

## Introduction

My submission for the 2019 Book of the Year Contest is a creative non-fiction piece called “Volcano.” It takes place on the island of Hokkaido, Japan, on my birthday several years ago. I was staying near a town named Biei, and I was an alcoholic at the time. Biei and its surrounding countryside, while very picturesque, are overshadowed by Mt. Tokachi, an active stratovolcano and one of the so-called “100 Famous Mountains of Japan.” Reading Michael Crummey’s *Sweetland* helped shape this story, with its depiction of human drama playing out against nature’s inescapable power. I was inspired by the novel’s themes of impermanence, mortality, and solitude, particularly in the second half, “The Keeper’s House.”

## Volcano

The morning of my birthday that year I walked out of an *onsen* hotel in northern Japan, unsure of what to do with the day ahead. It was May, sunny but early in the season, and there wasn't much happening at the hot springs: a couple of half-empty hotels, a waterfall I'd looked at the day before, a hiking trail to nearby Mt. Tokachi still knee-deep in snow. Wanting a drink anyway, I decided to head into town. As I waited at the bus stop, I watched plumes of smoke rise from a crater near the snowy peak. The crater was formed during the last major eruption, on Christmas Day in 1988. I only read about this later on. All I knew at the time was that I'd never been so close to disaster in all my life.

The bus ride took most of an hour and did nothing for my headache or the metallic taste rising in the back of my mouth. The bus was almost empty; the only other passengers were local elderly women heading in to shop. I got off near the stone building of the train station. Nearby was a shop that I'd noticed the day before, where a line of grey, unadorned rental bikes stood in front of the window. I went inside. The proprietor was busy explaining something in English to a couple that looked Filipino. As I waited to ask about the bikes, I browsed a rack of tourist pamphlets. I found something on the volcano, but before I could read much of it I knew that I was going to have to throw up at some point.

The bathroom at the back was unoccupied. I locked the door behind me, ran water in the sink, and flushed the toilet as I pushed two fingers into the back of my mouth. It was over quickly, and I felt lighter. I cleaned up the rim of the bowl, rinsed my mouth, and took a few deep breaths to calm myself. When I stepped back into the shop, no one looked up.

The bike was a thousand yen for the day. About \$10. The shopkeeper spread out a copy of a hand-drawn tourist map of the roads north of town and circled in pencil some landmarks.

Before I left I paused in front of the beer cooler. I bought a large can of Asahi Super Dry, which I wrapped in my sweater and placed in the handlebar basket along with the map and some pamphlets. Then I rode through the town, already busy with traffic, and out into the surrounding countryside, where I balanced on the thin shoulders of two-lane roads that hummed with snub-nosed work trucks.

I had no direction in mind, and I hardly looked at the map. The idea was to get lost, I suppose, to find somewhere I could sit and drink in peace. I chanced upon one of the landmarks the shopkeeper had circled. It was a lone oak beside the road, something called Seven Stars Tree. This was no ordinary oak tree, though. A nearby sign said this tree was famous in Japan because in the 70s a picture of it appeared on some cigarette packaging. And years later when I looked it up, TripAdvisor said it was #14 of 42 things to do in Biei. But on this weekday morning there was no one else around. I studied the tree from a nearby bench as I drank my beer, my head no longer hurting. The tree was pleasingly asymmetrical, I guess, like a girl in third arabesque or perhaps a girl reaching for something on a shelf. Of course the point wasn't so much the tree but the sweep of patchwork fields behind it, rolling up to the blue and white mountains where I had just been. I could still pick out Mt. Tokachi, though from this hazy distance I couldn't see it smoking.

I rode on, aimlessly, turning right or left on a whim at most of the crossroads I came to. I saw the Filipinos from before, and a handful of other people on bikes, and plenty of local traffic passing by. A lot went through my head. Just like that, I was 35. I'd been in East Asia almost seven years by then, somewhere between living and travelling, and I could feel I was approaching a different crossroads, where I'd have to decide which it was going to be.

Around noon I stopped at a pyramid-shaped observatory on top of a low hill. A row of

shops lined the access road. They sold souvenirs, photographic prints of mountains and lavender fields, local produce, watery coffee, lavender ice cream, fried potato, corn on the cob. I bought another can of Asahi and went up to the observatory deck. It was empty, with more of the same scenery. Everywhere you turned, the fields, the town, the hills and mountains. It was hard to imagine it ever being anything else, yet a large signboard reminded me in Japanese and English that this land was built of fire, a massive pyroclastic flow 1.9 million years ago that destroyed everything in its path and left the fertile volcanic soil that would in turn make life here viable. As I drank my beer I thought about the implication. That all this would be destroyed, in time. And that something unknowable would rise in its place.

Other people trickled up to the observation deck. A blonde woman approached and asked me in a Slavic accent if I knew where some place or other was. I didn't. We stared at my tourist map, though neither of us could make much sense of it. Then we stared across fields that in a few weeks would be coloured lavender and wildflower but for now were just green and shades of dirt. We stared at the line of snowy mountains where a volcano waited to explode. And she might as well have said, "This is solitude," or she might have said, "This is loneliness," or I could have said one or the other thing in that moment. But neither of us said anything, and I only thought of it later.

Later, I rode further and further down unused roads lined with oak and pine and birch and maple, until I was lost in a river valley where the mountains could no longer be seen and the heat hung low and the ditch bottoms were tangled with undergrowth. In a storm sewer near a crossroads I found a bloated tabby lying on its side, flies circling above it, the taste of putrefaction turning me away.

Scattered along the river was a village. I leaned my bike against the wall of a shop

attached to a house and went inside. The store part was dimly lit and empty, though a TV chattered through a closed door leading into the house. I took another Asahi from the coolers and waited, and when no one came I left some coins next to the register and went out.

I was alone. I crossed the road and entered a small park with a rough-hewn gazebo and a couple of old tombstones. I clambered through the trees along the park's edge, down onto the river bank, where I sat in the long grass and drank, a warm and welcome pressure building behind my eyes. I might have thought about the day ahead, and all the days after. Or maybe I thought about the disaster that was coming, and what I would look like after. Or maybe I thought of nothing. That's all there is in the memory of a place. Just the water slipping away again and again, and the air scented with dying shadows that fold and collapse into themselves and then grow again on another side.