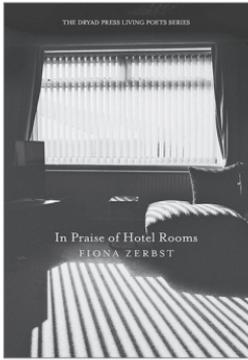


## The Book Corner

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***In Praise of Hotel Rooms,***  
Fiona Zerbst (Dryad Press, 2020)

Set in a wide variety of localities, Fiona Zerbst's poems demonstrate her deftness in evoking the moods and resonances of given places and spaces. Landscape and light abound as she reflects on childhood memories, the angst of adulthood and the flimsiness of perceived security or sanctuary.

Sanctuary is evident in the title poem, 'In Praise of Hotel Rooms', where spaces offer certain aesthetics and "acres of sleep". But the sense of security depicted here is undermined in a subsequent piece, 'The Hotel Room on the Second Floor', where the space is replete with images indicating the impending end of a relationship. Similarly, 'Campsite, Pilaesberg' suggests that while the designated camping area offers an element of safety, where "we brew fresh coffee; / recite new poems", beyond it lies wildness. The notion of existing "on the edge of darkness" is further developed in a poem of this title, in which the writer is aware of the "echoing shrieks" of hyenas, which give rise to the powerful, parenthetical metaphor, "(the stars bleed out, as if they have / been half-chewed.)" Further, in 'The Townhouse', Zerbst tenderly remembers a childhood sanctuary, shared with nurturing parents, but "surrounded by the growing world / of mine dumps, wire, death and fear". At last, in 'Presentiments', Zerbst finds a locality whose cliffs are "tinged with light", a "chunk of coast" which offers peace "after years of loneliness, / presentiments of death."

It is frequently in driving through an area or towards a destination that Zerbst is stimulated to reflect on things, perhaps because in periods of suspension between given points the mind is particularly open and receptive. In 'Landscape with Crows', the poet's awareness of the dark birds "turning in lazy motion / over the four-lane highway", of a coming storm and departing light lifts her into consciousness of the movement of the natural world "beyond / the stalled traffic of my thoughts". 'Driving to the Mountains' involves distancing from peopled areas, travelling

for some hours, observing the passing terrain, which is rendered in Zerbst's characteristically arresting imagery, and eventually sighting the mountains, which are depicted as luminescent, "giving off sparks / like the white burst of the Pleiades". Literally and metaphorically, it seems, they are capable of "illuminating things gone dark." And in 'Highveld Grass', although she recalls a tedious trip through "scruffy veld", she is overcome with a desire "to crush its grass against my face", since it is redolent with memory of irretrievable family time.

Irretrievable, too, is the young love of the poignant poems, 'One Night in Kyiv'—"when we were young and still in love"—and "Odessa Days". Subsequent pieces attest to a painful emotional period. In 'Black Sea', Zerbst writes of "that poisonous time", characterised by an absence of "healing"; and in 'Near Odessa', she is "where Ovid's exile stranded him", clearly identifying with his homesickness and eerily imagining, in "strips of drying seaweed", the hair of a dead woman.

Two poems reflect Zerbst's concern for endangered animals, and other pieces indicate that time has been spent observing creatures in natural environments. Through referring to a lioness' desperate calls for her cubs, the ensuing fateful silence and finally the "untranslatable gargles" of death, Zerbst elliptically and economically highlights the rawness and violence of the wild. By contrast, in 'Knysna Seahorse', she describes with delicacy the "skinny figure / by Giacometti".

"To write is to cry, or cry out, perhaps," Zerbst states in 'The Bay', a tribute to Stephen Watson. She imagines Watson's shade materialising and saying to her, "watch darkness come." The words are disconcerting and lead her to question the purpose and value of writing and to "imagine dying".

There is pain in this collection, there are wounds and there is crying out, though always with restraint and control, as Zerbst addresses fundamental concerns of existence—impermanence, irrevocability, inevitability—and produces work, which, while deeply personal, is also a reflection of the human condition.

MOIRA LOVELL