

CHRISTOPHER DAVID HOPKINS

Homeschool Woodshop

We called his backyard Little China
because there was a shrine on the porch,
because he burned incense that tickled

our noses, but mostly because he grew
the bamboo that we spent the school year
stealing. My brother and I,

we would kick his trees
until they snapped,
twisting and wrenching

the longest stalks we could save
and dragging them up the hill.
The stalks were so green

they made our hands look gray
and our veins purple.
We never stopped to think

how many years it must have taken him
to acclimate the trees to Carolina's
red clay while we sawed them

into swords and practiced shoulder rolls
and bruised each other's wrists.
We had a thirst for sweat and dirt

and dried bits of leaves in our hair,
a thirst so strong we convinced ourselves
it wasn't stealing. That God

had grown those trees, given them to us
that we might pretend to kill
each other. And while we were rehearsing

our deaths, we never imagined
our neighbor might tell our father
what we did to his home,

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killing five and six stalks
at a time. So green,
they made our bloody knuckles

look blue. We could have hated him
as we were bent over our father's knee,
and as we shattered broomsticks

or plastic pipes instead of his trees,
but we were too busy beating the weakness
out of our bodies. We didn't learn anything,

didn't grow up to be the killers or saviors
God wanted, just moved away and never talked
about whatever hurt we felt

or how it excuses nothing.