

## Hand Tools

by Carey Bagdassarian

with thanks to the old trees of Andrews Forest,  
where this story was conceived

I dropped by Jim's workshop the other day to pick up some wood. "Nice, yeah?" he said, holding up a maple burl he knew I'd like. Jim passed me the crazy-grained piece and then some cherry and walnut.

"These'll be good for the knife handles you're thinking of carving," he said.

"They are nice," I agreed, already considering how finicky the burl would be to work. "I might even get an adz handle out of the cherry. Thanks."

As a furniture maker, Jim always has pieces of wood left over from his work. His stunning chairs, tables, and cabinets command museum-quality prices and he earns his living from them. For his daughter's wedding present he fashioned a dresser decorated with an aquatic ecosystem on the top surface and flowing like a waterfall down the side. Absolutely mind boggling, a carved frog overlooking a pond of fish, butterflies, and grasses all inlaid in many kinds of wood.

Jim shook his head, "I'm not really sure if cherry has enough spring to it for a proper adz, but you should try." I nodded and he insisted, "Just take 'em," when I offered to help clean up his workshop in exchange for the wood. As I was walking out the door, he cleared his throat to call out, "Y'all keep them tools real sharp, boy, ye hear me?" with that fake hick talk of his when he wanted to use it.

When I got into woodworking about eight years ago, my enthusiasm naturally far surpassed my knowledge. I'd never carved wood before, but sometimes something just calls you to it and if you ignore that call part of the world shrivels. I ordered a couple of really sweet knives from a toolmaker in the Pacific Northwest. The tools arrived soon enough and their Pacific Yew handles fit my hand wonderfully as I play carved the air. Jim gave me a piece of wood to mess with and told me to knock myself out, and I did. Until the blades wouldn't slice through the wood anymore.

I called Jim on the phone, "These knives are *totally* defective."

“Totally defective,” he repeated as a question. “Did the blades chip? Maybe the steel was too brittle.”

“No, no,” I explained indignantly, “they don’t cut anymore. I am *so* pissed.” One knife sat useless on my workbench and the other in my hand as I bemoaned their impotence. The toolmaker would make it right, of course. I was pretty sure he guaranteed his work. But I’d have to pack the knives up, go to the post office, send them off, wait for the guy to repair or replace them and mail them back. We’re talking weeks here, maybe.

“You still there?” Jim asked during these weighty ponderings.

“Yeah, whad’ya think? I should return them, right? Who cares if the guy gets embarrassed for his shitty work. I mean, he should be embarrassed. But what if he can’t fix them? Then I’ll just get my money back, right? But it’d be a *lot* faster if I just took the hit and ordered knives from somebody else, right?”

“Are you sharpening them properly?” Jim asked.

“Wha—? Sharpening them?”

“Yes. Keeping them sharp.”

“Keeping them sharp?”

Jim’s got an odd last name: Nomane. Its ethnicity came up while he was teaching a woodworking class to four retired men who finally had enough time and money for a new hobby, three others of like age hoping for secrets from the master, and two young guys and a woman just out of college and committed to making work with minimal electricity.

“Ethnic because it rhymes with *lo mein* you mean?” Jim asked. He peered up from his glasses and the dovetail joint he was chiseling. “Nah, there’s no ethnicity to it,” he said with a fast shake of his head. Jim hardly looks Anglo.

His own work has few right angles to it as it flows mostly on curves. “But you have to cut your teeth first,” he’d said at the start of class while gesticulating with a saw, “So let’s cut our teeth.” I was helping out, showing the students how to keep their tools sharp, by now a near mania for me. As a carver, my tools include knives with curved blades for hollowing out the backs of masks or bowls, straight knives, gouges, and the adz, which is like a chainsaw on a stick for its fast work. Luckily, sharpening chisels on

whetstones and keeping them that way by stropping on leather is simpler than maintaining knives, and so I could handle my duties. A little delving into the matter reveals that the grinds on knife blades are varied: straight, hollow, convex, Scandinavian, and all with or without secondary, sometimes tertiary, bevels. Woodworkers have different preferences in these things, as do the toolmakers. The verbal battles would make a Baltic Sea sailor blush like a schoolgirl of yesteryear.

“Nah, no ethnicity to the name at all,” Jim repeated. “My great-grandfather came to this country when he was, oh, eighteen at most. A young man anyway,” he continued. For some reason Jim was saying ‘nah’ a lot; he never says ‘nah.’ He brushed woodchips off the workbench. “Younger than you three,” he added, looking at the youngest in the room.

He paused from his work to take his glasses off. “Thanks so much for being part of the class,” he said to them. Then back to chiseling, “Yeah, my great-grandfather came when he was eighteen, from Hungary.”

“Hungarian, huh?”

“Yup,” Jim answered, “the same old story. You know. Young guy wants a new life, comes to the New World to make his mark.” Jim pulled his chisel across a strop a few times. The tool sharp again, he continued with the joinery demonstration, interlacing his story and woodworking.

“He was a brilliant man, studious and full of fire for it,” he said. “My grandfather always said that about his father, everybody else who knew him, too.

“So anyway, he comes to New York City, dreaming big, but has to start out small. Works in the mailroom in a law office. His boss notices he’s quick on the uptake, eager and alert, never late, very efficient, very clean, always reading some book or other every free moment he had. Boss takes him aside one day and says, ‘You need to go to school, to college, my boy.’

“My great-grandfather barely speaks English and this guy wants him to go to college.” Jim shrugged his shoulders. “Somehow it happened, though, two or three years later. He even got married and had a little baby boy when he was in school. Worked nights as an elevator operator to support his family and went to City College during the day.”

Jim examined a student's work. "Good, but you can be a little cleaner with your cuts—see that splintering there? Smooth it out and start on the next dovetail. You'll get a proper fit, just work clean."

One of the older guys said, "I imagine your great-grandfather couldn't get any help from his parents back in Hungary."

"City College was free back then, in the early 1900's," Jim explained. "And his former boss from the law office helped out some. Even with all the prejudice against immigrants. But he went to school. Yeah, my great-grandfather earned a degree in mathematics."

As did Jim in his turn, but he didn't extend that information to the class.

"The American Dream, huh?"

"Nah, he ended up screwing some guy's wife on the side. Out of character for a mathematician-nerd, but that's what he did. Beginning of the end. Got his legs broken for it. Took to drinking 'cause his own wife wouldn't touch him anymore. What with the kid and finances and the way things were back then, she never left him and even nursed him back to health. They continued to live under the very small same roof in lower Manhattan with the other immigrants."

"Jeez-Louise."

"Yeah," Jim continued, "my great-grandfather died young of tuberculosis."

Jim's stories are upside down V's. He treks the listener up a steep incline, legs and arms and heart pumping headily towards a mountain view of possibility, of redemption, things getting better all the time. But once there, at that enviable and justly won peak—My great-grandfather earned a degree in mathematics—it'd be dishes smashing, a twenty-car pileup, punk-rock distortion heralding the apocalyptic end. If a story featured a child who got an adorable red-ribboned puppy for a birthday present, you just knew that the kid would die a horrific death soon after, leaving the parents with the sham consolation of an arthritic dog. Jim always crashed his stories.

"Oh, man. So, Nomane is a Hungarian last name?" one of the young guys asked, bringing the story around to where it had started.

"Nah. My great-grandfather came through Ellis Island, the Statue of Liberty, all that. The immigration guy asked him for his name, and my great-grandfather, shy as he

was, mumbled it under his breath—Rényi. He had to repeat it three times, mumbling it softer each time, the official not catching it behind the accent and my great-grandfather's eagerness to get going. So finally he just says to the official with the tiny bit of English he's got, "No name, no name." Meaning: Forget it, don't worry about the name. And the official wrote down what he thought he heard that time.

"You know you *always* do that with your stories," I said to Jim after class, as we were having pizza and beer.

"Do what?"

With my flattened hand sweeping upwards to an apex and then plummeting off with a final explosion of fingers, I explained what I meant.

"You just see it like that, cynic-man," he countered, "I am simply a proud realist."

I bit into my slice of pizza. "Anyway, listen," he continued, "those kids in the class—man-oh-man, they really fire me up."

Ok, I figured, we're not going to discuss his story telling strategy.

Jim put his eyeglasses down on the table, like he does whenever something strikes his liking. "Jamie, the woman today? She makes these wonderful hats and caps from old wool shirts and pants. She showed me her website during lunch."

"Tough to pay the bills like that," I said.

"She paid for a chunk of college selling her hats. It's tremendous."

He rushed on, "Weird paradox, though. The freakin' Internet, Etsy, all that—technology helping people sell things made by hand from recycled stuff. And some of it is good, good careful work."

"Hum," I said, thinking that my own sales could use a boost.

"There's a lot of talent out there," Jim went on. "People not just play-acting at being green, and they're tech-savvy, too. I am stoked, my friend."

He raised his beer mug to toast a good day's work of teaching and no severed fingers. "I ordered a dozen hats from Jamie. I'll give them out at the next workshop," he added. "Figured you'd like one, too."

But before I could thank him, Jim said, "But, man, that computer stuff ... One day I won't be able to keep up with it anymore." He peered into his beer and blew across it as

if cooling coffee. He put his glasses back on. "And I want to. I don't relish staring at a computer screen scared to touch the thing."

He shook his head. "There should be a circle of hell just for those fuckers who manufacture technology that makes you feel more and more obsolete every freakin' day."

"But one day they won't be able to keep up with it either," I offered as some consolation.

"They're still fuckers," Jim insisted, and we toasted their eternal agony.

Perhaps by way of amends for this latest upside down V of his, Jim said, "My band's playing tomorrow night." And he took off his glasses, "It'll be a good show."

There have been no particularly cataclysmic crashes to Jim's own life. His daughter was born from one short marriage long ago. Then a strong, if not easy, second marriage. And standing when he was a young man in front of Michelangelo's very last pieta, the one in Milan, and exclaiming *Je-sus* Christ so emphatically that he was escorted from the museum to the Italian sky, which he swore was part and parcel of the same thing. After that, the long, long years of learning how to breathe God through a hand tool and into wood.

So no crashes yet, but there's that one certain end starting to loom. Says he feels it coming slyly in the catch of a finger as he grips a hammer, his joint refusing to let go without a painful click.

We finished up our pizza and beer. Jim needed to head back to the workshop to set up for the next day's class. "And, anyway," he said as we waited for the check, "that story wasn't true."

"What story?"

"The one about my last name. That's not how it happened."

"I've heard it before, couple of years back."

"Doesn't make it true." The server brought back our change. I gave Jim half and we both put in for the tip.

"My great-grandfather never came to this country," Jim said. "His son did, my grandfather, in the 1920s. Left behind his parents, two sisters. Somehow he made it

through the Depression. And he actually did become a mathematician and a professor, but that was later, after the Second World War. He was very young when he came over, just a kid, came with an uncle.”

In addition to woodworking and art books, Jim’s bookcases at home are filled with volumes on math and volumes of poetry—“So as to glean the human condition as it percolates in our souls, yesterday and today,” as he once put it. I’d never given much thought to Jim’s ancestry. His mother was a practicing Italian-American Catholic and Jim received Communion as a kid. And I figured the story about his paternal great-grandfather from Hungary was true and that was that. But, suddenly, the direction of this story became clear enough to me.

“Your grandfather’s family in Hungary, they were killed by the Nazis?” I asked.

“They were all killed by the Nazis.” Jim added another couple of dollars to the tip from his wallet. “When my grandfather found out, I don’t know how you find these things out, but he went to some office building in Manhattan to ask a few questions. Probably Naturalization and Immigration, I don’t know.”

I nodded my head. We got up from the table and started walking to the workshop. “Anyway,” Jim continued, “my grandfather tells some office guy that he wants to change his last name and asks for the forms to do it. And the guy asks, ‘To what?’ and my grandfather tells the guy, ‘I’d like it to be ‘No Name’—two words, please.’ ”

There was a tilt in the world order that night. For the first time in our decade of friendship, I slowed my stride down a bit as Jim told a story.

“The office guy doesn’t bother to ask my grandfather why he wants to change his name. Doesn’t ask him anything. He just has him spell it out on paper and the guy goes down the hall to show his boss. Both come back to where my grandfather’s waiting. The boss explains that no one is called ‘No Name,’ and that it couldn’t possibly be legally binding.”

Certain as he was that anything was possible in this country, Jim’s grandfather was taken aback by this declaration. But only momentarily. And with synchronous hands

and words, Jim recreated his grandfather's elegant solution to the problem: "He squeezes the two parts of the name into one and switches the 'n' and 'm' around just to be sure."

Among Jim's math books are his grandfather's, ones that he'd studied as a student and those that he'd written. Jim looks through those books to this day, and most nights he works through some math sitting at the roll-top desk he designed and made for himself as a sixtieth birthday present.

Jim's own brief life as a mathematician is simple to tell. He loved Manhattan, and still does in bits at a time. That city and the life of the mind were what he wanted so badly as a young man. And so he became a mathematician, earning a PhD in record time while playing music on the side. Jim's research focused on applied instead of pure mathematics because of his suspicion that he, unlike his brilliant grandfather, didn't have the pristine creativity and mental stamina for the latter. But Jim was quite the promising mathematician and joined the faculty at New York University.

What got to him first was watching his older colleagues shuffling down the halls; these "exhausted gray shuffles," he called them. These smart, smart people after a lifetime of the life of the mind, and there they were, shuffling. "And you'd watch them at conferences fighting over details," Jim explained, "which held neither gods nor devils in them."

After a couple of years at it, he just wasn't interested anymore. To live in devotion to what could be calculated, with the mystery beaten and bloodied out of it, wasn't what he'd signed up for.

Soon enough, he was walking around Greenwich Village all day long when he didn't have to teach, lying to his colleagues that he did his best research at night. The need for mathematical precision simply collapsed in him. So he went to Italy and to Michelangelo's pieta on a leave of absence and never came back. The joy he finds working with his hands and heart and mind is another kind of precision entirely.

Around Jim, this older and accomplished man, I feel much the child. Not the diminishment that a son succumbs to from a tyrannical father, for Jim is not that, but a sense that I'd missed some nebulous boat sailing into even inkier waters where my life's

trajectory would clarify. Of course, as do most, I wrestled with that grand thing we call the meaning of life in my teenage and college years. I've had respite from such fruitless machinations for two decades, and then there was Jim to mess up the works for me. But through our friendship my own hands have come to use. And as he has said, "You become sick if you don't work with your hands."

I often remind myself that Jim is on the other side of some battle, that he's apprehended a smidgeon of peace that eludes me still. Sometimes I find myself waiting for that smidgeon to drip from his fingers into my soul, an older man feeding a younger man the only kind of nourishment that makes sense outside of pizza and beer.

But because this is a Jim story, there just has to be a crash. "But maybe I'm just another dropout," he told me that night as we walked to the workshop. "Like my father always insisted to his dying day. That I couldn't hack it in the big leagues."

And another crash: "Maybe he was right. After I gave my first talk at a conference—not one question from the audience, not *one*—my bowels calculated exactly the time it would take for me to hit the toilet before giving way."

Back at the shop, we swept up woodchips and prepared for the next day's class. We talked about that stretch of river we'd canoed a few years back. Coming to a set of rapids, we pulled into an eddy to judge the river's dynamics. Our carefully considered trajectory shot us through the rough water without a hitch and many high-fives. We went ashore to catch our breath as another canoe came into sight. The family of four—dad at the bow, mom at the stern, two kids in the middle—ran the rapids screeching with their paddles over head roller-coaster like, the dad with video camera in hand for added insult.

"Maybe it's strange," Jim said setting aside his broom, "but poetry and my grandfather's kind of mathematics are both tentative answers to longing."

Jim looked over each student's work. Most projects would be finished by late tomorrow afternoon. "It's easy to talk about sloppy work, to offer directions for improvement, you know?" Jim said, "But look at this one here." He picked up a partially completed tool chest. "This work is indifferent. How can you talk someone through indifference?"

The anvil upon which he forges his tools is more than a century old. His fingers tie the same knots that fingers have tied for centuries. His gouge moving through wood from the strike a wooden mallet recalls forebears. Even the sure easy sweep with which Jim puts binoculars to his eyes to see a raven's tumble reveals his knowing of things of long ancestry.

I often think about the ancient human beings who got curious when some charred wood accidentally fell into molten iron and discovered, little by little through drastic attention, that contaminated iron could be hardened to strengths previously undreamt. From Jim, I learned the body-knowledge to sharpen tools, to feel an edge's catch on the final stropping, that knowing when to back off on the angle or pressure just a notch. So should some ancient human being come for a visit one day, we could both stand in front of a bench together, each of us at work without a word exchanged, preparing the tools for Jim's next class. The human condition doesn't change much, nor do the wants of human hands. Jim likes to say that he works in slow quiet so that should any ineffable whisperings come to greet him, he won't be silencing their presence with the noise of machines.

Jim's band played that night after the workshop was over. I'd asked if Lainey, his wife, was coming to the show. "She'll be here later," Jim said, "but she's heard it all before."

People got up to dance, first the women. Especially that young woman who wouldn't stop dancing, earning stares from both sexes and not always for the same reasons. Then the men joining in, whether sexy or not, dancing in that goofy way men do. And then the surprise of the older woman who danced so eloquently, just to a couple of songs to prove a point, that all longing in all its manifestations turned to her instead.

Five men in their sixties playing the blues and rocking and rolling, enjoying their music and audience. And Jim, far from all illusions of success and power and for the

moment far from the darker dimensions of the human condition, taking a break from trying to breathe God into wood and blowing through a tenor sax instead.

At the end of the night, for no discernable reason and his sax jangling at his side, Jim walked up to the microphone and bellowed, “I must find peace from all this warring! Thank you! Good night!”

After the show, we sat drinking scotch on his porch. His was on the rocks, mine had a few of drops of water added. As the years pass, you gain some measure of differentiation from your mentor.

Another thing of old roots, this scotch. “My grandfather,” Jim said between sips, “never looked like he was doing much anything at all.”

“He must have been doing something,” I said, “He wrote all those books you showed me, right?”

“Yeah, you’d think. But that’s what my father said about him, that he didn’t do a thing.”

“Did you know him well?” I asked.

Jim shook his head, “Some. He died when I was about fourteen. My dad figured to save his old man’s math books for me, thinking that no one else could possibly be interested.”

“His story and your story touch at those books, don’t they?” I asked.

Jim looked at me. “Yeah, I guess they do.”

Other ancient things were afoot. Bats hunting the night, moon shadow, the strong olives, good bread, and the hard strong cheese we’d eaten. And a younger man sitting with an older man.

“My grandfather’s books . . .” Jim continued, “Having them with me, it’s shameful to be lonely even for a moment.” I thought about Lainey but that wasn’t what he meant by loneliness.

“When my grandfather was younger, he was interested in literature,” Jim said. “He wanted to write. Maybe beautiful mathematics is what happens when the kind of longing usually poured into poetry becomes way too painful.”

Looking at my feet and trying something out on my tongue, I said, “You know, it’s hard to look busy when you’re juggling the infinities.”

Jim refilled our scotch glasses, added fresh ice to his, water to mine, and said, “Me, I just want to make work that doesn’t lie.”