

View from the Lucky Hotel

Sandra Fitts

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Reviewed by Tim Metcalf

Reading Sandra Fitts' long-anticipated collection of poems was a pleasure worth the wait. Her poetry is suffused with a graceful intelligence and will appeal to readers who seek depth of thought and experience.

The collection, robustly presented in Five Islands' palpably attractive new format, is divided into three sections. *Waiting for Goya* comprises the long poem of that title, winner of the 2007 Gwen Harwood prize, which forms a kind of prologue and manifesto to the ensuing works. *Over the Water* is concerned with relationships one way or another, and *View from the Lucky Hotel* describes Fitts' experience of Vietnam.

In the second section, Fitts demonstrates her power to combine narrative and lyric forms. Some of her involved relationship poems are outstanding. In *Heat with Ice* she writes: 'hold a newborn baby and feel the sneer fall/ off. A torn animal, but the word *love* survives' and in the accomplished *Liminal* she anticipates her Vietnam poems:

and who needs bearings
when anchored so deeply
by the dark edge its sure line

On the Matter of Bed is as comfortable as a down coverlet on a rainy Saturday morning, displaying maturity and a quiet but pervasive sense of humour: so necessary in a world that closely examined doesn't always appear to make sense.

The third and title section occupies more than two thirds of this collection, yet this reader found only tantalising hints as to why the experience of visiting Vietnam became such a potent poetic trigger for this author.

Perhaps it was the philosophy of paradox as the all-inclusiveness embraced by Buddhism, as at the point at which she echoes Primo Levi's famous opening to *If This is a Man* when she strolls, a tourist, 'in the sunny execution yard', or again when she speaks of the 'orderly anarchy' of the traffic and the streets. Neither is the author closed to that paradox of the richness of darkness and humour combined that she finds in Vietnam. *At the Polite Pub* is the first of a fine trilogy (*A Defence of Humour; The Garden*) concerned with this question, and is a succinct, variegated and diplomatic piece about the invisible screens the imaginative tourist must inevitably sense. Indeed, in so far as the poems are tight pieces about letting go, about not worrying about clinging to another body on the back of a motorbike on the way to a city market in Vietnam, the poems are

paradoxical themselves, and this makes them thrum with life.

Perhaps, on an alternative hand, her mannered titles give a clue to some inner geometric, a kind of personal mantra. Consider *Visiting the Centre* and *Crossing the Intersection*; and in *Riding the Edge* at dusk she finds a

loosening —
the world's outlines, its ideologies and roles — I hold a direction
sensed — not known — a singular path threading around
the dark lodestar of the lake...

This poem reaches deep into that dark lodestar, its dark centre representing chaos rather than nothingness, but is joyful nevertheless. She suggests we who are foreigners in Vietnam may also be foreigners in our own heads, we can become so lost in the post-modernistic round and round of the question of the question of the question.

Fitts is cerebral at times, even extending to the poetic essay as it says on the back cover, but she does not make any difficulties for her reader. In poems such as the excellent *Headgear, Theories on a Bicycle* and *Multiplicities* she approaches the deeper questions with an open smile but an observant eye, and she treads lightly with her subject matter.

Fitts' is a measured and accomplished voice, fine-tuned to the language machine. She gives the reader something to get their teeth into. This is an engaging read with an impressive list of prizes and acknowledgements. It even has a happy ending! Highly recommended.