Don Paterson

Rain

I love all films that start with rain:

rain, braiding a windowpane

or darkening a hung-out dress

or streaming down her upturned face;

one big thundering downpour

right through the empty script and score

before the act, before the blame,

before the lens pulls through the frame

to where the woman sits alone

beside a silent telephone

or the dress lies ruined on the grass

or the girl walks off the overpass,

and all things flow out from that source

along their fatal watercourse.

However bad or overlong

such a film can do no wrong,

so when his native twang shows through

or when the boom dips into view

or when her speech starts to betray

its adaptation from the play,

I think to when we opened cold

on a starlit gutter, running gold

with the neon drugstore sign

and I'd read into its blazing line:

*forget the ink, the milk, the blood—*

*all was washed clean with the flood*

*we rose up from the falling waters*

*the fallen rain's own sons and daughters*

*and none of this, none of this matters*.

**The Hole by John Bowie**

The first digger glared at the earth. He could hear it beneath the surface calling him. He raised his shovel and stabbed downward. The shovel split the soil, prying away a hunk of dirt. It was there. He thrust the shovel down again.

The fine lattice of grass thatch and weed roots tore away as the blade passed through the humus. The fall of shovel strokes continued, clods of dirt grew into a pile next to the fledgling Hole. Plodding stroke after stroke, he dug. Hours later the digger passed the topsoil, unrelenting as his spade chipped through gravel and sunk into clay. The handle scored blisters across his palms and dirt packed each fingernail. Soil filled the grooves of his shoes until he slipped on the edges of the Hole. He nicked roots and scraped rocks. It demanded he continue.

Near dawn, his confused wife found him. Her scream almost formed but behind the dark rings around his eyes and the sweat sheen staring back at her she saw the answer to her question. He was there to dig the Hole and so was she.

The two of them dug together in silence. The man labored through slow shovel strokes; the woman clawed at the soil with her hands. When her husband collapsed for the first time, she snatched his shovel and continued digging around him. The days passed into nights and the Hole grew.

The next digger came on the fourth morning, a concerned neighbor worried over his friends’ disappearance. As he tested the unlocked door the hungry family dog darted out and fled. Rotten, untouched breakfast sat on the table next to a half-evaporated cup of coffee. The neighbor wandered through the house to the yard. He saw the mound of dirt and knew what they had started. Without question, he retrieved another shovel from the garage and walked into the Hole.

Two more days passed before the missing person report merited a response and officers went to investigate. They passed through the open house and into the yard to look over the edge of the Hole. The first man lay in the clay, his clothes tattered. The concerned neighbor carried a rock up the embankment, no longer concerned. The officers descended the dirt slope and joined the digging without removing their guns or uniforms.

More officers arrived to investigate the disappearance of their fellows. The first cruiser sat on the road, no sign of its drivers. The new arrivals approached with caution. They drew their guns but nothing could harm the Hole. The responding officers felt a moment of curiosity before they understood what they saw below the mound of dirt. The dispatcher cried out over the radio as each officer went silent. Soon, she too would be in the Hole.

Local news heard the calls of the dispatcher and sent their news van to investigate. The reporter steeled herself near the silent police cars and her cameraman started filming. She gave her introduction as they walked around the side of the house. She fell silent. The cameraman wordlessly set down his camera. The glass lens watched as he joined her in the Hole.

The scene beamed from the camera to the news truck to the station. The producer looked up at the monitor, squinting to make sense of what he saw. His gaze relaxed as the realization crept over him and he left his desk. Confused coworkers asked where he was going but he did not answer. Quiet spread over the room as the others contemplated the screen and understood what they saw. Some of them walked to their houses to retrieve a shovel or wheelbarrow. No one thought to take a car as they made their way to the Hole.

The news channel idled on a near-still shot of the Hole. Blades of grass lined the cockeyed image and clods of dirt arced through the air. A digger emerged with a rock or root, her uniform sweat soaked and dirty. In the Hole, they all looked the same. The camera watched, unblinking.

Within an hour, every local news station was empty, programming left to run to the colored blocks of off-airtime space. No viewer needed to ask why; they left their tasks and joined in the digging.

Family members came home to empty houses and waited for loved ones who had not returned from work. Blank news stations stoked the panic in concerned families. Emergency dispatch rang unanswered. The Internet offered no information. Instead, they called one another, assembling the realization that many of their community were missing. They set out to find them but only found the Hole.

Before the week’s end, the entire town was digging. Children old enough to understand dug. Babies were left in their cribs. Fires went unnoticed, pets roamed, and the Hole grew.

Truckers and travelers arrived in the empty town. Some listened to fear and fled. Others investigated the smoldering ruins and found the Hole for themselves. The trucks idled in the street until they ran out of fuel.

The leaders were the first pilgrims. Crisis demanded their attention and summoned them to dig. Cameras followed them as they walked and others joined. New leaders replaced the old until there were no leaders left.

No military could fight the Hole. The missiles and munitions remained unfired while the men marched to dig. Attempts at quarantine dared the soldiers to ask why the silent pilgrims pushed through the blockade. The question gnawed at them until they had to see and they started the walk themselves. Pilots brought their helicopters to jarring landings so they could clamber off to dig in their flight suits and helmets.

More mute pilgrims wandered the countryside, plodding through days and nights and weather. Many died on the walk to the Hole but nothing could stop them once they thought the sweet thought of digging.

Within the month, the first digger was long dead and his house had toppled into the Hole. Endless more diggers broke rocks and hauled red soil from the depths. It stank of sweat and filth. They did not stop for weather or food and would only occasionally pause to bend down to scoop and drink from the water that had pooled in muddy footprints.

Hundreds of diggers turned to thousands, then millions. The Hole compelled its own order, like fluids throbbing through an organ. Some diggers hauled dirt from the depths to the growing hillsides. Others dug crude shafts, while more focused to expand the rim. Some pilgrims used the buckets and barrows to carry water from the depths to the surface, sloshing their load as they struggled through the mud.

Diggers streamed into the depths and the Hole grew to be miles deep and hundreds of miles across. Heavy machinery toppled in unused, as the mouth of the Hole grew ever outward. To call it a monument would only have misunderstood its scale and purpose.

Beyond the rim, a tepid sense of the end started to seep into the remaining pockets of civilization. There was no longer electricity or Internet. The wars that riled human purpose since before memory came to their whimpering end as humanity found peace in the Hole. No one knew why, but they also did not care.

There was baffled disappointment at this doomsday. The tools of learning and art offered no remedy to the Hole: The scientists and the poets dug like everyone else. Priests and prophets claimed the mystery as their own but their rapture only conjured the song of the Hole. The pious dug in tattered robes and collapsed from thirst alongside sinners. The philosophers left before it seized them, thinking an act of will was better than fate. When they arrived, they dug anyway. They all dug because the Hole was an answer.

The depths of the Hole grew hotter and drier as they dug and many diggers died. Others carried the dead out to the dirt mountain. It was a silent three-day walk from the bottom of the Hole to the top of the pile. When they arrived they cast the dead aside to be covered by the next barrow full of dirt. No ceremony or grief, just another long march back to the depths.

The last pilgrims arrived at the end of the second winter. They were withered and hollow after months of travel from distant continents. When they arrived at the edge of the Hole, they cast themselves down the slope without stopping, as though digging might bring some relief.

The final shovel fell without notice. Its worn spade barely pierced the surface before keeling to the side. Dirt spilled next to the last digger as he collapsed. His breathing slowed, vigor drained by thirst and exertion. Rain fell and mud pooled around him. He sputtered as the filthy water crawled past his mouth and nose. The silt-red water inched up his cheek, past his open eyes. He did not move as it filled his lungs. Too weak to reach the shovel, he felt dissatisfaction.