

***So Much Light* reviewed by Kerry Leves in *Overland* #194, Autumn 2009, pp.90-91.**

* James Charlton: *So Much Light* (Pardalote Press, ISBN 9780980329711, \$23.95)

Alan Watts once wrote that all mystical texts can be read as sets of instructions. James Charlton's poems have this procedural quality – 'Best spiritual practice is to drop the word Best,/ the word Spiritual, the word Practice' ('Best Spiritual Practice') – but the longer ones shape up as engaging journeys. Their travel scenes are vivid with sensory detail, whether through 'Mangrove Swamp' – 'Stroked by parental shadows,/ young plants snorkel in brine./ Silt becomes mud/ becomes land' or through following the flight of 'Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos': 'Random as rags whooshed off a truck,/ they indolently amble on the air.'

In a genre that is singularly prone to sentimental cliché and vague abstraction, Charlton's poetry favours concrete imagery, exact description, subtle rhythm and a sense of history, the latter informed by research and a flair for the telling detail. In 'Transgressive Saints', a thirteenth-century Belgian nun, heretically desiring 'to flow with sap/ of fidelity to all', does farm work to lower the volume as her 'mind's clacking mill/ grinds and grinds'. Meanwhile 'My ducks nod and waddle in my wake,/ nuzzle fallow ground./ Here, see us, they say./ Look, you earnest sister' The nun's counterpart is Simone Weil – the brilliant social philosopher who by her own insistence was an assembly line worker for Renault, then a labourer in a vineyard. Charlton quotes her credo – 'only to refuse belief/ in gods that are not God' – placing this as 'the world's real labour' in the final line. It is moving and even persuasive.

The idea of non-duality is staked on an implicit or tacit (or 'molecular' as Charlton suggests in one poem) identity between 'you' and 'me', between 'self' and 'other', and is hard to express outside the lexis and syntax of spirituality, whether Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Islamic. James Charlton finds a non-denominational language for it that shows 'the holy and the ordinary to be equal' ('New Norcia Boys'). It is often bold: 'where our skin stops/ our bodies do not stop'. It is also effective, assisting to – in the words of Hindu mystic Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950) – 'give the mind an inward turn'. The end of the journey – call it being, silence, stillness – makes Charlton's vivid travelling worth the read.

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