"Bust," "Working in Flour"

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Two Poems

JEFF FRIEDMAN

Bust

"My bust, my bust," my eldest sister cries and crosses her arms over her chest,
as my other sister twists free, flailing her arms, losing only a small
clump of hair, her brunette curls drifting down over shards of blue roses.

The porcelain candy dish has wings, but it crashes into the piano.
The metal rooster collapses on the carpet.

The TV picture rolls.
Moses falls from the clouds with a legion of voices burning on his lips,
the tablets cracked. Ashtrays ride the wind into the wall.
Hidden behind the ottoman,

I survey the damage:
One howls her foot is broken, and the other cradles her breasts
like chipped saucers, like screaming babies.
Home at last, my mother
crunches glass with her heels,
and my father, like Moses, "gnashes his teeth," threatens to make
someone pay for this —
until my sister faints,
falling into the carpet with the pain,

her bruised breasts
pointed toward the heavens,
and my other sister sobs, "I won't apologize,"

while I duck behind her and kneel,
hoping to escape punishment
for staying up too late,

for sitting on the floor with a glass,
for opening a door at the wrong time,
letting the demons in.
When I walked into the bakery at my usual time,
asking politely for two marble cookies,
a fudgy chocolate drop rising from the chocolate swirls,
Ida Kaminsky, who came from strong Russian stock —
a hearty vegetable stew, spicy meats rolled in
cooked cabbage — winked and asked if I wanted a job.
She offered me two bucks an hour,
half off on the marble cookies, and anything
not sold at the end of the day might also be mine.
I put on an apron, pushed through
the swinging doors to help the bakers.
The smell of flour was thick
and tree pollen spotted the windows.
Tall and freckled, Max, the other assistant,
squeezed my hand, "I'll show you what to do."
He taught me how to use the cake decorator,
how to prepare the éclairs and put them in their doilies,
then pointed out the brooms and mops, the industrial
strength cleansers, the double sink
with rubber hoses coiled in it. "You don't want
paste to harden in the bowls."
From across the room, where he scooped chocolate chip
cookie batter onto a baking tray, Julius, the baker,
snapped, "Make sure you tell him. Everything
has to be spick-and-span." The flies heard him
and flew off the lip of the sink toward the light fixtures.
Soon I began sneezing, my hapless a-choos
running down spotted walls, glistening
on my face and hands as I pumped custard
through a nozzle into the delicate éclair rolls.
Later, when I worked on cleaning the floors,
Max yelled at me for spreading the dirt
in circles with my mop.
I stepped back, kicking over the bucket of lye,
all in a day's work, I thought.
The next morning, Ida Kaminsky cornered me,
“I liked you better as a customer.” I folded my apron neatly without arguing back. I picked up my bag of cookies and walked out into the bright spring air, where now I understood my mother’s comment, “You’re allergic to work” and where, for a moment, I stopped sneezing.