



POEM

## The Volcanology of Bulimia

Rebecca Egan

### Abstract

This poem explores the the purpose behind the author's (dis)ordered eating and how it developed as a survival mechanism for childhood sexual abuse. It also speaks to the harm and misunderstanding of psychiatry and other medical professions in responding to (dis)ordered eating, and how fatphobia is rampant in many of these responses. It draws on the knowledge that we respond to traumatic adversity with wisdom and expertise, despite the common misconception that (dis)ordered eating is an entirely maladaptive response.

### Keywords

Eating disorders; poetry; lived experience; mad studies; sexual abuse; epistemic injustice; iatrogenic harm; critical eating dis/order studies

### History

Received 25 July 2024  
Accepted 15 Aug 2024

---

I think volcanos have bulimia.  
Look at the lava, revelling in regurgitation.  
She has stuffed herself  
bursting. Innards thrust throat-first  
with a sharp  
spasm. No time  
for shame. Just give in to  
the outburst.

Tectonic plates are splintering like the rough  
of my finger  
tips and there is a rupture in the crust  
of me. But the food. Oh, the  
food. Up it rises from the guts  
of me with my hips hinged forward over  
porcelain. It all comes back in the order  
of consumption. Cauliflower, butter  
beans, blue corn  
chips. The colour marker. The sign it's all  
over now. You can stop.

A volcanic winter means famine before  
the feast. When I am not erupting, I am

an empty thing. My stomach as a  
beggar. Palms pressed together, all  
my shivering kneecaps. If only God  
took baptisms in toilet water. Wiped off  
the bile and washed my puke  
soaked cheek.

Did you know that most volcanos  
have burrowed under water  
and ice? Thrashing in the deep  
sea, screaming "help!" Like a magma  
chamber below the surface, I choke  
myself silent. Fingers stuck  
down the throat, blocking the  
scream but not the ache.

I yearn for a time when my hands were clean.

The doctors don't think girls  
should be volcanoes. They think they  
are keeping me from the Gods with their  
little pills. A crime for a girl not to  
swallow. They think they are  
taking the pebbles from my pockets  
before I dive into open  
water. I let them believe  
they are right and then make a river  
of my oesophagus.

I must perform the rituals. The rituals  
make the doctors look at me as if  
I am no longer a person, but a thing  
to perform medicine on. A candidate  
for pharmaceuticals.  
Psychiatry is not like volcanology.  
I am not determined worthy  
in my natural state. But God I am  
determined.

When lava drips out the gaping  
mouth of a volcano, minerals are  
vomited out. I am hooked up to the machine,  
potassium pushed back into my veins.  
The nurses say "tsk, tsk"  
when I turn away from the apple  
juice. The doctor says, "You're a bit too

big to have an eating disorder". They would never say this about Popocatépetl, whose size is praised.

This is where the metaphor fails. Because I am fat. And fat girls are considered a sore thing for the eyes. Unnatural. Fat is the spit up that purging sprints away from, but too slowly. Fat is the doctor taking the life threatening and calling it a diet. Fat is callousing of your first two knuckles and the blood vessels of your right eye bursting and hypokalaemia and syncope on standing.

I don't dare say: this is my road map for transversing through a life time - that with my fingers down my choked throat I can halt the creep of memory. With each heave his hands draw away and my dress stitches its return down my thighs. The itchy blanket unfolds and I watch as a hymen knits herself back together. When my stomach contents disappear, I follow into the black. Numb with the slowing of my pulse. I am no longer four and forgetting how to breathe. Do volcanoes feel relief when the eruption is over?

This is not disorder. This is simply street smarts. Here survival is dragging the pillars that make up the house of you and laying them down to live across the road from the volcano.