

Nicholas Pierce

Pig Roast

I keep my brother company till after midnight,
then slink off to bed, tossing and turning
through my dream of a story he told me,
of how he saved his neighbors from a gas fire,
banging on window after window till, at last,
he found their bedroom. In the dream
I'm the one scrambling around the house,
barefoot and shirtless, shouting "Wake up!"
His eyes are bloodshot, his face smoke-blackened
when I rejoin him early the next morning,
donning thick rubber gloves to remove the roof
of the slow-cooker, so that he can mop vinegar
onto the pig, its flesh now a deep red,
the meat so tender one leg all but tears away
when we flip the animal onto its back.
He checks the thermometer. "Nearly there,"
he grunts, shoveling more hot coals onto the fire.

People begin to arrive at noon. By then
we've set up the waterslide, a sheet of black plastic
running the length of the hill that stretches
from my brother's backdoor to his workshop.
One boy begs to go first. We urge him to wait,
having turned on the hose only minutes ago,
the water still steaming as it cascades over
the uneven ground, dividing into channels,
pooling in ruts — but the boy is already lathering
his body in dish soap, already sprinting toward
the slide, laying out, his scream of ecstasy
becoming a scream of pain as he tries and tries
to extricate himself, flopping back and forth
like a hooked fish, sacrificing his palms
to keep his chest off the heat. We all laugh,
even his mother, who meets him with a towel
at the top of the hill. "Can I go again?" he asks.
My brother cuts up the roast pig in his shop,
a dog under each corner of the workbench,
lapping up the oils that spill out. The more

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he slices off, the less the pig resembles an animal,
the easier it is to eat. We all gather on the hill
after dinner — everyone except my brother,
who heads down to the wood platform he built
for this occasion. I keep my distance, imagining
all that could go wrong when I see the spark
of his lighter, hear the hiss of the first fuse.
The mortar shells draw stunted parabolas, erupting
just as they begin to arc back toward the earth,
showering red, white, and blue sparks before
disintegrating into smoke clouds. After a while
I find myself watching the crowd, not the fireworks.
The burned boy passes his hand through the flame
of a tiki torch, moving too quickly to get hurt.

Inlaying a Butterfly

He works in stages,
routing an eighth of an inch
at a time, stopping

when half an inch deep.
With a chisel, then, he walks
the edges of this

shallow cavity,
cleaning up the scalloped walls,
taking care to keep

the tool vertical
as he taps a wood mallet
against its butt end.

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A butterfly joint
will slot into the hollow,
ensure the oak slab,

a future table,
doesn't split apart. Even
moisture in the air

can cause the wood to
expand. Did you know, he asks,
men used to break rocks

simply by pouring
water over wood wedges
hammered into cracks?

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He seeks to preserve
each tree's unique character,
believing defects

give wood its beauty.
On his left index finger,
just beside the nail,

is a memory
of his close call with the saw,
a scar he's grateful

won't soon go away.
It reminds him that some cuts
can't close on their own.

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When she neared the end,
I got to be so jealous
of the furniture

he made our mother,
that he could transform his love
into an object —

solid, tangible —
while all I had to give her
were the same cheap words

we all resort to
when a loved one is dying,
when language fails us.

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Five years between us
and only half-related,
my brother and I

are still learning how
to be close. He brushes glue
on the joint's back side,

then, hesitating,
hands it over, letting me
pound it into place.

Only one more step:
to sand the butterfly till
it's flush with the slab.