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Not quite Bukowski

Warning: may contain angst about the Melbourne Performance Poetry and Spoken
word scene

They hate you when you're clever but they despise a fool
– John Lennon, “Working Class Hero”

1995 to 1998

From 1991 to 1995 I organised Poetry Slams (the first in Australia I believe) and music and poetry nights including Arts Auctions, and tributes to Leonard Cohen and Charles Bukowski. Most of the events had large audiences and I tried to pay people as much as I could. I did the Poetry Slams to promote poetry to wider audiences and to encourage new writers. I was on the dole, living in rooming houses and eating in soup kitchens

In 1995 I lived in a rooming house and I was organising events and there was a beautiful woman living there and the tenants were jealous of my activities and they started putting poems under her door signed in my name.

I never wrote them and I don't know what's worse, being accused of stalking a woman or writing bad poems.

I was put into Royal Park Mental institution and I appealed and two weeks later I was in a room of twelve doctors in white coats and one of them said I was depressed. I said I'm a writer I'm supposed to be depressed. He said if you are a writer, recite a poem.

This is the poem I performed:

A Modern Fable

Larry was a lion.
a rough and ready

tough and heady
mean and lean,
vicious and ferocious
take no crap
from anybody Lion

Larry was a lion
who thought
he was a zebra.
“I think I am a zebra,
therefore I must be a zebra.”
Larry quit the prowl.
No more howling.
No more growling,
for this little zebra.

Then along came a hunter
who looked, thought
and shot like a hunter,
killing every lion in Africa
except Larry
who was too busy
acting like a zebra.

And there's a moral
in there but don't ask
me to explain it.

After I read the poem, the doctor asked me what it meant. I told him I used to be a lion living a violent life and I chose art and now I'm a zebra. The next day they let me out and I never went there again. I was put on medication called Stellazine which has since been banned because of the many side effects. While I was taking it I had a brain loop where I would occasionally hear this young woman call my name. I also had regular panic attacks. I was first diagnosed with Schizophrenia at 35 which even the doctors thought was strange for someone at my late age as normally this illness begins in your teens.

This woman was friends with musical friends of mine and they stopped supporting me or trusting me. I was lucky that I had a good psychiatrist who put me on the disability support pension and through that I was given priority access to a housing commission flat. I couldn't write for four years. A lot of people said I should write about my experiences but it took twenty years to put it down in the following poem:

The rise and fall of the idealistic dreamer

1. Entrepreneur on the dole

He promoted rock and roll poetry nights
putting up posters, writing press releases,
calling the media, while the venues treated him poorly,
on the phones to each other planning his demise.
They snorted cocaine, while he dined at soup kitchens
living on welfare. Many conspired to end
his career in show business. Until he was penniless
in a rooming house, still treading the boards,
chasing dreams, working tirelessly without pay
as a blonde woman called softly his name.

2. The walls of this hotel are paper thin

The lunatics took over the asylum
laughing at his failures, hating his success,
creating a caricature of him, planning his fall
from grace, from the stars, a penniless fool.
He survived on charity and food vouchers,
as the lunatics plotted his demise,
listening to him through paper thin walls,
planting love poems he would never write.
The woman with the blonde hair and long legs
coerced to pull the trigger to end his dreams

3. The rose garden

The bright yellow full moon'd conspired against him.
The police arriving in a divvy van to escort him

through the hell of Dante's Inferno.
Her soft voice calling his name forever,
Her footsteps down the stairs in his memory.
Penniless he was escorted to the mental institution,
his dreams postponed for twenty years of boredom,
confronted by doctors who declared him insane.
He recovered from the stress and the trauma,
standing near a rose garden pledging to be free again.

1999 to 2001

In early 1999 I worked out that I had to try and get my writing back and I made some decisions to keep a journal and write not for fame and recognition but to keep me sane. I even went on a fast for a few days. I had a good support worker who trusted and supported me and I was going to a rehabilitation clinic. I could see a situation in my romantic life where I would lose my dignity again and so I tried unsuccessfully to withdraw from that social circle as the woman I liked had friends who believed the false allegations.

My reputation seemed to reach the rehabilitation clinic and my story wasn't believed and I had ten attempts to be put into a mental institution. In mid-1999, I befriended a young poetess and let her stay with me, but she was too difficult and I evicted her—the first time that I had done this to anyone. She went to the authorities and told them I had abused her.

She was going to the same clinic as me and was instead put into the Alfred Hospital psyche ward. She began calling me from her ward and making death threats to me, so I put an intervention order on her. Her father was a wealthy man who believed her version of the events and hired a lawyer to represent her and had the intervention order revoked. This woman then went around the poetry scene telling people that I abused her and everyone believed her. I had chairs thrown at me outside a restaurant and was spat on twice.

My counsellor went to Sydney and I was given a new support worker who didn't tell me that he was also the counsellor for this woman. I felt this was a conflict of interest and I was forced to leave the clinic. I was refused counselling on eight further occasions when each new counsellor rang the clinic.

In 2001 a woman from the US representing the Poetry Slam organised a meeting at a prominent theatre and there were 200 people in the audience and I was not invited.

They formed a committee and I was refused three times to join them and my history and rights to the Poetry Slam were ignored. I felt gutted and could barely get out of bed for three weeks and decided that I couldn't support Poetry unconditionally anymore and I began to write fiction.

At first I wrote the collection *Postcards from the End of the World* in the form of micro stories which *Southerly*, *Overland*, *Meanjin* and a few other journals published. Here is another recent poem about that time:

The Princess

1. *Saturday morning at the South Melbourne market*

"Do you believe in me?" she said. "Do you trust me?"

She knew all about the mechanics of power and reputation.

She was a princess of noble bloodlines.

Her father, a rich and successful businessman. He replied he did, unsure of what her proposition was.

Though her mother more shrewd. Knowing her daughter well.

She orchestrated a meeting with the glamorous blonde.

trying to bargain her beauty for his head on a platter.

When her bluff was called, she rang the authorities,

but it was her who was taken away in a divvy van.

2. *The Alfred hospital Psyche ward*

He wasn't as stupid as she thought he was, no victim.

She called the lawyer of her rich father, who she also lied to.

She triumphed and then told her lies to her friends

stating that she was victim, leaving him vulnerable.

The full moon shone bright over his hi rise apartment.

He visited a friend at the Alfred Hospital Psyche ward.

There she was trying to get him put away again.

She was a princess of noble bloodlines.

He remained calm and traded her lie with one of his own,

free to once again be true to his creative self.

3. *The passage of time*

Fifteen years later and she has created very little,
while his muse gave him random olive seeds of truth.
“But I’m a princess with noble bloodlines,” she said,
yet no one listened to her anymore, as she screams.
It should have been her name in the spotlight.
It should have been her day in the sun, triumphing over him.
She tells all who will listen that she is young, there is still time,
Her pleas fall on deaf ears, abused by her many lies,
while he checks in every day on the time clock of art.
his discipline confining her to a footnote of his life.

2001 to 2007

I have had strange experiences with book publishers. In 1998 the publisher of my first book wouldn’t give me royalties after I had done all the work organising launches and publicity. A lawyer friend of mine supported me and the publisher even wrote a negative letter to my mother which began the end of that relationship with my parents.

In 2003 I had a collection published by Ninderry Press, They were about to publish a new collection of poetry and then the publisher died in a car crash. In 2007 a small press published a pamphlet of mine but did very little towards promoting it and it was basically a self-funded vanity press style publication. I began writing longer short stories after having taking baby steps into fiction with the Postcard stories.

I was a volunteer at a community theatre and arts complex from 2005 to 2006 and wrote a detective novel called *Heroes in the Seaweed*. I had wanted to write a novel for a long time and the stars were aligned and I wrote it quickly. Once again I think my reputation caused me to be ejected from Gasworks in late 2006.

I had always wanted to publish a literary journal and was given my first grant by the City of Port Phillip to publish the inaugural issue of the *Paradise Anthology*. All my organising over the previous years was about trying to raise money to publish a magazine.

The *Paradise Anthology* also had song lyrics. I was organising events for a writers organisation and they went feral on me and took ownership of the grant and once again my lawyer friend came to the rescue and I eventually got the money back to publish the first issue. In 2007 I organised the first of four tours with Les Murray which were all quite successful. Needing poems to put into the *Paradise Anthology* I organised Poetry Idol with the final held at the Melbourne Writers Festival. It took a lot of work but that too was a great success.

2008 to the present

I worked incredibly hard with Poetry Idol and there were many well attended events and I was lucky to also get more funding from the City of Port Phillip and the R.E. Ross trust to publish the *Paradise Anthology* and other related projects. But once again I found working with some of the poets difficult. I gave out thousands of dollars towards prizes, publication fee, printing, judges, hiring musicians, sound people, book designers, web designers, photographers and most events had free wine and finger food supplied by the libraries.

I proofread each issue of the *Paradise Anthology* twice but my book designer was lazy and let through many typos and all I heard from poets despite all that I have done for them was complaints about the typos. Sometimes I feel like the character from the Old man and the Sea where he spent so much time catching the marlin only for the sharks to eat all the flesh from the fish.

I'm reminded of the opening scene in the film *The Razor's Edge*, where everyone complains about the host of a party but everyone eats his cake. Thinking about some of the people I have met in the poetry world, I am also reminded of the following lines from the song "The Story of Isaac" by Leonard Cohen:

I will help you if I must,
I will kill you if I can,
the peacock spreads its fan.

I have returned occasionally to poetry with three collections since 2007. Geoff Page and David Brooks have referred to my writing having similarities with Charles Bukowski.

That is nice of them as Bukowski has been one of my muses and I always tell myself no matter how hard my life has been, he went through similar adversity. He had the security of

Black Sparrow Press for many years, but like him I have never been successful with many grants for my own writing. I'm not as great as him, but like Bukowski I have had many bad experiences with some poets, mainly those connected to the Melbourne performance poetry scene. If I have learnt anything from him it, it is to try and be brave and reinvent yourself. I thought most writers should find out both sides of a story and they have never bothered to find out my version of events. The piece below is about my interactions with the Melbourne performance poetry scene.

The Melbourne poetry scene complains about being excluded from the academic world, but they exclude other people like me and a Melbourne artist has painted portraits of more than fifty artists and I'm not featured. There have been two books of Melbourne poets published in the last few years and I don't feature in either. Here is another poem about the performance poets:

The Collective

1. Death by committee

Before he came along they were content,
pleased with their creative output, planning their careers,
but he sang a strange song of sirens
marooned on rocks, of the broken hearted.
They formed a committee plotting his demise
setting up the daughter of a fragile woman,
they were hungry for recognition,
all the while on the telephones gossiping
working out his psychology what he coveted,
giving him random seeds of hope.

2. Semantics

"You may be clever but we are smarter," they said.
We know all the right moves and people.
They formed the live Poets Society
excluding all who would not kill for their careers.
Power not art was their concern
for they knew without it they were doomed,
but they did not covert their muse
as their talents were small, but they had their wits
betting the power of many lesser talents

could defeat the dedication of the individual.

3. *Even the pawn holds a grudge*

He chose a lonely road less travelled
and though they sabotaged him at every turn,
they too had to deal with the hands of time.
They craved money to blend in with society
acquired position of power in academia
but there is a subtle shift in the world
weary of the warriors and the thieves.
Still toiling he believed in love and light
as the shadows of time and death
fall upon their calculating brows.

Now I want to return to fiction again and at the end of this piece are two unpublished stories. Looking back on the last twenty four years there have been a lot of great adventures and a lot of misadventures. But I feel I am an ideas man and some of them have been good. There is only a small piece of pie in the Poetry World and feel some of the poets are fighting over the crumbs like ants.

I sometimes feel I receive little recognition and fortune, but I also like to think that I have grown up in the world of literature and showbiz. I have many musical friends and for me they are well read and some of their lyrics are great poems. It seems like most of the musicians I know live responsible lives and the performance poets are living rock and roll lives drinking and taking drugs. Most of the musicians I know give credit where it is due. I am indebted to the many editors who have published my poems and stories over the last 24 years.

I can't seem to get recognition for my stories because I am labelled a poet even though I have never called myself one because I've just felt that was a little pretentious.

I'd like to write another novel one day, and continue writing short stories. For some people I am an enigma but in the end if I have gotten some friendships with people who trust and respect me then it hasn't all been a waste of time. All my recent works has been in the third person including parts of this memoir and writing it may allow me to write more in the first person for future writing. As David Brooks and Les Murray have been recently quoted, the "I"

may not necessarily be me all the time. Like Bukowski, and in the tradition of Woody Allen if any of my writing makes fun of other people I also make fun of myself.

I am an outsider in the mainstream literary world and it gives me grief sometimes, but if the writing is true then as long as I can find homes for my little orphan poems and stories then one day they might find readers who are interested in the stories from my life and not just the story of my life and that I go sometimes where my imagination takes me. Bukowski's autobiographical work doesn't interest me as much as his flights of whimsy and imaginary tales.

Like most people my life is evolving all the time and perhaps at the end I can make sense of it, but in the meantime my little writing ideas have to be investigated. I am seeking a new mental health counsellor, but until I find the right person, my friendships have been getting me through life. It took me a long time to find the right medication that didn't give me side effects

Bukowski was a complicated man and I feel I am a man with simple needs living a complicated life but I like his sense of humour. Whenever I perform I try and end with something funny and that is how I will end this piece.

The Grapevine

Eric thought
he was going insane
so he told his best friend Wayne
who told Sally his girl
that Eric was in a whirl.
Fool that she was she told
Jessica because who else
could you trust, but she was
in lust with an Elvis look alike
named Ike who knew
it wasn't true but just in case
he told Chase his motor-bike
mechanic mate, who in turn
told Kate his sister who knew
a Mister Drew, But Sue
the snitch told Mitch the school dunce.

Now once upon a time
long before rhyme
was ever used people
got confused over rhythm
and meter until a guy
named Peter came along
and turned it all into song

And restored the poem
back to its rightful glory.
Now back to the story...

So there was Eric
walking the street
when who should he meet,
but Doctor Brown
in his surgical gown
who straight away,
as clear as day
saw Eric's insanity
and sent him to the infirmary
where the Doc operated
to remove the pain
that drove Eric insane
inside his brain. Alas
how sad instead of a tumour
the Doc removed
Eric's sense of humour.