

Sinkhole Tourism

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The Sheriff

It's the water that does it, but there's no water around here, and there are no oil rigs, no old mines, no leaky faucets, no sewers to give way, no construction pumping, and there are no wells, so it must be God; it was God that did it. It was reported that way in the paper, anyway. The sheriff said it. It was quoted. He showed pictures he took with his pocket-sized digital camera.

In the center, there is water. Maybe there's water in the center of all things, because water is the force of life, some would say, some would say that's God too. The sheriff said this too, but it wasn't quoted, because if the water under the surface was God then that meant that God had been nibbling away at salt deposits and eventually caused a gaping hole in the ground and the death of one hundred and twenty seven chickens. The sheriff said maybe it wasn't God then, and laughed, and said maybe it was that serpent in Nordic myths that will rise from the ground and end all things. The reporter coughed and glanced at the cameraman, who was dressed entirely in white, except for the cuffs of his pants, which were coated in a fine desert brown, and said that would do it.

The Artist

You have to be able to paint branches scavenged from the woods of Vermont and, when bugs start bursting from the wood and popping out of almost microscopic boreholes, causing piles of sawdust to accumulate on the floor, you have to cut the branches up and dispose of them quietly before the artist returns from lunch. You have to be able to cover books in a coat of red wax so thin that it isn't red anymore. You have to be able to pour wax into solid forms, slush wax in circular movements, use the whole body to rock the mould. You have to melt wax, cut wax, shape it. You need to be able to sit at the right seat in an Arts Commission meeting. You have to introduce yourself as "a part of the team," not as an "assistant," and you have to know that without being told. You have to pretend you don't care when you almost die in rush hour traffic picking up hors d'oeuvres for the artist's opening party. You have to be able to

pick splinters out from under your fingernails without complaining about it. You have to be able to calculate the circumference of a baseball and plot all the seam lines too. You have to know what font the Red Sox used on their uniforms in the early forties. You have to know the differences between types of ink jet printers and gauge the thickness of copper wire by sight. You have to TIG weld. You have to get better boots. You have to get a car that works. You have to get an iPhone. You can't take your pants off in the studio when you're alone and it's hot. These are important things, and, by and large, you've done well. You've really come far. Think of all those things you've done, how much you've learned, the discipline you've gained. But what I really need you to do now is run down the side of this hole as fast as you can without tripping and tell me when the horizon disappears. Ready?

I can't watch my feet?

No, because how would you see the horizon then?

I'm probably going to fall.

That's okay, we can do it again. I would do it, but my foot.

Yeah, no, of course, broken. You can't.

I'll pay you triple for the time.

I'd do it anyway.

I know, but still. Money's money. Ready? Go!

The Weeds

The wind blows from the west, where a massive garbage dump makes tangled bodies from the lighter materials and sends them toward the hole in the ground to the east. These faux tumbleweeds made from shredded documents, ribbons from dot matrix lines, and the dust from the back corners of mega-church drawers meet the great tumbleweeds of the desert, gatherings of the tail feathers of large predatory birds wrapped in barbed bushes and fortified with hundred-year-old cacti skeletons that no longer look like plant matter in death, more like shaved rhino horns and talismans from magic types in forest silhouette dripping with long vines. If the two types of spinning matter were to meet between the dump and the hole, it's obvious which would crush the other, but they don't; they both drop over the edge, where the sheriff gets back in his car, outpace the man streaming down the side in a dust cloud, and drop into the small circle of water in the base of the pit, into the liquid bottom of the chasm where salt continues to wash away during every second that the tumbleweeds

make their paths toward one another, every second times a thousand thousand seconds before, and now a thousand thousand after.

The Assistant

Sinkholes have historically been used for garbage. Sometimes sacrifices. Now tourism. The man stops at the edge of the pool and spits in it, panting desert, spitting sand. *Shit*, he thinks, *shit, I forgot to watch the horizon.*

Forget something? He hears from the outer world, blowing down the side like the inert tumbleweeds before him. *Yes, yes*, says the inner world without vocalization. He climbs back up, salt water sweat to match the salty deposits beneath the hole.

The Students

Wow, that is a big-ass hole.

It's not as big as I thought it was going to be.

It's pretty big.

Yeah.

You wanna go back?

No. Where are the chickens?

It is big.

Yeah. Where are the beers?

They're in the back, with the chairs. We can sit awhile. I have some things I need to do.

Do you see the chickens? There are supposed to be chickens. I want one.

There?

No, that's a tumbleweed.

He spins his keys in a tight orbit around his index finger but knocks his thumb knuckle and lurches to a stop. He draws a gun with his thumb and index finger clumsily. Pow pow pow, he says. Waiting for the chickens.

You're an idiot, his friend says, thin brew snaking in his esophagus.

He takes a lawn chair out of the back of his truck. It smacks green neon against the muted purples and greens of the limitless dry around them.

It beats sitting out back.

The Press

I've got it all planned out, right down to the minute. I can't waste any time. If I'm in there at noon, it takes me exactly five minutes and forty-five seconds to set up my tripod and all my gear—I timed it, down to the five-second. I did it a few times, and there was some give and take, but I'm sure I can do it in five and forty-five. Anyway, I'll have the stuff set up by then, and I can run around to the other side—I measured the distance, it's, oh, it's five hundred and sixteen feet—if I can run that in just under thirty seconds, which I can, I timed it, on a track—then I'll be able to throw the switch on a display that will back-light the scene by the time the B-button clicks over and the camera goes off, so I'll get that picture, you know, the picture of her in her big yellow dress and all that garbage. And the monsters. Then, the best part of it, is that there's a pole I can climb up—because if I took the stairs, I'd have to go all the way around, all the way around this stadium because the other crews are going to be set up by this point, and they have armies with them—armies—and that would take forever, but I can get up this pole in two minutes and fifteen seconds—I timed it, exactly that. I did it over and over, and it was exactly that every time, amazing. But I'll go up the pole, and that will shave something like five minutes and who-know-what-all from the time, because I'll be avoiding the crowds, and then I'll just sit there and wait. And no one will be up there, because they're all following behind, and they don't know she's going up the stairs. So then I'll get the picture of her taking off the yellow dress and all the monsters becoming people again and all that garbage. Then I'll interview her. That'll take fifteen minutes. I'll set a timer on my cell. And then I can skirt down that pole again—genius—in under thirty seconds and be over to the other side, where I can interview the pyrotechnics guys—which no one ever does, ever—and they'll tell me about all the fireworks that go off like dragons and that ridiculous barge they have coming in with all the flowers that aren't really flowers but burst into flames and that bird they have spinning in on a wire that will fly through the churches—through the windows, even though it's mechanical, and sit on that barge. Ridiculous. That will be good. And then—those interviews will be fifteen minutes each, I'll time it. I'll make sure—then I'll hightail out of there, and instead of taking that plank that everyone else takes—that plank—what's it called—

The dock?

Yeah, I guess. The dock. Instead of that, I'm going to swim. I've arranged all that with the pyrotechnics guys. They're showing me the way around that they

use, and that'll shave ten minutes off the usual way for sure; there's no way the other crews will get there first, so I'll get all that bonus footage.

What about your notes and your camera? Won't they get wet when you swim?

Check. Check. Bags—they go in water-proof bags, where I'll have a quick-change stored too, and it'll take me two minutes to run around to the bathrooms from where I boarded and fifteen seconds to change—

You timed it?

I timed it, exactly. And still, even with that, the swimming –

How did you time the swimming?

In a pool.

But this is the ocean.

Yeah, it's water. Same thing.

What if there's a current.

A current? A current? I'm swimming across anyway. I thought of that anyway.

You thought of everything, then.

Yeah. Anyway, it'll take two minutes to get back, running, from the changing room, and I'll still, even with that detour I'll still—

What if you have to go to the bathroom.

Yeah. Fair question. I scheduled in one minute for the bathroom at any given time in this whole thing, except for between her going in with the yellow gown and going up that pole—

But what if one minute isn't enough, won't that throw everything off? Sometimes it can take—

Thought. Of. It.

You can't rush it though.

Check. Check. Got a spoon. Bringing a spoon. Scoop it out if it doesn't come out.

You're kidding.

No, not. Thought of everything. That's what my brother had to do in Iraq. Those MREs caused major constipation. Solution: a spoon. Listen, if I get those pictures, and those interviews, all that, I'll be golden. I'll be set.

You got it, then.

Yeah, I'm a little worried about my equipment. I'll be leaving it in the main cathedral when I dash around and up that pole, but I couldn't figure any other way to do it, you know?

They'll have security guards. You're good.

Yeah, thanks buddy, listen, you're first on the list if this makes me. Now where's this hole?

The jeep pulls up; the team steps out. One man takes a panoramic.

The sheriff orbits. His patrol car lights are black and out. He reaches the jeep and asks the crew to leave. They're leaving anyway. They got the shot. The sheriff's shoes are beat and rusty in the scuff of the desert and street. They have the kind of history that only comes from walking.

The sheriff walks away from the news crew leaving in a stream of dust. *This isn't Florida*, he thinks. *This isn't Pennsylvania or Texas or Alabama. This isn't Missouri or Kentucky or Tennessee. This isn't any one of the states that are prone to this sort of thing. This is tornado alley. Sinkholes are poor omens here. A woman in yellow, visible across the way.*

The Water

Water moves underground. Microrivers erode the earth in places where the earth is weak, in salt beds and domes, in gypsum, in carbonate rock like limestone. It's weakened slowly. Weakened, grain by dissolving grain, crystal by disappearing crystal. Something solid becomes something porous. Something dense becomes something airy. Caverns and voids open up and grow. Water can't hold shape like earth does. The more it erodes, the more it erodes. The process quickens and shifts, and suddenly the surface sinks as it settles into pockets where limestone or salt once lay and water once ran. It's simple. It doesn't require a whole lot of scientific explanation. It's like cutting the legs off a person very slowly, felling a tree, felling a building with thousands of small bombs in the basement, evaporating a foundation. The final implosion happens pretty quickly. That's the moment you want on camera. This isn't incredible. It's the aftermath, the debris, the rising dust rising spirit. Dead birds, pooling water. Tumbleweeds and gawkers.

The Dog

The artist is stationary as her secondary runs down the side of the pit. She

scratches the ears of the animal next to her.

You were already walking on air, you just didn't know it as you tripped so freely over the karst terrain; you didn't know that the dry pockets of sedimentary rock shrinking from the touch of water were air you were walking over with every motion of your own body, that you were walking on air. Rolling, more appropriately, in the dirt—a layer of Kansas dust peeling up from the surface of the Midwestern ground and wrapping the wrapping of your skin-wrapped insides. If you hadn't stood up and skipped away before the hour was up you would have fallen through the air and the rock, the temporary suspension over. If you hadn't got up from your rolling at the call of someone you trust more than anything else, you would have ended up just like the chickens, falling in desert cakes and substrate gruel in the darkening compaction of a consuming meal that digests more rapidly the farther it gets from sunlight, instead of facing the raw beef you took to with abandon while the ground imploded. You don't know how close you were to being devoured, you stupid dog.

The husky leans its side on the owner's leg and stares in the pit as she knits her fingers through its mane and watches the man barreling down the imploded ground.

This was one of those quick holes, not one that gradually deflates with no drama. The geological seconds were amazing, but they were only witnessed by the chickens, and even they didn't see what was happening, because they were mad-pecking the impacting ground for their grain forgeries, which weren't real grains, because all the real ones had been eaten already, and the birds were just mad with the idea that there might be more grain left between the silt grains, while other grains just below them were becoming weakened and ready to dissolve. That would have been good, too—chickens swallowed by their food: a beak reaching for a last bit of feed, reaching the point where the ground should have been but wasn't anymore because it had moved down in the infinitesimal moment between pecking and retracting, then in the tiniest moment the tiniest brain registered the tiny mismatch between expectation and reality and then chaos, the dust cloud rising with feathers. The chicken reached for food that wasn't there, but the ground wasn't there either, and they both fell. That was the amazing moment, the moment of destruction.

“Did you get it,” her phone asks.

No, she realizes, no, I wasn't listening.

“Did you raise your hand?”

“YES”

“I didn't see...”

“...”

“Can you do it again...Sry. Please? Then we go. The sheriff asked us to anyway.”

The assistant climbs up the side and repeats the trajectory of the tumbling earth.

There he goes, running down the side like the grains of dirt, disappearing into the pit before me, re-running the geological process. If I can't be there while the ground falls, because it's impossible, because I'd have to wait a century in one spot waiting for the hole to appear, I can at least replicate it from the point of view of the disappearing ground. This is too much to explain to the sheriff, and he probably doesn't care.

If only we could have captured that one photograph when the hole appeared, in the seconds when the subterranean waterways were replaced by collapsing dirt and the filling of all of those pockets caused the ground to compact as though it had been hit by an invisible meteorite. We want to see the landless layers between the land, the lands between the lands, disappearing as all the individual clusters of silt are joined after being separated by substrate streams for so long, finally edge-to-edge in the darkness and tumbling. No, the sheriff wouldn't understand. He'll make me go.

The artist turns to leave when the assistant reaches her level.

The assistant turned around after he saw the horizon disappear.

The students leave when the sun reaches the edge of the horizon.

The dog leaves when the artist leaves.

The press left when the sheriff reached them.

The sheriff leaves when everyone else has left.

The water is always leaving, along with the salt.

The tumbleweeds stay.

The sheriff returns in the night when he can't sleep.

He stares into the pit, casting his light to the center where it's swallowed. At first it's soundless, and he stands there for a long time as the silence makes itself physical. Then he hears the earth shift and thinks it's shifting down again, that another implosion has begun, that the grains are compacting. God is mad again. He steps back from the edge, and his beam hits a patch of earth moving awkwardly and not at all like he would have imagined a sinkhole to move. It's rising, not falling, for one. For another, it moves like an animal, like there are muscles under the dirt making their way out of the hole. The more he sees the more he sees until it seems that a giant creature must be rising from the hole, the serpent maybe, maybe the serpent that will rise at the end of all things. But *No*, he thinks. *That serpent was of the sea, and this is the ground.* He checked when he went home, because he was afraid the press would quote him and everyone would think he was an idiot. He's comforted for a moment with this knowledge, that he was wrong and that Midgard will come from the sea. But then he realizes (and it makes sense under the snaking Milky Way of the desert, so clear of light pollution) that there is salt water under this land, created from fresh water and salt, and that maybe the serpent begins to rise here, in this land-locked sea. But then his eyes adjust as his flashlight falters, and he sees feathers shaking along the hundreds of wings that bind them. It's a miracle.

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