

***So Much Light* reviewed by Robin Grove for *The Melbourne Anglican*, 2008, (unpublished).**

From its striking front cover to its helpful closing Notes, this finely presented volume is a pleasure to meet. It provides a generous selection of Charlton's recent verse, which is then framed by recalling sixteen poems from his previous collection, *Luminous Bodies* (2001). An Afterword by Janet Upcher directs attention to persistent motifs and particular intensities in the Tasmanian poet's work. Altogether, new readers will be well set up to explore the writer for themselves.

They will find scarcely a page without its gleam of wonder in these beautifully authored, short-rhythmed deliverances. And speaking of wonder, a good place to start might be "Lesser Long-eared Bat". A little creature answers our strangeness with her own:

Crinkly and frail as a fresh scab  
on an old man's knuckle,  
this tiny bat which flew in the door

and flitted over the candle-lit room  
has hung her cape of curled suede  
on the hat-rack.

Turning the crushed violet of her head  
to face me, she eyes me close up  
from very far away.

The likening of bat to scab is almost too adroit in its blend of the vulnerable and the unattractive, but the sudden diminishment to "this tiny bat" soothes any anxious play of sympathy for, versus revulsion away from the winged thing. "She" (genderless till now) can hang up her cape like any Edwardian lady overlooking the absence of servants. And when she turns to face the onlookers with her crushed-violet softness, it is with an effect that would be flirtatious were it not instantly re-focussed: "she eyes me close up/from very far away". Part of her stand-offishness is to keep non-bats in their place, part has the disinterestedness of a Martian measuring alien life-forms. But even as we catch the comedy, deeps open below the "social" calibrations of the verse. Beneath the skin (ref. "scab", line1) *are* we all the same? The poem answers with all the doubleness at its command. How could we/not/be? Straining to catch all the vibrations of the verse, we seem but poor specimens of Lesser Long-eared Bat.

When Hardy approached such issues in the 1880s, the divisions seemed stronger, hierarchies more needful than today. In his “Fallow Deer at the Lonely House” the inhabitants do not perceive the animal, while the deer in turn cannot leave the snowy world “without” to join the human couple at their troubled “fender-brink”. The poem cannot even escape from itself, closed-in by rhymes and phrases that come round as the seasons do, reinforcing here against there, inside *versus* outside, return for return:

One without looks in to-night  
From the sheet of glistening white  
One without looks in to-night  
As we sit and think  
By the fender-brink.

We do not discern those eyes  
Watching in the snow;  
Lit by lamps of rosy dyes  
We do not discern those eyes  
Wondering, aglow,  
Four-footed, tip-toe.

Creatures joined but separate in their beauty and their loss. Charlton’s world, by contrast, is ready to dissolve in light – or water, come to that. And it is a wonderful moment when

Lowering the word *spiritual* into the Ganges  
of the heart,  
we watch it drift away into nothing,  
into everything.

But self-transformation is arrested, with two commas and a conclusive full stop. Too often, the epiphanies of *So Much Light* descend from vision to explanation, or even, once or twice, to lesson. Despite this, an ecstatic responsiveness to the world, and a staunch refusal to expunge its cruelties give these poems a Franciscan tenderness even amid the “sound of harsh carpentry” (“One Spacious Day”, p. 17). We are lucky to have such a writer.