

The most beautiful boat

by [Brian Doyle](#) in the [June 10, 2015](#) issue



Thinkstock

He is nine and I am ten. We are brothers. We share a room upstairs. Our beds are six feet apart. His bed is under the window because he likes to look at the shoulders and fingers of the burly maple trees outside.

He will go on to spend his life working with trees and wood. My bed is in the corner because I like to curl up and read the Hardy Boys and Tom Swift and Jack London. I will go on to spend my life with stories and books.

We spend a lot of time upstairs. Upstairs is for dreaming and downstairs is for everything else. Today upstairs is the Pacific Ocean and we are building a boat using the slats of our beds, which we are not supposed to take out from under the mattresses, but we take them out from under the mattresses carefully, noting how they were laid under the mattresses so we can return them properly and not get that look from dad. Our older brother says darkly that this look from dad can stop time and quell hurricanes and frighten warlords in faraway jungles, and this may be

so.

We use my mattress as the bed of the boat, and we erect masts made of slats, and we rig sails made of sheets and blankets, and somehow it all hangs together without collapsing, because my brother is already a wizard with things made of wood. Wood obeys his hands when he asks it gently to work with him.

In later years he will ask wood to assume all sorts of forms and shapes, and each time wood assents with apparent pleasure, changing form with alacrity and grace. It's almost like the wood is delighted or thrilled to work with him, and the wood strains a little to be the best wood ever when he asks it to be his partner. In later years sometimes this will happen to me with words and sentences and paragraphs.

In later years I will learn not to command or dictate to the language but to ask it gently to assume shapes and forms that I dream about but cannot quite articulate, so I ask the language for help, and sometimes the language is delighted at the chance, and we sprint off together grinning and a little amazed at what was built on the page. This does not always happen but it happens enough that you never stop hoping it will happen again.

Often I think my books are like the chairs and tables and desks and beds and houses my brother has milled and planed and carved and joined and fitted and oiled and polished. In his case he gently asked trees to lend him their bones and sinews, and then he asked the wood to assume all sorts of lovely forms and shapes, and the wood did so, pleased to be working with such a patient wizard. In my case I went hat in hand to the house of language and asked if it could come and play, and many mornings out flew hundreds of words which spun and whirled and leapt and arranged themselves into laughing or snarling or dreaming parades and processions unlike they had ever done before for anyone else ever.

We take for granted that every piece is new in the world. Often I think that I am always ten and my brother nine and we are startled and awed and amazed at the boat we built. We still build boats, he and I, of wood and words; and if I know my brother, which I believe I do, he is exactly like me, and we stand in our workshops and stare at our work and think with amazement that this work was never done before in quite this way, and isn't that astonishing? Isn't that some sort of holy?

Soon we will take down the sails, and slip the slats back under the mattresses, and restore the beds to satisfactory condition, so that our dad does not have to quell

hurricanes and frighten warlords, but for a minute we will stand together and admire the boat we built. Someone sensible would say it was just parts of a bed but we know it is the most beautiful graceful boat there ever was.