on. Mother to daughter. Daughter to child. Woman to woman.

This is heresy, of course. Teaching a girl to wash windows is now an act of bravery — or else defiance. If she's black, it's an act of denial, a gesture that dares history and heritage to make something of it.

But when my youngest was 5 or 6, I tempted fate and ancestry and I handed her a wooden bucket. Together we would wash the outdoor panes. The moment sits in my mind:

She works a low row. I work the top. Silently we toil, soaping and polishing, each at her own pace — the only sounds the squeak of glass, some noisy birds, our own breathing.

Then, quietly at first, this little girl begins to hum. It's a nonsense melody, created for the moment. Soft at first, soon it gets louder. And louder. Then a recognizable tune emerges. Then she is really singing. With every swish of the towel, she croons louder and higher in her little-girl voice with her little-girl song. "This little light of mine — I'm gonna let it shine! Oh, this little light of mine — I'm gonna let it shine!" So, of course, I join in. And the two of us serenade the glass and the sparrows and mostly each other. And too soon our work is done.

"That was fun," she says.

Washing
windows
clears the
cobwebs
from the
corners.
It's plain
people's
therapy, good
for troubles
and muddles.

She is innocent, of course, and does this work by choice, not by necessity. But she's not too young to look at truth and understand it. And her heart, if not her arm, is resolute and strong.

Those years have passed. And other houses and newer windows — and other "women's jobs" — have moved through my life. I have chopped and puréed and polished and glazed. Bleached and folded and stirred. I have sung lullabies.

I have also marched and fought and prayed and taught and testified. Women's work covers many bases.

But the tradition of one simple chore remains. I do it without apology.

Last week, I dipped the sponge into the pail and began the gentle bath — easing off the trace of wintry snows, of dust storms and dead, brown leaves, of too much sticky tape used to steady paper pumpkins and Christmas lights and crepe-paper bows from holidays now past. While I worked, the little girl — now 12 — found her way to the bucket, proving that her will and her voice are still up to the task, but mostly, I believe, to have some fun.

We are out of step, the two of us. She may not even know it. But we can carry a tune. The work is never done. The song is two-part harmony. ■