

Holes
by Eric Cecil

It's the year after next, and the hole is bigger. It's now the size of a small car. Mounds of dirt heave at its edge. He has never noticed the dirt before. Or maybe, he thinks, he's just never seen it so high. Now he cannot help but stare at it as he enters the office.

In the office he sits at his desk and tries not to look at his coworkers. There are less of them now. And there are noises. He turns his head toward the window, where there are ugly and ungainly sounds: a consonant hollering, many voices joining in a hooted chorus. A rhythmic pounding throttles below it. He turns from the window and back to his desk and looks down at a pad of paper. He has written his name there. He underlines his name three times and writes nothing else.

Nothing else will do that night but to leave the office by the back exit. Only then will he avoid the hole and the noises out front. Past a number of empty displays and through a chipped vestibule he finds a heavy wooden door. He pushes through it and into the back hall. He has never seen anyone in this hall, does not see anyone now. But now he notices cracks spidering from its western wall, branching toward the far corner. The floor settles there, bows and tapers into a jagged opening.

He does not look directly into the hole but shoulders through another door beyond it, finding his way into an alley. A walk, he decides, will do him good. He will avoid the main streets and the parks and the lots, with all that open public space, and will not take the train. He will take lesser streets all the way home.

On the way home he will not admit to himself that something has changed. But when he arrives at his building he cannot ignore the lack of activity: it's quiet there now, calmer than it's ever been, and there's no traffic running through the intersection. Nor are there any lights. In the darkness he spies a deep shadow that hollows a portion of the crosswalk. There's a puckering of the road, a sharp slope that dimples into still deeper black. And in his bedroom he lowers his blinds and listens at the window.

All winter long he listens to the commotion outside his office and watches as his colleagues laugh about something in the corner. When he looks at them, they stop, stare, whisper, then continue. There's a high wheedling to their laughter. He turns from their wheedling to the window and back to them again, and when he looks at his notepad, he sees what he has written months before: his name, the three lines. He circles his name and scribbles in fierce jabs, filling the space with black ink. He does nothing else for the remainder of the day. No one seems to notice.

No one seems to notice that there are less and less people every month. Not just in the office. But all over downtown. And the cars no longer crowd the street, and soon there is no more water in the building. He cannot find the office manager, and in the super's quarters, nestled in a corner of the cellar, he cannot find the basement lights and cannot see and does not care: I do not, he tells himself, want to see anyway. He palms the cool, rough brick of the basement walls, feeling his way deeper under this building and maybe the next and another still. He then slows against a breeze in the darkness and pauses, scenting something rancid. I am either near the first hole, the thinks, or another. But he will not look. He can't.

He can no longer sleep at night. There are now wild noises outside his apartment. These are harsh sounds, similar to those outside the office: the clipped and voweled shouting, the forceful pounding. The glasses chime in his cupboards. He will not go to the kitchen nor the window but knows that the intersection will have changed again by morning. At the bruise and rust of dawn he dresses in haste and finds a second egress from his building, scuttling through an emergency exit at the side of the complex. Its alarm howls after him as he runs from it. He runs anyway.

And I am running, he thinks, out of exits.

There are no new ways to leave the office. Few of his colleagues remain. One of them has called a meeting, but no one knows which, and still they're laughing. The wheedling of their reverie is now a low hiss. The sound harries him from the meeting and into the hall. He rounds the corner to find the restroom, knows he will not like what he expects to see in its mirrors: a gaunt face, pale and shiny. He sees, instead, another hole. This one hollows the bathroom floor. The thin metal doors of each stall hang at its edge. He hurries off, looking away.

Away from the office and his apartment and downtown and he is on a ferry, headed to the island where they send the leisurely men and women who must visit it. He must not look down, he tells himself. Not at the deck, not at the water. Nor down the shoreline, where his office is or was or should be, where there are now less buildings. Less of everything. But still more holes.

They just need filling, a man on the ferry says.

He turns to look at the man. Sorry? he says.

The holes, the man says, shrugging. They just need filling, that's all.

He does not respond. The man approaches anyway, hands in pockets, and says, We think you're the kind of guy who could help us fill them.

I don't know what you mean, he says.

We think you know exactly how to fill those holes, the man says. We know you've been thinking about it for some time.

I wouldn't know anything about it, he says. I don't know landscaping. I don't know anything about construction.

The man laughs. The laugh is at once a wheedle and a hiss. You know, that's not what we had in mind.

He also laughs, but his is thin, hoarse. Look, he says, I don't know who you are or what you're proposing. But I have no idea what should go in those holes.

Not what, the man returns. Who.

The man repeats the last word, chanting it, as if forcing a question. It echoes up and down the ferry. Other passengers join in hooted chorus. All stamp their feet as they gather and shout: a rhythmic pounding that throttles below their hollering.