

Regional Echoes

Mountains by Josephine Winter

In the distance here in Central Victoria, in every direction, there are hills and mountains. Some as bare and as brown as baked loaves, some woolly with blue-green forest. Many of these are volcanoes – dormant, it seems, not extinct. Turns out there's no such thing as an extinct volcano, not entirely.

Even from a long way away, most of the ones around here are distinct enough to navigate by: the two distinct humps of mounts Buninyong and Warrenheip point the way to Ballarat, from anywhere in the district, and even beyond: they come into view even as you drive back up from the coast.

Easily seen from here are the Pyrenees ranges, the very start of the Great Dividing Range and the vista that greets anyone who looks out of my Grandmother's kitchen window. These mountains waver blue-green in the hot summer sun, and sometimes sleep under a dusting of snow in the wintertime, and their heights and crevices are home to waterfalls, to eagles' nests and to secret, hidden valleys of rare native orchids.

When I see the Pyrenees I'm reminded of my Granny, and of the large slice of my young life I was lucky enough to spend visiting with her and the rest of my large family, in a house where there was always something in the pot for anyone who came along around dinner time, and a warm fire and a cup of tea not far away.

Down the road at Clunes, you can easily spot Mount Beckworth by its "lollipop tree" – a cypress pine over a century old, planted at the end of the first world war, then used for bombing practice by the RAAF during world war two.

Nearby, Mount Bolton was once used as a hideout by some of the bushranger Captain Moonlight's men. It's all sheer rock faces amidst thick bushland, and its summit has a clear view of what would have been the coach road for miles in each direction. Today, it looks out across sheep grazing and wind turbines in the distance.

Near Daylesford is Mount Franklin – Lalgambook, the celestial emu's nest to the Dja Dja Wurrung people. It is a breached scoria volcano, so high storms will sometimes disperse and move around it to drench the native bushland and hawthorn-hedged laneways of the surrounding lowlands. For the last forty years, members of Australia's Pagan community – witches and occultists, pagans and heathens and druids - have gathered there at a certain time of year, to celebrate, to share food and fireside, and to enjoy one another's company.

From Franklin you can see to Mount Alexander, *Lanjanuc*, between Castlemaine and Bendigo. It lies long and heavy like a sleeping giant, with orchards and secret oak groves nestled amidst its foothills, was a valued vantage point for the Jaara Jaara people for thousands of years.

A few minutes' drive from us is Mount Kooroocheang, just one of the volcanoes dotted across the plains around here. Kooroocheang is especially formidable-looking: it was one of the largest eruption points in the district. The twisty-turny back road to Castlemaine gives a spectacular view of Kooroocheang: driving that way you can sometimes see hanggliders or light planes making the most of the mountain's high summit and the big, big sky beyond.

As I write this, we're coming up on the Winter Solstice. Plans are afoot for a bonfire with my family and friends, here in this place amidst mountains, where volcanoes are only ever sleeping. After the chaos that was 2020, we'll have a get together - witches and occultists, pagans and heathens and druids - to celebrate, to share food and fireside, and to enjoy one another's company.

And because of who I am, and because of the Pyrenees ranges in the distance, there will be something in the pot for anyone who comes along around dinner time, and a warm fire and a cup of tea not far away.