

# FOSSIL

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A palaeontologist told me a fossil is the presentation of the moment of death. However, trace fossils record an action – eating, walking, breathing, but not the organism itself. A record of life. We are autobiographical trace fossils.

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

*The Hall of Gems and Minerals*

I grew up a few blocks from the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. My sisters and I would play in the Hall of the Great Whale, seeing who could stand under the tip of the whale's nose for as long as possible without running away. But mostly, we played hide and seek in the Hall of Minerals and Gems. We slid down huge chunks of Jasper, lay on our backs next to monoliths of copper. We thought we were so tough, running around the dark lit passageways of diamonds and petrified trees. We didn't know that in 1976 – following a huge heist by some boys from Florida who broke into the museum in 1964 and stole 24 gems including the Star of India, the world's largest Sapphire – the hall had just been redeveloped to mimic the interior of a cave. The hall was designed to make you want to explore. In an article I found about the reopening of Gems and Minerals, they said they wanted people to touch these specimens, put their arms around them, fall in love with them. And I did. On October 26, 2017 (Alison's birthday), with just 12 days notice, the Hall of Gems and Minerals was closed for a complete and total renovation. Online are renderings for the new plans. Soon it will look like an Apple Store. All around the city, an outpouring of grief followed the announcement. I was inconsolable. I couldn't think of anything else. I did not get to say goodbye. To put it simply, I loved the Hall more than anywhere

else on Earth. We were in the process of clearing out the apartment I had known my whole life. A time capsule with a locked door, unchanged since 1971. A glacial moraine of accumulated objects. Domestic Deep Time.

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. I got in touch with a friend to see if we could salvage something from the Hall of Minerals and Gems. Anything – a piece of carpet from the 1976 ziggurats, a letter prised off the wall, an information panel – anything. We were told it was impossible. Some months later, I got a message. Someone had a panel for me, from a Hall of Gems and Minerals, which no longer exists. A material witness. It is from a display on diamonds, though I prefer mica – a more faultless mineral worth almost nothing, but sparkling everywhere. I cannot confirm where the panel came from, as it was given to me on trust. All I will say is it is from a place I loved – and I will miss this place.

## *Volcanoes and Fossils*

Geology is a borscht belt romance, with its lava beds, and pillows of lava, its volcanic dykes and multiple orogenies. There is a 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 downstairs 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.

I read an article that said dementia brings out the true character of a family. If a family is healthy, the family will grieve for the family member who has dementia, but they will be able to support one another, and find a way through. The unit will not self destruct. Whereas in a family that is unwell, has deep conflicts or problems, the dementia reveals every crack and the chasms grow deeper,

a parallel process of erosion akin to the evolving cliff edges of the dementia itself. The family will crumble and most usually collapse.

Since March 26, 2020 when lockdown in Scotland 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.

Over the last few months, I have been keeping a field diary of another sort. An accumulation of daily trace fossils. Field Diary (Covid). These twin accounts seem to coexist. It goes like this. Covid alongside dementia. Volcanoes alongside fossils. I will try to put them both together.

## Volcano

*Stromboli, Aeolian Islands, Sicily. June 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.

*Oh god! Oh god!* she says,

falling to her knees atop the volcano.

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, I’ve never been so hot

in my life. 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 can't go on ... I resist, I give up.*

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.

## Fossil

*April 16, 2020 (in the morning)*

Here is the truth, I don't know how to think anymore. I don't know what to do anymore. I just don't. When I was little I would practice what to do when the Nazis came to get us. I spent hours, over and over, going through the motions of where and how to hide at the back of the closet, so they wouldn't find me. I would plan for what I needed to live in the back of the closet, assessed locations, and decided the optimum position for safety was behind the large square hanging box which held my mother's wedding dress, as you could not easily move or see around it. Later in that same crawlspace, surrounded by the edges of dresses, skirts, shirtsleeves skimming across my face, a soft cascade, like passing under new boughs of leaves hanging from willow trees. I returned to prepare for imminent nuclear holocaust. Now I wonder, did preparing for the worst, for impending catastrophes, help to prepare me for now? Inside, only able to focus on shoring up supplies.

How to talk about art in the face of needless death? Why talk about art at all. All I can do is cook. I have a vague memory of the world before.

Finishing work, getting ready to install. But the last piece I made before we began to completely self quarantine – when my throat was on fire, my ear hurt like a burrowing infection into my skull, and I couldn't stop coughing – was an eroded red brick encrusted in a new layer of limestone that I was sanding and polishing back. But I had to stop. The red was coming through the bone white calcium carbonate stone deposit, and it felt like I was scraping layers of muscle away. Making a brick, which now looks like a bone, bleed. I had to stop, as right now I can't evoke, even visually, physical fragile bodies, remains of bodies. When morgues in New York are too full, when parks have become temporary graves. I don't want to make work that looks like a bruise coming through to the surface of the skin. Maybe later, when we have to account for everyone who has died. Then maybe, but not now.

Do we carry the epigenetics of mountains, tearing apart and crashing back together? Do I carry the terrors of previous catastrophe? Do I inherit geothermal desire not only from my grandmother, who was born and lived until she was six in Druskininkai, a mineral rich thermal town in Lithuania – but from the geothermal landscape itself? Epi-genetic memories of landmass – what would that mean? Fleeing during a round of pogroms, and a hunt for the whole

family as a relative supposedly was part of a failed assassination attempt to kill the Tzar. Do I have epi-genetic memories of the Aquitania, the Ship Beautiful, built on the River Clyde in Glasgow and later, the ship which took my relatives across the ocean to New York? Is that why or how I ended up in Glasgow? Back to a point of origin, back across the ocean.

I heard of one carer going house-to-house, who didn't know they were positive. All five people they went to help have died.

What are the epi-genetics of mountains?

*April 20, 2020 (in the afternoon)*

A message from my mother's carers. Today my mother forgot how to stand. She forgot to get ready for bed. She forgot to move. She sat up all night until the morning on the couch with all the lights on. Something is very wrong. A light fever. An accident. In the middle of a lockdown.

*April 20, 2020 (later that day)*

There are tragedies inside of tragedies. (Underneath this note: IV fluids, ER day trip, renal function compromised, elevated levels of infection, pros and cons of support – evening team – more people coming and going. How many? Risk.)

I still can't think. I circle things. Literally, I walk around the house. I walk around the garden. I sit in one place. I get up, go inside. Sit down to 'work', no chance of that as nothing to do. Think, think again, get angry. No idea how my mother is doing. Think, don't get angry, do something else. Try. But the trying is extremely limited. Send a brief email, get a reply, not have the energy to write back. Is this what depression looks like, feels like, is like?

Today we saw an old man jumping up and down outside the care home one block from our house. He was in his 70s and was trying to find a room from outside the building instead of from inside. He was waving at a woman on the first floor who was seated by the window. I couldn't see her face only her hands gesturing back and forth. She looked frail. He was trying to get her to go on the phone, he kept waving at her from the street. She could see him outside. Just before we saw them