

The Post-Hole Digger

by Scott Davis Howard

I often see an old post by a field,
Smothered in a hedgerow, sprung up around it,
Forgotten, half-rotten, lichen splotched,
Rusted wire clinging to a rusted nail,
 Sun-baked and gray, furrowed with lines,
 Cracked, leaning, twined by creeping vines.

“Who was it,” I wonder, “who planted this post,
Whose hardened hands held the handles
And dug a round hole in the fragrant, red earth?
Who strung this wire? Who spent days
In the sunshine with a sweat-ringed cap,
Dust-crusting gloves, clay-caked boots,
Aching joints, blistered fingers,
Blackened ends of purpled nails—

“When finished, did the digger sigh,
Content with this fence-line?
It ran straight, no doubt, proper,
Marking a lawyer’s paper periphery.
And what cows, horses, or sheep
Trode the turf, behind the line,
Unwinding their time, pacing the perimeter,
Heads low, searching for summer clover?

“I’m sure they heeded the breeze
Rattling the leaves of the holly, as I do now.
I’m sure they minded the wayward flight
Of the gust-blown butterfly,
The cacophonous caws
Of a murder of crows,
The pungent sting
Of fresh spring manure, as I do now.

“So much the same,” I muse, “So much different.
Who sold the digger these posts?
From the shelves of which small shop?
Flung into the bed of what bouncing truck,
Clunking against themselves, new, smooth and brown,
While it trundled across the uneven field?
What tune played on the tinny, knob-twist radio
While the post-holer bit into the dirt?

“To whose affectionate arms
Did the digger return at night?

Any at all? Behind which house's walls?
"Bickering children? A beagle baying?
A squealing gate's rusty hinge?
Which silent grave, in the cemetery over the hill,
Was dug for this post-hole digger?
Which stone slab stands, mute, atop it?
 Less weathered than sunken posts?
 Less weathered than buried bones?

"And why do I dig at this life?
Why do I caress a shrunken post to feel
The variegated grooves in worn-out wood?
Why run this digger's wire between my finger and thumb,
Scraping corrosion, another's rust, onto my nail?
And why does this action force me to see
The holes I've dug, the posts I've planted,
The coils I've unwound in the vain hope to connect them?
 In the vain hope that they, too, will outlast
 Me? – A statement of weathered resistance
 Asserting the simple hedge-rowed boundaries
 Of my temporary existence?"

Perhaps because I, too, have been a digger,
Have planted posts, real and metaphorical,
And will again. I am both digger and post—
Planter and planted—a pole positioned, upright
My shadow circling in brush, 'round and about,
Sundialing out the wheeling hours, days, and years
Of my lingering span: my limited legacy enduring
Against the inexorable pull of a benevolent nature
 That's destined to choke me out, knock me down,
 Rot me, wreck me, weather my wood,
 And, one day—afar or soon—
 To lay me down in this same red-clay ground.

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