

Launch of *Balance* by Luke Beesley
Readings Carlton, November 1st 2012
by Bonny Cassidy

If you fold together the circular rhythms of Gertrude Stein and James Joyce, the pure tones of Mark Rothko, the essayistic scrawl of Cy Twombly, the clean lines of Pierre Reverdy and George Oppen, you get to a place near Luke Beesley's poetry—but not quite there. It's possible to read his new collection of poems, *Balance*, and let its prismatic cohesiveness fool you into thinking you've gripped the essence of this poet.

Read it again, and you slip from its surfaces, receding corners and thin air. In *Balance* you start to see and hear a number of Luke Beesleys at work: the discursive prose poet of his first book, *Lemon Shark*; the minimalist artist; the rustic folk musician; the cinema-fan who devotes at least two of the poems in this book to film directors.

Balance, published by Whitmore Press, is Luke's second collection. It's been a while since we had the pleasure of a new Beesley book, but that's also deceptive—he's a productive bugger. This is the first of three books he will be releasing over the next year, including an artist book. This is a luscious-looking chapbook, tropical and refined. Congratulations to Luke and Whitmore Press on this fine publication.

Balance arises from an Asialink literature residency in India that Beesley undertook in 2006. It makes a valuable contribution to the rich tradition of transnational Australian poetry that has been produced through that program. *Balance* may a love letter to India—vivid with the immediate perceptions that only being in a place can produce—but it also possesses qualities of reflection, memory, bafflement and withdrawal that I think might be the result of writing about a place from the position of distance and time past. As these poems have been several years in the making, Beesley has, in his own words, been able to "chisel away" and "peel back" the collection, and this reduction is one of its major strengths.

I'm not sure how Luke feels about this approach but my own, preferred way to read *Balance* is as a sequence; encouraged to this by its concentrated focus on India and on the precise continuity of its order. Each poem seems to speak to the next in both overt and covert ways. Even the Contents list reads like a sustained poem:

Vinyl / Old Delhi
 Peacock peacock
 Go
 Waking up in Delhi
 Racehorse
 Two shorts
 The second obstruction
 Burning ghat
 Two naughts
 Night
 Short story
 I've been / In another story
 Turning pages

Not all of the poems in *Balance* focus on India—Brisbane, where Beesley grew up, features a few times, for example—and in fact many that *seem* to reference India feel truly placeless. For example, from the poem "Go":

i.
 The sun is green over the lawn. The sun is green
 through that drink, juice is it? Guava. The sun is green
 on her chin. The green sun of night-time. The green
 light inside a canary. The lake you ate. Lettuce in the
 spring. A long lettuce. The green men of Atwood's
 poems. The nasty sleep. Light before the storm. Her
 green bath. Stepping in a green bath. Matisse's Japanese
 lover's green cheeks...

This poem reflects Beesley's masterful ability to create a suspended sense of location. The language is rich with immediacy and tangibility, yet unspecific or perhaps transient. It's as if we're floating in some David Hockney pool: not so much a physical place as a dense block of vibrant affect. In *Balance* the colour green (apple, spinach, mint, celery) and "green light" are

points of obsessive return, creating an associative mood in the reader. We are dunked into this affect of suspension/immersion all the way through the book, frequently through the repetition of particular colours that have synaesthetic associations: tomato, milkshake-pink, putty, terracotta, rain wet page beige, apricot, yellow light.

Rather than being about India as a public or shared reality *Balance* is about the sensations that resonate in the body that travels there/has travelled there. As the book's opening line states: we are "walking by the word *India*"; a walk that takes us past the surface of the word and into more intimate seconds and hours. This is an *inner India*.

Like bold colour, the image of teeming human and animal life is something we in the West might traditionally associate with India. In this sense the poems in *Balance* are unavoidably coital in their motifs and allusions: mouths, breath, heat, juice, enervation, sleep. But I don't think Beesley is interested in rehearsing those sorts of associations unthinkingly. Rather, by abstracting them from their source he makes them into structural experiments; and in this way they become something far more interesting and utterly original.

Drawing on the effects of impressionism and tonalism, each poem in this book is a study in light. From these angles Beesley explores the concept of *balance* itself. Another frequently repeated word in the book, "balance" is a centering, stabilising motif, and it reflects Beesley's poetic structures. He tells us in the poem "Vinyl / Old Delhi", of "the word balance its jazzy policies and opulence", however it's a red herring. The sense of balance that he represents both linguistically and structurally is a deserted form, stripped back by time and weather and forgetting to lingering qualities of texture, design, solidity.

In "Terracotta sonnet", for example, Beesley avoids the formal rules of the sonnet but adheres to the structural rule of the *volta* or turn:

the bent bowl
of sunlight in the open novel
•
a vase made
buckles near the potter's navel

What this gives us is a concrete image of balance as well as a metaphor of positive and negative spaces intersecting. The first epigram offers a negative void, "the bent bowl"; while the second provides a positive convex, "a vase made". In both, a double or cupped concave image occurs: the bowl of light "in the open novel"; and the vase that "buckles" near the navel. Navel echoes novel and the epigrams mirror one another's line lengths. Balance.

We also find structural balance in Beesley's startling imagistic minimalism. This will to restraint is present in his drawing practice, and it is pushed more boldly in the poems of *Balance* than in his first book, *Lemon Shark*. It is as if Beesley has starved the poems to see how attenuated and absent they can become without their bright lights dimming. The white space of the page is an equal presence in this book; in Beesley's poetics, the black mark and line of print must work to assert themselves. The lacuna, therefore, is a crucial point in this collection. It gives the opening sequence its title and punctuates nearly every poem in *Balance*. In representing the poet's withdrawal from utterance, the wish to *say nothing*, the lacuna is loud with possibility. I see it as the rest pause taken by the traveller in a busy foreign street; or the memory of travel, its vivid but disconnected images linked by forgotten events and days; or perhaps, it's the hesitation of the outsider—the visitor to postcolonial India—to speak.

The lacuna also stands in for time. Beesley gives time a quality of balance: not of progress but meditative stasis, as in the poem "dharamsala, afternoon":

low cloud and the sun is candle light

•

on the horizon

•

enormous pines

•

quiet birdlife these hours

•

though they

leave

•

towards the distance

As well as this spaced-out mode, we also encounter a chatty manner of voice in *Balance*. This is particularly noticeable in Beesley's prose poems. The form continues to be a significant thread in his work; I wonder if it's to do with the appeal of the squared composition on the page, with its dense field of text. In any case, the prose poems in *Balance* exemplify the book's key effect of *mise en abyme* or the infinitely receding image, as in the poem "Racehorse":

In a large semi-detached timber dwelling, doubling as a restaurant, a patron has ordered something no longer on the menu. Verb. To hit someone with a horse. To run into someone with an old racehorse with a royal name e.g. Prince Queen. An old track horse put out to pasture and watched sentimentally by a stooped man with a yellow beard. Hit meaning pushed up against without serious intent, but not a brush — less an accident or bang! [...]

This poem's speaker grapples with continuity as words and images seem to unfold from one another. Here there is a quality of automatism but also autism. The surrealism of Bunuel or Breton, for instance, may be glimpsed in the poem's final sentences: "A sink full of cutlery. Dangerous as a frothy / sink full of new knives. Cleaning dirty windows with an / ice block." Indeed, film lingers at the margins of this poetry. Beesley names Lars von Trier and Wong Kar-Wai in *Balance*; we could also imagine Wim Wenders and Terrence Mallick looking on.

Beesley's predominant poetic figure is not surrealist symbolism but metonymy, by which the signifier is also always the signified. Nor are his prose poems structures of chance, but rather of constraint, with their narrow margins and quite marked line turns. Like Borges or Brooks way, Beesley uses exquisite detail to give realism to the improbable or shocking image:

in the film
a folded cloud

- a trumpet touched by morning sun and busted
- umbrellas
(upside down in a tree)

I've begun and ended this speech with a list of possible influences on Beesley's poetry. Influence doesn't work like some kind of recipe, but I do feel that name-dropping is significant to Beesley's writing, which like his art is often and openly an act of homage. In this way, he deepens the meta-structures within his poems, and I think joins a number of contemporary Australian poets who show us that the postmodernist project is still very much alive.

In *Balance*, it's ultimately the image of "the book" itself that begins to enfold the poems' other motifs. As you read on, you first notice that the noun "words" is beginning to circle past the eye at an increasing rate; followed by the appearance of "the book" in various positions—"its balance in my hand", "The tree and the book", "Books to each other". This book itself is the eroded form; and what Beesley leaves us holding is an intricate, crystalline piece of architecture, mirrored and unfolding.