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Love of Line: Notes for an Apprentice Shingler

Sara London

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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.