

Directions

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Read this passage. Then answer questions XX through XX.

In this nonfiction essay, a father reflects on his heritage.

The Inheritance of Tools

by Scott Russell Sanders

The hammer had belonged to him, and to his father before him. The three of us have used it to build houses and barns and chicken coops, to upholster chairs and crack walnuts, to make doll furniture and book shelves and jewelry boxes. The head is scratched and pockmarked, like an old plowshare that has been working rocky fields, and it gives off
5 the sort of dull sheen you see on fast creek water in the shade. It is a finishing hammer, about the weight of a bread loaf, too light, really, for framing walls, too heavy for cabinetwork, with a curved claw for pulling nails, a rounded head for pounding, a fluted neck for looks, and a hickory handle for strength.

The present handle is my third one, bought from a lumberyard in Tennessee down the
10 road from where my brother and I were helping my father build his retirement house. I broke the previous one by trying to pull sixteen-penny nails out of floor joists—a foolish thing to do with a finishing hammer, as my father pointed out. “You ever hear of a crowbar?” he said. No telling how many handles he and my grandfather had gone through
15 before me. My grandfather used to cut down hickory trees on his farm, saw them into slabs, cure the planks in his hayloft, and carve handles with a drawknife. The grain in hickory is crooked and knotty, and therefore rough, hard to split, like the grain in the two men who owned this hammer before me.

After proposing marriage to a neighbor girl, my grandfather used this hammer to
20 build a house for his bride on a stretch of river bottom in northern Mississippi. The lumber for the place, like the hickory for the handle, was cut on his own land. By the day of the wedding he had not quite finished the house, and so right after the ceremony he took his wife home and put her to work. My grandmother had worn her Sunday dress for the wedding, with a fringe of lace tacked on around the hem in honor of the occasion. She
25 removed this lace and folded it away before going out to help my grandfather nail siding on the house. “There she was in her good dress,” he told me some fifty-odd years after that wedding day, “holding up them long pieces of clapboard while I hammered, and together we got the place covered up before dark.” As the family grew to four, six, eight, and eventually thirteen, my grandfather used this hammer to enlarge his house room by room, like a chambered nautilus expanding his shell.

30 By and by the hammer was passed along to my father. One day he was up on the roof
of our pony barn nailing shingles with it, when I stepped out the kitchen door to call him
for supper. Before I could yell, something about the sight of him straddling the spine of
that roof and swinging the hammer caught my eye and made me hold my tongue. I was
35 five or six years old, and the world's commonplaces were still news to me. He would pull a
nail from the pouch at his waist, bring the hammer down, and a moment later the *thunk*
of the blow would reach my ears. And that is what had stopped me in my tracks and
stilled my tongue, that momentary gap between seeing and hearing the blow. Instead of
yelling from the kitchen door, I ran to the barn and climbed two rungs up the ladder—as
40 far as I was allowed to go—and spoke quietly to my father. On our walk to the house he
explained that sound takes time to make its way through air. Suddenly the world seemed
larger, the air more dense, if sound could be held back like any ordinary traveler.

By the time I started using this hammer, at about the age when I discovered the speed
of sound, it already contained houses and mysteries for me. The smooth handle was one
my grandfather had made. In those days I needed both hands to swing it. My father would
45 start a nail in a scrap of wood, and I would pound away until I bent it over.

“Looks like you got ahold of some of those rubber nails,” he would tell me. “Here, let
me see if I can find you some stiff ones.” And he would rummage in a drawer until he
came up with a fistful of more cooperative nails. “Look at the head,” he would tell me.
“Don’t look at your hands, don’t look at the hammer. Just look at the head of that nail and
50 pretty soon you’ll learn to hit it square.”

Pretty soon I did learn. While he worked in the garage cutting dovetail joints for a
drawer or skinning a deer or tuning an engine, I would hammer nails. I made innocent
blocks of wood look like porcupines. He did not talk much in the midst of his tools, but
he kept up a nearly ceaseless humming, slipping in and out of a dozen tunes in an
55 afternoon, often running back over the same stretch of melody again and again, as if
searching for a way out. When the humming did cease, I knew he was faced with a task
requiring great delicacy or concentration, and I took care not to distract him.