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Book Review: *Crater and Tower* (2025) by Cheryl J. Fish

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A still — Volcano — Life —
That flickered in the night —
When it was dark enough to do
Without erasing sight — (Dickinson 1-4)

Volcanoes and wars are notorious for causing the wreckage of rubble: be it tephra ejected during volcanic eruptions or broken pieces of bricks and concrete from buildings destroyed by wars. There is a deep connection between fire and rubble. The rubble is often produced through fire at the site of destruction. When put together or analysed in parts and dust, could we decipher what stories of rebuilding and regeneration rubble can tell? How do narratives unfold through the porous debris of rubble? If matters could speak in anthropomorphic languages, could we unravel the degree of wounds they carry and inflict? When disasters fall, our psyche might often desire transcendence and seek *deus ex machina* to solve things for us. When bodily entanglement seems unbearably toxic, it seems easier for us to look at the sky and calm our minds, hoping that some unseen power would elevate us from things that are suffocating us.

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Yet, looking into aspects of various wars and different natural disasters, the sky has never been the space through which we can ask for safety. Nor could such strict and absolute transcendental bypassing ripped off from the material world always relieve us from toxicities we are entangled with. Cheryl J. Fish's poetic work *Crater and Tower* is not seeking healing through that sort of transcendence. Rather, her focus is more on the recognition and understanding of traumatic memories and experiences. If the towers are hit by the planes from beyond the sky, the crater brings out fire and rage from within the ground to the extent that we experience and feel uncertainties leading us to question our realities. Interestingly, volcanic rocks and debris of buildings are not always signifiers of ending. It is often a precursor to a new beginning. So, if fire can rupture and cause destruction, it can also spark *Promethean* desire for life.

> Use ash to build dikes along the rivers. Make concrete of pumice and sand.
> Ash can be like pet rocks new collectible. (46)

There is a deep relation between volcanic rock and the construction industry. Ancient Romans used volcanic ash to make buildings. The rebuilding looks great as long as the process weaves the narrative of regeneration while being aware of the nature of wounds. Otherwise, it could backfire into inciting traumatic experiences more deeply. In addition to this, the space where the disastrous event occurs often sparks many questions for scrutiny. Does the trauma arise from our sense of guilt when we attempt to leave and flee from the scene where the incident takes place, or does it derive from our failure to escape the space while living through and experiencing the wreckage all the way without being able to reverse or change the situations we did (not) choose for ourselves? I feel it stems from our sense of not being able to process vulnerabilities and uncertainties. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth focused on how the etymological meaning of trauma shifted from physical wound to psychological wound. (3) However, post-dualistic ethics critiques and challenges the anthropocentric desire to separate the body from the psyche. Whatever affects the body also affects the psyche and vice versa. Our bodies are porous and may often be vulnerable to toxins, nutrients, etc. in a shared environment entangled with the more-than-human world. (see Nayar) Thus, our transcorporeal experiences might often be traumatic, sharing vulnerabilities with the more-than-human world where bodily wounds affect the psyche and psychic wounds impact the body.

Fish's poetic work *Crater and Tower* uniquely sketches those vulnerabilities in a post-anthropocentric outlook. She brings forward two instances: the incident of 9/11 on the Twin Towers and 1980's volcanic eruptions of St. Helens, where the traumatic experiences erupting from both these instances often overlap with each other. She expresses this thing in the prologue portion:

> 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, failing to acknowledge certain forms. (15-16)

The poetry book follows a distinctive structure containing four parts preceded by an acknowledgement, and two poems titled "ABECEDARIAN" and "SLUMBERING" in versified forms. The prologue section focuses on how any sort of disastrous event leads to the formation of trauma. Fish calls it a "multi-verse". Actually, "multi-verse" in this poetry book works on paralleling, comparing, differentiating, and blurring the realities of the volcanic eruption of St. Helens and the attacks of 9/11. Here, "Multiple voices register, creatures stir" (15).

Both nonhuman activities like volcanic eruptions and human-induced activities pose horrific experiences of trauma (15), raising ethical questions regarding environmental concerns. The multi-verse pattern of *Crater and Tower* deals with how disasters might generate trauma during and after horrific incidents. The poem titled "SLUMBERING" understands the volcano through anthropomorphic lens specifying how it might become suddenly and dramatically active after a long sleep. The poem also refers to the Cowlitz people who were affected when St. Helens exploded and emitted "50 million tons of TNT" (20). In the same manner, 9/11 exposed firefighters and people to such vulnerabilities as instances of cancer reappear even after twenty years. (20)

Paralleling the instances of volcanic eruption and 9/11, the poetry book aims to reveal unhealed conditions of bodily scars. The transcorporeal nature of trauma implies that all entanglements are not healthy. Hence, there is a psychic desire for transcendence to go beyond, bypass, or make an attempt to forget about what affects our bodies and the environment with which we are connected. Yet, the horrific thing about all traumatic experiences reveals its recurrent pattern that haunts the psyche and puts survivors in a *fight-or-flight* mode.

> One-third of adults surveyed by the WTC Registry
> report unmet mental health care needs
> among 10-to-11-year-olds after 2001. (20)

Fish's poetry book follows a four-section collection of poems. The first one, titled "ROCK THAT VORTEX", comes with a quote by Charles Goodrich regarding how a volcano can teach people about surviving and living through its catastrophes. Cheryl J. Fish juxtaposes personal trauma of experiencing 9/11 with volcanic eruptions of St. Helens so minutely that while reading this section, our spatio-temporal shift from one instance to another does not seem irrelevant. This shift in reading can travel through readers' psyche so smoothly that it can incite the empathetic chord within readers. This part, comprising nine poems, effectively engages with diverse themes. Fish's description of St. Helens with "geothermal underbelly" (24) signifies a state of repressed fire that may overflow with rage and cause destruction. The nine poems alternatively bring out both human-induced wounds of 9/11 and volcanic eruptions. The poems, in this collection, bring out several references, starting from the speaker's curious tone of paralleling her life with a hula hoop to the grim projection of a survivor of 9/11 as the dust lady who dies of cancer being exposed to ash. All these instances bring out bodily effects of trauma. In between, we have the reference to the mountain women who have been recruited as rangers in St. Helens to guide tourists. The horrific thing about the

incident of 9/11, creating a "crushing noise" (33) and "a windy void" (33), is that many people could not escape from the scene. The scene also re-imagines how Lenape people have settled on bark in New York before European settlers made it a colony. Parallel to the incidents of 9/11, the eco-poetics of volcanic eruption also raises issues related to the eco-horrific catastrophe:

> A 13,000-foot eruption of ash and steam harmonic tremor signaling. Hot
> seismic chart blot
> May 12 a 5.0 earthquake underneath the north flank of St. Helens
> triggers a small debris avalanche half a mile down. (35)

The portion titled "ASH FOR CASH" starts with Timothy Morton's quote about how *Nature* regenerates and recycles as the undead. Timothy Morton's ideas expressed in *Dark Ecology* (2016) and *Hyperobjects* (2013) are not unknown to the scholars of Environmental Humanities. However, this apparently macabre and gruesome aspect of *Nature* might also reveal that matters or objects (irrespective of how we view them) do often carry vibrancy and residue of emotional wounds. The curious mix of rhymes found in the title of the poem, "VOLCANIC/PANIC", does not merely echo the amount of affects that human and more-than-human went through during these incidents but also brings out anxieties of various ecohorrific conditions. Fish adds how the first surges of the volcanic eruption buried "cars, mailboxes, farms, roads" (47), destroying bridges and closing doors. In the poem titled "SIMON SAYS", the speaker talks about conspiracy theories centred on the fall of the Twin Towers. Within and beyond such narratives, we need to delve deeper into the nature of PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) in people who experienced these events. In fact, Fish focuses on this traumatic aspect of these disastrous events. The poem titled "LOSSES WE COVER" is written in horizontal axis. It is interesting to note that losses caused by volcanic eruption do not include effects on the more-than-human world like the vegetation (50).

Fish dedicates the third portion "OFF-SIDE" to her neighbours and her son, Joshua. The part often recounts the people related to Fish's life. The complexities exhibited through these poems might make readers feel a bit confused about the consistency of events. Going through the imagery, it might seem difficult to keep track of whether Fish is talking about people who lost their lives or survived 9/11. This difficulty arises due to Fish's surreal nature of representation of events in this section. This part is not directly linked to either the volcanic eruption or the incidents of 9/11. I find this part can serve as an essential break or a relief from the seriousness of things that happened in both of these disasters.

During the instant moment of any disastrous event, the survivors often go through a sense of confusion until time brings more clarity to these incidents, enhancing wounds more deeply than actually healing them completely. The final part titled "POST-TRAUMATIC POSTS" reveals why the aftermath of terrible incidents is more damaging to people over the course of time. This is why even after fifteen years of 9/11, it is difficult for the speaker to reprocess the events as she feels that her lungs still hold the particle residue of the event (88). The poems, in the fourth section, exemplify that people

take time to process trauma: "We enter openings, porous hands. We're almost home" (75).

The trauma does not go but comes back, reopening old cuts and wounds, sustaining an environment of uncertainty. The circumstances of 9/11 also reveal that wounds also ruptured the lives of many children who have lost their parents during this incident.

> post-traumatic poster children know their Parents are gone
> Or they know nothing. (84)

Fish uses space breaks in several lines of the poem, perhaps to intensify the broken condition of the event. The use of *caesura* reflects the disjointed condition of bodily affects and the traumatised psyche of people who are affected by these incidents. The poems are arranged in both vertical and horizontal axes. The limited knowledge might create a fantasised construction of different cultures, be it Western fantasy about the East or vice versa. The ideas, expressed in the poems, I think, might question politics, ideologies and fantasies. One of them is probably generalising the entirety of America through the standards set up by *beat writers*. When the speaker talks about mountain women who did not align steps or dance "to Kerouac and Burroughs" (30), we find that this reference is quite cynical of such kind of fantasies.

The destructive forces trigger trauma. We might feel that *Crater and Tower* apparently might carry two different narratives of wounds. Freudian psychoanalysis simplistically often perceives unconscious, power and vulnerability through understanding the world in relation to *phallic* and *yonic* symbols. One might look at tower and volcano through the lens of *phallic* and *yonic* symbols respectively. However, such Freudian symbolic association can no longer easily explain the complexities of relationality, after Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *schizoanalysis* (see *Anti-Oedipus*) and *rhizoanalysis* (see *A Thousand Plateaus*) have critiqued the linearity of relations and hierarchical structure by understanding these things through porous, vulnerable, uncertain yet generative assemblages. Rather than seeing the volcanic eruption stereotypically as a *yonic* desire, Fish's *chiasmatic* alignment of volcano and man signifies a complex association of both destructive "Yellow alert" and generative signs of "new flows and flowers" (32). Therefore, when it comes to sketching different layers of trauma, *Crater and Tower* brings forth toxicities of disaster, crisis, shock, pain, and vulnerabilities to both the human and more-than-human world. Thus, while the regenerative properties of matter work through destruction, the trauma might also inspire. As the volcanic rocks cool down, rubble paves the way for vegetal growth, generating a lush landscape brimming with vibrancy. The volcano that takes life also prepares a ground for a forest of fir, mosses, elephant ear, lupine and ferns. (24) The interesting mix of plant species in the forest, mentioned in this collection, brings out that the sign of a healthy ecology is its sustainable biodiversity.

> who builds buildings, and who demolishes them?
> who are the artful and who lack vision? (25)

The lines seem quite self-reflective to me in a way that makes me ponder the nature of material engagement. Being a keen gardener, I have often thought about how demolished rubble can be put to use, not in an essentialist sense but as a healthy re-beginning. Here, the re-cycling as an alternative seems more practical and artistic than the withdrawal, discard, or even overt obsession. The rubble and volcanic rocks artistically might pave the way for a lush garden/vegetation in the same pattern as the traumatic experiences might trigger regeneration. I feel the artistic landscape of the "multi-verse" pattern of Fish's poetry book can suggest healing through studies of memories, recognition of wounds, and analysing accountability without being overtly engrossed in (un)ending games of blaming and shaming. As mentioned earlier, *caesural* patterns of this poetry book are not merely broken conditions but moments of pausing, stopping, and reflecting upon wounds before the regeneration might germinate through dilapidated conditions of the human and more-than-human world.

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