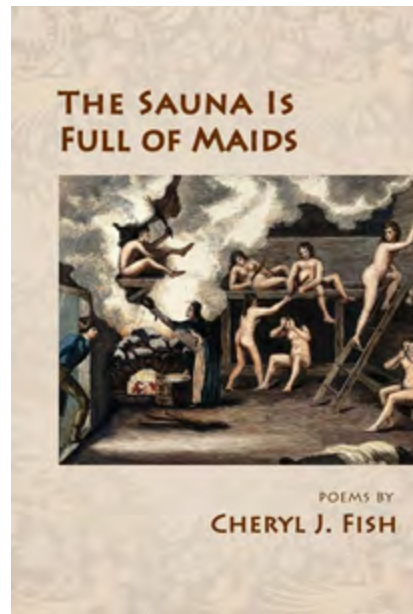


# HEAT RISES LIKE TOLERANCE

KENDRA REYNOLDS



*The Sauna is Full of Maids* by Cheryl J. Fish who was a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Tampere, Finland, in 2007.

Opening with an epilogue quoted from the Finnish National Epic, the *Kalevala*, Cheryl J. Fish's collection invites us to venture over thresholds, both geographical and political, on its voyage through an enchanting maze of steamy saunas, and acquaint ourselves with humans at the heart of the culture, mythology, and gritty beauty of Finland that she herself first delved into during her time in Finland. The first poem, "Gulf of Finland" functions as a portal, where readers are invited to dive into Finnish life: "Go and hit the water. Swim naked, then sit / in the smoke sauna / hot on a wood bench, top row. Out into cold pool" (17). In this piece, Fish also immediately captures one of the main exponents of the Fulbright experience – namely, growth in travel – through the collection's opening line: "Can I use my miles to get more miles? / They never expire" (17).

Complimenting her words with photographs of the people she grew to know so deeply, particularly the indigenous Sámi (descendants of early Nomadic people), whose treatment she equates with the indigenous Native Americans of her American homeland, we are given windows into real lives as she captures hidden stories and practices of a culture threatened by colonialism, climate change, and the influence of ever-encroaching modernity. Encompassing pictures of both the people and the still lakes, forests, mushrooms and sheer magnificence of the Finnish landscape, the reader is transported to a place of calm, of contemplation, a space outside of

time where life moves more slowly and deliberately, in sync with the pace of nature. We become voyagers learning with each new *yoi* (song). As the title of one of Fish's poems attests, these are certainly "Songs [that] Captivate the Traveler," allowing readers to "dwell in the Northland for inspired intervals" (18).

In one of my favorite poems from the collection, "Prior Previous-ness," Fish foregrounds a central motif: the sauna as a haven, a space outside of social expectation, symbolized by the cast-off clothing where "we relax our previous- / ness. Lost in sweat and shower, heated meditation, far from / New York City, and our jobs" (25). Fish captures how saunas are almost spiritual in their nature, encouraging users to live in the *now*, and connect intimately with others outside of the superficial corporate rush: "In our prior previous-ness we were not / close. Here, we glisten" (25). The saunas become a space for transformation and healing.

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Saunas also cross divides—political, social, national—as "Heat rises like tolerance" and inhabitants "Leave / imperfection / and judgement" at the door to enjoy "Music / collective and separate" (63). The sauna provides a space where shared humanity is foregrounded, difference accepted and embraced, and people are inspired to take "non-traditional paths, content with in-betweens" (63). It is difficult to maintain distance, both physical and psychological, in these small, intimate spaces of bonding, warmth, and vulnerability. Challenging those in power who uphold divides, construct the barriers and boundaries that separate and divide, Fish writes "Liars cross the line so often they fell bridges" (60). This whole collection is an act of resistance that, like the saunas, is about cohesion, healing over these man-made cracks, embracing all kinds of seemingly contradictory concepts: hot and cold, vulnerability and strength, self and Other.

The collection is thus not an exercise in detached escapism; these poems are imbued with politics and a sense of urgency, the saunas providing only brief respite from the forces at work in the world outside. This is captured in Fish's poem, "Turbulent Cruise-Ship Sauna" where she questions: "What's / next in these troubling times? Away from the mainland / . . . queasy inside wet waves" (37). Fish is a scholar not only on theories of identity and resistance, but also on environmental justice. These influences merge together here as she writes "I apologize for my Americanness" (18), destructive Capitalism present throughout, in tandem with colonial brutality as "Nations circle the water, on alert / to take more" (35). The reader is left with the sense that the Sámi people, their culture, their ecosystem, their homes, their traditions, and their peace are all as fragile as the ice, melting into the rising sea: "The [Sámi] town is sinking. Citizens, monuments, homes must / be moved or demolished / From cracks and crevices, the sound of cash" (34).

Overall, Fish aims to “make bridges with words” (42) to connect her poems to a number of political issues: namely the oppression of the Sámi people and their culture, women, and the environment. Fish refuses to despair, however, highlighting the innate strength of the oppressed who refuse to lie down as victims: “Survival is our name. Don’t fuck with us” (43). At the same time, the collection acts as a healing meditation, urging readers to embrace and accept who we are, no more and no less, as we recognize our shared humanity and connect once again with the rhythms of the natural world. My experience of reading this collection ultimately rings true in the book’s closing line: “How pleasant for me to flit here / . . . Longing for eternal things” (63).

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#### BIOGRAPHY

Kendra Reynolds lives in Northern Ireland and was the 2019-20 UK/US Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence for the University of Tulsa and Tulsa Community College in Oklahoma, where she taught contemporary literature and creative writing in poetry. She is both a literature scholar and poet, having published poems in a variety of anthologies and magazines, including *The Honest Ulsterman* and *North Star: Short Stories and Poems by Female Northern Irish Writers*, as well as a research monograph entitled *The Feminist Architecture of Postmodern Anti-Tales: Space, Time and Bodies* (Routledge, 2020). She can be reached at [reynolds-k6@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:reynolds-k6@ulster.ac.uk)

