

Loveliest Grottesque

By Kristina Marie Darling

Book Review:

Loveliest Grottesque, by Sandra Lim. Kore Press, 2006.

Loveliest Grottesque, the winner of last year's Kore Press First Book Award, introduces readers to Sandra Lim's spare, lyrical poems, which examine such diverse subjects as romance, ruin, and Greek tragedy. While her book treats a wide range of ideas, Lim's exploration of her poetic heritage unifies the collection, particularly as she reflects on the implications of literary tradition for new American writing. Often juxtaposing formal work with fragmented texts, *Loveliest Grottesque* raises fascinating questions about the role of convention in literature, a theme that is echoed by the graceful shifts in style and voice throughout the book.

As Lim delves into these subjects, her applications of literary forms, such as the sonnet, the ballad, and the pantoum, are impressive. By pairing them with modern imagery, the poems of *Loveliest Grottesque* suggest that these remnants of tradition color the way artists perceive contemporary ideas. She writes in her poem "And She Addressed the Ages and She Sighed," for example:

I rung you from the lonely paths, I cut the rind and knew
 The soul is neither raw nor vast but hewn and followed
 through.
 What comes on like a language and is dreamed before
 performed
 Hides deep and idle living, thick and heavily adorned.

Just as the fruit in the poem is carved by the speaker, the poem itself is shaped by literary conventions of the past—direct rhyme, diction, and meter being merely a few examples. Through the stunning use of metaphor, Lim suggests that the work of poets is

literally “hewn” from the writings that came before them, and, like many of the works in *Loveliest Grotesque*, this piece proves both lyrical and thought-provoking throughout.

Additionally, the formal poems in this collection are often paired with text fragments, challenging readers to negotiate literary convention with experimentation. For Sandra Lim, tradition offers both a framework in which to write and maddening constraints, which many of the poems in *Loveliest Grotesque* abandon. Her piece “In Radiant Serenity” reads, for instance:

I pound the steaks,
 you verb the noun.
I man the pipes,
 you still verb the noun.
I kill a bottle of wine,
 hawk the goods,
and work the ellipsis.
 You verb (like a smirk).

By excluding the verbs and nouns of the poem, Lim rejects the descriptive tropes of conventional poetry, namely those of the love poem, suggesting that some artistic limitations remain unnecessary. A piece that is at once inward-looking and engaging, “In Radiant Serenity,” like other works in the collection, examines both experience and the art of writing, presenting the reader with evocative imagery all the while.

Sandra Lim’s debut is a stylistically striking, rewarding book, ideal for those who enjoy formal and experimental poetry alike.