



**Weekly Favorites: “Moles” by Timmy  
Reed**



*I can't not love this short story by Timmy Reed. Over the past 7+ years, I've pointed to this as an example of the type of fiction I love most. It's made its way into half a dozen creative writing classes. I've even given a dramatic reading of it at Timmy's book launch event. Hopefully, you enjoy this even half as much as I do. [AK]*

## Moles

I like moles. Not the cosmetic imperfections, but the small subterranean mammals. In fact, I've written about them before. But there was a different protagonist in that story. This time it's actually me. In this story, I like moles.

One time I was staying at a cabin near a lake that belonged to my friend and her husband. I was staying there because life had gotten busy in the city I love and there was work stress and money trouble and the alcohol had come back and of course there was a girl. So I was hiding out at my friend's cabin. And there were moles there.

The moles lived in a lonely pile of earth across the yard from Betsy's garden, which was the site where her husband Rick had been going to build a swing set. But then there was the miscarriage so the swing set never got built and the mound just sat there, ignored. And they ended up with a molehill instead.

After about a week of moping around, not writing anything, not doing much at all, I wandered out into the yard while everyone was at work. I found myself over near the mound, in a corner of the yard by the edge of the woods. It was shady there and looked sad. I climbed up and sat cross-legged on top.

I was sitting there only few minutes when I began to notice all these little holes everywhere I looked. They made me nervous at first, I thought of snakes and creepy things. I was very surprised when a little black face popped out right between my knees. It was a mole! I had never seen one so close up before...He looked like a worm, cylindrical and sort of slimy with traces of pink skin showing through his charcoal black coat. I liked him immediately. I felt sure that he would run off or scurry back down his hole, but he didn't. He just looked up at me from under his blind, folded eyelids, apparently oblivious. So I picked him up! And he let me!

Now we were friends. I could tell.

Then another one popped out of a little hole to my left. I picked him up too.

Now I was holding two moles!

And I liked it.

We sat like that for a while until it started to rain. I let the moles crawl back into the earth. I remained there for some time and got wet. Then I went back inside and decided that I would learn about moles.

The Hairy-Tailed Mid-Atlantic Mole is slim in shape and dark in color. Its diet is largely made up of earthworms and insects, but it will occasionally dine on a small mouse if one of them is unfortunate enough to get near the entrance of a colony. The Hairy-Tailed Mole inhabits Virginia, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Western Maryland.

In the early days of Modern English, British moles were known as "mouldwarp", "mould" meaning "soil" and "warp" meaning "throw". Male moles are called "boars" and female moles are called "sows". A group of moles is called a "labor".

For centuries, moles have been misunderstood animals. I related to that. Mainly the cause of this misunderstanding has been things like: contamination of silage with soil particles, pasture and yield reduction, damage to young plants from the disturbance of soil, and damage to agricultural machinery by the exposure of stones. I had a different set of issues of course, but still I could relate.

So I started spending more time with the moles. Making daily visits to their sad little mound. I met more and more of them. Some were bigger than others, but basically they all looked alike. I couldn't really tell them apart and when I tried to give them individual names, I ran into trouble and gave up. They would remain a labor of nameless moles.

I had zero idea what their total population amounted to, but I knew that I wanted them to thrive. I would set about developing their colony and improving their quality of life. I would cultivate their population.

I never mentioned the moles to Betsy or Rick and they never visited that part of the yard. Ever. At night they would come home and we would sit together on their porch and they would sip wine and, I think, try to cheer me up and distract me with jokes and stories and complaints about work and politics and family and things. They told me that my melancholy seemed to be improving, but they were in the dark about the molehill so they probably just assumed any improvements in my demeanor were a result of their positive influence on my spirit, or the fresh country air, or something as simple as a physical separation from my problems. Little did they know that I was purchasing earthworms from the bait shop each morning and saturating the molehill with food. I picked weeds and gathered stones from the perimeter in order that the mound and the tunnels underneath might grow. I cleared the upturned soil around each hole so that the dirt pile looked like a big brown belly covered with tiny navels. I spent hours on a little throne I had fashioned from soil, basking in the loving presence of the labor.

And I began to heal.

And the colony began to prosper. I was discovering new holes each day, which meant new tunnels. They were building. I was proud. The worms were wriggling about everywhere as well, multiplying for the moles to eat. I felt a little bad about feeding them to the moles, but I chalked it up to a natural order. Besides, I liked the moles better. So I kept buying worms.

When I saw that Shelley was calling – Shelley was my girlfriend or ex-girlfriend or something like that – I didn't pick up my phone. I was sitting on the molehill late in the afternoon and my phone began to vibrate. I was surprised to have it in my pocket. I hadn't received a phone call in weeks. In some ways, I had begun to forget about the outside world completely. When I looked at the screen and saw who was calling, my heart got weak and fluttery but just then, as if on cue, a furry little head poked out of the dirt near my foot and smiled at me. I put the phone away. I was startled by my reaction. I hadn't expected to be smiling back.

Continuing with my initiative to develop the mole colony, I thought I might like to introduce a new species to the labor. I thought it would be nice to diversify the population. It had seemed to work pretty well with humans, right? I knew I would have to go to a lot of trouble catching them

on my own, so I sought out a store that sold exotic pets. I borrowed Betsy's truck and drove there. I bought two dozen moles: twelve boars and twelve sows. The clerk was a kid with pimples and a lisp. He assured me, with what I took for undue relish, this particular species of mole mated aggressively and was very fertile. I would grow the population in no time. And then the tunnels would surely spread.

It was springtime and Betsy began to plant. Her garden was not near the labor. Like I said, she never went near there. Ever.

I would help her plant things on the weekends. Flowers and vegetables and carnivorous plants to keep away the mosquitoes and flies. It was good for me to help her and I felt like I was starting to earn my keep, even though I probably wasn't. I wasn't very good at gardening. I had lived in the city my whole life.

The tunnels were spreading. I began to notice new holes in the lawn on my way to and from the mound each day. The new species that I had introduced were larger and more skittish around me, but they seemed to be excellent diggers. The holes were popping up closer and closer to the cabin and the garden around it. I wanted to encourage the moles to build in the other direction, toward the woods, but I had no idea how to go about accomplishing this feat. I thought and thought but nothing came. Still, I fed them worms. And under my care, the labor continued to grow.

Betsy was an experienced gardener, so when her young plants started to die and the grass began to recede from the area around her garden, she suspected moles right way. She asked me to help her get rid of them. For days, she searched on her hands and knees through the grass, finding new holes like hidden Easter eggs all over the lawn, but still she refused to go near the mound. If she had, she would have discovered a finely manicured little hill, swollen on the inside with moles. And one small dirt throne on top.

Rick was a carpenter by trade, but he was also a volunteer firefighter. He had access to high-pressured hoses. He and Betsy decided to use those high-pressured hoses to flood the moles' tunnel system. I didn't know what to say to them, so I didn't say anything.

The night before Rick was to bring the fire truck by the cabin, I slipped away from my futon and went out into the yard. It was pitch black out in the country at night. I had never really gotten used to not having noise and lights around me after dark, and until that night I had rarely strayed more than a few feet from the cabin's front porch after dusk. This time I went all the way to the molehill, walking on tip-toes to avoid any invisible moles at my feet that might've popped out to gaze at the stars or take in a bit of fresh air.

I sat on the mound and addressed the moles in a loud whisper. I was sure that most of them were too far underground to hear, and were probably sleeping anyway, but I did it anyway. I had to get this off my chest. Also, I had been drinking again, for the first time since I came to the cabin.

“Listen, Moles. I am afraid I may have steered you wrong. You have been the best thing that has happened to me in a long time, maybe too long, longer than I even remember. And I have tried my best for you – you know I have, don’t you? But I’ve failed you. I was over...zealous, my intensity was over...wrought. And now you all may die. You must move your labor into the woods. Tonight. Find a new home. And live there. Thrive.”

By now I was lying prostrate on the dirt pile, whispering into one of the larger holes. I could hear my voice as if it were someone else’s. I sounded like someone singing through a thick wet pillow. I felt ridiculous. I went back inside. That night I had a dream about underwater caverns. The fish inside had fur. And tails. They were moles, I think.

The next day, two small fire trucks rolled up with three or four volunteer firemen in t-shirts and ballcaps. I had already helped Betsy situate both of the cabin’s garden hoses in the holes closest to the house. The water did little more than trickle out, doing very little damage to the vast system of tunnels.

I sat on the porch with a lemonade and tried to enjoy myself. I was failing at it.

There were four firehoses, all total. I watched from the porch as the men dug out the holes to make room for the heavy nozzles at the end of each hose. I closed my eyes as they turned on the pumps.

I could hear the water moving through the hoses. It sounded like what I imagined the innards of a waterpark might sound like. And then there were the screams.

Betsy was shrill like a bird when she screamed, Rick and the firemen sounded shocked. Some began laughing. But what yanked my heart into my chest was the blast of tiny squeals, almost a song like birds in a tree. Hundreds of moles. Screaming.

I opened my eyes. Water seeped out through the lawn everywhere I looked. But that’s not what was causing all of the commotion.

The mound in the back corner of the yard had turned into a fantastic fountain with streams of high-pressured water spraying every which way. Each stream started and stopped in a sporadic

fashion. All these tiny black clumps were being shot into the air. I noticed that as many of the clumps landed, they scurried off into the woods. Some didn't.

I could tell it was time for me to go back to the city.

After about twenty minutes of watching the yard leak and flush like a toilet, Betsy, Rick, the firemen, and I were all standing around what used to be the mound. The hoses had been turned off. The hill had been blown apart at the sides. You could see in some places where the animals' passages had been. To my surprise, the top of the mound was in relatively decent shape. Muddy and misshapen, but still intact.

One of Rick's firemen buddies was the first to speak. "Looks almost like a little throne," he chuckled, pointing. "Looks like the moles had a king."

We all just nodded in agreement.

Then I spoke up. "Had one," I said.

And everyone just laughed.

