

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

Michael Shannon

Digging

The worst time to die is in September. That's when the burial fees are most expensive. Some say it's the way the soil starts knotting during that time of year, becoming gnarled, harder to shovel.

Some people say it's the worst time to die during *any* month.

"It doesn't matter," I say to Jason. "There's no good time to die. It's not like the cost of burial is going to make a difference to you when you're dead."

Jason just stares at me with those dumb, crimson eyes. He takes another hit from the joint, sucking deeply. He puts his elbow on the shovel's handle, leans on it. "Damn," he mumbles, "this is good stuff." He reaches the joint out for me to take. I shake my head no.

"Come on," I say, "this has to be finished in almost one hour."

In about one hour, it'll be dawn.

The sun will come up.

We'll be visible.

And being visible is one thing Jason and I don't want. It's the only cardinal rule. It's the major decree. The one everybody—I mean *anybody*—heeds if they want to stick around to reap the bounties of retirement.

The rule is to never work during daylight hours. Just at night, when things don't happen.

Old John, the man who trained me thirty years ago, said, "Never dig a grave for a son-of-a-bitch while the sun is out. Some do. Personally, I think it's blasphemy."

Some things are better left unseen. Like ghosts. Like trysts. Like digging graves.

Jason lets go of the shovel, grabs a flashlight from his tool belt, and shines it on the lump of dirt that we've piled near the cemetery's fence. He nods, looks at me, and says, "We'd be done in ten minutes if we had one of those new hand-held cranes."

He's probably right. The hand-held crane he's actually referring to is called a *Dummy Digger*. It works the same way a crane would, but this machine is so small and light that you can hold and wield it and use it with the same effect as a crane.

Dummy Digger, which connotes that only dummies dig graves.

"Maybe someday we can buy one," I answer him. "First we have to finish this job." And I start shoveling.

He joins me, sighing, wheezing, grunting beside me.

My truck is parked behind us, on the cemetery's road, its lights on, affording us great visibility.

After a couple seconds of shoveling, Jason stops, pulls a cigarette out of his jean pocket, and lights it.

I, too, stop.

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I look at my watch: 4:04 a.m. In an hour, maybe less, we'll see the sun.

In two days, there'll be a family standing where we're standing, saying good-bye to their father forever. Their father's name is Joseph Retko, according to the obituary. Joseph was a real estate consultant, according to the obituary; he died of a massive abdominal hemorrhage two days before his 25th wedding anniversary, according to my daughter, who works at the ICU.

"Come on," I prod Jason, "you're a young buck. Hurry up. I'll buy you breakfast when we're done."

He throws his cigarette into the hole we're digging and smiles at me. Jason's twenty five, engaged, waiting for his child to be born in the winter.

He's waiting for his life to begin. For his dreams to start.

He starts digging again, as do I.

Two dummies working in the middle of the night—a job nobody sees, or acknowledges.

And maybe it's better that way.

I'm not sure.

"So," Jason asks, "did you dig the hole that buried your wife?"

I thrust my shovel into the ground and hit a rock; the jolt vibrates my arm, my neck, the muscles in my face. I crouch down, out of the headlight's light.

Out of the light, so I can't be seen.

"You okay?" he asks. "You hurt?"

I don't answer.

I'm just a ghost in my own solitude of darkness, away from the lights shining from my truck, away from reality, aloof and content.

Out of the light is where I'm safe—safe from the truth of my dreams, which lay dead and forgotten on the bottom of her grave.

Michael Shannon has a B.A. in writing and works as a technical writer in Pennsylvania. His works have been accepted by *Enigma*, *Steam Ticket*, *Down in the Dirt*, *The Oak*, *AntiMuse*, *Barfing Frog Press*, *The American Drivel Review*, *Transcendental Visions*, *Poetry Motel*, *The Lampshade*, *Cherry Bleeds*, *Zygote in my Coffee*, *Dispatch*, *Straylight*, *Lalitamba*, *The Cherry Blossom Review*, *Subtle-Tea*, *Backwards City Review*, *Wisconsin Review*, *Midway Journal*, *The Foliate Oak*, *Gloom Cupboard*, *The Griffin*, *Seven Circle Press*, *Word Catalyst*, and *The Hamilton Stone Review*.