

## Megan Hesse

### The Hole

It was down the street and through the alley and squeezed between two buildings of tall and dirty brick in the middle of the city and the middle of nowhere and no one had noticed it but him. There was a rusted metal stump that a handrail had once grown out of and a flight of cracked concrete steps leading down, down into darkness. He'd been crouched there, the boy, his eyes puffy and his lip bloody and had seen the hole, had wondered at its innocent strangeness.

First there had been running, worn sneakers pounding against pavement until his thin, wobbling legs threatened to collapse beneath him like overworked horses and he had ducked into the alley. Then, there had been crying; the kind of hot tears that sting their way out of your eyes without consent. After this he had rubbed his face on a grubby sleeve and took stock of where he was sitting. And there was the hole. It almost looked like the steps that led down into the cool dimness of the subway, but it was hidden here on an isolated street corner. Maybe it was for maintenance workers? But as the boy inched closer, desperate to focus on something that wasn't the throbbing of his eye or the bloody taste in his mouth, he saw it was worn and weathered but also dusty with disuse, piles of old dead leaves from seasons long past layered on steps leading down.

Down where?

The boy stood at the top of the steps, staring. It was late afternoon as the sun beat down on the city but the light didn't reach the darkness that was only five steps below. It was the kind of dark that didn't stop, it just went deeper and deeper and the boy almost felt as if he'd get lost in it if he looked too long. It reminded him of the night when his sad, bug-eyed cartoon nightlight had flickered out on him, leaving him stranded in sudden blackness. He had sat there in the dark, too afraid to call out, knowing that there were things worse than darkness, things that gave out black eyes and bloody noses and it was better to be scared in the dark than to risk calling out.

As his mind churned with these thoughts the boy put his fingers to his lips, feeling the warm wetness there, wincing at the pain that came with the touch. He switched his focus back to the hole, looking now at the rusty stump beside the steps. A handrail meant that people were supposed to go down there, didn't it? He got down on his hands and knees and examined the stump with his one good eye. It was ridged and rippled where the metal stopped, as though the rail had met its end with violence rather than neglect. The boy wondered what was strong enough to do that, a small shiver snaking its way down his spine despite the heat. Staying low to the ground, he peeped over the other edge of the hole, the darkness still inky and endless at this new angle. He argued back and forth with himself about dangling his arm off the edge, letting his fingers brush against the dark and see what they might find and that was when he heard it.

"Boy! Get back here, God dammit!"

His whole body went cold now, his hairs standing at attention as the voice called out again, slurred and fluid, tasting the syllables as it yelled them.

"You come back here! I'm not done with you yet!"

Heart hammering, the boy's eyes danced over the hole once more, taking in the torn stump, the steps covered in leaves and rot, the endless darkness just five steps down.

The voice, closer.

"Booooooy!"

He sprang up suddenly, stood at the top of the steps, and hesitated, even then, for what seemed like the longest second. And then he went down, down into the black.