

Review: *View From the Lucky Hotel*, Sandy Fitts

This first collection of poetry from Sandy Fitts heralds the new period of poetry publishing from Five Islands Press. A new logo and design, hers is an impressive looking book printed on good quality paper, and which, befits the quality of the poetry. Sandy Fitts, formerly Sandra Hill, is an award winning poet who has been published in journals for quite some time. Australian poetry exploring Asia is an ever-developing field, and so Fitts' poetry continues the engagement of Steve Kelen, Adam Aitken, Jane Gibian and others who have explored the position of a Westerner in a non-western culture that is rapidly embracing Western values.

The book is divided into three sections: *Waiting for Goya*, a long and intense meditation of a person waiting to enter a Goya Blockbuster exhibition in Berlin, *Over the Water*, a series of poems which include personal narratives and a number of poems dealing with Australia, and then finally the third, and for my money the strongest section, *View from the Lucky Hotel*, 26 poems set in Vietnam. While each section overlaps with each other in terms of form and style, *Waiting for Goya* foreshadows the pain and horror of poems in the final section.

Perhaps the most astonishing quality about *Waiting for Goya* is the confidence of the voice within the poem. The poem is a reflection between a narrator and an other, a kind of doubting Thomas, concerning the value of Art and blockbusters, 'What a circus! What ever for? I hear you, mate,'. The tension between formal and colloquial diction is managed expertly throughout the poem. The poem becomes a type of argument as to whether to be involved in the 'struggle' and 'track truth through reason' and be reminded of our present day horrors or to sit back and avoid asking questions that a blockbuster show may give us. Fitts' reference to Goya's painting *The Sleep of Reason Brings Forth Monsters* becomes an allegory for the monsters of warfare:

'Humanity/slaughtered by those raging forces that forever/ fight to destroy all questions'.

Fitts grew up on the coast of Yorkshire and the second section, 'Over the water' begins with several autobiographical poems. In 'Jump' the reader witnesses a girl struggling to find the words for 'beyond' as she jumps across a metaphorical gap between herself and a train platform. An enquiry into the purposes of language, its limitations and disjunctions features in several poems, such as Prospecting: 'sunlight radiates the blind mind hits the wall/ the body floats with no name' and Still Flight, where images of seagulls become rests in the gaps between phrases laced across the page. The effect is of a disappearing narrative:

'a frail lattice of feathers
moving wings by instinct fuelled by an ounce'

And yet, as if befitting the subject of road trips, 'Visiting the Centre', is a narrative exploring landscape and presence within that landscape. How to belong, and 'how to travel' in the outback when it is so difficult to get beyond visiting, as well as the 'secrets/ I don't always understand' become fuel for the journey.

This paradox of wanting to know the country yet being aware of her own lack of knowledge becomes a thread that sustains the poem. Even with the aid of a friend, Wendy who 'hums notes/ of songs that string along lines of desert winds,' Fitts as narrator is an outsider relying on intuition to get her through, and in doing so she makes her own song of the desert road.

The trope of visiting an unknown place under the guidance of a local is extended in View From the Lucky Hotel. Here Fitts' main guide is Thuy who negotiates Hanoi's 'traffic-clogged' streets by motorbike. Easy Riding with Thuy is a great evocation of a crowded, noisy, smelly city where death might come courtesy of concrete mixers, trains or a 'bully car.' Fitts' imagery is rich, and dense and as a traveller she is painfully aware of her presence as a Westerner who can walk away from

