

DAVID GROFF

*My Father, A Priest, Pruning*

He painted the trunks with mud  
to heal them, he said. They caked  
as dark as the neighborhood's faces.  
(I shame to compare them, but do.)

It worked; the wounds healed over,  
the cherries scattered themselves  
like spots of blood on the walks.  
I tracked them to the church,

the bedroom floor, the bed  
where I slept inhaling the taste  
of fermenting cherry juice  
he aged in the rectory basement

though I was not to tell  
or say, "He drinks" (it meant  
"He drinks too much,"  
and he did not),

though I am telling now.  
The sculpting of privets and trees,  
the ivy regretfully ripped  
from the church's porous bricks,

would open the property up,  
keep muggers from lurking, he said,  
allow the property light,  
invite the people in!

It wouldn't work, I guessed:  
the world and all its sins  
would trespass onto our lot,  
swipe my ball and bat,

because, I knew, we were white,  
and they, like cherries, were black,  
though often friendly and kind,  
black sheep I saw as myself,

but others jumped me in school.  
It didn't work, of course,  
the whites all flew away,  
the blacks prayed with themselves,

and my incredulous dad  
kept clipping and pruning and snipping  
God's little acre of turf  
because aesthetics obtained

and hope persists like a stain.  
The wine was spectacularly sour.  
Gone now, trees and church,  
the rectory, the mud,

supplanted by the hulk  
of hospital next door.  
My father, eighty-four,  
refuses to admit

the church he labored for  
exists just in his head  
and I at forty-six  
still fear the neighborhood.

I drink good wine for my heart.  
Dad seldom drinks at all.  
A single glass, and his face  
goes red with the ruse of cheer.