

Classic Poetry Series

James Charlton
- poems -

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James Charlton(1947 -)

James Charlton is an Australian poet and writer in the area of interfaith and interreligious studies. Born in Melbourne, Australia in 1947, Charlton has lived mostly in Tasmania. He completed a MA at the University of Cambridge and a PhD at the University of Tasmania. Poetry editor of the Australian literary quarterly *Island* from 2002 to 2008, he delivered the inaugural Gwen Harwood Memorial Lecture in 2008.

Works

Charlton's *Luminous Bodies* was published in 2001 by Montpelier Press and tied for second place for the 2002 Anne Elder Award. *So Much Light* was published in 2007 by Pardalote Press.

Numerous poems of his have been published in anthologies, in literary journals (Australian, American and British) and in newspapers. Various poems have been broadcast. "Transgressive Saints", shortlisted for the 2006 Broadway Poetry Prize, was published in *The Broadway Poetry Prize Winners 2006* by Picaro Press.

"Letter to Walt Whitman re: Iraq" was published in *The Best Australian Poems 2006* by Black Inc.

Charlton's study of three European mystical poet-theologians is due from Continuum Publishers in late 2012.

Absence

Your absence
holds the shape
of your face.

I repeat your name
in the night.

This chair
where you sat;
those days

in the park -
how far we wandered
in those days;

our manners delicate,
the air gentle.

A discontented man
would stare at you;

a burdened woman
look away
and feel

that she was you,
back when ...
and one day, you'd be her.

James Charlton

Koonya, Cape Barren Island, 1828

She wore a sheen of possum fat,
ran from the surf with high-up knees,
kept orange starfish in a pool.
She flayed the sky with kelp straps,
jumped out giggling from behind rocks

until caught by the heels
and tied below deck.
They fed her in the sealers' hut,
changing the leash after each month's work.
She coughed up oyster pulp,

and those white barnacles she grew
inflamed Dan Smith with their rasp.
He buttoned his trousers,
trussed up her legs,
took her out the back,

fired a flintlock in her ribs.
There in the Cape Barren dunes,
under midden shells,
her chipped nails claw
the evasive sand.

James Charlton

Luminous Bodies

Her old VW
mows the dirt road
to my shack,

past the noiseless fall
of frangipani,
a flash of butterfly

in deep shade.
We walk in the garden
of now,

and find an alcove
of tenderness
behind the melaleuca.

She listens
to the hidden life:
roots drawing nourishment,

sap rising in stems.
Each twig,
an inverse tongue;

each leaf and flower
a wisdom far removed
from knowledgeable din.

Infrangible desire:
a thousand cicadas
throbbing the heat.

Shyly assertive,
she sings my body;
I, hers.

We sing
the joy
of imperfection,

the caress
of impermanence.
Soft tissue,

exquisitely bruised,
collapses
into limb-sized folds.

James Charlton

On A Day Of Still Heat

In the still heat
 a breadfruit ripens:
a multitude of tiny sunspots
 mounted on hexagonal platelets,
green leather skin
 and flesh of kneadable custard.

In the breadfruit
 is hidden the sun,
in the sun
 the breadfruit.
Before the heat reaches Earth,
 the flames have already died;
before being picked,
 the breadfruit is already rotten.

And all the unpurchaseable luxuries
 - beetles, thunder, pebbles, twigs -
whose lives say, simply,
 I accept,
are hidden in each other
 and hide all things.

James Charlton

Sister Spider

This large, sedentary spider
which shares our bathroom,

spending hours wiping droplets
from her leg hair,

has a dusting of animated poppy seeds
on her back.

Greetings, spiders, with whom we inhabit
common space;

and potoroo and magpie, also having a part
in us, and we with you.

Greetings to everyday epiphanies;
not forgetting you insects,

in bodiliness our brothers;
and you, the unseen forms

which might infect, or assist,
being heirs with us and all the other creatures

which walk, crawl, fly, slide, multiply,
divide or stay put;

joint heirs of such molecular inheritance
that where our skin stops,

our bodies do not stop,
greetings.

James Charlton

To Governor George Arthur In Heaven

You didn't fornicate, swear or drink.
You didn't cheat or hate.□
Each night, studying Scripture,
you thanked the Lord for dying to save you.
In the mornings you dangled the guilty.
Their throats were tightened after prayers,
and "all but the most insensible
showed signs of repentance."

I should not judge -
you did not choose your code.
But talk with Mary MacLauchlan,
dragged from husband and family in Glasgow;
transported for theft to Van Diemen's Land.

Remember stretching her for infanticide,
8 a.m., Monday, April the 19th, 1830?
At least you couldn't sleep -
struggled with that verse about yea be yea
and nay nay - and shunned the leading citizen
who seduced her.

Ask Mary about that final letter
to two small daughters,
and life's last walk, on air.

James Charlton

Truganini's Soliloquy

I have known Earth's texture
like another skin.

All my life I have seen
the unseen entities. Each one
reflects a light beyond colour,
a light which paints
all colour into being.

When I was young, a white man
came to my shelter.
He'd heard the night-chorus,
but complained he couldn't sleep,
having failed to hear the song behind the noise.
And when the new-created light
quivered through the slattings,
and shoals of eucalypt leaves
waved their shadows over us,
he wanted blinds, curtains.

I think he only saw Earth's foreground -
his eyes roving for quarry.

The white men broke our circle,
which stretched outwards, like the sky's vastness.
Their leaders thought we needed to be overseen.
If I'd known their words, I would've said:

You have lost the all-embracing song
which nurtures the past
into the future. You have failed
to see the All-Encompasser:
One who inhabits the wind,
without being it; One who dwells
within the cutting grass, but isn't botanical.

The overseeing continues.

Pink heath is burnt; blackwoods cut down.
This is how the white man makes a garden.
Someone has planted 'hydrangeas'
in front of where I live,
saying: 'If the sun gets hot,
please cover them with an old sack.'

James Charlton

Yellow-Tailed Black Cockatoos

Random as rags whooshed off a truck,
they indolently amble on the air. This caterwaul:
wee-la. Yes, there,

husky, high. It seems an idle sortie,
a lope of meander-flight, a frittering in the eye
of foul weather.

Gale winds begin to split and peel
a suburb of weather-board husks, but the flock
keeps following its memory-grid

to grubs in weakened trees. (Birds like these
saw dinosaurs plod through dust.)
They prise, rip,

rasher the acacia bark, and change trees,
wheeling and veering like black Venetian blinds
collapsed at one end.

Then they dip, curious,
to an English willow;
shimmy down bare verticals on hinge-claws;

whir out
on a glissade of whoops:
concertina-tailed, splay-winged, wailing.

James Charlton