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The Fox and the Groundhog

Lynn Levin

When I find myself revisiting the insults I have suffered, when I imagine new indignities to come, when I reflect upon my shrinking circle of, let us not call them friends exactly, more like nodding acquaintances, I pick up a shovel and dig holes in my front yard. Few will admit it, but a dark and deep pleasure awaits those who delve into their grievances and resentments. Not for me the cult of self-care with its yoga and breathwork, mindfulness meditation, vitamins, teas, and regulated emotions. Could there ever be a more pernicious regimen of self-denial, not to mention a waste of time and money?

Here on my street, life is hard for me. Embattled by terrible neighbors, I try to survive. On the left, there is Farquhar with his maples. Every season a new torment. In the fall, his trees bury my yard with their leaves, which, though I demand it, Farquhar refuses to rake. In early spring, his trees litter my property with their whirlers, which the squirrels love to eat, causing more squirrels. Then the blasted maple seedlings emerge, and I must constantly yank them out

lest a forest sprout in my lawn. On the right, there is Bettencourt with her Dachshunds. Such ill-trained, loud-mouthed, foul-tempered spawn. No sooner does she open her door than they rip across her yard to mine where they hurl their barks at me, bare their fangs, and try to bite my ankles. Out of terror, I've called animal control. In counterattack, Bettencourt has sicced the cops on me.

I dug small holes in my front yard for several years. I had so much turmoil and dread, I could have plowed a field and planted crops. Eventually, it occurred to me that my scattered project was shallow, dilettantish, and failed to match the profoundness of my plight. As they say, the fox knows many things, but the groundhog, or whatever, knows one big thing. Therefore, I resolved to dig one big deep hole. I bought myself a sharp new shovel. Empowered by my hatred of Farquhar and his maples, Bettencourt and her wiener dogs, and so many other things besides, I dug into my great project. I sought to plumb my own depths. What kind of self-understanding would I come to? I was inspired.

As I sliced past the horizons of soil: the humus, the topsoil, the rocky and reddish clay of subsoil, conceivably down to the water table, the bedrock, the mantle, and the Earth's molten core, I thought of what it would be like to approach the boiling center of myself. I also considered that there might be no center at all, merely a void or a lot of cold mud. In any case, I would find out. My body, that loyal soldier, worked in tandem with my mind. As I bore down, I imagined Farquhar's maples being struck by lightning or felled by a gang of lumberjacks. I had visions of hawks carrying off those sausage dogs. I saw them snatched by coyotes. When I was not digging, I thought about digging. As long as I thrust my shovel in and flung dirt out, I felt filled with purpose.

My work progressed to the point that I had excavated over four feet. It was early April and the ground was soft. The maples were sending down their blizzards of whirlers. One night I had a dream that I put my shovel aside, but the hole grew on its own. And in that dream, I stood at the edge of the hole as at the brink of myself and gazed down into my dark unfathomable being.

I decided to dedicate a whole Saturday to my project. I packed some sandwiches and bottles of water. In order to dig deeper, I would have to dig from inside the hole. I threw my shovel into the pit (I was now calling it a pit), tossed down a bucket to help me clear out the dirt, and slid myself down. I was well into the subsoil, which was thick and rocky. I wondered when I would hit groundwater.

Hours passed and things were going well. I was making progress. Due to the depth of the pit, I was no longer able to fling out the dirt with my shovel, so I loaded up my bucket, lifted it, and emptied it over the side of the pit. My will was finding its way. I was on route to discovering my truth.

My pit was now several feet deeper than I was tall, and at a certain point I found that my arms could not reach high enough to dump the bucket over the edge. I grew fatigued. Although I carved handholds and footholds in my pit, the sides were slick, and I could not clamber out. Nature called, and I found myself in a latrine of my own making. I looked up to the sky: so blue, airy, so far from me. Groundwater began to pool around my feet. I thought that I might perish in my pit. Alas, the narrowness of my shaft would not permit the turkey vultures to fly in to pick my bones. My funeral would be up to the flies and worms. I was feeling mighty low, a failure.

I began to think that knowing many little things might be preferable to knowing one big thing. I also started to doubt that there was one big thing after all. Maybe that was a false goal that merely sounded meaningful. And I wasn't so sure about the little things either. What was I sure of? I stank. I was cold. I wanted a shower.

Just then I looked up and saw Bettencourt's wiener dogs, their nasty little faces staring at me from the edge of the pit. How glad I was to see those trespassing little bastards. They started barking, more like a hunting dog's I-found-it bark than a threatening bark, and this attracted Bettencourt whose head appeared above me. She must have called Farquhar as moments later he materialized also looking down on me. It was the oddest perspective: the heads of my tormentors ringed above me as if in a ritual circle, and to top it off the whirlers sailed down.

Evidently, someone called the town's emergency number because presently a rescue crew showed up with a harness and hoisted me out of my pit. One of the guys spoke to me in a patient and neutral tone, the way you talk to a lunatic you are trying not to rile. One of the other guys was nice. He asked me if I was okay, and did I want him to wash some of the mud off me with my garden hose. Absolutely, I said, and thanked him. I thanked Farquhar and Bettencourt, and they nodded back. So, there you have it, two additional nodding acquaintances.

The township code inspector walked up to me. He asked me if I was trying to dig a well or strike oil or what, and had I cleared this digging with the utility companies? Did I know about ordinances and regulations? It was likely, he said, that I would be cited for my action. I found this a fresh cause for perturbation and hence a new bitterness to celebrate, probably not by digging, but in some new way that would make me feel truly alive.

Lynn Levin is the author of nine books, most recently the short story collection *House Parties* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2023) and the poetry collection *The Minor Virtues* (Ragged Sky, 2020). Her poems, essays, short fiction and book reviews have been published in *Smartish Pace*, *Hopkins Review*, *Southwest Review*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Cleaver*, and *Boulevard*. She lives in Bucks County, PA and teaches at Drexel University. Her website is lynnlevinpoet.com.