

COURTNEY SENDER

Lift

The ceiling in the dining room isn't working. It's been caving in all day, wooden beams bowing to the floor like gracious butlers.

We watched giddily over breakfast as the beam directly over the banquet table began to curve downward in the middle.

"Perhaps we should call a contractor," Mother said, so she did. He came and nailed the rafter back in place, told us that the heat can do that sort of thing to wood: expand the space between its atoms.

But the ceiling swooned out of place again that afternoon, dipping to a height just above our heads.

"Perhaps we should call an architect," Father suggested, so he did. He came and bent the beam back into shape and told us that humidity can do that sort of thing to wood, warp its contours.

But it swooped downward that evening, onto the table this time, knocking a bowl of gravy right into the mashed potatoes.

"Perhaps we should call a therapist," Older Brother joked, and—just in case—he did. She sat next to the table cajoling the beam back to the ceiling, and it stretched slowly upward. Stress can do that sort of thing to wood, she said, make it lose its will.

But by nightfall the rafter had dropped all the way to the carpet, crashing through the table and onto the floor. "There is no one else to call," the grown-ups conceded, so they put on their dressing gowns and went to sleep.

And the children climbed out of bed and we sat on the sudden wooden swing, and without any hammering or sanding or coaxing, it rose from the ground and lifted us up to the sky.

Amy Hempel: "Lift," the other runner-up, is a modern fable. A ceiling beam above a family's dining room table dips lower despite a succession of attentions by experts with their various interpretations. It is not until the children act that we see how their simple, appreciative take on the situation brings the beam—and the story—to a higher purpose.