

# On a Tentative Shore

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley

The warm coffee-ground sand gives under my feet. I sink to the ankle with each step; my legs protest the difficulty. I continue scanning the black beach, searching. For exactly what, I do not know. The sand, liberally studded with peanut-sized tephra, invades my boots. I stop and begin untying them, intending to shake them out so that I might proceed less painfully. I look up and there it is, right in front of me, as if it knew I would find it.

A small blue glass globe lies on the sand where last night's high tide has left it. Its colony of barnacles is tightly closed, expecting another high tide to take their floating home out to the cold wet sea again, where proper barnacles belong. It will not be so. I pick up the glass globe and examine it. With my knife, I scrape the barnacles off. It gleams dully in the sunlight.

This little orb once buoyed a fishing net, survived storms and currents and the violent surf of this island. Its travels are nearly finished; soon it will rest on a shelf in my study. Perhaps it will still be on that shelf when this beach is no more, when the island is gone and the Pacific washes deep over its shattered bedrock roots. The peaceful place will not always be peaceful, or even a place.

Iwo Jima was discovered in 1779 by the British Captains Gore and King, who were in command of the two ships of Captain James Cook's last expedition after that famous explorer was killed in Hawaii. They noted that the island stank of sulfur and logically enough named it Sulfur Island, which is what Iwo Jima means in Japanese.

Japan claimed the uninhabited eight-kilometer speck in the late 19th century, making it a part of greater Tokyo, which it is to this day. No other metropolis can lay claim such a suburb, a rumbling, steaming glob of congealed lava over a

thousand miles distant from downtown traffic jams. For a while, the remote island boasted five small villages, all devoted to growing sugar cane, fruit and medicinal plants.

World War II ended that gentle existence. The island became a savage battleground in early 1945, and since has been a base for patrol and rescue aircraft. A radio navigation beacon transmitting facility shares the island. It is a somnolent warp in hustling modern reality, a backwater. Time moves slowly. The frothing waves sweep up the black beaches and down again in their ordained rhythm. The appearance, however, is deceiving.

Iwo Jima sits atop a growing bulge of magma. It has risen more than seven meters since 1945. It leaks bitter steam and fumes of sulfur. The ground is hot, the caves underground even hotter. Earthquakes rumble. Some volcanologists say that within the next 50 years, this small island will disappear, blown into ash and smoke in an eruption like the one that evaporated the Indonesian island of Krakatau in 1883.

I put the glass float in my shoulder bag and continue on toward the conical crater at the south end of the island. This is, I am thinking, a shoreline of *terra* very much *infirma*. The little blue glass orb will likely outlast this place. Iwo Jima will be a mere moment in its past, like the barnacles. And like myself.

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