STORY A

Story B

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus

For a time I had felt helplessly drawn to particular breeds of the Japanese trivial: the most important Internet-cat band of our day, a café where you could pay to cuddle with a young woman, the twenty-foot singing hologram that went on a concert tour around the country. Which meant that as soon as I heard about the Japanese hole-digging contest, I was going to find some reason to go. In part I was looking for any excuse to visit my brother, Micah, and his fiancée, Sydnie, in Japan, especially in the lead-up to their wedding. But I also justified the effort and expense I put into writing about these things by telling myself, and others, that, though they seemed indefensibly frivolous, they were obliquely about quite important things—the commercialization of intimacy, say, or the way technology shapes our need for approval. This is standard journalistic practice: many essays purport to be about one thing but reveal themselves to be about some other, profounder thing. Story A might be about the game of Monopoly, but its real role is to give cover to Story B, which is about the decline of the American city. Generally speaking I am most interested in moments in which the gap between the two stories seems the widest, in which the manifest events are highly, perhaps even irresponsibly, leveraged in the production of latent meaning. Competitive hole digging, as far as I could tell, promised both infinite frippery and infinite significance. It was a symbolic gold mine. On the surface it was about digging a hole. Beneath that, I mean, take your pick. Futility and death. Knowledge and revelation. It was a contest in which great industry and skill would be brought to bear on an undeniably silly task, and the result would resemble a cemetery of disinterred graves. I paid for my own ticket.

It's quite early on a Sunday morning in a field near Tokyo's Narita International Airport. The excavation leaders are in high, precompetitive, itchy spirits, carrying batches of authorized shovels back to their teammates. The shovel-approval site is on the verge of the grassy rises soon to be dug up. In the overfull parking lot, competitors costume themselves from trunks and hatchbacks. As far as I've come to understand, this is the only hole-digging contest in Japan, but it's pretty well known. For Sydnie, who works for a Japanese subsidiary of an American pharmaceutical company, and her colleagues, the competition is meant as a morale-building exercise, one of the two or three they participate in each year.

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Sydnie's team puts on the brightly colored work onesies they were directed to buy off the Internet. Their shoptalk is incomprehensible to Micah and me, and Sydnie is eager to use this event to deepen her nascent work friendships, so we leave them alone and walk over to the approval area to witness the process by which tools—shovels, primarily, but also ladders and ropes—are inspected. The authorities kneel behind pine boards, where they accept three or four shovels at a time. Each board runs waist-high, with a black line marked at about ten inches. The shovel handles are permitted to extend no higher than the top of the board; their blades may not rise past the black line. The shovels in compliance are marked with a slug of green tape bearing the name of the competition's host, a dairy farm. The Japanese often use branded tape to indicate proof of purchase: if you buy something at a convenience store and require no plastic bag, the clerk tapes an inch of company logo onto your item. This grants you safe transit out of the store. The tape has hieratic properties. "If you had a roll of that green tape," Micah says, "you could tag a bulldozer and they'd have to let you bring it in. 'Well,' they'd say, 'it doesn't look like something we would've approved, but, after all, it does have a sticker on it.'"

The teams trudge out onto the field, which is gridded with posts and twine. Men and women here and there point thoughtfully at the earth. Shadows of planes ascending from Narita cross the patchy grass. The competitors are mostly segregated by gender: a narrow cart path winds through the field, dividing the women from the men. Many of them adjust their dragon suits, their Pokémon outfits, their clown wigs. They're looking to take home prizes for best costume or funniest hole. The humorous contestants are spread out haphazardly among the nonhumorous. Several of the latter group tug at the elastic waistbands of their standard-issue work trousers, long teardrop billows that look like a compromise between plus fours and Hammer pants. Some idly play with their buckets, some stretch, and everyone smokes. The more conscientious participants stomp and pad their fifteen-by-fifteen-foot plots in rows or ever-widening circles. They are in search of the softest soil. Noncompeting team members wave flags and expand tripods. A team of skeletons in Mexican wrestling masks turns cartwheels.

Micah and I head back over to Sydnie's cohort, in the women's section on the far rise. They are six. (This is the limit for participating diggers.) They were supposed to be seven—so that they, like most everyone else, would have a photographer/cheerleader—but one colleague had been previously engaged by Japan's second-largest organized snowball fight, which is taking place right now below Mount Fuji, more or less as far west of Tokyo as we are east. One of Sydnie's co-workers points to their neighboring adversaries, six women in coveralls the pale pink of cherry blossoms. The website was sold out of pink by the time she geared up, she says. She pulls at her pleated orange coverall. Sydnie takes a team bucket and puts it on Micah's head, so that I can more easily read the label. It advertises that these buckets are equally at home carrying dirt, toys, and laundry.

"We're wasting time," I say, and Micah takes the multipurpose bucket off his head.

Over on the men's side we patrol the aisles before we stop to admire the embroidered jackets of some chain-smoking louts from the coal country up north. Their jackets identify them as some sort of racing team, and their T-shirts have a fragment, in English, declaring THE REAL JAPANESE ABILITY. No ability is specified. Like many teams, they've laid their shovels out in an approximation of the top profile of the hole they plan to build. Micah asks them about their strategy. The foreman puts his cigarette in his mouth and holds his hands out at shoulder height. He draws them down sharply to his waist, then brings them in to his hips, then extends them downward again. The idea is to dig a hole like a large, wide box on top of a narrower, taller box. It will resemble a square, inefficient funnel.

We skip past the team dressed as milk cartons and the one spotted like cows and a few uniformed little-league squads. Frankly we're not as interested in the humorous teams; there's barely enough time, at this one-day competition, to take seriously the teams that are taking this seriously. We spy, atop the men's rise, a single other non-Japanese, and quickly make our way over to him. He has a press pass around his neck that says ABC—the Australian Broadcasting Corporation—and he's confabbing with a Japanese cameraman. With collegial chumminess I ask about his angle on the holes. When he starts talking I take out my notebook and nod for him to continue.

"Pretty much just that it's a pretty bizarre competition. I don't know of any others like it."

"Is this the sort of thing you usually cover?"

"No, I do everything. It could be a nuclear meltdown or it could be hole digging, the whole gamut."

"That's quite a gamut," Micah says.

"Yes, it's a gamut. But this hole digging is a nice change of pace, really, from the nuclear meltdown. It might be dirty, but it's just good, clean fun."

"Ugh," Micah says.

"Is there any other media here?" I ask.

"NHK [the Japanese national broadcaster] has five or six camera crews, but apparently they're not airing the documentary until May. They're from a team that covers competitions. Exclusively competitions. They're pairing this with a French sommelier competition. A ninety-minute show, it'll be, in May."

"Who've you got your money on?"

"Well, I'd never bet on these things, but we're set up here for the moment for a reason." The little pine post identifies berth 222. "These guys are the defending champions. They're a hometown favorite, a construction crew from the Tokyo-Chiba border." In Chiba the city's bedroom communities give way to farmland, which in turn gives way to the Pacific. "It's a good, clear day for some hole digging."

"Do these guys, the defending champions, have a strategy?"

"Our cameraman was talking to them. He said that because they work together in real life, they're good at teamwork. I think their plan is that all of them together will dig up the first layer, get it going, and then they rotate in shifts."

The team, which won last year with a hole 3.39 meters (11 feet, 1.5 inches) deep, is kitted out in trousers with a wide pinstripe and matching tight vests. They grin and smoke and take

pictures with their approved shovels brandished mock-menacingly. They invite an old man lingering outside their plot, presumably a former digger out to pasture, to the center of their photographs. Behind them, in the next allotment, two dancing bears with distended stuffed muzzles and oversize sunglasses disco-point skyward at the planes, which gain height steeply and continuously.

"There are five or six contenders, probably." The ABC guy points down the rise, toward the women. "Those guys in balaclavas over there are pretty good, I'm told. They're from a gas utility that has several teams enrolled.... What we're going to do is cover these guys here for the first ten minutes, then go around and cover a few other teams really quickly—the other contenders and some of the costumed teams and the women—for the middle ten minutes, and then come back and cover these guys again for the last ten minutes. That'll give us a mix of breadth and depth. So to speak. Then I guess we've got three hours to wait while they measure three hundred and forty holes."

He tells us we won't get to see that part, because the judging is secret.

At ten on the dot the teams assemble for the opening ceremony. A young man from the dairy farm stands on a picnic table with a microphone and greets the crowd. Assembled diggers yell "*Konnichiwa*!" in elated unison. Sydnie interprets for the man as he speaks.

"Welcome to the thirteenth annual *anahoritaikai*. Thank you, um ... you hole-digging people, for coming here today.

"This is probably the place with the most ... shovel interaction ... in all of Japan. There are teams here from as far away as Niigata (that's snow country, in the north) and Ehime (that's on Shikoku, in the west). He says that this could be an Olympic event. He says that this *should* be an Olympic event.

"Now he's introducing the defending champions. They won the Golden Shovel last year. I think he said it had been their third or fourth year of participation. Most of the teams are here for a return visit. The Golden Shovel carries a cash prize of a hundred thousand yen—like a little over a thousand dollars—but to bring a team here from Niigata or Ehime probably ended up costing that anyway." Sydnie looks at me for a moment. "I guess they're sorta like you, insofar as if they win the prize money they basically just break even. Anyway, the prize is given by the shovel company that sponsors the event. He's inviting a Hayashi-san from the shovel company to say a few words."

A man in a suit gets up on the picnic table and takes the microphone. He thanks everyone for coming. The company, he says, opened in the twenty-sixth year of the Meiji period. The crowd gasps in synchronous pleasure. Sydnie calculates in her head. "That's, like, the early eighteen nineties. Since then, they've sold more than one hundred million shovels."

With both hands, Hayashi-san holds aloft a simple pine box about five feet long. It's lined with luxurious ruffles of bright blood-red velvet. From within the velvet shines the matte dazzle of a gold-plated shovel. The crowd applauds through its gasp. Hayashi-san stands down.

The dairy-farm organizer takes the microphone back to announce the rules. The competitors are absolutely silent.

"This is a sport, he says, so there are rules. If you use unapproved tools, you are disqualified. The approved tools are marked with green tape. The only approved tools are: A shovel, with a blade tapered or flat. A bucket, or buckets. A ladder. Rope.

"He says that if you move something—I don't know what the word was—then you lose. Maybe the posts or the twine that mark the plot. If you are inside a hole then you need to be wearing a helmet for safety. You can only have your registered six people dig. You may not dig a tunnel to connect your hole underground with the neighboring team's hole."

In the time it takes Sydnie to translate the last rule, the crowd realizes it's a joke, and the joke uncoils everybody a little. There's relieved collective laughter.

"This is a sport, so they will give out cards for safety violations. A yellow card will result in the deduction of fifty centimeters from your final depth. A red card will get you thrown out entirely. All scooped dirt must remain in your own plot area.

"At the end of the competitive-digging period, please leave the digging fields as quickly as possible and proceed to the dairy farm to await the results. No one is allowed to watch the judging. There will be an awards ceremony later.

"There is international attention here. There is international attention from Australia. So please help the foreigners in their work by answering any questions the foreigners have, when you can.

"There will be pictures used on the website, so please allow us to use your pictures on the website.

"You might hit a pipe, and then water might spew up out of the hole."

A few of the diggers around us throw back their heads and hands and mimic comical little geysers.

"You might also hit big rocks." The geyser charades halt.

"This was originally a campground, and it was not made for this purpose.

"Please remember that we are all rivals, but let's also not forget that we are friends. Also. One last thing, he says. We have heard that there might be an *onsen* below our property." An *onsen* is a volcanic hot spring; Japan has thousands of them, and the Japanese visit them frequently. "So please keep digging until we reach our *onsen*. Everyone, keep digging today, and help us reach our *onsen*!"

The crowd of thrilled shovelers descend to the field, regional and corporate standards held high. Men and women in workers' outfits and colorful tributes to workers' outfits and work-unrelated costumes stretch and smoke. Marios and Luigis reseat their caps. The Snow White team set up a mirror in a corner of their plot. Sydnie's colleagues lounge around consuming pregame rice balls. Over the PA system a voice announces an eight-minute warning. Why eight? Why not five, or ten? We have no idea. We pace the aisles. They've offset the grid from the previous twelve years of the competition, so the grassy interstices are stained dark with the ghosts of past trenches.

One of Sydnie's co-workers says that their strategy is rotation. They'd get tired if they all had to dig for the full


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half hour. That's a long time for anyone to dig, even noncompetitively. They're going to rotate out every thirty seconds or so. We look to Sydnie. Sydnie is a methodical person, though not insusceptible to whimsy. She's been known, for one reason or another, to make elaborate fake PowerPoint presentations. She says she's thought about the competition and discussed it with her father, who has never dug for a living or for leisure, and decided that the best approach would be a kind of triangular hole. One person, at the vertex, would move down and forward as she broke up the ground, and two people behind her would clear the dirt away. Sydnie's co-workers don't love the idea. They want to focus on digging straight down.

It's become clear that there are two basic exhumatory camps. They are not quite the ones historically associated with foxes and hedgehogs, though there are similarities. There are those focused on labor efficiency—varieties of rotation—and those invested in hole design. Sydnie thinks her teammates are too intent on the former.

Micah stays behind for moral support at the start, but I think I ought to go back by the Australian and get an early load of the champions. I jog up the rise to find them doing some prematch calisthenics. To their north is the team of dancing bears, and to the west is a team in oil-smudged All Nippon Airways jackets. Three cameramen—the one from ABC and two from NHK—are lined up at one corner of the champions' plot, filming the idyll before the burrow. The PA announces thirty seconds until digging. There arises a buzzing from the hill behind us, and we all look up at once to see a drone-mounted camera fly over us. Those holding shovels put down their shovels and wave to the drone.

I turn to the Australian. "It's a little weird to see people waving cheerfully at drones, even if they've only got cameras on them," I say, "I don't think the first thought of a newspaper-reading American, when confronted with a drone, would be to wave cheerfully."

"Yeah," he says, "but don't forget this is a country without a military. They don't have to think about drones, because you do that for them."

All of a sudden everyone is counting down. Five of the six champions are squared off, their shovels poised to spear. At zero, the hilly field of participants erupts downward in a frenzy of crouching and stabbing and sloughing and videoing.

At first the five champions stand in their little rectangle, troweling clumps of grass-matted topsoil, but soon they have the early workings of an actual hole. They work in two tiers, four at a time. The two guys on one side dig down really furiously and don't worry too much about clearance. The two guys on the other side carry away the dirt. After a while they switch, so that the clearance crew can get into the deeper tier and the groundbreakers can get going on the shallower side.

The ANA mechanics in the adjacent plot dig straight down, as Sydnie's colleague had advised. In the first ten minutes or so they build down a crushing lead, at least fifty centimeters. The dancing bears on the other side cheer as their companions, in heavy camo, contour swelling breast-mounds from the dirt they've removed from their shallow ditch.

There is a problem, or rather a whole family of problems, universally encountered by those committed to immediate plumb depth: they've left themselves insufficient room to maneuver. This manifests itself in three ways. First, they develop intractable problems with dirt removal. The principal groundbreaker, in a hole too small for two people, becomes responsible for the clearance efforts, which means he often wallows in unevacuated dirt. This is an inefficient use of the approved tools: the dirt clearance is achieved not with the flat-bladed shovels invented for that purpose but with the spade-ended tools best used to pierce and cut. The second problem is one of smooth worker substitution. Seconds are lost as one worker is hauled out of the hole and the next descends. But by far the greatest disadvantage is ergonomic. Diggers of wider trenches can get underneath dirt clods from side angles. From cramped depths you're forced to dredge from under your own feet.

In the holes of those who've gone for both depth and breadth, digging and clearance are done simultaneously, workers are fluently exchanged, and obliquer angles of hollowing allow for ultimately accelerated progress toward the hidden irradiating core of all being.

Between us and that hidden core, though, is the luck of the land. As dirt is thrown up into little knolls, color variations reveal themselves. Most heaps begin a rich brown, but some teams have the good fortune to find sand. Sand, though more likely to pour off a clearing shovel, is lighter, and it requires less coaxing from the earth. The mounds of the fortunate look frosted with ground sesame. The drifts of the afflicted are lumped with misshapen tumors of gray clay.

Micah finds me; we're both a little out of breath. Sydnie's team has been struggling with a hole that got too deep too soon. We pay close attention to the champions. It's clear they're used to working together. They substitute in and out with a greasy precision. They make very little noise. Their group communication is practiced and gestural. The rotated-out diggers collapse on their dirt heaps, their soiled plus fours puffed out like parachutes. On break they suck greedily at cigarettes. In the neighboring plot the bears swivel from side to side with their hands cupped to their stuffed ears, as if listening for distant orders.

"I don't know what I expected," Micah says, "but these are some serious holes." Between the two of us we've seen most of them by now. We peer over the head of an NHK cameraman; the champions' hole looks to be about eight feet deep. Two helmets bob below the surface. "Although it's kinda hard to tell who's winning or what," he continues. "Some of the major holes are pretty good. I guess in the end it's probably close."

The thirty minutes are a little more than halfway through, and we rush around to make sure we haven't missed anything. One row we've somehow overlooked is now host to a fussy commotion. A team in matching black jackets with white lettering have cordoned off their plot with a perimeter of electrical tape to ward off the media and other intruders—they've planned a hole so dark and abyssal it might be dangerous even to be near. Their foreman stands outside the cordon holding a multicolor technical diagram. A worried-looking man with a stopwatch

stands beside him calling out regular substitutions. The *x*-axis of the diagram represents elapsed time, the *y*-axis the depth of the hole; the line begins at earth level, in the upper left corner, and descends with punctuated equilibrium in the direction of the lower right corner, mapping the workers' descent as they drive their tools toward the irreducible certainty of a center. The foreman calls for subs (the word is *kōtai*, Micah is pleased to tell me) at the prompting of his assistant, and as they lower the ladder they mark the rough depth against its side. The ladderman calls out the measurement and the foreman marks their new depth on the sheet in front of him. The diggers on break take long pulls from an oxygen canister.

These clever technicians pose the greatest challenge we've seen so far to the rough, untutored camaraderie of the champions. We buttonhole an NHK reporter, who tells us through a translation app that the team before us represents an elite cadre of water-pipe layers from Toyota City. Toyota City is near Nagoya and is just what it sounds like. He's confident they will take the Golden Shovel back to Toyota City.

"You should probably tell the Australian guy," Micah says, "so he doesn't miss footage of these dudes."

Back at the champions' plot the ABC correspondent is already a little dejected.

"I like their style, these guys, but I've already seen four teams well ahead, on the tour around we did for the middle ten minutes. I think the smoking breaks are hurting them."

"Down the hill, over by plot two twenty-four, there's a team in black nylon jackets with white lettering," I tell him. "They're a tight bunch from Toyota City, with a managerial consort. The NHK guy thinks they're going to take home the Golden Shovel."

The ABC correspondent thanks me and rushes downhill, dodging the dirt that is being flung with increasing desperation into the aisles. We follow on his heels, but he's been taking smoking breaks, too; we defer and don't overtake him. It's minute twenty-seven, and the technicians' manager has ticked down his hole chart to below three meters. He barks out for *kōtai* at shorter intervals. Less dirt is coming up with each bucket, which seems to mean they've decided to abandon breadth for a last-ditch effort for a few final inches. The team's oxygen canisters, now apparently empty, lie half-buried in their tidy dirt.

The ABC guy is still set on filming the final minute plotside at the champions' so we hustle back uphill with him. A peal over the PA announces the end. The last champion is pulled up from the hole. He falls face-first into the rough nap of their great sandy hillock. A colleague comes to his side and offers him the last drags of his cigarette. The digger waves it off.

"He's not well," the ABC correspondent says. "I think we need a medic."

The judging is supposed to be secret, but we stand at the top of the little rise by the parking lot and look down on it and nobody seems to care; we're just foreigners. The teams have repaired with their families to the dairy farm's theme park, which normally costs ¥1,200 per person, but they've kindly waived the fee for diggers. Sydnie has gone to fetch her parents from the airport.

A warm wind blows over the late-winter field and we survey the hundreds of trenches of varying and uncertain depth, the heavy masses of vacated earth. In the distance the little group of judges moves slowly from hole to hole, solemnly stopping at each to take and retake the temperature of the world with a long measuring rod. The NHK crews move their heavy tripods around, filming the still, quiet holes. A single crow circles and caws. The weather and the breeze and the solemn penitence of the judges before the gaping trenches makes it feel as though we're at Gettysburg, at Ypres or Verdun, I say. Micah coughs a little.

"Well, the Japanese," he says, "you know, they don't bury their dead."

"Wait—so you're saying that—"

"Yep. The only people thinking about graves are you and me."

The field looks like it's been ransacked by gophers. After the judging, we idle down amid the strewed soil and black maws, which have taken on new significance in the light of my understanding that the old significance was significant only to us. Their new significance is that of mere holes, dug by people who labored over them as mere holes. The best Story B ultimately returns both writer and reader, with new perspective and charge, to the brute facts of Story A. At any rate, I'd found a way to travel to Japan to spend a day with Micah and Sydnie at the national hole-digging competition. The deep significance had, as usual, only been a way to get here for the surface significance, which was quite enough. As Barthes wrote, the secret of Japan is that there's no secret. Micah suggests I mention fun, ridiculous days like these in my best-man toast.

He and I go to take one last picture of the hole Sydnie's team dug. We stand near the judges, who have just finished their tallying. The NHK correspondent leans against his tripod; his camera lingers on the technicians' hole. We ask what's up. He points to the hole before his camera and winks at us. He speaks into his app. His phone whirs and beeps and he holds it up to our faces.

"Hold sacred the mystery of the winnings of this day," the phone says.

"What?"

Again he speaks into the phone. The tinny robot voice appeals to us once more.

"Be quiet with the riddle of future victory."

Finally, he tries halting English: "Toyota City has Golden Shovel. Don't tell."

We crawl under a fence into the dairy farm and sit in the cold mud with Sydnie's co-workers, who are eager to translate the ceremony for us.

When it is announced that the men from Toyota City have won the Golden Shovel, with a hole 3.49 meters deep, we almost don't recognize them when they take the stage. They've all changed into white. The foreman holds the plated spade in its little coffinlike not-coffin high over his head and the streamers affixed to its golden handle take flight in the breeze.

"He's thanking all of their wives and children," Sydnie's co-worker says.

"He is dedicating to their wives and children this prize.

"This is the fourth time they have been to the hole-digging competition, and they knew that if they tried hard enough they would win, and they did.

"Now, he says, we're tired, so let's all go drink!" ■