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Digger

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Digger · *Jim Simmerman*

Mainly I work at night
because there's one kind
of hole deserves all
the dark it can swill.

A person might call
the world that much lighter
for it. But I say
it's nothing so black

can't get a little blacker.
Like there was shadows
piled up behind shadows.
The first shovelful is

soft and clingy, about
the size of a baby's head.
I seen them go down too.
And the old ones,

so whittled by the time
they get here, you half
expect them to blow away,
like dried-up hairs

off the grill of a sedan.
But it's the digging
I crave—the way
the shovel takes

so natural to the land,
damp and close
as the place
between my sister's legs.

Or the times I'd make
her take me in her mouth—
it feeling how rain looks
in a fresh-dug grave.

That's her yonder,
where I put her myself.
Because that's respect.
Not only the doing

but the staring
flush at what you done.
Like looking back
over your fields

after a day's plowing
to check if your rows
are straight. Back
on the farm I'd dig

for the sweat and hell
of it. Plant a penny
to see if it would grow
into a luck tree.

I buried my sister's cat
alive once. That was when
folks took care of their own.
That was family.

So that some nights,
belly-deep into
what I do best,
I can hear their voices

floating up like mist
off the marshes,
thanking me,
saying how I buried them

deep and good,
how a body couldn't want
to get buried better.
Because when the spit

and gnawing goes away,
what are you
but a tatter of compost,
a name that gets mumbled

into a mouthful of dirt?
It's no stone
nor grieving
going to ask you back.

No, it's the digging
is all, standing upright
at the finish
so as to feel

the breeze skittering
through the grass
and tickling
the top of your hair.

It's the kneeling down
and setting your lips
to the ground, kissing
its cool underbelly,

whispering into it
the way night
whispers off into the trees.
Because a hole

can keep a secret,
keep whatever you put there.
It goes on downsinking,
getting stiller and deeper,

settling in
like a grudge,
like the earth was nothing
but a worn out brain,

and you just
helping it forget.
So that the filling
in later is restful,

like patting a dog
or tamping down shag.
Nothing to mark
but a blister of sod,

and the shovel
sticking up out of it
like a cross
with roots instead of arms.