

These poems are from a group of poems I wrote in memory of the journeyman mentor who taught me carpentry, Mr. Virgil McLynn. Virgil taught me to cut a straight line, to drill a perpendicular hole, and to construct work that would last at least one hundred years. In the process, he helped me recognize that craft elevates to art with consistent effort and the discipline to improve. He helped me recognize that the same rules apply to my relationships—the relationship with myself, with my family, with my art, and with all the other members of my worldwide brotherhood and sisterhood. These poems reflect on the dignity of labor and on the corresponding dignity of human relationships.

—**Thom Brucie, May 2024**

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LEGACY

Virgil always signed his work.
Somewhere hidden in a wall
or the back of a cabinet
we signed our names and left the date
so one day another carpenter
would find us,
and we would pass our legacy
to another generation.

He wanted everything we built to last
one hundred years.
Some of my early work
stood on sand; some constructed in weeds;
only after many indignities of carelessness
did I learn
to seek foundations of granite
and attention to time.

I look back upon the number of my days,
the walls I stood,
the roofs I framed;
I have spent the expanse of my body
in making things,
calling forth structure from wood and stone and steel,
amassing a fortune of memories,

making cabinets, doors,
windows, floors,
walls and ceilings.

Do these monuments, the heartwood of my craft,
justify my energy?
I wonder for those who sleep
under the roofs I built.
Are they dry? And safe?
The foundations of my family, deep and robust?
Are the walls of my friendships plumb?
What is my life made from
if not the corridors I have built
between my burdens and my loves?

A CARPENTER'S EYE

Virgil said
a good carpenter always stands back
and looks at his work.
He made me stop often,
and I resented his interruptions,
for I did not need to take a rest
and call it looking.

One day
I watched the lines of two walls
meet in a perpendicular,
and my vision grew acute,
like a plumb-bob and a level.
I saw with the eye of a carpenter,
the eye of tension and forgiveness.
Virgil taught that if a wall is
already out of plumb,
build the new wall to match it,
and no one looking at the new work
will recognize either imperfection.

The blemishes of this world
call unto themselves—
lies, greed, betrayal;
but the attributes of daily bread
need no headlines,
for the aim of the eye is truth,
not judgment,
and caution reminds us
that we do not always stand plumb.

AN HONEST DAY'S WORK

Pope John Paul made the edict:
An honest day's work for an honest day's pay.
Virgil approached work
neither from a profit-driven attitude
nor from philosophic design.
He told me –
If you don't like the work you do,
find a new job.

A man's true work
revels in joy,
it surpasses dollars
with esteem,
and it allows God to display His reality
in beauty.

If a man produces beauty
with his handiwork,
that is reason enough
to get out of bed
every morning,
and sleep serves recuperation
not escape.

PAYDAY

The first payday,
after he counted out my cash,
eighty-seven dollars and thirty-nine cents,
Virgil handed me a 12-point Sandvik
cross-cut saw.

Back then,
before the days of conglomeration,
they made worthy saws,
balanced, with comfortable apple wood grips
set with four brass screws.

He told me that when I could cut
a straight line
with the hand saw,
at a 90 degree angle,
then I could use a power saw.

Two months later,
he presented me a hand auger with five balanced bits.
He told me that when I could drill a hole
perpendicular and straight,
then I could use a power drill.

He told me to accumulate tools,
and like habits,
if I chose good ones,
they would sustain desire
and accrue good results.

THE CHISEL

The first chisel Virgil bought me
measured an inch across,
thick, flat, and sharp as flint-glass,
for cutting wood at areas
where I could not squeeze a saw.
Later, I bought a half-inch chisel,
razor thin and precise,
its fine edge sharp as a line of silver fire.

The chisel holds stout
under the hammer blow
and cuts an artistic ravine
as cedar, fir, alder, and ash
curl in obedience to its
formidable authority.

The chisel holds its place in the toolbox quietly,
resting in the excess
of chalk and saw dust,
out of the way of screw drivers and
the cat's paw,
never complaining at difficulty of effort
nor at its limited access to fame.

SANDPAPER

Sandpaper moderates uneven surfaces
and eases hard edges
to make the denseness of wood
feel soft.

Sandpaper raises the luster of irregular grain
and peels away skin-thin layers of rough surface
to reveal the inner beauty
of the species.

Like the chisel, sandpaper is designed
to discipline matter
in man's declaration over nature.
Adam began it, this need to control,
by naming things,
and since,
every individual
has measured his life
by the application of will to obstacle.

A HICKORY HAMMER HANDLE

Hickory makes the best hammer handle.
The handle is eased
from the heart of the hewn giant
whose beauty is as obvious in its height
as in its color.

The wood, smooth and dense,
absorbs each strike,
taking the shock upon itself,
away from callused palm and brittle wrist.

Like a human body, a hickory shows
its age with scars
and brags of youthful energy
in supple boughs.
It gives hope
that the individuality we demand of trees
may fall to us as well.
Yet, like the hands that fell it,
the hickory finds in its time, dust.

I am not always certain
that my days on earth will amount to memory
beyond my own,
but I hold the secret prayer that
my daughters and my sons might endure
as I will not,
that wisdom pass to them
as sap to leaf.

THE FRAMING SQUARE

When Prometheus tricked Zeus
into demanding as offering
the uneatable innards of a calf,
leaving the sweetness of meat for human benefit,
Zeus grumbled.

When Prometheus tricked Zeus
into releasing flame from the burning sun,
and he brought fire to humankind's hearth,
Zeus threw lightning bolts of rage.

But when Prometheus tricked Zeus
into revealing the secrets of the framing square,
Zeus commanded Prometheus
into the darkest corner of Tartarus,
for the square divulges the mysteries
of algebra and geometry
on hash marks along two metal bars
joined at a right angle.

It releases the enchantment of gables and gambrels,
domes and dormers,
hips and valleys,
designed from encoded mathematics,
and fashioned into patterns,
each dazzlingly unique,
each an independent self,
like each son, each daughter.

BENT NAILS

The trick to pulling nails
lies in the angle of the claw.
Hook the claw onto the nail
and bend it sideways,
one way, then the other,
and the nail comes out,
a little at a time,
without breaking the hammer handle.
The bending and pulling
crooks the nails into geometric shapes
unsuitable for use.
Virgil made me straighten them.

Bent nails move with serpentine irregularity,
and you cannot straighten a bent nail
with one swing;
you correct one flaw and
move to the next,
one swing of the hammer at a time.

Early on, I hit my finger
more than I hit the nail.
I learned to look only at one kink at a time,
and hit it.
I learned, eventually, to keep my fingers
out of my own way,
and I learned to strike the nail square on,
like any other matter of concern.

THE SMELL OF ASPHALT

Virgil got a job repairing the roof
of an old manufacturing plant.
I worked the melted asphalt.
It was summer, in the fierce days of my teens,
and I walked a line of 55 gallon drums
cut in half the long way, placed end to end
in three rows.

Under each row, propane pipes held fire
against the belly of the barrels.
I released the hard cakes
from their cardboard girdles
and watched them swell
into popping black smudge-bubbles
as I stirred the murky butter with a metal flat bar,
releasing lava smoke of deep oil pitch.
Each long day of watchfulness and sweat,
mixing the glue that held the hot patches,
I trailed back and forth
within the ghostly steam,
the stench of it working itself into my nostrils
and into my throat, like boiled camphor.

Now, I can smell the labor of men in asphalt
a mile away if the wind is right,
and I remember the difference
between the hot and the cool of effort.

WITCHING FOR WATER

The driller parked his rig
along the roughed-out driveway
and pulled the witching stick
from behind the seat,
a barkless Y,
stained the colors of hand sweat and tannin.
“It must be oak, and it must be native,” he said.

He held it waist high
and pointed the tip away from him
toward the yellow grass
of the back acres.
He walked until the tip pulled
toward the earth
and into the dusty weeds.
He drove a nail in the spot,
set the rig, hit the spot with the drill bit,
and brought in 21 gallons a minute at 148 feet.

I thought the stick held a charm,
or the well-man knew a chant,
but Virgil had seen it all before,
watched nature offer itself for use,
known men who trusted tradition over technology.
He never doubted we’d find water;
nature conjures its own magic.

THE MATHEMATICS OF ENCHANTMENT

A 3-foot by 4-foot by 5-foot triangle
makes a right angle.
This knowledge allows the builder to carry
a straight line
along and away from an already existing point
in space and time.

The line, if extended, has two options –
if the universe is flat, like the earth,
the line will extend to the end of eternity;
if it is flexible, and self-contained,
like an Einsteinian glass ball
resting on the back of a turtle,
the line will continue in an ever-lasting 180 degree angle,
and eventually return upon itself.

The elegance of mathematics,
its geometric subtlety
of right angles and straight lines,
can connect a room addition to a house
and a straight line to the universe.
The thunderous accuracy of mathematics
suggests that a house is more than an angle and a line,
more than mortar and brick,
more than foundation and roof.

If properly constructed,
a house becomes its own universe,
the beginning and end
of memories scratched in the table top,
and growth charts on the wall;
of holding fast to grandma's stew recipe,
and the crawling stage of granddaughter's daughter;
of summers running out the back screen-door,
and of all things stored in three-dimensional boxes,
and stories,
and hearts.

CONFESSION

I confess
that I have added to the burden
of the earth,
for I have plastered
with smooth trowel and clever design
concrete suffocation
over much soil.

No one made me.
I did it for money.
I accepted gratuity from those who
drove prosperity
in order to fatten my wallet.
I did not think of polar bears
or indigenous peoples.
I thought about food
and rent
and steel-toed boots.

For penance
I shall plant one more tree
five more flowers
ten blades more of grass
each spring, before I die;
I shall hold hope as a deterrent to greed,
and nature as a measure for art.

WHEN VIRGIL DIED

He is not dead to me.
He will live one hundred years,
his memory as solid
as any wall we framed.
The care of trees
and respect for beauty
he passed to my hands.

I cannot accept a shoddy cut
or a miter that's off one degree.
Cuts and miters and the care of others
must be exact.

We bury the bodies of those we love;
we must.
Perhaps it is necessary that
each generation die
in order that we may look to them
to know the evil in the world
is balanced by their good.