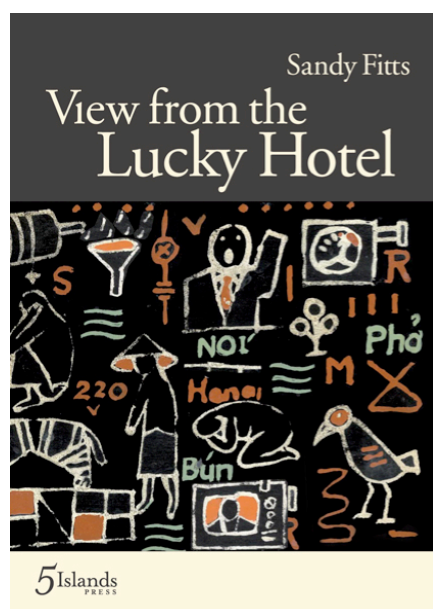


Diane Fahey reviews *View from the Lucky Hotel* by Sandy Fitts

VIEW FROM THE LUCKY HOTEL by Sandy Fitts.
Melbourne: Five Islands Press, 2008, pp 88, AUD \$19.95. Paperback,
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View from the Lucky Hotel opens with the ambitious, feisty, richly complex ‘Waiting for Goya’. It is addressed to an absent friend, from whom imagined challenges whirr like cricket balls, and are batted back over time and space, while the speaker stands in a queue, within sight of walls bullet-holed in Hitler’s time, to enter an exhibition of work by Goya, that passionate witness of human pain, vulnerability and cruelty. Themes canvassed are: art and life; simulacra and original; war, violence, and politics. The figure of Jovellanos – ‘reformer, writer, doer’, at the cost of imprisonment and exile – is also summoned. The poet is far from rehearsing pieties when she affirms ‘our great legacy – reason, / ... joined with compassion, / ethics.’

The sense of spirited, morally intense sparring recurs in later poems, such as ‘In Defence of Humour’ which is openly combative and finally scathing in response to the injunction to ‘lighten up’ in the face of tragedy. ‘Discount’ takes on the seemingly impossible task of testifying to the fact of child slavery and abuse – focusing not on the perpetrators but on those – in effect, most of us – who ‘want good yet don’t / want the fight’. The strongest lines come at the end: ‘... Child, don’t forgive this poem, its / useless cant, words failing, as you change hands.’

So, a fierce and fearless poet who has no investment in the higher moral ground, but who actively embraces the most difficult facts, feelings, issues. And what else? This is also a book of warmth and friendship, and of new people, places, experiences, adventurously encountered. Characteristically, there is a sharp-witted percipience, a subtle evocation of detail and nuance, and a sense of full human presence – even when the barrage of complexity threatens to overwhelm.

The latter is especially the case in the powerful title section, based on the poet’s

experience of living in Hanoi. The opening poem, 'Reading the City', acknowledges the elusiveness, the slippage, that are part of living in an unknown city – 'myth, monster, machine, maze; / living text, an unstable language, always inventing itself.' And the dark and difficult aspects of Vietnamese life, past and present – the multiple impacts of war and poverty – are part of the picture. But the predominant impression is of an open, often exhilarating, engagement with people and settings – a blend of vitality, risk, strangeness.

Throughout, Sandy Fitts' observations remain earthed, free of any impulse towards exoticism – despite the temptations to be found in places like the 'Ghost Market', with its 'Eight varieties of rice – stacks of headless dogs – / giant snails – dappled frogs – spindly chicken feet.' 'Blackout' presents the other side of the coin; as summer rains envelop the city, the poet dwells in a kind of uncanny but fertile isolation in her room, with a gecko for company – 'A cool survivor always open to debate.' A number of poems centre on friends, one of whom enjoys testing moments: in 'Easy Riding With Thủy', the speaker rides pillion in chaotic traffic – 'Each time we don't die, you exclaim in delight *lucky / lucky*.'

The experience of charmed and risk-taking friendship also comes into focus in the other major section, 'Over the Water'. 'Visiting the Centre' is a memorable poem charting an outback journey, ('the sun is bigger, bolder, splashes red-orange / across vast lands with no care to consequences. '), taken with a friend.

Between speech and silence, Wendy hums notes
of song that string along lines of desert winds,
brush over mulga, acacia, flower of wild tobacco;
or tells stories of the land before us...

In this section we also visit the poet's childhood in England. Another poem about a rite of passage, the crossing of thresholds, is 'Ashes of Violet', which engagingly tracks a day out in Liverpool with some audacious new friends, who 'lift lippy', splash themselves with scent: 'Parading the posh dresses, they heckle and stir ... // ... chat up shop dummies, finger the pearls, strut about / in pink hats trading riotous words.' There is an irrepressible vitality about these wild girls with their 'sparking wit', their 'breathtaking flair.' The bonding through freedom and danger proves a deep one.

And, travelling further back, 'Jump!' is about a first train journey – terror and excitement deliver the young girl finally to a vision of arching glass – 'a river of broken light': 'Mouth opening, she / sets a course for "beyond"'. Her hat slips. *Watch your / feet!* she hears. But lands, stumbling, eyes raised.'

The note of courageous, risk-spiked adventure is indeed a pervasive one in this volume, and operates on many levels. It coexists with the subtle, life-affirming circumspection of a poem such as 'Opening', another journey poem – 'Wandering narrow streets in the old city, we / lean inwards, to learn how the other walks.' –

and a beautifully poignant tribute to a loved grandfather in ‘the caretaker’. There is the witty humour of poems such as ‘On The Matter of Bed’ and the five-sonnet hymn to the bicycle, a hilarious tour de force, ‘Life Cycle’.

Throughout the collection, Sandy Fitts’ approach to form is flexible and adaptive; it is an instrument both of an ambitious inclusiveness and of a refined, carefully tuned engagement. She offers, in *View from the Lucky Hotel*, a vibrant, challenging, deeply authentic voice and vision.

DIANE FAHEY

Diane Fahey was born in Melbourne, Australia, and has published nine collections of poetry. *The Wing Collection: New and Selected Poems* will be published by Puncher & Wattman in 2010. Fahey holds an M.A. in Literature, and a PhD in Creative Writing for her study, ‘Places and Spaces of the Writing Life.’

Fahey has been writer in residence at Ormond College, University of Melbourne, and at the University of Adelaide. She has also been awarded residencies in Venice, at the Varuna Writers’ Centre NSW, The Tyrone Guthrie Centre in Ireland, and Hawthornden International Writers’ Centre in Scotland.

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A selection of Sandy Fitts’ poetry can be read at www.fiveislandspress.com and at www.sandyfitts.com