

Sparrow Down

by Gita M. Smith

We buy an old house from an old builder, and soon we are builders ourselves. We pull off layers of flowery paper to find more layers beneath, every wall a palimpsest. We become intimate with plumb lines and levels, with setting things straight. Down we go, down to the bones: the load-bearing joists, the sub-floors and lathe. We are its surgeons; we know the periodic table of its elements, this house made of carbon and copper and antimony. At night, I hear music, a sound -- unexpected -- like the whisper of water that slips over bricks.

In this driest of months, we bravely tear off the roof. I lie on my back and peer up at the sky through what once was an attic. We haul in a mattress and sleeping bags. This feels like camping except that the ground is heart pine, newly varnished, instead of Piedmont soil.

There's no surcease from heat, no "cool of the evening," like the songs say about summer in the South. Those songwriters sat under fans, I tell you, in the Brill Building in downtown Manhattan. (They didn't know that crops don't die from the heat of the day; they die from the heat of the night.)

In the morning you rub ground-fog from your eyes. I boil water for grits on a hotplate. A sudden commotion from the front room: a dozen birds seem to be calling, "Sparrow down! Sparrow down!" We rescue the bird, send it out the front door. Six a.m.: we start over, you with an adz and me with the sander while August tries its best to beat us down.

