

laying hedges

at the ditched margins of our town
between mowed fields and the outlaw land
a hundred yards from our back lawn
down among the dens
their faces appeared

watching from the dog roses
through sharp indifferent eyes
with skin leathered against sloe-thorn
and made impervious
by a hundred summers

and ten thousand winters all
as inhospitable as a stripped church
smelling of straw and tweed and sweat
men with fingers knuckled
like crab apples

gripping ancient billhooks of shrapened steel
and wood worn to the shape of their fathers'
and grandfathers' hands and pivoted deftly
into the wych and rowan
stems each split

to gut out the wood's sinew
twisting around one another for bindings
to form neat tops along the row
already drying in the sun
and sweet violet scent

their cold tea in tin canteens and sandwiches in paper
left among the wood sorrel and wild garlic

eaten with dripping and oblique talk of women
and of George Adlam who...

... "died last Sunday"
who "never did know what to do with it."
who "never gave up look, and ended up
with a rich widow in 'inton-Parva",
and "that's 'er, jus' disappeared o'course"
and "'e killed 'er... 'course 'e did or where's she to then?"
and "'e kept the 'ouse mind, but I don't b'lieve 'e did it"
and "nice enough fella though, old George,
played centre-back f'Ramsbury."
and "'e dint know what t'do with that neither"
and "I recon 'e murdered a few pints in the...
oh... what's that pub, with the stuffed puffin?"

and laughter full of cider and flint 'til
setting to swiftly back at cutting poles
and laying fibrous pleachings of ash and beach
and elder like rope still
in flower winding

through the living wall of branches
traversing the space between each sentinel of oak
'til seeing me they give taugt smiles
and gently mock
with wordlessness

futility and uselessness laid open
like split sapwood from which they read the future
and from the softness of my face at once
fascinated and afraid as if
i had just stumbled

across pixies or ancient ghouls of ligament
and perspiration with spines bent to heave
heads down and blades raised and swung
to fletch the bark and branch and stem
to form a wreath around the fields

to mark the passing of the elder time
and while that boundary still remains
it's now unlaed between the country park
and pitch and putt and pastiche housing
built to boost the growing
digital economy