Littoral Days

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Anthony Lawrence
THE SLEEP OF A LEARNING MAN
Giramondo, $22pb, 112pp, 1 920882 01 4

THE SLEEP of a Learning Man is the sixth verse collection from the gifted and exacting Anthony Lawrence. He has also written a novel. The epigraph to this book gives some hint as to where the poet stands, and where he intends to go. It is from Antonio Porcia: ‘I am chained to the earth to pay for the freedom of my eyes.’ But looking is only one means to find his way, a dilemma that a number of the forty-two poems gathered here confronts.

In several, the poet finds himself on the littoral, where land meets sea. The first poem here begins ‘In late September the dunes / stop moving’, which means that the poet has to face the consequences for his art: ‘The only danger, now the dunes have stopped / is what imagination does.’ Found things on the seashore arrest his attention. ‘Kelp’ begins with a delicate but sustained effort to give a visual sense of the stuff, ‘this pliable, light-keeping amber stem’. The poem shifts into a mantra of love and becomes an unexpected ode.

Lawrence is one of a significant number of poets who have migrated to Tasmania in the last half century, whether from the mainland or beyond. Their concentration is rich, and remarkable. One of the earliest to make such a move was Gwen Harwood, with whose poem ‘Littoral’ Lawrence is surely acquainted. He also does homage to her anthology piece ‘Barn Owl’. In his poem ‘Owls’, one stands sentinel for a dead mate and appears ‘from a distance, a stone roadside marker, then / the face of a clock in a fog’.

In another poem of the fallen things of the natural world, ‘Gathering Pine Cones’, Lawrence writes of how the child (perhaps his son) who accompanies him weighs the cones in his hand, confoundingly, for ‘I have no measure of the calm deliberation / you bring to the earth’s found poetry’. This feeling shifts to a broader dissatisfaction with himself, in the confession, or concession, that ‘I have used the voice of a teaching man too often’. What his art needs, instead, is the deliberation / you bring to the earth’s found poetry’. This is both a childhood apotheosis vividly and disturbingly brought back to mind, and an adult reading of himself as a poet. In the complexity and tension, there is an essence of Lawrence’s poetry.

The Sleep of a Learning Man seems an intensification of what has gone before in his career (for instance, in his previous volume, Skinned by Light) rather than a new departure, although the autobiographical burden is more overt. Lawrence has crept up on the audience for Australian poetry. He is now one of the most assured and challenging of our poets. This volume is a testament to craft skills at the service of a relentless self-questioning.