

**Paul Hardacre**

## FOR THE RECORD: DIONYSIUS UNBOUND: AN INTERVIEW WITH BRETT DIONYSIUS

Brett Dionysius was born in Dalby, Western Queensland in 1969. In addition to a humble pursuit of his own poetic craft, he spent a selfless last decade of the twentieth century raising both the standards, and profile, of Queensland poetry. Here, Brett, former chairperson of Fringe Arts Collective Inc. and Director of Queensland's major, annual poetry event *The Subverse: Queensland Poetry Festival*, speaks with Paul Hardacre about festivals, funding, finding the muse, and what it is to be a man.

PAUL – You spent the first eight years of your life on a property near Tara, 350 kilometres west of Brisbane—tell us about that.

BRETT – My father worked as a farm labourer on a cattle and wheat property called Weranga—poll Hereford cattle (the brown cows with white faces). He worked for two different owners during this time, the Marneys and the Clarks. We lived in a tiny weatherboard cottage, about 100 metres from the Condamine River, where as kids we used to play hide and seek, war, build cubby houses etc., and I used to search for gemstones. I was obsessed with collecting bits of agate, jasper and quartz down by the riverbank. Mostly the river was dry—it very rarely flooded. When it did it was something to behold—pure elemental fury, pent up, unleashed at last. We lived at Weranga until 1977, when my father's bowel cancer forced him to give up work and we relocated to another weatherboard cottage in Dalby, a small country town of about 10,000 people, 200 kilometres west of Brisbane.

PAUL – It's interesting that you start by referring to your father and how his work controlled where you lived and grew up, because a lot of your poetry focuses so strongly on both "place" and rural identity, and the patriarchal role. Poems like 'My Daughter & I at the End of the Century', 'Sometimes He ...', 'Atomic Shadow,' and 'Fatherlands' seem laden with a deep sense of loss and an almost dutiful sense of regret. I say "dutiful" because it's evident that your father at times behaved in ways which were far from endearing. The image of your toes as "small, white slugs / [trying] to bury themselves" ('Sometimes He ...') in order to avoid your father's stock-whip, brings to mind the more disturbing areas of masculine behaviour.

BRETT – There has been enormous energy invested in discussing "place" and "landscape," two of the most dominant themes in Australian poetry. I

think "masculinity" has been the poor cousin in relation to these issues, particularly within the rural landscape, where class and the struggle against nature (the bush, etc.) dominate the debate surrounding identity. *Fatherlands* [Brett's first book of poetry, published through the Five Islands Press New Poets Program in 2000] attempts to (re)examine masculinity from the psychological perspective of the child/father dichotomy in both a "remembered" rural landscape and later in the urban sphere. Fathers have the capacity to both endear and terrify, I suppose. The poem 'Sometimes He...' is a powerfully layered piece about the mismanagement of masculinity, that obviously affected me deeply, so somewhere I have assumed the duty subconsciously to investigate what it is to be a man. Becoming a father myself in 1994 was the trigger for that responsibility, I guess.

PAUL – By becoming a father yourself, and investigating "what it is to be a man", you must have had to confront a lot of the expectations forced upon you by those "creosote hands" ('Fatherlands')? I mean, when I interviewed you in 1997 (Hardacre, unpublished interview) you described yourself as "a man who has never shot anything bigger than a sparrow with a slug gun", whose father shot kangaroos to supplement the family income, and even made his own bullets by hand. Was it difficult as a young man to escape this "atomic shadow" ('Atomic Shadow') of expectation?

BRETT – Sure, as a child there was a measurement of one's self against the father, like Heaney in his poem 'Follower,' but it was more difficult for me living up to an expectation of "manliness"... after my father died in January 1978. Then, the absence of a male role model to feed the mechanics of masculinity made itself very present. I was the boy who couldn't fix his own bike, who didn't know anything about tools or engines or cars, who never got his driver's license (some things don't change!). The poem 'Atomic Shadow' is possibly a lament for my own lack of an early masculine identity or for an interrupted identity as much as it is a lament for a "remembered" father/son relationship.

PAUL – So unlike Heaney, who was unable to live up to his father's example and "stumbled in his [father's] hob-nailed wake" ('Follower'), you were the "fair-haired cockatrice" ('Cockatrice') whose sense of masculine self was not much more than a composite of polaroids which "only ever captured, / half the picture" ('Fatherlands'); whose "father failed to complete / his training in the acts of killing" ('My Daughter & I at the End of the Century'). Without a father to show you how to do those things like fix your bike or engines or cars, or use tools, etc., it must've been awkward for you at times, particularly in rural settings like Tara or Dalby, where I

imagine that such qualities are highly valued? How did you get through that?

BRETT – I've often thought about an alternate history (a Philip K. Dick sort of thing) where my father didn't die and I stayed out West and worked the land in a successful masculine fashion and never ever wrote poetry (perhaps only bush verse?). I often think about that other reality and if it ever could have come true. Probably not—out of boyish awkwardness (ala Les Murray) comes some other form of grace—writing perhaps. Art. I survived the “bush” through finding other masculine examples (teachers, rugby league football players, etc.) and learning from them. Ultimately it was Bruce Dawe and his poem that goes “blink, blink cemetery silence” (“Enter Without So Much as Knocking”) that, as Emily Dickinson suggested, “took the top of my head off” in high school and kick-started the attempt to write poetry myself.

PAUL – So you started writing poetry in high school? Or was it simply a case of exposure to the poetry of Dawe et al. at that time?

BRETT – Yeah, it was 1985 in grade 11 English. I asked my teacher if I could write a poem instead of the usual essay on the subject of “freedom.” That first poem ‘Summer Skies’, was I'd have to say now, very clichéd but I got 9/10 for the effort—the highest mark for an assignment I think I ever received. The poem had legs too—it was read out in a Year 12 English class by the Head English teacher, it was published in the 1985 school magazine and it was included in a Senior School Writing Competition anthology *Turns of Phrase* (Darling Downs Institute of Advanced Education Press, 1985) which was judged by, you guessed it, Bruce Dawe. So I had to go to the official launch and meet this famous poet we were studying at the same time in high school. It was fairly surreal and inspirational and I thought if all this could be achieved by just writing one poem—what would happen if I sat down and wrote another?

PAUL – You obviously did sit down and write another—many others, in fact. How long was it after you received your award and met Dawe before you wrote more poems? Was it a slow immersion into poetry, and the compulsion to write it? Because I know that like many teenage boys, you were heavily into reading fantasy and sci-fi at that time.

BRETT – During high school I was immersed in the usual adolescent fantasy material—Tolkien, Kelleher, Wyndham, Eddings, Le Guin, Steve Jackson & Ian Livingstone, etc., insulating myself from the “real” world. However, the poetry anthology we studied at school—*Mainly Modern* (Colmer & Colmer,

1974)—was the eye opener for me. It introduced me to the big guns—poets like Miroslav Holub, Paul Celan and the whole European tradition, Seamus Heaney, modernists like Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams and the Australian tradition, Slessor, Wright, Harwood, Murray, Dawe, etc.,. Encouraged by the success of 'Summer Skies,' I tried to write more biting, hard hitting social poetry about "freedom" and "capitalism" and other rebellious teenage themes (who doesn't?). After leaving high school I went to uni in Brisbane, but I only ever managed to write about six to eight poems a year from 1985-1992. Poems like 'Supermarket of Life' and 'Young Men of Dalby' and that sort of first attempt stuff. Lots of clichés. 1992 was the real breakout year for me.

PAUL – What was happening then for you? What changed that made '92 the breakout year?

BRETT – In 1992 I travelled down south fruit picking and ended up living in Melbourne for four months. During that time I discovered the Perseverance Poets weekly reading at the Perseverance Hotel in Fitzroy, where I sat in the audience for two weeks consecutively—absolutely shit scared to get up and read anything of my own, but eventually I did get up the courage and as Frost reckons "that has made all the difference ...". The gig was run by Ken Smeaton—a mover and shaker in the Melbourne Street Poetry scene—and he encouraged me greatly. It was through the warm reception I received as a young, beginner poet and from being surrounded by poets who had actually published books—guys like Mal Morgan, Ian McBryde, etc.,—that I started to write more poetry than ever before—ideally so I could get up each week and have something new to read out. Melbourne was my poetical genesis.

PAUL – As well as being the "genesis" of your poetic evolution, did your time in Melbourne get you thinking about organising poetry gigs? Did it make you want to have a go at running something similar in Brisbane? Had you been exposed to readings in Brisbane before going south?

BRETT – I hadn't been exposed to readings in Brisbane prior to this. I know there were gigs such as "Talk It Down" at the Storey Bridge Hotel and "Wild Words" at UQ, but I didn't attend them. I saw the "community" of poets in Melbourne supporting each other and I was impressed by the dedication and determination of organisers like Ken Smeaton, Shelton Lea and Thom the World Poet. After coming back to Brisbane, I was directed to the Queensland Poets Association (QPA) which held regular readings at Metro Arts on a Monday night and an open reading downstairs at the Crackerbox Cafe, MC'd by Francis Boyle. I began to read there and met the local poets,

but in September '92 established my own gig, "Chalice Poets" at Chalice House Cafe in South Brisbane. QPA at that stage was run by Robert Hughes and he suggested I start up a reading of my own. So a second genesis occurred in Brisbane with event organising.

PAUL – You mention that you were "impressed by the dedication of organisers" of readings in Melbourne, and now, a decade later it's come full circle—where you've got many Australian poets who are impressed by your dedication to event organising. Deb Comerford states "I think Brett's dedication to supporting and promoting Qld poetry is largely responsible for putting Qld poetry on the map—finally!". Jayne Fenton Keane adds that "Qld will have to wait a long time before anybody else will be willing to dedicate themselves to poetry in the way Brett has" and "it is not possible to think about "Queensland Poetry" without Brett's influence manifesting inside those words." How do you respond to statements like these from your peers?

BRETT – Firstly, where did you get those statements? I think I need to put them into my job application process! For me it's been pretty simple. It's taken about ten years of promotion, presentation and dedication for Queensland poetry to be recognised on the national stage. I've always known that we have many extremely talented poets here and that the Southern publishing/editing/reading bias has kept many of them outside the due recognition they deserve. Through a decade of organising poetry projects (Chalice Poets, "Seriously Fishy" poetry broadsheet, Brisbane Writers Fringe Festival, With Baited Breath, The Word Made Flesh, etc.) and the Queensland Poetry Festival in particular, my role has been to break down this entrenched Southern poetry hegemony. I feel that we've been successful in this.

PAUL – So after the better part of ten years promoting and presenting Queensland poets (alongside an impressive array of interstate guests), putting in all that time and energy with very little notable financial support from arts funding bodies (certainly when compared to other "mainstream" writing events), how do you feel, now that it's come to an end? Is this the end you had imagined for Fringe Arts Collective and *The Subverse: Queensland Poetry Festival*?

BRETT – Fringe Arts Collective Inc. never really got it together as a professional arts organisation—we never had an "official" office, had lots of resource problems and of course, never received the funding we required to make the leap from a semi-professional outfit to a professional arts company. Over the years we received good project support from all levels of government—

Arts Queensland, BCC, Australia Council, Creative New Zealand, etc., but we never received adequate operational support to a) create full-time paid positions for an administrator or b) keep the organisation functioning professionally. Over the last two years we only received half of what we applied for operationally—\$40,000 instead of \$80,000. Then the GST came in last year and ripped the guts out of our budget in respect to processing BAS and other new accounting costs. It just got to the stage where it became too hard personally and professionally to run a four day arts festival under these conditions. Besides, Meltssa (Ashley – Assistant Director) and myself needed to stop organising for poets and start writing again ourselves. However, if Arts Queensland had come to the party with \$80,000, I'd probably still be directing the festival and not currently an unemployed event manager. Out of the 53 Cultural Infrastructure Program (CIP) organisations funded by Arts Queensland annually, Fringe Arts was the least supported.

PAUL – There are different opinions in the poetry community about the impacts of the loss of *The Subverse: Queensland Poetry Festival*. Richard Hillman said that "the loss of venues such as the QPF will only subtract from Queensland's artistic culture ... it is a loss that will be felt by all poets of this country." And yet others like Deb Comerford are more optimistic, saying that "perhaps it is too early to talk doom and gloom." I share the concern of Jayne Fenton Keane, who states "whoever endeavours to try and continue the work of Fringe Arts Collective will face the same problems [lack of financial and personal support]. This lack of ongoing support and commitment to Qld poetry from many levels is problematic for any attempt to create a notion of Qld poetry." Your thoughts?

BRETT – What has struck me since the decision not to go on with Subverse, has been the number of people who have put up their hands to help organise new poetry projects in Queensland. There's a new committee formed to organize the 2002 Queensland Poetry Festival, albeit with probably less resources than Fringe Arts ever had. There are new poetry readings (Speedpoets, New & Selected) and publishing projects (papertiger, Interactive Press, etc.). Perhaps Queensland will lose the gains of the last ten years and its national relevance, if there isn't a major infrastructure event or organisation of the calibre we've seen. If poetry in Queensland becomes just another parochial exercise, then who is going to care?

What worries me more however, is the new funding regime at Arts Queensland where all artforms are competing in the same project funding pool for Major Grants over \$5,000. I believe only one poet (Michelle A. Taylor) received individual funding last year. I can see project funding

support for poetry unfortunately dropping off. I think the notion of a Queensland poetry will be an endangered species if infrastructure support is withdrawn and or significantly scaled down.

PAUL – I agree—it's of great concern, particularly in a state which apparently prides itself on having it's own "Minister for Poetry"—Matt Foley—that the arts bureaucracy seems unconcerned about its recent failure to support the development of Queensland poets, in addition to the loss of a nationally reputed literary festival. Why do you think poetry's fallen out of favour with our state funding bodies? To me it seems as though it's great for politicians and arts bureaucrats to have all these wonderful "Queensland poets" to quote from at media launches and events—and even to name centres of contemporary arts after (the Judith Wright Centre of Contemporary Arts)—and yet there is no real commitment (financial or otherwise) towards supporting future generations of Queensland poets.

BRETT – It'll be interesting to see if the new Queensland Poetry Festival receives the same \$40,000 per year allocated previously to Fringe Arts, or if some other larger arts organisation will receive a Xmas bonus! To me the commitment to funding poetry by Arts Queensland has been satisfactory, not terrific, and there were gains each year until the figure was capped at \$40,000 in 2000. I suspect it will never go higher, even if a new organisation or festival arises out of the Fringe Arts ashes. Unfortunately, the next generation of Queensland poets who have benefited from involvement with Fringe Arts/Subverse will have to look elsewhere for inspiration, mentorship and promotion of their work—interstate and internationally I think. The local poetry scene, while virulent at the moment, is unfortunately characterised more by its boom/bust cycle. The internet should override this local pattern and hopefully, talented work will get its due respect and be published no matter where it's produced. Or so one would hope. There's always a *Calyx* anthology (Brennan & Minter, 2000) lurking around the corner I suppose!

PAUL – So what's next for Brett Dionysius? You've got a second collection on the way—*Bacchanalia* with Interactive Press—but where to from there?

BRETT – Yeah, *Bacchanalia* was a project funded by Arts Queensland back in 1997, so they should be happy with the publishing outcome. It represents work from 1997-2002 and deals with local "Brisbane" issues and larger global themes of alienation and marginalisation. I've also recently finished a discontinuous verse novel—*Universal Andalusia*—courtesy of a Literature Fund grant in 2000. It deals with aspects of nationalism, tourism, Western cultural hegemony (?), Australian national identity, ockerism and yes—

masculinity. That subject seems to pop up again and again in my work – I guess it's a pretty universal theme for me—"what does it mean to be a man in the 20th and 21st centuries"? I've also just begun a new short discontinuous collection—*The Negativity Bin*—examining contemporary unemployment in Australia, the humiliation of job search training, Centrelink, etc., juxtaposed with highlights of cultural evolution from J. Bronowski's *The Ascent of Man*. It's a cheeky hybrid look at the current political, cultural and social atmosphere in Australia and more universally. Like *Andalusia*, it is a more humourous attempt at dealing with quite serious contemporary social issues.

PAUL – No "verse novel for young adults" in the works?

BRETT – No, not unless I get a five figure advance! Hell, even a four or three figure advance would do right now! At the moment, I'm still trying to write those biting, hard hitting poems. And I hope, I'm slowly getting better with each attempt. If there's a market for them—great. If not, I've got an idea for a fantasy novel based partly on the Epic of Gilgamesh, called *The Seed of Youth Regained*. I have no qualms about writing bestseller material and trying to earn a living from writing, as well as maintaining the more "literary" output. This project might even be a "literary fantasy" novel in the vein of Le Guin and Tolkien. I'm willing to experiment I guess as most poets are finding these days—flexibility is the key to survival.

PAUL – I'm sure I speak on behalf of many Queensland poets when I say good luck, and thanks again for ten years of selfless dedication to the development of Queensland poets and poetry infrastructure.

BRETT – It's been a great tens years of "muscular" poetry development in Queensland. It's been an honour to witness the rise of the next generation/wave of contemporary Australian poets from out of this state. Poets like Rebecca Edwards, Sam Wagan Watson, Melissa Ashley, Liam Ferney, Jayne Fenton Keane, Ted Nielsen, Bronywn Lea, Brentley Frazer, Michelle A. Taylor and yourself. I'm sure I'll have an opportunity to contribute to the poetry infrastructure again—however, it may be somewhere else and in some other form. At the moment I'm happy just writing and sending poems out into the wide blue poetical yonder.

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