

Excerpts from The Library

An audio field guide by Ilana Halperin
with contributions by Andrew Patrizio and Veronika Geiger
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I. The Suidhe

A volcanologist said to me, a volcano buries itself. It perpetually erases its own history.

Geology is a borscht belt romance, with its lava beds, and pillows of lava, its volcanic dykes and multiple orogenies. There is volcano behind my house in Kilchattan Bay on the Isle of Bute. But it just looks like rock. Or a hill. Grown over with moss and trees, bracken and blue bells. Snow drops in winter. It smells like wild garlic in spring and I have walked the path alongside it 1000 times. The volcano is named the Suidhe and is the largest volcanic vent in this area. My neighbors told me when they were teenagers they climbed the volcano in the middle of the night to listen to the last broadcast of Radio Caroline. At the end of the village are some of the most significant rocks in Scotland – sandstone, which was cooked and cooled into perfect hexagonal columns around 60 million years ago during a series of massive volcanic eruptions on Mull, up the west coast from here. The columns in Kilchattan Bay are some of the only ones in the world made of sandstone. Usually, they are basalt like their most famous hexagonal cousin the Isle of Staffa, formed during the same eruptive episode. But I first encountered this volcanic phenomenon in New York around 1988 when I was 15 - outside the old Dia Foundation on West 22nd Street as part of Beuys 7000 Oaks.

Some years ago, I spent several days in a row watching films by the volcanologist couple Maurice and Katia Krafft. They died in a pyroclastic eruption in Kyushu in Japan in 1991. Over almost a quarter of a century, they witnessed over 175 volcanic eruptions. Watching reel after reel, I started to recognize certain volcanoes. I know you. Vesuvius, Snæfellsnes, Arthurs Seat, Staffa, Krafla, Bass Rock, Hekla, Ardnamurchan, Etna, Stromboli, Eldfell, Kilauea, Mull, Eigg, Mount Aso, the Suidhe, Kasayama, Kirishima, Sakurajima. All the places I have gone to meet volcanoes, to understand what it means to be human and rock and both at the same time. Watching footage from 1973 of ash from Eldfell sifting through Katia's hands - it felt like watching a home movie – but for a family of a different nature. An extended geologic family composed of deep time relations whether animal, vegetable, mineral or each other.

During my first visit to the archives of Mount Stuart on the Isle of Bute, I asked the archivist to pull out any and all material on geology, as I like free style encounters when I start work in a new collection.

Two volcanic travel diaries came up – one by John Stuart, 3rd Earl of Bute - From Rome to Naples, 1769 – 1771. And one from June 22 – August 1st, 1866, by John Patrick Crichton-Stuart, the Third Marquess of Bute who built the current house. Both diaries feature descriptions of Mount Vesuvius and Mount Etna mid-eruption. In these accounts, there was no love lost for either volcano, so a very different experience to my own volcanic obsessions. And yet, their involvement led to the creation of one of the most magnificent and moving volcanic volumes on Earth – the Campi Phlegraei by William Hamilton – a love letter to Vesuvius, illustrated by the artist Peter Fabris in the late 1700s. That same book featured in *The Volcano Lover* by Susan Sontag. There is not a copy of the Campi Phlegraei in the collection. But instead - there are letters from Hamilton to the 3rd Earl. In one he asks for a job assignment in Naples, explaining it would greatly improve the health of his first wife to be in a temperate climate. He got the job. In another from a few years later – he thanks the Earl for his visit to Naples, and updates him on his work on Vesuvius. So – if not for the job in Naples – there would be no Campi Phlegraei.

I started this story a year ago, almost to the day. Now, everything is different. I can't tell the story I set out to, because it no longer exists. There is only before, and after.

Before - looking out of my kitchen window at the volcano in Kilchattan Bay, I wanted to draw a dotted line between when the Suidhe was molten and now. And then, it was as if time stopped or stood still. It's the same season, but a different year.

We were meant to begin install on *There is a Volcano Behind my House* at Mount Stuart two days before lockdown. We postponed the show for a year. A collection of unfinished sentences.

And how to describe what this year has been? I'll try to find the right words - it is as if we have been encased in solid Amber. But that isn't quite right, as Amber is permanent infinite fossilized moments. Maybe it's more like being stuck in the thick sap from the maple trees that were tapped in the place we used to go - in upstate New York when I was little. Though now that is a place of memory and deep dreams by shallow creeks and peeling birch.

It is like time has been suspended, like Ballard's birds - perpetually caught mid-flight in a crystalline lattice-work in a crystal world - but that is too beautiful an image for what this year has been.

I feel like we've stepped into Lord Kelvin's Artificial Glacier at the Hunterian. It's a small model of a staircase with pitch, or really - cobblers wax, running down each step. It is the second longest running experiment in the world, demonstrating that matter can be both liquid and solid at the same time - as the wax has been slowly moving down the staircase ever since it was poured in 1887 - initiated around the same time that Mount Stuart began to be re-built. Like a slow moving lava flow. It might look like pitch black solid rock, but it is always still in motion. We too are starting to move our limbs again.

The exhibition at Mount Stuart has been waiting, growing - in a time requiring almost geologic patience.

For me, this year has been a year unlike any other - as my mother died in September. It has been a year of grief for me and my family, as for so many families - here - and across the world.

In Judaism we place stones in memory of those that we love. We have a lot of stones to place this year.

Before, my mother was alive. Now, she is gone. What can I possibly say about volcanoes?

Since March 26, 2020 when lockdown in Scotland first began, I have mostly been at home with Alison, my partner of 20 years, and our dogs Eadie and Ira. In constant close proximity, every day I found myself thinking instead about volcanoes. I placed myself on the slopes of active, quiet and sleeping mountains I have encountered over 20 years of volcanic fieldwork. I looked through old notebooks and found field diaries attempting to describe each moment with these volcanic relations. They reminded me of the travel diaries from the archive.

What can we learn from thinking about volcanoes and rocks? I will keep writing, to try to find out. I have invited my friend Andrew Patrizio to contribute too, and we will be joined by the Danish artist Veronika Geiger. We will see what we can find out, by the time we reach the end.

2. Vesuvius

The first volcano I ever went to was Vesuvius. I was 23. I went with my best friends from High School - Adam Putnam and Genya Turovskaya. En-route - Adam and I went to Iceland together for the first time too.

Then we met Genya in Amsterdam, and eventually made our way to the outskirts of Sorrento, swimming at Bagni Regina Giovanna, watching grandmothers lower lunch pails out the window, and then to Pompeii. We could only afford to take one big day trip – Genya voted for the Blue Grotto in Capri, and Adam and I outvoted her to make a trip up the volcano. Hours on an old broken down airless bus on twisting roads to the top of a cone of ash. Genya got very car sick. And at the crest of the volcano, a thin chain link rope to keep you from entering the crater, hot sun, and what we decided was volcanic smoke, but was most likely dry earth lifted in the air by high wind that day. Genya has never forgiven us.

AP: From Rome to Naples, 1769 – 1771. John Stuart, 3rd Earl of Bute

We continued along this mountain until we had got above the stream of the last lava that filled the valley, and there crossed on the cinders that had fallen on old lava, the points continuously appearing at the foot of Vesuvius, we again entered the stream of lava by the side of a ravine it had made its chief current, and ascended by this steep and painful road to the lowest great crater where the thermometer rose instantly above boiling water. We continued mounting to within a hundred feet of the top of the uppermost crater but the sulphurous smoke drove so thick down upon us that we were almost suffocated and our guides declined venturing higher. Indeed we had seen the principle parts for most of the last eruption came from the crater we crossed. The Sulphur lay in great quantity all around the crater and indeed appeared all the way where it smoked with amazing variety of forms and mixtures made by the fire.

IHH: Andrew, can you please tell us a story about your grandfather?

A.P. : *Of course. Let's call this 'Cold Lava: Vesuvius 1944'*

Family tradition paints my grandfather, on my mother's side, as unlucky. He was a science fiction author who published novels and short stories, had films made of his books, but his career sits more modestly adjacent to the thunderous impact to that of his close friend, Arthur C Clarke. Only real aficionados know the names of the smaller volcanoes around Vesuvius.

I've recently discovered yet another example of his ability to be just off on his timing.

I have a small glass container that is filled with volcanic ash from the 1944 eruption of Vesuvius. It was collected by my grandfather, who was there as a regular member of the British 8th Army.

That year, 1944, was the year of Vesuvius's last major eruption, which occurred between the 18th and 23rd of March.

We will come in a moment to what my grandfather recorded of his visit. Meanwhile, here's what is recorded by American Air Force men who happened to be based in the vicinity, not far from the near-invisible city of Pompeii and the partially buried, ash-cloaked metropolis of Naples.

One member of the US 486th Bombardment Squadron called Dana Craig, wrote in his diary:

"... Vesuvius was belching smoke. It was an overcast sky with the threat of rain.... While outside, in a mild drizzle, I was hit on the head by what I thought was a small rock. Suspecting some sort of joke, I went inside for a flashlight.

When I returned, the light revealed a layer of damp cinders on the ground. We knew at that time that Vesuvius was erupting. We began to feel the earth shake as though a bomb had gone off. After each quake, a few minutes would pass before the debris blown out of the crater would start to hit the ground. About daylight, the rear of our building started to cave in. We then began to see the larger rocks coming down."

Leander K. Powers, made entries in his diary between the 17th and 22nd March. Like this one:

Saturday, 17th March, 1944

"While we were just finishing supper, someone called to say there were huge red streams of lava flowing down the sides of Mount Vesuvius. It was a sight to behold. Never had we seen such at night — usually a faint red glow at the most. As we watched the streams, like giant fingers flowing down the sides, we could see a glow in the sky. All during the night and Sunday there were quakes of the earth with tremendous roars - similar to thunder - from Vesuvius. The windows rattled, and the entire building vibrated."

The next day, Sunday, 18th March, he continued:

"Streams of fire were shooting thousands of feet into the air, and the countryside was lit up for miles around. Oft times the entire top of the mountain looked as if it were a blazing inferno."

Back to my grandfather, who moved into Naples with his regiment only 44 days after these diary entries. He who had grown up obsessed with the novels of Jules Verne and H G Wells and a budding writer himself with the manuscript of his first novel in his back-pack.

On 19th May, after seeing a performance of Tosca at the San Carlo Opera House in Naples, my grandfather records in his diary: "Back passed Vesuvius and Pompeii, cold, sunless weather & depressing."

Is that all he witnessed in May 1944, compared to what the Americans had seen just two months earlier in March? Such incredible sights would have inspired this unlucky young science fiction writer - yet he passes this place at the very moment when Vesuvius paused for breath, cold.

The sharp melancholia of being just too late. Of being on the cool periphery where all that was possible to do was to shovel a small pocketful of volcanic ash and lock it within a glass container shaped like a test tube. That tube, brought home and passed to my mother, with its burnt sienna wax seal still intact, cotton wool holding down this narrative core sample of fine and lumpy granules was brought out and given to me for a short time by my parents in Scotland so I could write this and connect directly through my grandfather's small memento of his wartime travels. We might call these granules, in Robert Smithson's phrase: "Deposits of gritty reason". Two labels along its flank read:

'MOUNT VESUVIUS ITALY' and 'VOLCANIC ASH'.

Those deposits in our Vesuvian tube have followed a near identical trajectory as the lava medallions pressed by locals at the edge of the lava stream for the tourist trade. From the guts of the earth, into air and, then to ground, gathered for the mantelpiece in a foreign land to become a memento for a loved one back at home. One kind of danger collected at the site of another.

We try to make the past into an event through creating small objects for the hand and the eye - framed by a glass container or a camera lens; kept in a sunless drawer or uploaded onto YouTube for the world.

But remember, the lava is in its death throes by the time we watch it. A living event for us is a dying event for the burning material expiring at our feet. Its life was prior, in the hidden earth. Now all we see and hear is an object set somewhere between a breath and a wound.

I returned my grandfather's Vesuvian ash to my parents' home and it now lies in the care of my dad, who cares too for the ashes of my mother who died in Italy in 2019.

In her book, Autobiography of Red, Anne Carson wrote: 'A healthy volcano is an exercise in the uses of pressure.'

3. The Volcanoes of Sicily

Mount Etna. June 21st, 2001

I have never written about this. Almost 20 years ago I went to Mount Etna. My mother had a small stroke in early June 2001, following a long flight home from Amsterdam that she slept through. This was in the haze of those naive summer days just before 9/11. Early that spring, for the first time, I sold a large series of drawings. I took half the money and put it aside for rent and used the other half to buy a ticket to Catania in Sicily, with the sole purpose of heading to the island of Stromboli to see lava in real life for the first time. One of the drawings I kept from around that time said 'the lava is a scab'. I went on Sabena airlines, which no longer exists. Alison came with me. We had a few days before we were due in Stromboli. And, as unbelievable luck would have it, Mount Etna erupted on the day of our arrival. We were staying in Catania. Wandering around after hours we ended up in the meat market. The streets were covered in awful and blood. Packs of dogs circled the leftovers. We drank fresh squeezed blood orange juice. Ash from Etna covered the streets. I needed to get closer.

My mother had her stroke just before we were due to leave for Sicily. I said to her "I'm coming, forget it, I'll cancel the trip..." but she said NO, she was fine and not to. My older sibling was going to be with her - I was going to see her in early September - not too long until then, and she didn't want me to change my plans. I got my first cell phone right before we left so that we could talk whenever we needed. A terrifying bill by the time I got home, as no cross-border phone agreements back then. When I remember this, I feel - was I always just missing her when she needed me, but I know that's not true. So many trips and times and hours and days and weeks I did everything I could to keep her safe and well and earlier, even before the dementia, I would go over just to be with her. In early autumn we'd go apple picking together, for her birthday, digging a ton of earth in her garden in spring, in deep winter - Hannukah so that she wasn't too surrounded by New England Christmas - except for June 2001 and now, when the pandemic grounded us all.

We stayed in Taormina to get as close to the volcano as possible. Usually, from there you could get a bus all the way up to up the crater, but all roads were closed because of the eruption. The volcano was too volatile. No tourists allowed. The road was closed one day, then the next, and the next morning after, the road was opened and we got the only bus heading up. Samara gave me a bright red T-shirt they found in a thrift store that said VOLCANO RUN with a turquoise blue outline of an erupting volcano. I wore it that day, I still have it.

The peak was so high, that even in bright June sun it was covered in snow. You would think it was a mountain, except for the smoke tunneling out of the top. You can't see molten lava during the day, so we had no idea what was really happening. We climbed up, but not too high and I stood on the crest of the volcano for a photograph. We didn't stay long, then a slow descent back down. The next day the road was closed indefinitely. Afterwards, we realized maybe it wasn't so smart to go up in such a narrow window. That night in Taormina, as the sun started to set, I started yelling to Alison LOOK! The volcano was in the distance, but what I didn't realise, what I didn't understand when we had been so close, made itself known in the sunset twilight - a river of lava fluorescent orange was travelling down the whole side of the volcano. It was like a painting from the Grand Tour. A Living Mountain. We stood for a long time and watched. Nearby was an outdoor concert. We heard crowds cheering and we weren't sure if it was the rumble of the volcano or the crowd. We could've been in any time, or 79 AD or now. At the top of the volcano, I remember being a little disappointed. I wanted to see lava and here was only smoke. Stupid girl. It was everywhere, but just not for my daylight blinded eyes.

AP: Travel diaries. John Patrick Crichton-Stuart. 3rd Marquess of Bute. 1866

Friday July 6th

We sat on a parapet at the far end and watched the wonderful changes of colour, which passed over Etna as the shades deepened...

About one in the morning, Mr. W and one guide having long dropped entirely behind, where their shrieks and yells could be faintly heard and the darkness far down the mountain now growing horse from despair, we emerged upon the summit between peaks and at the same time the full moon silver, intense, rose from behind the lower with a vivid light and shed a flood of radiance over the tremendous scene of desolation. As far as the eye could reach, there was nothing visible but cinder and sky, the last starless, the former a plane of black dust in which we sank some eighteen inches at every step, as we stumbled on in single file amidst the August silence of the midnight volcano.

About a couple miles ahead rose that great hill, the crater with patches of snow at its foot and the eternal white cloud emanating and writhing from the summit... The East was already orange and wrapped in plaids, we started. Mr. W arrived; the cone is a hill about the size of Arthur's Seat, about three quarters of rolling friable cinders.

We reached the foot after clambering over immense masses of black lava. Soon after beginning to climb we passed an immense ridge of rough burnt lava. The ascent took rather more than an hour. Mr W. gave out half way declaring he should faint. Here the pungent sulphur smoke came sweeping down the hillside choking and blinding one. My eyes were smarting, the lungs loaded, the throat burnt, mouth dry and nostrils choked. We struggled on until the very ground gave forth clouds of white sulphur smoke from every cranny. Step by step and we were on the summit at the edge of the crater which yawned into predation...The crater is an immense glen surrounded by a rough chain of heights and with sides of tremendous epiphyses, bright yellow at the bottom where at a profound distance below rises the vast body of thin smoke. It and the whole top are exactly like Gustave Doré's illustration of the inferno. I think that without all exception, it is the beastliest natural spot I ever was in. The sun rose red over Italy as we sat with our heads wrapped up and handkerchiefs in our mouth...It was soon broad daylight, there was no view at all. The height is too enormous. We walked a little around the edge of the crater and then were delighted to run down out of our misery...We took a different road to that coming up and after a long time made to dismount to look over a precipice into the Valley of Bove, a vast round territory of desolation, like a burnt out fire place...

Eulogy for a German Tourist. Stromboli, July 2001

A man named Herman Horst, aged 60, had a terrible form of Diabetes. He went to the island of Stromboli, climbed up to the top of the volcano - placed his wallet and glasses by a rock, and walked into the crater. Never to be seen again.

I went to the island of Stromboli. It was the site of the movie and the excuse for the ensuing romance between Ingrid Bergman and Roberto Rossellini, with a backdrop of molten activity. The volcano, known as 'The Lighthouse of the Mediterranean' erupts all the time. I had only seen lava for years in my dreams.

It is 95 degrees outside. We begin the three hour walk up to the top of the volcano. I've never walked up a volcano. I've never walked up a Munro. This is as high and as hot as both. I fly into a panic. Smoke everywhere, more hot than almost ever before. I keep drinking gallons of water. They tell me not to. I am going to faint. We are half-way up and I've had it - can't even look at the top of the volcano, don't even care about it at all because it is so steep I am sure I am going to fall off the mountain.

I begin to have visions. They will have to get a helicopter to take me off the volcano. I am in an extreme state of terror. I can't move. I am holding onto once molten rock. Lava is flying out of the volcano and I can only look at my feet. A recurring dream - and you imagine you can rise to the occasion. I discover I can't. I will never make it to the crater. You never know yourself in a situation until you are in it.

The sun goes down. It gets a lot cooler. I can walk. We reach the crater. It is not something I should be allowed to see - the bowels of the earth. And all I can do is think about Herman Horst. I have to remind myself that you can't just walk into the crater. Like when standing by a waterfall, you really have to remind yourself not to jump, not necessarily because you want to die, more because it seems to make sense to do it.

4. Kīlauea

Big Island, Hawaii. April 2009

Last night I woke up in the middle of the night in a panic. We are on an erupting volcano in the middle of the ocean. But, this is not a useful way to think. We have only just arrived.

The amount of lava that comes out of the Kilauea volcano could pave a road to the moon and back again five times a day every single day. At the crater's edge is Volcano House, opened in 1865. For 90 years, Volcano House held a register, where visitors were asked to describe exactly what they saw the volcano doing when they were standing at the crater's edge. Thus, a 90 year-long daily history or - a volcanic diary changing hands each entry, was constructed. A communal biography of a volcano. This reminds me of a conversation I had with a volcanologist about volcanology as a science. Ultimately, a volcano's life is much longer than yours or mine, so to learn about a volcano, study it, get to know it, you must accept that you may never see its full range of behaviors firsthand. A calm volcano might have a violent eruption 400 years from the day you first meet, and even multi-generations of volcanologists may still only cover 300 years in the long life of an active mountain. So, inbuilt into the process is the tradition of passing along everything you know about your volcano to the next volcanologist who will be there when you are gone. Inbuilt into the story of each person who gets to know a volcano is the story of that same person's obsolescence. A volcano perpetually erases its own history.

Lava Encounters

Today, we drove up to the summit of the volcano. We stopped at a vast expansive lava flow formed in 1985. Actually, it was quite frightening. You really have the feeling that the lava is an organism. The way the crust forms over these tubular flows is almost like reptilian skin. Where it is completely smooth, it looks like starfish tentacles or a little bit like the roots of the trees in the Fossil Grove in Glasgow. Certain areas look like details from renaissance paintings with heavy Italianate velvet drapery.

There are sections of braided lava, long and ornate like a majestic set of cornrows for the volcano. Some sections look like the most intricate woven ropes used aboard ancient fishing vessels, so delicate, they look handspun. Sometimes it is very hard to believe it was all made through a naturally occurring process.

Ken has agreed to take us out onto the active lava flow on Thursday.

A dream : New York was experiencing erupting steam vents and explosive craters on Broadway. Buildings collapsing. Trying to find my way home across continents. Plane parts falling off. Wires coming out. One person was killed in the eruption on Broadway, on 79th Street in a gaping hole about the size of a grand piano. An internal landslide appeared inside the chasm. In the newspaper is a photograph of the person who was buried in the street, following the landslide, head laying to the side as if asleep. Like the David Wojnarowicz photograph, body buried, face exposed. Light weight pumice.

The Boat

We joined a boat heading out to the lava entry ocean points, to see the process of new landmass in formation. We climbed aboard the boat while still onshore. From a height the boat was dropped into the water. Night swells still rolling in at 5:00am, in the distance, with slight sun rising, the plumes. And then, with distance changing velocity, we were almost in the flow. We were so close to the lavas edge I thought we would be engulfed. The air was unbelievably thick – a substance filling the empty caverns of your throat. Billows of smoke surround us.

I began to count and hold my breath until the smoke dispersed – three seconds to go, now cool air, three seconds, now cool air. I looked down at my chest for a moment, wearing only a tank top against my skin, thick air swirling and too close to the phenomenon.

Tiny wisps of invisible down protecting my skin (that throw back to more animal days) were entirely encased in airborne lava mud. Every hair a miniature lava stalactite. Physical Geology.

Each part of the flow like an anatomy lesson, muscle opened, bone revealed, blood and tissue all there, like holding a heart in your hand.

The Secret Lava Tube

We heard it was possible to enter a hidden lava tube. We were able to join an expedition that week. En-route to the lava tube through the rainforest we passed a mobile seismograph unit - a nondescript rectangular box containing monitors to follow movements of the volcano. Boxes were implanted into the slopes at regular intervals, like the heart rate monitor my mother had to wear to following unknown 'flutters' and a faint feeling. Our guide also had a detector hung around his neck – a mechanical canary to pick up sulphur dioxide levels in the subterranean air. We went down a ladder, deep underground. Inside the artery of a volcano.

The volcano is like a body. It pumps lava throughout its system and breathes in and out through the mouth of a crater. A lava tube is like an artery coming out of the ventricle of a volcanic heart. New arteries form as needed. Layers lie down one upon another. Through this process, new land is formed.

Once inside the lava tube, the walls appeared to be covered in the finest silver latticework, moonlit lace clinging to every surface. Invisible until your headlamp made contact with its contours, a mosaic of mica, the moon, opals and hammered metal. In fact, it was a rare type of bacteria that only lives in several cave environments throughout the world. In the search to understand how chemotherapy could work, these particular bacteria were a critical piece of the puzzle. A most unexpected revelation - to be standing inside of a lava tube on an island 2,500 miles from anywhere else on Earth - and realize these organisms - thriving inside a lava tube - had drastically affected my father's quality of life. I want to call him and tell him - I am standing looking at the cure. Time is so inflexible when someone dies.

Inside the cave are other forms of life, insects so small they look like floating dust in a patch of sunlight. Tiny spiders weave horizontal webs that shiver with your breath. At the tip of each lava stalactite is an amber hue, as when in a molten state, metals are heavier than liquid rock and sink to the bottom of each volcanic finger.

When we entered the lava tube we were told we could not touch any part of it except for the rock floor. Even the natural oils from your fingertips would wipe out the entire bacteria colony.

Kīlauea Iki, Traces of the 1959 Eruption

We started our descent to the crater floor. A steep way down through rock cuts and fan branches. A jumble of lava boulders and fissures. There is nothing human here, no braided ropes of spun obsidian or constructions of cut basalt columns as elegant as Ionic, or Doric. Just rubble, heaps of geological detritus. If you were to dig into the ash, would it open into a lava tube. Scooping out some more, would you reach down back into the magma chamber, below the crust, the plates, down to the core.

Driving up the volcanic ascent of the Chain of Craters Road in reverse, I feel totally emotional. Maybe after being in that place for the first time, seeing that – what the volcano can do. Maybe because time melts in this lava flow and I want to find an imprint from the early living room. Those rainforest branches remind me of the forest which thrived behind the orange leather couch my mother was so proud of, that she bought herself for her first apartment on East 77th street, in the days when that part of town was not THE Upper East Side – a different city. Multiple stabbings at the corner store, Hungarian restaurants on every other corner.

In truth, a New York I miss so much I want to lay down and press my cheek against the sidewalk to make contact (corporeal understanding) but it is gone. I digress. The canopy in the living room was grown from a cutting taken from a plant in my grandfather's apartment on Utica Avenue in Brooklyn. A sharp feeling. A shadow fossil of camping out together in the one room with an air-conditioner, cold noodles with sesame sauce to bring the temperature down on too hot summer days in New York in 1978. This indoor canopy died a few years ago. No one remembered to water the plants in the empty apartment. Soot and dust settled over the room, sifted through the window screens cracked open to let fresh air in. Urban ash fall.

Out on the Lava

Today we would meet the active flow. Ken, the volcanologist, arrived with three volcanology students. We would visit both plumes and explore the active flow areas. We were instructed to have gloves handy, as new flow was pure, brittle, volcanic glass, and would slice your hand open without fail if you stumbled along the way. The plumes were way in the distance, with fields of lava to cross before we met face to face.

We passed the remains of small shacks eaten by the lava flows, corrugated bits of roof and wall left embedded mid flow. The lava was very irregular; surfaces went up and down like broken icebergs in the spring thaw. We passed lava flows, one week, one month, nine months old.

We crossed a river of lava that had only recently stopped gushing. The lava was like burnished brass here. Traces of Pele's hair could be found in shallow fissures of rock made only yesterday, or just before. Even with the knowledge it was glass I could not stop myself from picking up just one strand, like Persephone. A thin glass shard went straight into my fingertip, through my skin, a drop of blood. Pele's tears were at my feet. The sun was strong, very strong and I felt my long sleeves stick to my arms, my back - textile in sweat. We were only a quarter of the way there, and I began to push the idea of sunstroke very far off and away. There was no time, no space for sickness. Only now to meet the lava. My hat clung to my head. Sunscreen was reapplied as thick as paste.

Ken said to be aware certain surfaces might appear solid, but were air-bubbles formed above the flow. Your foot would drop through the crust - but no more than a few feet. The plume in the far distance came into closer focus - you could now describe it in 'blocks' rather than miles away. The volcanology students would stoop and bend down, taking samples of ash and sulphur.

We were near the plume. The ground was hot. The sound was very strong. Like a steam engine mixed with a shrieking wind tunnel or an amplified tea pot hitting boil, a loud hollow sound, an airplane passing directly overhead, an autumn storm. We situated ourselves in a small dip of the cliff face. One volcanology student sat on a perch and looked out at the lava. The two other students were a couple, two girls, very into each other but all quite new. I tried to imagine what it must be like to be in love for the first time, on this volcano. There was one open lava pool. Shocking crimson. Lava moving as if a normal body of water - like the Hudson, only blood red.

Lava bombs flew into the air. We walked through a field of Pele's Hair. To our left was a frozen waterfall. It was as if a switch had been flipped and time stopped. Cascading falls rushing over an old bench stood still. Gulfoss, Godafoss, every waterfall I had even known, but stuck in perpetual free fall. Like dripping candle wax over the edge of an old shoebox. As Mark Twain said, a truly petrified Niagara.

A dream : Two halls, two rooms, two doors, two beds very high off the ground. I am borrowing our dog Maxwell (he died many years ago), even though that is not his name anymore. Back at home – at the apartment on 86th street, the room in double mirror form. There is a stairwell, more like a cliff edge or a chasm, sinking deep between two doors. There is only one way to cross this precipice. The lower landing is a treacherous drop. I have to wade through the hall with Maxwell in my arms in order to keep him, watch him. But how can I hold him and climb down and across the chasm, two dangling chairs of precarious stepping-stones that may become dislodged from this crumbling cliff edge path. Two tall beds to cross - floating in a slow moving flow - and all the while holding Maxwell close. His fur is even more mahogany than I remember. The volcanologists Maurice and Katia Krafft dreamt of kayaking down a river of molten lava.

Field Notes

Lips and eyes burning a little bit today.

You begin to obliterate through the act of watching lava. Each small part that gets made of new rock breaks off a little part of your body. You have no sense of distance, perception of space. Only walking with one foot in front of another. Flashlight over lava. Rough. No idea where you are, what you are travelling over, just motion over rock. In this sense, it is like caving, but strangely outdoors in an expansive space, rather than the interior space of subterranean architecture.

You don't feel like you will stumble and incinerate in a hidden fissure, but instead just break apart into volcanic particles, becoming part of the extended volcano. Part Empedocles.

My sleep was slightly more agitated last night. It is our last day here. Acid edges set in. The trip home is so epic. How will we ever make it all the way there? And the real truth, I don't want to leave here, I am becoming part of the volcano, so how can I be expected to leave? What has passed between us is too physical, too personal. I feel like my arms could fit between the braided channels of lava, that I could spoon into the crushed drapery, in sleep, in the fields.

We stayed in a town called Pahoa. Not long ago, lava from Kiluaea covered the entire neighborhood.

5. Eldfell

Heimaey, Vestmannaeyjar, Iceland. 1973, 2003, 2013, 2020...

I spent my thirtieth birthday with a volcano born the same year. In 2003 I turned 30. To mark this event, I visited the Eldfell volcano on the Icelandic island of Heimaey, celebrating our simultaneous appearance in 1973. A few summers ago, I went back to the island. Standing on the volcano, I thought about how Eldfell and I were almost 40. I wondered about returning to Eldfell when we both turned 50, 60...on. How, while we both share our lifetimes now, that will only continue for a certain amount of time, and then Eldfell will go from a human time scale, 30 years old, 40 years old, to a geological time scale - 150, 1000, 800 hundred million years old. The earth is 4.5 billion years old, give or take a few million years. When I was 30 I found a crystal shard on the slopes of Eldfell. Upon return to the volcano, marking almost a decade more of life, I happened upon agates, which emerged from the 'new lava' in 1973. Not long ago, the Icelandic anthropologist Gisli Pallson got in touch in regards to my work on Eldfell. He was born on Heimaey, and his childhood home was devoured by the lava flow in 1973. He sent me a lava bomb, labeled "still glowing" when it was collected from the volcano on 17 June 1973. Self Portrait as a Lava Bomb...A few years ago, during my first trip to Japan I learned about the existence of Nishinoshima, a young landmass 1000 KM from Tokyo, which is an active volcanic island that formed in 1973. Since that time, I have been obsessed with finding a way to Nishinoshima, to meet this newfound geological cousin. My growing geological family. And necessary. When I went to Eldfell for the first time my father was dying. When I went back ten years later, I was trying to have a child. Now, my mother has dementia.

She's eroding like layers of ash from a new eruption. Never settles, peels off and is gone. Hopefully I will return to Eldfell when we both turn 50. I want to make new introductions too. Nishinoshima – meet Eldfell, Nishimoshima – hajimaymashitay – nice to meet you my volcanic sibling.

6. Aso-San

Kyushu, Japan. March 2014

The story of how I came to Beppu began a long time ago, almost half of my life ago, in New York when I was walking down the street downtown across from Cooper Union near the now unrecognizable Bowery. There was a man selling old books on the sidewalk, laid out on a sheet. One caught my attention, a book called Volcano about volcanoes from around the world. There were volcanoes from Iceland, Hawaii, Italy, Scotland. In retrospect, every project I have ever undertaken can be traced to a picture in this book, but that is a story for another time. It was here, in the book, that I saw Beppu for the first time.

Photographs of children cooking eggs on the streets, steam coming through every crack in the sidewalk and a pool as red as blood found their way into my understanding of what another type of city could be. In New York steam vents erupted at every corner, but these were industrial rather than natural. No matter, I imagined a correlation between my home city and this city of steam. For almost 20 years, I dreamt about Beppu, and then I went.

In Glasgow, I live near a forest of fossilized trees. I am used to extinct volcanoes. In Scotland, hills are volcanic plugs and craters. Former lava flows pave the streets. Island chains erupt, only in silhouette, out of the water. But really, now it only seems like rock. You have to be told Arthur's Seat is a volcano, the Royal Mile a slick lava flow between the castle and another crater. Otherwise it is a hill, another hill, a street.

Aso-San is the largest active caldera on earth, only a few hours by train from Beppu, then a bus to the foot of the volcano. The day I go, I am informed that access to the volcano is shut, poisonous gas and wind going in the wrong direction. Two sides of a volcanic coin - one extinct, one entirely alive. You can be ready to meet the volcano, it doesn't mean the volcano is prepared to meet you. I go anyway, stay at a distance. Watch. Smoke billows in one long continuous stream.

Then, the road to the volcano is opened. The weather has shifted, the air is clear. You will not choke, you can ascend to the crater. You can get a bus up to the top or walk. I walk. I want to walk, I want to meet this volcano from the soles of my feet up. Past vast boulders of tumbled rock, craters so huge they look like valleys, volcano evacuation huts made of cement walls three feet thick, like a fortress, but for protection against this very temperamental mountain. I walk. The smoke continues without pause. Evacuation huts are at regular intervals now, and at the crater, trembling. The sound fills every part of you. Louder than an earthquake, but equally as startling. The walls are almost vertical into the mouth of the crater, and so deep you lose a sense of scale. How is it possible to lead a normal life in a still world, alongside the knowledge that your neighbor, that dinosaur cousin that no one speaks of – the remote world - is right next to you in this continual present. I stay as long as I can manage to be this close to the other side of the volcanic coin, so active, you almost feel extinct.

7. The Center for Short Lived Phenomena

The Global Volcanism Program, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., U.S.A. July 2007

The volcanologist William Melson recorded the sounds of the Arenal volcano erupting for over 40 years. 40 years, longer than most marriages. It was at The Center for Short Lived Phenomena that William Melson explained the nature of love to me, when talking about volcanoes.

He said,

AP: You love what you get to know, what you pay attention to and therefore become more aware of. This is not a passive form of love. This is how I feel about Arenal. Now, after forty years, I don't need to see the volcano to know that I love it, just as I don't need to see my daughters often to know that I love them. Just to know they are there and happy and doing as they should is enough.

8. Sakurajima

Kagoshima, Kyushu, Japan. October 2019

In a waking dream, I try to synchronise my breathing with the smoke pouring out of the volcano. Sakurajima, I can't stop thinking about you. My ribs are opening, my lungs are a thin membrane over the mouth of the volcano. I am breathing with you. I am trying to slow down my breath to dissolve what is you and what is me.

Will I change if I can just let myself be subsumed by the volcano? Not to be incinerated by it, and then part of it through breaking into a million particles (a previous desire) – but just a moving part of this active mountain. This is a change, a differentiation from previous encounters with active volcanoes. My ribs opening like the mouth of the volcano, smoke coming out, breath coming down, smoke coming up, breath coming down.

I will try to describe Sakurajima. First, in a shuttle bus driving up a corkscrew almost vertical road to the top of a hill – like hill top towns in Italy, which also makes sense as the twin city of this active mountain is Naples - with a child's drawing of a volcano - a triangle coming out of water, Vesuvius the most prominent feature in any direction. But this is Japan, southern Kyushu in Kagoshima a city on a bay with Sakurajima - the volcano - so I've been told but haven't seen when coming out of the train station, or in a taxi heading to the hotel, or from our room. We are told there is a volcano, but we haven't seen it yet, so we can pretend this is a normal city, just another urban place. And then we get out of the shuttle bus, and we round the corner and the volcano is shockingly huge.

Not a normal size of big, beyond immense - a triangle with smoke coming out of the top on the right hand side. It's so big it literally fills your peripheral vision - there is nowhere else to look because there is nothing else to see other than this massive, beyond huge, smoking volcano. It is ferocious and constant, and the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. Well, we are all going to die at some point, so if it happens while looking at this, well that's just going to have to be fine - because this - is amazing.

We have come up here as I am taking Alison for a special birthday onsen which overlooks the volcano. Soaking outside in water that is hot and mineral electric, eyes fixed on the horizon line - that is to say fixed only and always on the volcano. Inside is a strange lounge with resting beds, fainting couches - you wash, you soak, you stare at the volcano, you come in to rest, body melts, fall asleep in a public place with a smoking volcano outside, wake, wash, soak and drift off to sleep again, preparing to become part of the volcano.

9. Eruptions

February 16, 2021

Mount Etna began erupting.

Giuseppe Salerno, a volcanologist said, *'We monitor its every breath. You have to imagine this control room like a hospital, with dozens of doctors working for the same patient: Etna...'*

February 24

A swarm of earthquakes began in Iceland – more than 50,000 earthquakes over three weeks, to be exact. Then the eruption began.

March 2

Every day I watch Mount Etna erupting. In Gísli Pálsson's book *Down to Earth* he explains there will be more volcanic eruptions due to climate change. We imagine Earth processes and the weather as separate, but they are deeply connected. As ice caps melt, they don't press down on the Earth's crust anymore in the same way. They are lighter, have more bounce. They are not being held in an even tension anymore, like when your mother cups your forehead in her hand - the perfect and most deeply comforting point of contact and pressure. Where you de-contract and relax. The ice holds the plates in perfect pressure.

They still move and shift as tectonic plates do, but now they are lifting up in the wrong places, unsettling the balance, upsetting the Earth's crust. It becomes agitated and uneasy, moves around, flings its arms and thrashes – earthquakes. Volcanoes are erupting. Mount Etna is erupting. How much movement would it take to open up below the Suidhe? To awaken again with a start - to erupt. I watch Mount Etna from North View. There are rivers of lava. Ash 9 kilometers into the sky, spiraling in a double helix. I want to go. I want to be near Mount Etna. They call her Mamma Etna. My mother is gone. In Rivka Galshen's recent essay in the New Yorker - she said, "*Lately I find myself awake in the middle of the night in a panic – wondering - why am I here? Where are all the people I have known? My mother lives only 2 miles away, but I still sometimes think - where is my mom? Where is my black sheep stuffed animal?*" And this is it. Where is my mom? Who is my family? Can Mamma Etna help me. She can, she can, she can.

March 19, 2020

How do I think about Sakurajima today? What do I remember? We are on a boat, the Cherry Queen, a ferry heading to Sakurajima. It is terrifying and totally life inspiring all at the same time. It's erupting. It's always erupting. We are on the water heading closer and closer to it.

March 19, 2021

The eruption in Iceland has begun. I got a message from Gisli, and a link to the livestream. I started watching. I began recording the eruption over zoom. A meeting with myself, or really – between myself and the volcano – a continual meeting, which goes on pause when I'm out or go to bed. What are you doing today? What are you doing now? This morning? Tonight? Before I go to sleep? Like we are having an affair. I can't keep away. Check and refresh all the time. I'm obsessed. It gives me hope, something amazing can still happen. I send the livestream link to everyone I know. Watch this - it is incredible. This is happening.

I watched scientists cooking sausages on the edge of the lava flow. A shallow pool of lava re-melt itself over and over.

I ache that I can't be there. Sometimes watching from afar reminds me of other recent long-distance aches. I watched a time lapse of the entire hike to the volcano. I sent Adam a screenshot from the livestream of a person in silhouette looking out at the volcano. He said, *let's imagine it's a prediction, that you will be there.*

One night, watching the eruption, snow covered hills surround two bright hot lava eyes staring out of the new crater. Then, someone who looked just like me waved at the camera. How can it be? Am I there, and everything that has happened here can be confined to the realm of waking dreams?

April 1st

Memory is like a volcano. Field diaries - an attempt to imprint experience into something concrete. Memory made palpable. Memories of my mother. She told us - her parents wanted her to go to Brooklyn College to do something sensible, but she hated it, wanted to go to Art School. Dropped out, went to work at a department store called B. Altman, selling gloves to save up money. Put herself through Art School at Pratt. Right out of college she got a job at Pandora designing knitwear. She had her own line - called SNAZZI. The tagline was - it moves. It launched at Max's Kansas City. Her clip book was incredible - Womens Wear Daily, Glamour, Seventeen. She hated sewing, but designed the most amazing clothing. She had a hand knit sweater line in the 80s. She'd sit with a group of women around the dining room table, and they'd knit these gorgeous, strange sweaters - colour block like drawings. She taught me how to crochet. She was so messy, but her closets were immaculate and organised by decade. We were not allowed to touch them. We named our favourite one The Forbidden Closet. Every interesting garment I have, came from her. In high school I worked for her old boss Ike Miller, at Pandora. I got to take home any sample sweaters I liked as a bonus - my favourite was sea foam malachite, an oversized cardigan so soft it felt like perfectly worn flannel sheets.

If I focus on one seam of memory, it's solidifies like taking a core sample at a specific point and place. I can't find my memories of her. I need a task to get them. A field diary of memory. Like William Melson & his volcano - training yourself to pay attention to and therefore become aware of - something you love. And then like a volcano erupting, each thought covers the memory that came before. Each memory a pulse of new lava covering up, slipping away. The eruption in Iceland is composed of lava that has come from deep inside the mantle of the earth, 17 or even 20 kilometers below the surface.

10. This Geological Grief

Around the same time that my mother was diagnosed with dementia, I met with a geologist in Yosemite.

He told me that the Lyell Glacier would likely be completely gone in five years; about the same length of time it could take for my mother's cognition to melt away. The act of geological grieving. I wrote down the phrase BEARING WITNESS and underlined it several times. This is not a passive act, just as grief is not a point of stasis. Physical, corporeal understanding.

Now, I keep writing letter after letter...

Dear Dominic,

Thank you. I'd love to go for a walk at some point soon...I'm taking it day by day here. It's very hard. I miss my mom immensely, and I still can't really make sense of having gone through all of that - on a screen. It's incomprehensible that my family is now one of those families we have all read about during the pandemic, dealing with profound grief and loss in digital form rather than the corporeal understanding we all need within the process of mourning...

Dear E.,

I hope your mother is safe, healthy and well, and I send warmest birthday wishes to her on the occasion of her 95th birthday. I hope that you will be able to be with her again in person. It is too much, this immense ocean. It gets wider every day - as if all landmass was reforming back to its earliest moments, when oceans were far more plentiful than land. Everything and everyone feels so far away...

I find myself in such a complicated grief, the absence of physical understanding is sinking in - that I was not able to be with her, that she is gone when I am still here in my living room, and everything looks the same as when she was 'here' too.

Dear F.,

Here, it has been a complex time. My mother became increasingly unwell during the first lockdown and she passed away at the end of September. I was not able to go over and be with her due to travel restrictions...We were with her on a screen for two weeks while she was dying, a zoom funeral, zoom shiva. In any event, I miss her very much. And digital grief is - a new animal.

Dear G.,

I hope you will not mind my getting in touch. Our discussion in Yosemite has stayed with me, and more recently I have begun thinking about one aspect in particular. When we met, you mentioned that you had been carrying out surveys on the Lyell Glacier over many years, following a long tradition that stretched well over 100 years, of watching and recording any changes in the glacier. I remember you said that due to climate change, rapid changes were now occurring, and that it was possible that the glacier would be completely gone within about five years. At the time, I was very struck by this, as my mother had been diagnosed with dementia just before we met and her doctor gave her a similar prognosis. I wondered at the time, and since, about whether the correlation between my mother and the glacier's situation might allow for a slightly different way to connect to the urgency of climate change.

I have found myself thinking about the Lyell Glacier quite often recently. My mother passed in the Autumn. She did not have Covid, but her health greatly declined due to circumstances around the pandemic. As I have been thinking about my mother, I have also wondered about the Lyell Glacier, and that is why I am now in touch. How is the Lyell Glacier doing? Is it still here? I wonder if you might be able to share some updates with me, if it were not too much trouble?

Letter after letter, each from a slightly different angle. If I say it in the right way, maybe it will start to make sense. Maybe all I am trying to say is - my mother has died. But it's a digital grief, and I keep trying to find the right way to articulate that, to anchor it, to make it - exist. To make it real. To use language to make something which is utterly incomprehensible, real - whether it's a volcano erupting in the middle of the night - or the fact that my mother is gone.

I've mourned in private. I remember the first time I left the house with my siblings after my father died. It felt like the sidewalk was slipping out from under my feet outside West Side Market. Running into people - you practice talking about it. It helps metabolise the grief. A few weeks ago, in the woods walking the dogs - I ran into a neighbour that I don't know very well. She asked if I was ok, that I didn't look myself. I started sobbing and said - my mother died, as if it had just happened. Then I realised, it was 6 months to the day. The next day, flowers and a card appeared on our steps, saying how sorry they were for our loss.

Is that why I am doing this? Telling this story of volcanoes, but really, a story about my mother and how she died. To be able to publicly utter - I am in grief. A strange impulse. But, people used to gather and moan. In an essay on mourning on social media and in ancient Greece, my friend and scholar Laurialan Reitzammer wrote – then, as in many cultures still - public mourning was common. Women sang dirges. There were funeral processions and laments. Public and private grief melded together.

Everything is conflating in my mind, the volcano and my mother. I can't go to Iceland to be with the eruption and I couldn't go to be with my mom.

Then, on March 23rd - a gut feeling - of wanting to make contact with the volcano, even if it can't do it with my own hands. I put out a post asking if anyone I knew was going to the eruption site in Iceland. April 2nd I got a message from an artist named Veronika Geiger. We didn't know each other. She was in Iceland, she was going to the eruption, was there something she could do for me? First, I had been thinking about my old lava stamping implements, then I started thinking maybe we make new conglomerates, composed of very old rocks merged with new lava. Veronika wondered about shells. We decided to try both.

She called me from the volcano over Instagram chat. It was wonderful. And different to the livestream. She was actually there. She turned her camera for me. My eyes through her lens, held in her hand, her feet balanced on sharp rocks and scree. Looking down on the eruption. Closer to the body. Closer to the volcano.

This experience also shifted something very careful inside of me. The quiet fact. The last time I was on this kind of chat - was with my mother.

And now today's experience allowed for something alive - to meet the volcano, and another person. It doesn't undo what I've been through, we've been through - but it does something else.

11.VG: Beautiful Valley of Lava

Fagradalsfjall Volcano - Iceland, 4th of April 2021.

I collected the lava rocks at the edge of the volcano. It was not a good day to be going up there, really. I quickly met the rescue team - Björgunarsveit - who told me to reconsider my walk.

Gasses from the volcano were going in the wrong direction at the eruption site, they informed me, and they told me to stay on the hillside. For a few seconds I considered my options: going back to the car or continuing. I continued. My hands quickly got numb in the cold wind, making me walk faster and more focused. My feet moved forward. One step after the other. Over rugged lava stones and frozen mud paths. Walking up the steepest part of the trail I once again encountered two guys from the rescue team. They warned me about the gas pollution at the volcano. I could already smell it and taste it in my mouth. They looked at me a bit puzzled. They told me the pollution at the volcano was high today and that I should not go close to it on this side. I needed to get on the other side, where the wind would blow the volcanic gas away. I continued.

I met several people. I climbed up the steepest part and felt the joy of moving upwards. The joy of defying gravity! I walked quite far attempting to get away from the gasses. I traversed the path. The path was not really there, but it was a feeling of walking in other people's footsteps. I was on a sort of hillslope. I tried to remember lifting my feet high up as I learned by a geologist walking in the lava fields on Etna. I walked fast and balanced myself with my walking sticks when I stumbled. My legs were sore, but I didn't mind. Stopping to look at the volcano more carefully I observed that the activity in the newly formed vents were not as intense as on my visit yesterday. I walked a bit more, eyeing the fire fountain, aiming to turn the next corner, as to be safe from the fumes.

It was already better now. I didn't smell the gasses anymore, I only saw them at a distance. I decided to climb down the slope a tiny bit. I was almost at the edge of the lava field now and settled for a bit at a large boulder. It looked stable, but a new lava field can alter rapidly. I took a rest, but not for too long remembering that the gasses are heavier than air. The big boulder was slightly bluish on the surface. The ground was nice and warm. I picked up stones from the ground. Heat emitted in my face, when I removed them. I'm not sure for how long I stayed. I think I lost my sense of time. The new lava field enveloped me in its heat.

12. The Library

There are many rocks and minerals in the exhibition at Mount Stuart, and two of them are new born rocks from the current eruption in Iceland – now named - the Beautiful Valley of Lava. Working with them, and with all of the work this spring, has felt like a process of coming back to life.

My mother never went to a single volcano. At least not knowingly, she must have been near one in Mexico City, when she went with her friend Maddy, many years before I was born. Even as I say that, I realise it's not true. I moved across the ocean to Glasgow in 1998.

One week after I arrived I turned 25. My parents came over for my birthday, and it was the only time we were ever all together in Scotland - though they had been here before, in Edinburgh when my mother was pregnant with my older sibling Samara. A few years ago, my mother left out a stack of photographs on the kitchen table. In one, she is standing, leaning against a gate behind the castle, where the road winds downhill. Her hair is long and she is in a beautiful sharp cut raincoat. It takes me a while to understand the picture. It looks like a photograph of me, leaning against a gate, uphill from Alison's office, under the volcano. I have been here before. We both have.

AP: All of the rocky and metallic material we stand on, the iron in our blood, the calcium in our teeth, the carbon in our genes were produced billions of years ago in the interior of a red giant star. We are made of star-stuff.
– Carl Sagan, 1973

My mother wrote a poem in 2008.

Lava—lavare—to wash, from the Latin...

My daughter is fascinated, perhaps even obsessed, visiting, celebrating her 30th birthday atop one born in 1973, the year of her birth, but mostly writing, drawing, photographing, from the distance of time.

In Iceland, they've just announced that the amount of lava that has come out of the new volcano would be enough to build a wall 1 meter high and 1 meter wide around the whole world. But we don't want to build walls, we want to tear them down. We should take lessons from landmass - even our metaphors are wrong. Why the volume of a wall? Why not instead - of a river - which could encircle the Earth and keep changing its path, like the river of lava which now refuses to stay in the valley and instead is making its way down a mountain and across fields, on a steady trajectory to go across the highway, and straight into the sea. To form new land or maybe to keep travelling. To cross the ocean and make a bridge which momentarily connects us, before it erodes back into the sea again, and then it's up to us.

Now, in trying to imagine what this time is, I would like to propose something else. One of the three standing stones under the shadow of the Suidhe, along the path from Kilchattan Bay, is made of red sandstone conglomerate. A conglomerate is a sedimentary rock composed of many different kinds of rocks naturally bound together.

A family, just like a rock, can be composed of many parts. The standing stone is a large stone and looks like it may have come from an outcrop at the far beach in Stravannan Bay. It must have taken many hands together to bring it to its current place. Today, we are part of another conglomerate, intrinsically bound together by the virus. Invisible glue, holding everyone together in a shared catastrophe. In thinking about this moment, I would like to imagine that - no matter where across the surface of the Earth you may be - we are also all part of an international conglomerate, a conglomerate family, held together by feeling and by love. And with that, I would like to ask all of you to raise a glass and say L'CHAIM - to life.