

Sifting Through the Ash: Cheryl J. Fish's *Crater & Tower*

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In 2001, [Cheryl J. Fish](#) watched in shock as planes collided with the World Trade Center. She witnessed the plume, the fire, the buckling buildings. The diving bodies. She breathed in the ash. Nineteen years later, striving to reconcile, Fish parses her trauma on the page: “All the ash of my life smudges the margins of this page,” she writes. The result is her stunning collection *Crater And Tower*.

The events of that day and the days that followed marked a turning point in Fish's life and the lives of her fellow New Yorkers, clear as any epochal striation in a geologic record. The truth is, we are shaped in ways similar to tectonics. Trauma moves and morphs the human landscape as tectonics shift earth, always slowly pushing, pulling, sometimes explosively and dramatically breaking ground. The sudden forming of rift or ridge in the human experience determining what grows next and how. Cheryl Fish starts here and pulls the thread, determined to heal from her own PTSD and to make sense, on a grander scale, of the trauma wrought on her community. So it was that Fish traveled from New York City to the wilderness on the West Coast—to make sense of the trauma that shaped her life and her city.

Every five years, the Mount St. Helens Institute hosts a gathering of scientists to share stories and carry out research. In 2010, 30 years after the eruption and almost a decade post-9/11, Cheryl Fish was one of ten writers who joined the cohort in the “blast zone,” adding an artistic dimension to the scientific fieldwork. Pieces from those writers, including some poems from Fish's collection, have appeared in *Terrain.org* and other outlets.

For Fish there was a lot to learn from studying the aftermath and succession in the blast zone. She found communion with scorched Douglas fir and took instruction from speleologists. In studying the Mount St. Helens eruption, Fish discovered an inroad to her own grief and trauma. “The charred and beautiful post-eruption landscapes, the idea of ‘succession’ from scientists, geological events like toxic particles lodged in our bodies. Only later would I consider smoke and ash at both places, fragments of bone and rock, shock and death, the interplay between ‘natural’ and ‘manmade’ disasters, the forces of commerce and politics commodifying loss,” Fish writes.

In the decade following her time at Mount St. Helens, Fish immersed herself in writing, an act akin to sifting through the ash, nearly ceremonial in its intent to reconcile. From this ash she excavated stories and spirits and gleaned instruction on how to go on.

Fish rightly labels her collection a “multi-verse.” There are poems that stir, causing one to seethe like the great smoking mountain. Poems that perceive the undercurrents of a moment as well as any seismograph can detect the subtle creeping of continental plates. Poems that quiet and calm. And poems that remind us that life continues, in ways right and wrong, ways that resolve and ways that distract. This haunting multi-verse allows us to make room for all of these realities at once.

The poems of *Crater & Tower* are arranged in four distinct sections. The opening section, *Rock that Vortex*, calls us to question exactly how a disaster is measured. It is here that she proves a poet’s worth in a blast zone. She makes it clear that the depth and range of pyroclastic flows and the rate of regrowth are not the only ways to know eruption and aftermath.

We open on the rim of the Mount St. Helens crater. Hula hooping. The image is centripetal, hypnotic, setting up a trance at the outset of this collection that will follow through to the end, “East to west, low to high / I kept it spinning, it spun me.” The movement is reminiscent of the vortex of trauma, so simply capturing the breadth and pervasiveness of deep emotional unrest.

In the poems that follow, the trance of the hula hoop oscillates our focus between Mount St. Helens and the terrorist attacks of 9/11, sometimes even seeing both at once in a turn of phrase that is equal parts poetry and magic:

Species return, some new to the
Cascade plain where forest had been.
We still live with the embers.
What about a simple memorial?
A national monument for all who pray or cry.
Volcanic insides expose hot air.
Who may speak of rebuilding?
Light hits the pit where rubble lingers:
I hear something.

In her second section, *Ash for Cash*, Fish applies a wider lens, rightly and poignantly positioning these disasters in an era of rampant capitalism. Capitalism, itself a vortex that holds us in our trauma and commodifies our losses, effectively kicking up the dust that naturally wants to settle, making it so challenging to reconcile.

This section churns with conflict, conjuring the haunt that arises from building on hallowed ground:

The new tower named “freedom,”
belongs to developers and feds. In exchange for the right to shop,
pay taxes, go to war, and remain flagrant targets. Where shall they keep remains?
Spirits can’t rest.

Living through and analyzing the trauma of post-9/11 New York, Fish is able to give voice to an evolution of the human/nature dichotomy. Viscerally, she colors it here as a tension between that which is of a natural order, and that which is bred from commerce and development:

They found bones a few blocks from the Twin Towers
ore than 10 years after the attack. Between the cracks as they demolished
old scaffolding

for multimillion-dollar condos they excavated a skull, a tibia
what might have been a jaw. Whose brother or mother?

Concern floats for a millisecond whispers between lovers' despair.
Where is sunlight going to go?

"You mourn, we own," said the developer.

This novel framework sheds light on how estrangement and distraction from natural tendencies can keep trauma, anxiety, and unrest alive and well in individuals and communities alike.

Fish's penultimate section *Off-side* is a quiet and moving acknowledgement that life carries on regardless of whether we've healed. "If there's loss take to the real," Fish begins her poem "Stand Clear of the Closing Doors," and that is precisely what we do in this section. We take to the real, the daily. In these poems we accompany Fish through day-to-day moments which, while mundane, are lived in the shadow of her trauma: her son's soccer game, sitting in New York traffic, waning friendships, romantic fantasy. We are reminded that while we seem to move on, the vortex of trauma keeps its hold:

Thank heavens "Shark Week"
Has come and gone.

It's always Shark Week.

Having lain the groundwork and mapped the terrain of cataclysm, natural and commercial, east and west, Fish digs in with her final section of poems, *Post-Traumatic Posts*. These poems call up lessons from Mount St. Helens and forge paths toward reconciliation in a modern, post-industrial world.

In the opening poem of this section, "Cave Explorers Request Permission to Enter the Red Zone," Fish turns to speleologists in the red zone of the Mount St. Helens eruption. What they do in the depths of rock, we may do in the depths of the human experience so shifted by PTSD:

We crave crystalline.
Outside, fresh growth on conifers
Elk tracks elegant.

We enter openings, porous hands. We're almost home.

From those intrepid explorers, Fish garners the courage to enter the depths that trauma has burrowed in her community. The ensuing poems break down supposed progress and see behind the thin veil of safety and normalcy offered by a modern life:

In my mind's mind
 we could bake casseroles for hook-and-ladder crews
 But the bathtub where we submerged our skin

And embers sitting in a barge down the block.

Who got sick? Who flew?
Eyes and minds and years of hell

 Proved SAFE

Already always misstated (UNTRUE).

Throughout, Fish poses questions: "Does the dust ever wash off?" "Do images disappear?" "How and when can we reconcile?" Taken as a collection, *Crater & Tower* makes space for some answers to arise. While we may always smudge the margins of our page with the ash of our lives, Fish proves that there is solace in learning from the land even in the most urban expanses:

the island

the river

the sky

always with us

after

all

other

signs.