

## A New World in Guatemala City

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The edge of a deep hole, if it is too wide to jump across, marks a space that you can walk around and look into but which it is death to enter. Such things occur naturally when caves come to the surface so that the world above and the world below intersect in a black hole. Often these sinkholes are round, or nearly so, a form so simple it can be drawn typographically, like so:



Spaces where it is forbidden or impossible to walk can easily acquire a sacred character and it is curious that the unit of volume for holes like these is the size of a large religious building: we ask, how many cathedrals can be fitted inside?

Gaping Gill, a lonely sinkhole on the moors of Northern England, illuminates a cavern like the oculus of the Pantheon. A better place to dispose of a body cannot be imagined. Anyone who steps over its rim has, like a freshly decapitated man,

about five-seconds left to tell what they know. Not enough time. The first thing to come out of that hole, dead or alive, was French adventurer E. A. Martel who in 1895 was lowered 330 feet to the bottom and back again in front of eighty spectators. His journey down took twenty-four minutes sitting on a stick tied to a rope. Spooling cable out behind himself as he descended he spoke to his team on the surface using an early telephone then astride the floor of a cavern where no one had ever stood before he swigged from a brandy flask by the light of a magnesium flare. With his one piece denim overalls over his suit and his running commentary he resembles an astronaut, indeed, his non-discovery of Satan frozen at the bottom was an act of desecralisation to compare with Armstrong planting a spring loaded flag on the moon. Between them these men knew first hand what was later told in a song.

*No hell below us, above us only sky.*

In a previous age what these men did might have been considered not only foolish but impious to the extent that they risked not only their lives but damnation. So far as I am aware neither of them took any religious precautions before launching into the void which shows that they did not take this latter possibility seriously. When we no longer believe in such a thing the signs for it, however they may arise, must be denied or ignored, which, since we are dealing here with matters of life and death leads to black comedy.

This can be seen in the holes that appeared suddenly in Guatemala City in 2007 and 2010, events that seemed so unlikely that many who saw the news images wondered if it they were faked. They showed an outsize hole like a bad science fiction prop whose location, cut out of a road where it would be easiest to clone its edges, seemed suspicious. Yet they were real. The standard theory of their formation is as follows: Guatemala City is built on a thick layer of volcanic ash out of which, one is astounded to learn, underground streams have leached enormous air filled caves. One of them migrated close to the surface where its collapse was hastened by discharge from a sewer broken by heavy traffic at a crossroads. This

cavern roof, loosened by the drain water seeping into it, suffered what is known as a piping failure in which a circle of disintegration surged headward towards the surface. Standing on the road you would have heard thunder as it rose beneath you. When it reached the surface it manifested itself as a circular crack.

If you were unlucky enough find yourself inside that circle you would be on top of a cylinder of earth 90 feet in diameter and 300 feet long weighing maybe 300,000 tons that was not connected to anything at all. A cylinder is the shape with the greatest weight for a given surface area that can slide along itself. In short: the earth shuddered, answered a high school geometry problem, then dumped a reeking plug into the abyss. It went down too fast to ride, compressing the air in the cave beneath it as it plunged. Once it had cleared the hole and smashed on the bedrock below the air blew back like a killer bubble from below. What had begun as a crack in a ceiling instantiated itself as a bottomless pit from which foul vapors rose and the sounds of gurgling water could be heard. Everything that had stood within it was sucked into the depths and swept away by a subterranean torrent.

With its primitive shape and its artificial infinity the hole is unquestionably sublime. To protect the public from its power it was swiftly fenced off by the police until such time as it can be filled in with a column of concrete that will probably create the most stable spot in Guatemala City. Let us suppose you could get round the guards by passing yourself off as an engineer rather than an artist. Pretending to overlook its numinous aspects, how would you behave? I do not suppose you would saunter up to the edge then sit down and swing your legs. Most people, one imagines, would examine it at a cautious distance before throwing a stone into it, or maybe, more respectfully, a coin. Bold men might stride to the edge to pee over it, then give up when they realize they have nothing to hang on to; small boy stuff really. More plausibly you might put on overalls and crawl to the rim with a rope around your waist; something like a Carthusian monk prostrate before the altar. Peering in all you will see is a black void, which, if you go any further, you will

spend a few seconds crossing before the place you are curious about is reached, quite suddenly.

Falling into it you leave this life not stage left or stage right, but like Faust, through the trap door. A death like this carries a certain cachet, like being hit by a runaway grand piano at sea or being struck by lightning. For this reason it would be difficult to put a sinkhole into a novel, its meaning would be too obvious. We design life to make death invisible, then something like this comes along. You can laugh at it, disbelieve it, think it won't happen here, call it a piping feature, call the police, nothing you do will make any difference. You can stand behind a piece of plastic tape and gawp or watch people on TV turn their backs on it and talk to a camera. Or be a real man and expose yourself to the void, sniggering at what lies within. Or maturely accept responsibility, it was after all a transgressive disaster, part natural and part man-made. But sewers break often enough without this kind of thing happening and there is a kind of vanity in making ourselves to be the author of what is, in truth, beyond our control.

Sinkholes are like lightning from below. Lightning begins with a tickling cascade from cloud to earth called the dark leader which opens a conducting path from sky to earth along which the luminous bolt strikes upwards. In both cases there is an initial exploring crack followed by a deadly blow moving away from the earth. Another similarity is that lightning can, reputedly, strip people of their clothes. Oddly, sinkholes can do the same. Crossing the road just prior to the event, you will sense the earth shuddering through your feet and your legs will do the rest. In a car the suspension will keep you oblivious for a little longer. You must be ready to get out and jump, those car doors how they get in the way! In a building you are in real peril, what you must not do is worry about leaving the house with no clothes on. Of the people who escape sudden sinkholes those who come closest to tasting death may be naked.

Physicists conjecture that inside black holes are other universes, could something similar be the case here? Look at the trade across the event horizon in a sinkhole. Into them go

rain, stones, small change, screaming soon-to-be-dead people and heroes like E. A. Martel on a rope. What comes out are echoes, bats, smells, gurgling, and E. A. Martel on a rope. However, at the very instant that disaster strikes we may get a glimpse of an Eden within if we look at the people who run screaming from the hole as it is created. Who could they be?

These last people out may be naked, dripping wet and humiliated. Do they perhaps have an inkling of their guilty part in the affair? Perhaps they pulled the plug, perhaps it was their bath water that triggered this disaster. And yet, knowing death close up they will be fearless survivors high on life. They will be on TV before they know it and despite having lost everything may do well in this world. I wonder what they will make of us, this new Adam and Eve, when they see us standing stupefied by the hole out of which they have just leapt?

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