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Sara London

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*Sara London*

LOVE OF LINE: NOTES FOR  
AN APPRENTICE SHINGLER

The injuries are small ones,  
the blade slips from the cedar  
slat to the kneeling knee,  
or the plane slides  
off the shingle's edge  
and shaves the thumb knuckle.  
Splinters are surprisingly  
rare, but when the hands  
are cold, the hammer glances  
the galvanized nail  
and slams the horny one,  
pinching and blistering  
the pellicle. This  
is the worst.

What we labor over,  
a swayback beach house,  
rests on a rheumatic wharf,  
our task to pluck  
the worn wood scales,  
add new bridgework, a shield  
of George Washington teeth,  
clamped against adversity.  
We begin with the shingle iron  
slipping it along the virgin  
backside of loose dentures,  
and pull so shakes fly off  
in our faces, crack and splinter,  
the sharp dry notes narrating

fifteen-plus years of weather.  
Like dog years, this is ancient  
beyond thinning and brittleness.  
Where we find rot, we chisel out  
the grainy porridge and fill  
the gap with new pine,  
thick wedges for warmth.

Wood chips in our eyes  
make us cry a little,  
but mostly we keep right on  
through the small disasters  
to batten down before nightfall,  
our eye on the suture—  
horizon stitching low  
grey sky to our dark Atlantic.  
Tar paper (or a new slick  
synthetic stock that doesn't rip  
and bears a name too New Age  
for song) is whack-stapled  
to weary ship-salvage boards,  
top layer always over bottom  
to keep rain water from seeping  
back to wood. Then the sweet  
new cedar shields we extract  
from fresh bundles and fit,  
side flush to side  
and hammer in twice, milk  
oozing from flat four-penny  
heads, the soft white fur  
of mold, like premature infant  
fuzz, rising from wet wood  
into the crisp autumn  
turn of air.

Chalk lines are best  
when workers hold each end,  
one reaching to the center  
to snap, the blue powder  
mapping a million points  
along a line so straight  
the day's doubts are deleted  
in its sure direction.  
But a course of shingles  
followed by another and another  
parading up the house—these  
hands saluting, soles of tree,  
puerile soldiers sweet  
as puberty, pressed side to side  
so no one stands taller,  
though some are fatter,  
“hippos,” and some are “weasel”-  
thin, their bodies set  
like brickwork so no two seams  
meet—all the bathos of the week  
is buried here. Lines  
link lines to what we love  
in these long hours, the wood  
wine of it, the weighted plunge  
and smack of hammer and nail,  
the hard grip, hammer handle  
to palm, the knock, knock, knock  
answering back from neighboring  
houses and street, wood and nail  
and wood, even the smeared blood  
marking the rough facade.  
We swing and drum the day.

And when we finish, the lines,  
stacks of horizons, paths to  
an exacting place, meeting at trim  
and window, foundation and roof,

are what we've made. Lines  
where cold, rain, wind,  
sleet, sun and snow end. Lines  
we step across the street  
to judge, and when they're fine  
they're fine, and when they fail  
they haunt. Order is easy to  
plan for, hard to achieve. This  
is what houses are about—  
planes that meet along degrees  
we trust. Lines that say,  
The weather is up to you.

We unfasten our nail aprons  
as the sun sends its light  
into Africa's day. Toss  
into the toolbox tape measure,  
plane and knife,  
hammer, chalkline and coping  
saw, and head home to husband,  
or girlfriend or dog, or house,  
house, bless it, though it  
doesn't save us from ourselves.  
And when we sleep, it is  
the sleep of lines well made,  
or lines that are not well,  
marginally mis-measured,  
but in our dreams slanting  
earthward or rising toward  
some inevitable convergence,  
the confusion of infinite touch,  
and so we return like some  
floating angel to the house  
and remove by glance alone,  
five fresh courses  
to correct our quarter-inch mistake.

★

When we wake, the error  
dissolves into morning,  
compulsion keeling into  
the undefined plane of day  
and its incorrigible knots.  
In a year the high wheat  
of the wood will fade to blue-grey,  
the seams will open a crack,  
for the wood has dried and shrunk.  
The smell, once fecund as forests,  
will be salted, and somewhere else  
staging will be assembled, a house  
be stripped, a dog amused  
at what trouble humans go to,  
dangling their booted feet  
at the face of a house  
as the hammers hound the quiet  
of day, as the afternoon arcs  
around our deep imperfections,  
and we measure with expectation  
another course, another line.