



GIRAMONDO PUBLISHING

## Tim Grey's Launch of *Jam Sticky Vision*

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I'm in absolutely no way qualified to launch Luke's book, but I'm hugely honoured nonetheless.

As is often the case, I started *Jam Sticky Vision* twice. It's not that Luke Beesley's latest collection is particularly forbidding – in fact, the opposite is probably true: it's filled with deeply familiar stuff – conversations with lovers and children, FM radio, birds, beards, dogs, cutlery, expanses of lawn, cafes and tennis. I was struck, however, by the fact that I interpreted its meaning in two entirely distinct ways each time I began.

The first poem in the collection is, after Koch/Coehn, Malley/Breton and Rousell, 'A Thousand Characters' which begins:

'This, too, is about a thousand characters. It's much like the last one.  
I wouldn't even read beyond the following sentence. The following sentence is a silky thing – purple in the late day, drizzled in smog.'

Initially, I took 'a thousand characters' to refer to the mechanics of the text – not words, even, but the constituent stuff of language, reduced to even less than a letter, less meaningful than the 'content' of an overlong tweet. It's an uncharacteristically snotty introduction from Beesley, a self-referential and paradoxical challenge to the reader, who he exhorts to not read on, and to the poem, which may only ever be about itself.

When I started again, however, without any effort on my part, I interpreted the 'thousand characters' more generously – a thousand unique personalities with wholly individual traits, rubbing up against one another inside the poem.

Even though the poem is surrounded by anxieties about the possibility of writing whatsoever, at the centre of *A Thousand Characters* is a lyrical and surprisingly sincere vision of the sky over a football field: 'the clouds, just above the line of trees which form the horizon, here, are salmon pink. At the local gelati shop they'd call it grapefruit.'

Luke's ability to make the poem a container for genuine sentiment while acknowledging its inherent instability is a skill I think he shares with John Ashbury, whose presence is felt throughout this book. Indeed, the poem 'The Australian Double' explicitly acknowledges him with its title, drawn from 'Quick Question'.



Generosity is, I think, key to Luke's process. *Jam Sticky Vision* is certainly open to dissonance, chaos and disorder. Occasionally, poems unravel and collapse, such as in 'Double Portrait, Cornflake Sunset', where an authorial voice seems to reach out of the poem and demand the reader 'help.'

Often, poems are more than willing to refuse meaning, such as in 'Six Minute Mark' where (and I quote) 'the mangled sneeze she produced appeared decadent opera beard dog eared page 36 pants through to a third sitting, deficient, distracting actor walked over to the salt basin.' Occasionally they unravel, suggesting that our previous sense of having understood the poem was entirely mistaken.

But, again, I don't read these difficult sections as forbidding. Rather, I see them as examples of the poet allowing the poem to direct him in the writing, letting the very particular circumstances of the work unravel into their own possible meanings.

As most of you know, Luke is a visual artist as well as a poet, and these pieces of impossible syntax remind me of the way he lets his hand draw, rather than his brain, revealing something more fragile than his intention to draw the bird in his mind. The ability to allow oneself to do this, to be true to whatever arrives, isn't easy – our natural inclination's usually to wrangle things into order, and there's a generosity toward the creative process on the part of the poet that's required to circumvent it. Sometimes you can almost see the engine of the poem working, like in 'Your Margin, My Mahjong,' where the word 'Existence' morphs into the title of Cronenberg's 1999 film *Existenz* and from there reappears as 'exquisite'.

Other poems attempt to acknowledge all the potential words not inside the poem. One of my favourite pieces is 'Retreating Moods,' which suggests a whole hinterland of meaning...

Retreating Moods  
the fatigue attuned to used  
car dealers' unbuckled vermilion  
racing postures or driver's side opinions un folding maps larger than the interior  
of the rally car  
as in Morris Louis  
his paintings were larger than the room he made them in

*Jam Sticky Vision*, however, isn't entirely a product of elision or chance. The field might be open, but not so much so that anything can just breeze into it. It's also a catalogue of, and testament to, the things Luke loves. Songwriters Bill Callahan and David Berman appear alongside Tran Ahn Hung's film *Norwegian Wood*. There's a hilarious minimalist rendition of Paul Thomas Anderson's masterpiece *The Master*, Spike Jonze gets a poem, Terrence Mallick and Kelly Reichardt get one and David Lynch gets two. Jorrie Graham appears as does John Don Passos, Faulkner, and, as usual, Joyce. Kandinsky appears, briefly, as does Matisse, Bacon and Mondrian. The cover, as you'll immediately have noticed, is a detail from Pavement's classic album 'Crooked Rain, Crooked Rain'.

These aren't the same kind of cultural allusions we often see in literature, however. To *Jam Sticky Vision*, not all culture is created equal, and it's the things Luke genuinely loves, the films, books and music to which he's devoted who get a mention. Luke approaches *Jam Sticky Vision* as a very particular aesthete – what's in there – even chaos – is in there on purpose.

To say *Jam Sticky Vision* is a mixtape doesn't do it justice, but it's assembled with the same near obsessional attention a teenager gives to their record collection. I'm always touched by the fidelity Luke has to his preoccupations. Personally, I'm always after the next new thing: one week I'm assembling a record collection made entirely of witch-house, and the next it's all about vapourwave. But Luke's cultural touchstones are lasting – over the years I've seen him deepen his understanding of the same, carefully selected family of artists, returning to their works with lasting affection.

It struck me, reading *Jam Sticky Vision*, that Luke is an erotic poet – his poems are celebrations of the subtle and sensuous qualities of the thing. And if he's an erotic poet, he's a particularly orally-fixated one. When Luke likes something, he is literally compelled to put it in his mouth.

This might explain the wild preponderance of food in *Jam Sticky Vision*, and in Luke's poetry overall. In this

book, he seems have a fixation on pancakes, but there's still room for pears, carrot juice and milk, pepper, maple syrup, two boiled eggs, tomatoes, pork, a milkshake tucked into a felt dicepouch, octopus-flavoured crisps and lots, and lots of cabbages.

I'm confident in my armchair Freudian reading of Luke's food obsession, but there's another compelling possibility as to why so much of it appears in his poetry: food is funny. I saw Luke perform as New Archer last year, and was totally put off balance by his show. Between songs, he'd engage in what, at first, sounded like on-stage banter. But it became clear that Luke was re-purposing his poetry as a supposedly conversational interlude between songs. Seeing him intone 'I just looked/in the crisper' for no apparent reason to an unassuming audience, was beautifully uncomfortable.

The show demonstrated a politics to Luke's poetry; while there's room to be earnest about the sunset, he's also aware of poetry's place in the world, and of his. To that end, *Jam Sticky Vision* sees Luke engage in a bit of parody. Sure, his work's unapologetic about being about the world it was written in: urban, educated, middle class, male and white – but of course Luke's smart enough to know it. Unwelcome Lycra/Portrait of a Patron with a Straw, Loafer cnr St George's Rd and Scotchmer imagines a terrifying encounter with a cyclist in the local bakery, and is in part a hysterical complaint about dining with a pig. Is this the poem as an urbanspoon review, perhaps? In any case, it adequately punctures the tightly proscribed world of middle-class Melbourne.

But as I noted before, Luke is able to write through the inherent instability of his position to discover a place of real feeling – the gelati coloured sky that, while it might be artificial – moved him nonetheless.

It's in struggling to resolve, or at least confront, the poem's relationship with the real that produces *Jam Sticky Vision*'s most ambitious project, 'How Will I Know When I'm Home?' named for a Laura Jean song and assembled during a residency at the The Wheeler Centre, the ten-part poem describes a domestic scene with characters that share names with Luke's actual family. Pulsating between sleep and wake, the poem follows the care-worn processes of getting dressed, reading a book, catching the train. But the unusualness of language distorts this domestic reality:

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I came through the station dreamily, on with the audio's\* tapestry of gargles and intonations, and was without memory as I walked, perfectly attached to the narration and the pace of each commuter. I have nothing to write of what must have been the walk from the station to here, but I rolled out of bed to dress near the heater, and ate dreamily, too, as in half-asleep. We have no telephone. The train came up silently beside me like the memory of an old quarrel. At one point, on the train, the light washed over passages opposite, passengers, and I stared closely at the mauve eyelids of a dozing woman.

Here, we move off the train by turning the page, where we meet commuters who are explicitly 'narrated'. Passengers are not adjacent to the narrator on the train, they're beside words on the other side of the page. The poet acknowledges his writing of the poem itself, and deflates the image of the writer on the train, the vision of domestic life. Whatever this reality is, it's defined by the limits of this poem. And, through deliberately interrupting our ability to create meaning out of even the simplest of scenes, Luke investigates the ways poetry might interrupt life. 'Nature as documentary' is 'where we slip', Luke advises back in that first poem – does he mean that a world already and only mediated as culture, is any the less for it? *Jam Sticky Vision* certainly isn't. So go give him some money for it.

Tim Grey is a writer photographer and journalist, whose work has appeared in *Best Australian Poems*, *Cordite*, *Southerly*, *Mascara* and *Rabbit*. The launch was held at Longplay, St Georges Road North Fitzroy on Monday 15 June 2015.