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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.

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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.