

# *An Archaeology of Holes*

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I join with a new feminist group who believes all women are linked by holes, on the outside as well as on the inside. I don't understand the theory exactly. It is very complicated, combining quantum physics and speculative philosophy with feminist theory. A lot of it is based around new discoveries related to dark matter and black holes, the idea of a black hole as a process—as a progression that appears differently, or not at all, from various perspectives. A lacuna, then, that allows space for change and indeterminacy. Despite my inability to comprehend the specifics, I get the main thrust of what they are saying almost instinctually. It's like I can feel it, a sucking in my stomach, not a queasiness so much as a churning, a new opening.

I like that the group is practical about it—advocates that new recruits start with something simple. The members suggest digging a hole; that the elementary process of excavation might lead to a deeper understanding. I buy a small spade from the gardening shop. I choose a spot in the back garden and dig close to the fence. Winter has come this year and already the grass is a kind of thin, angry yellow. I pull it up and set to work on the black earth.

At first I dig at night so as to keep my hole a secret. In the dark the garden seems bigger, there is the sound of crickets, and then there is the familiar smell of the soil, dark and fertile. I soon discover that my clandestine efforts are unnecessary. Nobody blinks twice at a woman digging a hole. It is the most natural thing. They imagine flowers and vegetables, fertility and gardens and bloomings.

I work on my hole daily. I am not so interested in depth as I am in circumference. I want the walls of my hole to be smooth and resilient. Often I drop the spade and return with a spoon to work on the detail. I work carefully, trying not to disturb the hole. I kneel above it and it opens. I am afraid of how big it's getting. Half of my time is now consumed by maintenance. A hole has so many enemies. I watch the weather closely, every pattern, every warning. Rain forms and drops. The soil is sodden and slippery. At night the wind blows. I fear avalanches. Sometimes I hear things: seeds splitting, a beetle, the steady slide of an earthworm. Often, I get out of bed and slip outside. The grass is cold and dead beneath my feet. My hole is waiting. It quivers unsteady in the moonlight.

As I go deeper, things become precarious. My spade is a weapon, a blade that reflects the sunlight; every shovel of sand is weighted with imminent collapse. The sand keeps opening up like little graves beneath my feet. I realise I myself have become the enemy. There is dirt in my shoes, on my shirt and beneath my fingernails. I go to the kitchen and scrub my hands under the faucet. I stop digging. I ban myself from the garden. Confined to the inside of the house, I watch the hole from my window, not the hole itself, but the mound of dirt that has grown up around it.

At night, I wrap a cardigan around me. I push my hands deep into the pockets. One has a small hole at the bottom, something easily fixed with stitches or darning. Holed up for days, I start to realise that there are holes everywhere. A dustbin bag is a black hole ringed on all sides by plastic. The wall socket is three holes that appear empty but are filled with electricity. The peephole in the door opens and closes—a kind of gaping sphincter or a startled mouth. The air vent in the bathroom is a glory hole. When I bring my ear close, I hear whispers. I have become obsessed with the drain hole in the sink in the kitchen. I fetch the pliers and remove the metal filter. Its walls are slippery, deceptive. I force myself to continue. Push my fingers deeper. I imagine my drain hole linked, connected by pipes to a complicated drainage network that extends to eternity, the faucets and drains connected for millions of miles.

The city I live in is built on holes. My forefathers were miners, European migrants who journeyed to the colony to make their fortune. There are graves; bones are buried deep beneath my feet. In death my

forefathers share the earth with the black miners who came after. Cheap labour imported from rural areas. Male bodies dropped down the shafts, tunnels drilled and dug out. At night they were extracted, along with the ore that had been blasted, hoisted up in an elevator cage then jammed together in cheap hostels built by the mines to house workers.

The hostels still stand. We still call them hostels. A news headline reads: Alexandra hostel raided in weapons search. There are pictures. Long corridors, badly lit by yellow lights, walls that recede into shadow. The beds are unmade, sleep interrupted. The men wear underwear. The police carry automatic weapons and wear blue helmets. The pictures are too beautiful for what they contain. The light is soft, smouldering. The men's bodies are taut, at attention, hands behind head, stomach muscles locked in fists, feet slap the cold surface of a corridor. Skin is chocolate, shades of mauve and ochre, the bruised shine of too many accidents. The photographer is obviously invited, embedded. He has time to frame each shot, to manipulate the aperture, refine the focus. The final shot shows the police standing triumphant over bags of dagga and pangas. The photograph is taken from overhead. I imagine the photographer balanced on one of the metal bunk beds to take it. Someone's bed. A mattress and sheets torn suddenly open.

In the centre of the city there is a building with a hole in the centre. All the way up like a mine shaft. I am told that once the hole was conceived of as a meeting place, its circular shape inviting congregation, the coming together of neighbours from the flats above. At the time, it was considered the latest thing in urban living. The city has changed. The building has fallen into disrepair. Its white inhabitants have fled to the suburbs, opening spaces for the migrant workers to take up residence. The building is run by a slum lord. Maintenance is neglected, services suspended. The hole collects things. Rubbish piles up in the centre. I am not welcome. When I visit, the residents throw things at me. Bones, potato peels, cans, packages in various phases of decay, more or less intact bottles and jars rain down from balconies. It is impossible to dodge them. When I look up I feel dizzy. The walls seem to curve inwards and the sky sways, a bright blue circle that wavers above me.

Driving back I pass through the old downtown district. People congregate in doorways, conducting transactions. They watch me pass out of the corner of their eyes, indifferent. Most of the buildings are run down. Shadows eroding the facades, riddled with the holes of what were once windows. A hollow of smashed pavement, a puddle of stagnant water studded with detritus that sparkles under the street lights.

At a poetry reading in a small bar, I listen to a famous poet read work about the violence of our history. The place is shitty, a dirty carpet covered in holes, burned through by cigarettes. Afterwards the poet lifts his t-shirt to show the audience his bullet wound. He invites us to come up to the front and touch it. No one stands. No one moves. The poet waits. Long, terrible minutes. I become intensely aware of the sounds: the creaking of chairs, the wheezing of the ceiling fan, the traffic outside. In the front row someone coughs softly. I look around me and feel the wine I drank earlier start to bubble then boil, to burn holes through my stomach lining. Still no one gets up. I start to panic. Everyone is sitting. It is like the room has been frozen. I am about to leap to my feet when a young woman rises. She walks to the front slowly, one small foot in front of the other. She gives the poet her hand and he puts her finger on the hole, as though to stop the bleeding. After that everyone claps. More people stand. They form a line in front of the poet. In front of the hole. So many fingers. I sit in my seat as the wine grows cold and stale in my stomach.

I buy sushi from a takeout place that advertises Chinese and Japanese food in the window. It is run by a Korean family who watch TV from a wall-mount between customers. They turn down the volume to greet me. I eat the sushi with a plastic fork while watching a movie streamed on the internet. The movie is set in a diner. The diner is called Kamome, which sounds Japanese, but the movie seems to be shot in Finland. In one scene a woman sneaks into a bakery to poke holes in the fresh loaves of bread as they emerge from the ovens. One by one, each loaf. The camera zooms to capture her face, mouth

contorted with the pleasure of violating the crusty surface, sinking dirty fingers into the soft warmth under. The woman is very plain. Ugly even. Her fingers are thick, hands uncared for, carelessly used. But something happens when she penetrates the bread. Something changes. Her hands become precise, fingers fluid, her face glowing with a strange, youthful beauty.

At night, I dream of men making holes in bread. Not with their fingers. They are fucking the loaves, dicks erect, drilling into the soft dough centres. There are lots of them—the men, fucking, each with a different type of loaf depending on their dick size, its length and thickness. A tall man with a French loaf jutting upward like a strap-on dildo, just his arse muscles moving. Another has penetrated an oval Portuguese loaf—his penis, both testicles, and the two little fingers of his left hand are jammed inside it. A large black man fucks what seems to be some kind of rolled flat bread or dosa. His crotch hair is wet and his cock shines, as if polished. The poet is there too, his shirt is off like it was at the reading, the ridge of the scar, a small hollow above the ribs, his cock throbbing hard as he fucks a splayed rye loaf.

I awake sweating, terribly hungry. My mouth is filled with saliva. In the kitchen, I spit into the basin and imagine cutting into the fucked loaves, the knife piercing the brittle surface, sinking into the doughy goo where the men ejaculated. I imagine steam rising from the bread, still oven-warm; how nice it is when it isn't cooked all the way through, to go from crusty to soft to glutinous. And how the butter melts, slides across the surface.

I go to a talk at the feminist group. It's about black holes and is being given by some physics professor from the university. The talk is well attended, lots of new faces, a different demographic than the usual group members. Everyone is well dressed and there is even a scattering of men amongst us. The woman scientist seems to be very young, in her thirties. She sits on a chair next to the stage as the audience files in. I am already seated, watching her check the tint of her lips in a hand mirror. Before she begins she takes a sip of water from the bottle provided, unscrews the cap and lifts it. She doesn't bother with the glass. Her talk is mostly about singularity. She tells us: Once a body crosses the event horizon, it reshifts but never disappears completely.

After she has finished there is a Q&A session. I raise my hand and ask about collapse. As soon as I have spoken the word, I feel my face flush. I do not know what has given me the courage to pose the question but the lecturer beams as if I've put my finger right on the crux of the matter. She doesn't wait for clarification. She talks and talks until the audience becomes restless. I don't understand a word of her response but somehow this no longer matters.

In the ladies room I walk in on a woman vomiting. The stall door is flung wide open. I try not to look but can't stop myself. Only the woman's back is visible, her head vanishes into the toilet, as if instead of throwing up she is being pulled under, sucked into the bowl's hole. I stand and stare, hypnotised by the heaves of her back, the long rhythmic wretches that shake her body. Her pants are on her hips and her shirt is untucked, unbuttoned. Finally she finishes. She reaches a hand up to flush the toilet. I turn towards the mirror, pretend to be concerned with my appearance.

I take the bus home in the evenings, sit upfront just behind the glass divider partitioning the driver from the passengers. When I first came to the city, the conductor would punch the tickets with a shiny silver handheld machine. Always they would litter the floor, tickets with holes so you could see the rubber matting beneath. Now it's all electronic. I swipe my card and find my seat. At the halfway mark, I turn and look behind me. Heads bobbing and mouths that move silently in mimed conversations. A woman catches my eyes, stares back: a white round iris and the black hole of a pupil. Just behind me a man has fallen asleep, his head tilted, mouth loose with sleep and open so I can see the dark hole of his throat. I am overcome with the urge to lean back, push my hand into the opening. My fingers, then my hand, a fist. Thrust it down his throat. Punching in and out, deep-throating him.

I have always been too scared to have anal sex, but since joining the feminist group, I feel braver. I tell my sometimes boyfriend I want to try again. He looks at me, his brow furrowed. When we tried before, it hurt so much that I made him stop. The pain was the same as when you get something stuck in your throat, when it won't go down, or when you make yourself vomit and it all comes up too fast, a tearing that isn't really a split but a stretching. I say it'll be different this time. I want to tell him about the fantasy I've been having recently. In it he is fucking all my holes simultaneously, down on his knees, straddling my legs, fucking me in the arse doggy style, while he uses his one hand to finger my cunt. His other hand is on my face. I am sucking his fingers one by one, skinny hot fingers, sucking and licking. His tongue is in my ear and I can hear the sound of lapping. Then he begins to rock, stuffs his dick deeper, thrusting and thrusting, everything going around and in and out.

I start to describe this sequence of events but then I see my sometimes boyfriend's face and stop. A giant hole has opened between us. I don't have words for it. We have no shared language to talk about these things. I don't know what to call my cunt. My vagina, my thing, my hole. I don't have a word for his dick either. Usually our sex is silent. He breathes hard and maybe grunts. Once, when we hadn't fucked for a while, he came so hard that he started to shout. But even then he just said my name over and over. It sounded strange in his mouth. The syllables all jammed together, breathless, like they were being squeezed through the slit at the top of his penis. And then afterwards he collapsed, and I lay next to him while he stroked my hair, breathing hot gasps into the back of my neck.

It was the same in my family growing up. I never saw my mother naked. She was perfectly sealed and seamless. I remember her saying leave it alone, don't touch it. I had developed a habit of clasping my fanny. I held onto it when I got nervous. I don't know how it started exactly, but I remember sometimes feeling like my stomach would drop out from inside me. I imagined it coming loose, sliding through my body and sluicing down between my legs. My mother would always rebuke me: stop holding it like that, it isn't going to run away.

Now I'm not so sure. Holes, it seems to me, are slippery things, always on the brink of collapsing, sliding away or becoming unmade, a hole within a hole, multiplying.

Sometimes I think of the phrase: like a hole in the head.

In my feminist group we discuss naming and ownership. I confess I don't know what to call it, my thing, and there is a ripple. Everyone giggles. The group leader takes control of the situation. We canvas the room and I am amazed by the names that come up: cunt, pussy, gash, beaver, doos, fanny, snatch, cutie, gwarr, gwat, slit, twat, ntubi, poon-tang, vag, box, poes, punani, panty hamster, hole.

Afterwards I stand and talk to the group leader. She is striking, a tall, masculine woman wearing high boots and a tailored jacket. But more than her clothes it is how she wears her face—her mouth. I watch her purse her lips as I explain the trouble I've been having sustaining my hole, with maintenance and surveillance, warding off impending danger; my fear of finding it washed away, caved in at the centre or, worse, clogged up, sad and night-soaked.

The group leader laughs at me. Her head tilts back and her mouth opens. Her teeth are tiny and very white. They dance like city lights as she speaks, leaning in so she doesn't have to raise her voice. She tells me that I have misunderstood the whole thing. She says that what I am making is a round wall. She says the hole is only revealed at the moment of collapse. It is in collapsing that the hole divulges itself to us, its potential and its mysteries.

Back at home I go out to the garden. It is early evening. A pink happy light. The lawn looks brighter than usual. I walk to the fence and kick my hole in. I am dismayed by how easy it is. One stomp launches an avalanche. Nothing remains but a small indentation.

At the supermarket I buy seeds to grow flowers. The packaging is very helpful. It has pictures of the flowers and all the details on the correct season to plant in. So many options: arum lilies, strelizias, vygies, yellow clivias, foxgloves, daisies, impala lilies, everlastings. I spend all day planting even though it's a simple operation. All you have to do is stick your finger in the dirt and drop the seed in. The ground is soft and loose where my hole had been, moist beneath me. I push my fingers in. Lift them, sniffing. The dirt is dark, raw. I try to feel for the hole itself but it burrows deeper, worming and whorling in circles that elude me.

