BORN AND RAISED IN UNDERGROUND chambers and tunnels, moles find everything they need in their subterranean habitat. They rarely venture above ground.

TO EXPERIENCE THE NATURAL WORLD, we often navigate congested highways to swim in the sea, fly over patchworked terrain to hike through preserved forests and climb distant mountaintops to catch rare views.

Largely because of our ever-increasing mobility, the areas nearest to us are rarely the dearest—and all too easy to dismiss as familiar ground.

But how familiar are we, really, with what lies below? Instead of traveling afar for a sense of place in the universe, what if we paid more attention to what’s right underfoot?

These questions are especially visceral once you’ve seen the seemingly solid earth shift next to you. More than once, I’ve been lost in thought in the garden when—in a flash so quick I question my eyes—the soil erupts into a tunnel just beneath the surface.

It’s a startling reminder that nothing is immutable, not even the ground we walk on. And the quiet movements of moles also convey a larger truth: Even the dirt outside our doorsteps is breathtakingly alive.

Over the centuries, many people have wished that weren’t so, with entire industries capitalizing on fears of the unknown. Pest control companies specialize in creating mountains of paranoia out of harmless molehills, hawking chemicals and medieval traps for killing creatures who live largely out of sight.

Yet there could hardly be a more unassuming creature than a mole. Industrious animals with an unrivaled work ethic, they don’t dig tunnels to tear up our lawns or eat our plants; contrary to popular belief, vegetation isn’t a mainstay of their diet.

Moles go about their subterranean construction work as if their lives depend on it for good reason: Their lives do depend on it. Eating more than half their body weight each day, moles dine on insects, earthworms and other invertebrates in the soil layers. Staying underground as much as possible also lowers risk of predation.

Often alternating labor-intensive tunneling with sleep in four-hour shifts, moles are stronger than human athletes, capable of lifting 20 times their own body weight, writes Rob Atkinson in his 2013 book Moles. “What they can achieve puts humans to shame,” he says, likening their prowess to the strength of a man pushing an elephant out of a tunnel with one hand in 20 minutes.

“There’s something kind of honorable about the way they live their lives,” says Atkinson. “If you can’t have sympathy for an animal like that, you can’t have sympathy for anything.”

Long before he studied moles at Oxford, Atkinson viewed them as pests and trapped them during his youth in rural England. Moles have been subjected to even worse fates in the United Kingdom,
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