

LAUREN SLATER

Tongue and Groove

We needed a new kitchen table. My husband hated the kitchen table we currently had. It was one of those islands on wheels, high off the ground, a sort of snack bar with two tall chairs that toppled easily, if you leaned the wrong way. Our daughter had leaned the wrong way a time or two, keeling to the ground like a ship filled with wind, only the landing here was hard and made of maple.

I liked our kitchen table because it had storage space. It had a drawer in which I slid my bills, usually unopened, where they remained out of sight and out of mind until the mysterious automated phone messages arrived: “this is an important call for Lauren Slater. Please return the call and cite reference number 5670890325619.” At that point I would open the table’s drawer and pull out my wayward bills, sticky from food that had slid in. I have always liked paying my bills in a state as stained as possible. I like to envision the recipient on the other end opening up the envelope and pulling out a check and an old french fry, and feeling . . . what? Sorry for me? Guilty for harassing an overworked mother? All of my bills have always carried on them the contents of my kitchen table.

If it is possible for a table to be two faced, ours was. It was a piece of furniture whose explicit mission was to provide a surface for dining, but whose implicit purpose was to allow an escape from the very domestic burdens it seemed to support. Tax bills, raveled ribbons, single socks, unsigned report cards, life insurance quotes: the table took it all in. A few times, when I’d become especially agitated at the chaos of my life, I’d picture opening the front door and sending the table sailing—swoosh—out over the porch and down the hill we lived on; there it goes. I can see it now. It careers crazily, bonking into cars, getting sucked up by its own speed, smaller and smaller it keeps going, a table with legs, it can run, it goes on and on, and then I’d picture the table swerving off the street and into some fairytale forest, where it finally came to rest with a soft crash against the sapped trunk of a tree. And there it lived, on an enchanted carpet of

pine needles, beneath a fairy blue sky, in blessed silence, and happily ever after.

If I sound disgruntled by domesticity, it's because I am. I feel, as a forty-two-year-old woman in 2005, almost obligated to say that, while simultaneously knowing such complaints are stale and smack of other eras. Nevertheless, let me recount the whats: I dislike the dishwasher; I dislike anything having to do with diapers; I dislike car rides with my kids, those cumbersome car seats, the big jammed buckles, the straps always twisted, you bending into the backseat while the winter wind snaps at your exposed legs. I dislike shopping for birthday presents, which I think should be outlawed, all those presents, all those parties, the grown-ups milling aimlessly about, the kids with plastic forks. I dislike the flowers on the birthday cakes, big beveled roses, the sugar so dense you can taste the grit in your teeth, the rickrack of frosting that fringes the cake, which is sometimes green inside. I dislike emptying the trash and I dislike the supermarket, where red wheels of beef are sealed in plastic, and pale chicken flesh bleeds pink around its edges.

But there's another side of the story to tell. I am also delighted by domesticity. For every piece of it I hate, there is a corresponding piece of it I love, and that makes up, in large part, the core of how I wish to live my life. For instance, I love sewing. I love my sewing machine, a Singer 660 with thirty-three stitch options and a translucent spool. I love mechanically winding the thread, looping it through the this's and that's, snapping the empty bobbin into place, pressing the pedal and watching the thread swell on the spool—so fast—you can see the accumulation of color, the single strand of blue now a bundle of blue, ready to be clicked into the contraption and threaded through the needle. I love fabric. My favorite brand is Moda, which makes, in addition to unusual designs, vintage children's prints, prints at once sentimental and haunting; a girl with golden curly hair offers a boy a frog; Humpty Dumpty sits on his wall while the letter W sprouts wings and flies over the Land of Nod.

But it doesn't end there. I will try to be brief, although it is difficult to cut a passion short. I also love my red enamel colander, my two very domesticated dogs, my pine and Pergo floors, my slotted

spoon, my loomed pastel pot holders and my salad bowl made of lathed and oiled wood. I love my crochet hook, my knitting needles, my modge podge glue and stencils. I love my steam cleaner and I can get very happy filling it with water, hearing it hiss as it heats up, and then, cloth in hand, firing at the floor, the loud blast of sound always accompanied by a billow of burning mist that dissolves the dirt faster than you can say *Bounty: the quicker picker upper*.

The other day, while I was picking my child up from school, Rosemary, one of the other mothers and I began talking. Many of the mothers who are there for pick-up work in corporate jobs. The other day Rosemary, the CEO of a company, was telling me of her neighbor, an old lady gifted in almost every “domestic art.” “We don’t do domestic arts in our house,” Rosemary said, “so my kids are curious about her.”

Domestic arts. That’s the term Rosemary used. She didn’t say it condescendingly, but it is impossible for a woman to use that phrase in a neutral way while standing in a business suit. “I can’t cook,” Rosemary said. “I can’t even thread a needle,” she said, laughing, and I wondered what she would think if I said I could, and often did, in lieu of paying work. The sewing, perhaps I could tell her about the sewing, but the decoupage I knew would remain a deep, deep secret, as would the crocheting, the appliquéing, the stenciling, and the steamer.

What am I hiding, and why? My domestic life is not dumb. It holds within it my writing and rugosa roses, tadpoles as thick as thumbs swimming in my daughter’s fishbowl on her white windowsill. Often my daughter and I will go out walking. Now that it is fall, the weather is perfect for this, the sunshine slanting, the air cool. My daughter is six. We pass Colonials, Victorians, vinyl-sided pastiches that tilt and probably leak. I teach her about mansards and hipped roofs and hostas. This to me is not idle knowledge. If you know what to call a house, from which style it springs, the materials that make up its shape, you know something about how to design and inhabit a life.

And yet too often, late at night, when I find myself involved in a domestic task while my husband reads his chemistry book, I become angry. “Here I am,” I think, “pushing the vacuum around

and around while he sits with his fat feet up on the table.” A thought like this leads me lockstep to a cascade of other thoughts and images—images of men and their dirty underwear on the floor, images of me paying the bills, doing the doctor’s appointments, walking the dogs, picking up poop, scooping the coiled mound of excrement into a produce bag. When he offers to help in any of these chores (except poop pick-up, for which he has never offered help) I say no. Traditional interpretation: I am trying to maintain control, protect my female turf. But in fact it’s both more and less complex than that. I say no because, even while I feel angry over the fact that I am vacuuming, I also really like my vacuum. It’s an Electrolux Harmony with a hepa filter and an impressively quiet motor. The crevice tool locks into corners and cracks you never even knew existed and sucks out the detritus which makes a crackling sound as it swirls in the vacuum’s lungs, coming to rest at last in the bag bloated with filth. I even like the bag; I like holding in my hands the exact cubic volume of scum and hair packed into one place, one lobe, heavy, somehow significant. “See,” I always say to my husband, holding out the bag before I toss it, “see what we live in?” and I have to say, he always looks impressed, and vaguely disturbed.

It is a night in early October. The day shuts down quickly now, shutters banging across the blue, darkness drawn in. The children are asleep, as are the dogs. My Electrolux Harmony purrs from room to room while my husband reads, thoughtfully chewing a pen. And even though I’m having a grand old time, I do what I often do when I look up and see him oblivious to this work. I abruptly switch off the motor and stand staring at him as he sits in the dining room, his fat feet up, my arms akimbo.

“What?” he says.

“Do you realize this is the third time I’ve vacuumed this week?” I say.

“Um . . . no,” he says.

“And today I took Clara to the dentist, plus I got her socks and underwear plus I made her a new skirt plus I patched the wallpaper in the bathroom.”

He doesn’t say anything. He never does. What should he say? What can he say? I know his real thoughts on the subject; he has expressed them to me many times. “So don’t vacuum,” he’ll say.

“Did I ask you to vacuum? Do I care whether the wallpaper is patched?” For god’s sake, he has told me over and over again, he is a modern man; he asks none of this from me; he would rather me grow hair on my legs and smoke dope all day while writing my own version of “Kubla Khan,” better that than for god’s sake a WIFE. With a STEAMER she holds like a gun.

What do I want from him? Sometimes I want help. More often I want just a certain kind of comprehension, an understanding that, like any other pursuit, the domestic arts are a combination of mindless tasks and mindful executions. Have you ever tried to design a really first-rate quilt? It boggles the brain. It takes a brain. Two years ago I was a Knight Science Journalism Fellow at MIT. A part of my research appointment involved going to twice-weekly seminars where I heard researchers speak on topics that ranged from dark matter to the fate of Venice in an era of global warming. Halfway through the year, as the weather got cold, I began to bring my knitting. I knew this would be, at MIT, an act more radical than freeing a pathogen from a locked lab. I did it anyway, with equal parts fear and desire to get the baby blanket done. On this particular day, Craig Ventur was speaking about the genome. The director of the fellowship glared at me as I removed my materials and began to very quietly click away. This was definitely not okay. It was okay for fellows to fool with their Wi-Fi while listening to a lecture, to IM a colleague across town, to doodle intricate overlapping hexagons on graph paper, but for me to purl in such a situation? Never.

But I digress. Our kitchen table. Twice my daughter fell from the high chair needed to reach its surface. Then, when my son turned one and a half, he discovered the table had wheels and we came home from work one day to find he had made a sort of sleigh out of it, tying the table to the dogs with ribbon, and getting them to pull it like reindeer around our house. This was not a good situation for our dogs, who are old and have hip dysplasia. It presented other dangers as well. I won’t get into them here. My husband and I agreed that the table, despite its spectacular storage space and its ability to diminish bills, must go.

His requirement: that the replacement table be of normal height and have no wheels. My requirement: that the replacement table have built into it both a drawer—the drawer of denial I call it—and a

cabinet in which to store the crock pot. Such a table, I soon learned, does not exist. Why not, then, build one? I can sew, I can stencil, I can knit. I know flour and grease, stripper and stencils. I know wool, so why not wood? I can use scissors, so why not a saw? In the hardware store I found a circular saw and lifted it up. Its heft was substantial, its teeth bared.

Home Depot is a fine place, especially late at night. The big lights blaze in the warehouse while beneath them thousands of nails twinkle in their assorted bins. I began to go there after I'd put my son to sleep. I bought my material; four hefty legs, pre-primed, planks of pine wood. It took weeks to assemble my materials and over those weeks I slowly got to know the immense store. Home Depot has its own code of etiquette. It's okay to stop someone in an aisle and ask whether or not they think a shank or a dowel would do a better joinery job. You can discuss for at least half an hour the merits of a brad point bit versus a blunt point bit. You can talk about toothless chucks and collets, chamfered dowels and dovetails. It was exhilarating, all these new and mysterious words, as good as pig Latin, a secret society. I bought myself a leather tool belt and wore it slung low around my hips. Like a cross-dresser, I never actually wore it out; I tried it on over and over again behind closed doors, angling myself this way and that in front of the mirror, thinking, "hmmm."

I remember one night in particular. It was raining, and the rain made a clattering sound on the tin-topped roof of the store. I thought I might need a table saw in order to make this kitchen table, which was still in the planning stages. And as I stood there discussing the yeas and nays of different table saw brands with the salesperson, an entire group of late night contractors formed around us, offering their own opinions. "Porter Cable, ten inch with the rip fence just isn't going to last you." "A Bosch is superior." "Without a dado blade the saw is useless." "What about beveled cuts, only a Delta can do that." Around and around the men went, discussing the merits of their tools with such genuine feeling I was charmed. They didn't sound dumb or parodically male at all. They sounded thoughtful. The language of their lives rolled off their tongues as curvaceous as any French. "So which one do you want?" the salesman finally asked me.

I shrugged, scrubbed my eyes with the palms of my hand. “Decisions decisions,” I said.

“You look tired,” one of the men said.

“All day with the kids,” I said. Somehow, I expected this comment would drive some sort of wedge between me and the men, but it didn’t.

“I’ve got seven myself,” the salesman said.

“Your wife work?” I asked.

“Don’t have a wife,” he said.

“Oh,” I said. He smiled at me. “I think I have the perfect table saw for you out back,” he said. “Sit,” he said, gesturing towards the orange cart used to haul around lumber. I sat and he hauled me towards the back of the store, towards the saw he thought I should see; he was my very own workhorse, my coach, my carriage, my prince; I was being treated just like a woman and just like a man at the same time. This, I discovered, was nice.

In woodworking, you have to cut a corner in order to make one. You have to measure out a perfect forty-five degree angle, slice sideways with a hand as steady as a surgeon’s, and then mate one mitered corner to another. If you do it wrong the corner edges will gape and wobble; if you do it right then you experience something akin to relief, even joy as the two pieces kiss and click.

I began my work. I moved all the lumber into our dining room and started to figure things out. This, I discovered, was not so easy. Problems I’d never anticipated immediately arose. Wood warps when you clamp it, for one. A straight line is exceedingly hard to create. Most baffling of all, how do you join one board to another? The miter is one way. But, as I soon learned, there are also rabbet joints, butt joints, biscuit-joined joints, dowel joints, slot joints, finger joints and dovetails. This, to me, had philosophical as well as practical implications. Woodworking seemed to me to be in part an optimistic pursuit, a pursuit which took its cues from E.M. Forster, or perhaps vice versa: connect. Only connect.

What I learned was that woodworking is intensely lyrical, and thus I came to love it. At the same time, it secretes its own power. It’s impossible to feel anything but tough when holding a reciprocating saw and wearing a tool belt. The day I bought the reciprocating saw I took my six-year-old out into the backyard with me. The

leaves littered the ground like Hanukkah gelt, all gold and wet. “What are we going to do?” she asked. “A surprise,” I said. I took her over to a tree that had grown so large its branches cast shade over half our yard, turning what was once a perennial garden into a thicket of weeds. “Watch this,” I said, and with comic book flair I held the saw up like a sword, flicked its “on” switch, and brought the roaring machine down to the tree’s trunk. It made a jagged quick bite and spun sawdust into the air. The interior of the trunk was pale, and this somehow made me sad. I kept going.

That was just the beginning. There were other trees to clear. I bought four-inch screws and sunk them deep into the table’s legs. Slowly, like a foal struggling to stand, the table eventually found its footing. The built-in drawer and cabinet were definite challenges. For these I needed a router, a machine that dervishes across a plank of wood, its bit bearing down, a neat groove into which you can slide shelves. I went early one morning to Rockler, a high-end construction store, where a sales assistant named Woody with an actual wooden leg discussed with me the differences between router bits and bases. “The most important thing,” said Woody, “whether you’re gang routing, plunging, using jigs or just doing dadoes, the most important thing is how you use your clamps.” I nodded solemnly. “I’ve been doing this for thirty-five years,” said Woody. “And I’ve always said, of all the power tools out there, the human machine’s the most dangerous of them all.”

My husband began to get seriously impressed when I brought the router home, showed him how to use it. “Why,” I asked, “are you so impressed with this but not with my sewing machine?”

My husband likes to theorize about many things, whether he is familiar with them or not. Lately he has theorized about the avian flu, naloxone, and learning disabilities. His theorizing often sets off a fight. How can he know so much about something he has never really researched? “I can have opinions,” he says.

But about the router/sewing machine conundrum he had no opinions. He seemed genuinely stumped, as was I. “A sewing machine is just as cool as a router,” I said.

“I know I know,” he said.

“But a router has more status, because it’s associated with men’s work.”

“I’m sure that’s true,” he said. “But it doesn’t really have to be men’s work anymore. Now that there are all these power tools, you don’t need the same kind of upper body strength to do it.”

“Well, then,” I said, “why aren’t there more women doing it?” Later on I called Home Depot. The marketing department told me that indeed there are more women getting involved in woodworking. “Ten years ago our customer base was almost exclusively male. Now it’s fifty-fifty,” a representative told me. Similarly, a marketing representative at Lowe’s, Home Depot’s main competition, says their store was designed specifically to attract the female customer. Is this the result of women’s changing status, their rise to power, their willingness to enter and master male-dominated activities? That would be the obvious interpretation. My guess is a little bit different. As my husband said, power tools have made it so carpentry does not require the same kind of upper body strength as it used to. We associate power tools with ultimate machismo, but the reality may be that at a deeper level these ultra masculine tools have and will continue to feminize the craft so in two decades, three decades time, a woman with a circular saw will be as common as a woman with a serger. Even at their most substantial, hand-held power tools do not weigh much more than five pounds, which is less than the satchels stuffed with groceries you must lug up the long stone steps. My son, when he was born, weighed ten pounds. I carried him around for months, and I didn’t even have to use my hands.

From my six-year-old daughter I am newly aware of how the world is divided up between “boy things” and “girl things.” Color is the most obvious and perhaps the saddest example of this, because blue is the sky, the sea, the eye, the music. A girl should feel she can claim blue and a boy should know that the raw pink of a wound or the hot pink of hilarity is also his. When it comes to crafts, how, I wonder, did the divisions occur? Why did sewing wind up women’s work while wood stayed in the circle of men? Yes, there is the factor of upper body strength, but that explains only a part of it. After all, wood whittling requires nothing more than a pen knife, and yet still there are no women wood whittlers. In the eighteenth century the wood whittlers were almost all boys, shepherd boys with time to spare, or monks carving frivolous images into prayer stalls as a way of alleviating the stern sobriety of their pious lives.

Perhaps the answer lies in the status accorded to the materials in question. From the middle ages onward, wood, it appears, was a prized commodity. There was purple heartwood, coromandel, Hollytree sandalwood, zebrawood, brazil wood and the rich dark wood called bois du roi. Wood was precious, its production precarious, its artisans granted, therefore, respect. Early woodworkers were seen as artists, employed by kings, their styles shaping their centuries. There is William Morris, Grindling Gibbons, Duncan Phyfe, Chippendale, Hepplewhite, Sheraton. Sheraton, who has a whole string of hotels named after him, was a bitter boastful man who loved ingenuity above all else. Furniture made by Sheraton was often fitted with secret drawers and springs. He made a bed disguised as a bookcase, a desk with a rolling top.

Cotton, however, has a whole different story. Cotton was always in plentiful supply; cotton plants grew abundantly throughout the world, their prickly leaves and pods surviving in all sorts of climates. Cotton plants spilled their innards indiscriminately, snarls and seeds all mixed up with mud. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when textiles were on the rise, slaves were hired to pick apart the cotton plants, tedious work that could take months, or even years. Cotton was white, but at a deeper level it was black, while wood was always golden.

Theories are one way to give your work, indeed your life, the kind of context it needs to be nuanced, and rich if not in money then in meaning. In theories, true or not, I can find a way of elevating and explaining my various pursuits, of giving them an intellectual edge no knife or needle can carve. But in the very end, a theory cannot compete with the tactile. Knowing the physics of heat cannot warm you like a blanket, or a house.

It has been three months now since I have completed our kitchen table. It is fully functioning, child friendly, abundant in storage, and white. I painted it with white glossy paint and then stamped its rim with suns the size of quarters. My husband likes to make fun of the table. "It's a great table," he says, "so long as you don't lean on it too hard."

"You're just jealous," I said to him the other night, and indeed, I believe he is.

But all in all, woodworking has brought us closer together, and in a marriage strained by various competing demands, I am grateful for this. After the table I built several other smaller projects, a dollhouse for my daughter, a blackboard for my son. With my husband I am able to discuss angles, drafting, support studs, the complexity of a curve in a way I have never been able to before. It seems a kind of conversation has opened up. Last night he showed me how to draft a diamond, which is not as easy as it sounds. There we stood together in the basement light, he holding the pencil, making the measurements, each side symmetrical, perfect. I took his diamond drawing then and traced it on a plank of pine. Later on today, I will take a jigsaw and cut this solid shape, which will be ours.

And what for? For the headboard of the bed I am making us. A new bed, because the old one is busted.

My husband and I speak often about how to best make our bed. The basement is lit by a single low lamp. It is late, late at night. Together we puzzle out the pieces. Canopies, pencil posts, platforms, there are many possibilities. We could discuss it for a long long time.

And so we do. We stand in the basement in the night with the mice and the cat and the scent of sawdust and we discuss the rout, the carving. As for myself, I think I have finally found a craft of which I am unashamed, a craft with all the trappings of masculinity and all the intent of domesticity, for what else does the woodworker build if not shelter, if not a place to put your head? As for him, I think he has found just the opposite, a way to enter into domesticity without suffering the shame, or boredom. As for both of us, we have used these tools to get to a different place, a place neither—or both—male and female. At the very end carpentry is not about power: carpentry is joinery, bringing the beams together, mating the miters, we are learning: dadoes, dovetails, rabbets, blind splines—tongue and groove.