



Photo by Kevin Powell

### **New Possibilities #3: The “Difficult” Third Newsletter by J.R. Barner**

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Hello, friends! It’s been a season of travel so far as, shortly, I’ll be in the UK, where it is a bit chilly, but also where I will enjoy the much-needed warmth of friends and family this holiday season. London, even at its dreariest, always has a bit of festive sparkle this time of year. I’m certainly not immune to its charms, so I foresee a bit of window shopping, cozy reflection, and what I’m choosing to call “gentle tourism,” lest my brash American tendencies wear on the patience of my transatlantic hosts. I always worry about that when I go places, being perceived as a nuisance, being “in the way,” asking too much, that sort of thing. Being “difficult,” in other words. This brings me around to the subtitle to the newsletter this month, which I shamelessly nicked from Billy Bragg’s 1986 album *Talking with the Taxman About Poetry*, a title [he nicked from Vladimir Mayakovsky’s brilliant 1926 poem](#). All this appropriation and it’s just the subtitle! Mayakovsky saw it coming, of course, writing in the very poem:

**They write**

**stolen lines in -**

**Not turning a hair.**

**Thieving**

**Like that**

**Is nothing unusual**

**in a country**

**where thieves are enough and to spare.**

Leaving a place and going abroad, it's tempting to just disavow the old shore, to immerse oneself in the new one. What the late Anthony Bourdain and musician Josh Homme refer to, in an episode of the former's travel show *No Reservations* as "the bittersweet curse," namely, as Homme noted, that "nothing feels better than going home, and nothing feels better than leaving home." Like Mayakovsky's narrator, we're exhausted by our everyday inconveniences and yet pay a premium for new, exciting ones. That's the adventure. On this precipice of a new year, a new election cycle, we stare down at the hundred different crises vying for our attention at home, and then look up, over the fence, out of our backyards, to other horizons, elsewhere.

Mayakovsky writes:

**Poetry-**

**all poetry-**

**is an exploration.**

(Translated by Peter Tempest © 1985 Raduga Publishers)

Poetry has that tendency - to look up and out but also look inside, often at the things that we wish weren't always that visible. Poetry doesn't let us filter, censor, or leave uncounted. Poetry, and poets, Mayakovsky reminds us, don't always play well with others. Mayakovsky speaks to all of us when he says:

**But if**

**you think**

**all I do is just press**

**words other people use**

**into my service**

**Comrades,**

**come here,**

**let me give you my pen**

**and you**

**can yourselves**

**write your own verses!**

(Translated by Peter Tempest © 1985 Raduga Publishers)

Freedom's not over there, Mayakovsky seems to be saying, but inside every one of us. We all have a song to sing. We all have a role to play, no matter what ground is beneath our feet.

## No Plan: Asking the (Dreaded) Social Media Question, Part 3

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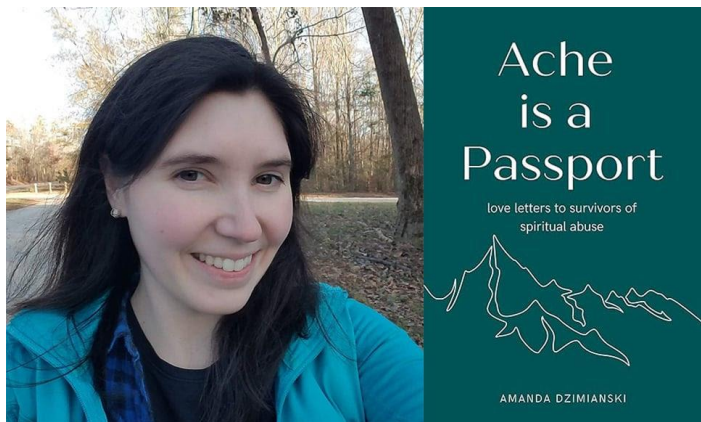
On January 1st, I'll be leaving 4-5 social media platforms and deleting most, if not all of them, from my phone and other devices. For the two or three apps that will stay active, I'll likely turn off the DMs and everything will refer to [my website](#). Any updates I post will likely be copied and pasted from there. My email ([jrbarner@gmail.com](mailto:jrbarner@gmail.com)) will stay the same and I'll always take the time to respond - that's a promise.

Beyond that, I have [no plan](#).

We'll see where this experiment takes us. Over the next few weeks, I'll post something on the socials that are getting the axe. I flirted with the idea of doing a poll to see which accounts [should stay or go](#), but then I realized that I don't like polls, so I think I might draw straws, roll dice, or do some other random selection process. If you wish, email me and convince me to keep one or lose another. I'm guessing that [a large percentage of my followers are just as ambivalent about it as I am](#). We'll have to wait and see.

## Burning Questions with Amanda Dzimianski

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Burning Questions is when I ask three questions of a writer I admire and sometimes they ask questions back. This month, we have [Amanda Dzimianski](#), from my town of Athens, Georgia.

Amanda is a certified writing coach, poet, parent, partner, teacher, and prolific presence on Instagram ([@amanda.idareyoutospellit](#)). She is the author of *Ache is a Passport: Love Letters to Survivors of Spiritual Abuse*. The book is a fascinating examination of growing into, and ultimately leaving behind oppressive spirituality and is presented in a way that is vibrant, thoughtful, and healing. I've been extremely fortunate to share the stage with Amanda and can attest that seeing her perform her work is a powerful experience.

**J.R. Why poetry? How did you find poetry (or how did poetry find you)? Tell me your poetry origin story.**

**AMANDA:** I think poetry patiently pursued me until I turned around and took notice. And I've stayed with it so far because nothing else has offered me the same sense of satisfaction and safety.

As a kid, I would write occasional, Seussian-type verse for school assignments and holiday scavenger hunts, just for fun. I was maybe 10 or 12. But that was the extent of my interaction with the form, until high school. The company that my community purchased homeschooling curriculum hosted annual student competitions, and one of the categories was poetry recitation. So, I chose poems from dusty old books, memorized them, and performed them at regional and national events. Metrical, nationalistic stuff, like "Paul Revere's Ride" by Longfellow and "Keenan's Charge" by George Parsons Lathrop. But after graduation, other than a very meaningful blip on my screen in college when I ran across "The Dead Man Walking" by Thomas Hardy in a history class, I utterly forgot poetry existed, at least to me.

Fast forward to about 4 years ago. I had begun writing prose on purpose, and every once in a while, I would run across another writer's poetry, feel inspired, and just dabble in writing my own. It was such a subtle thing, I never really thought twice about it. It has surprised me looking back at old archives, that I was experimenting with poetry, and not even noticing.

In 2020 during the pandemic, when holes were ripped in all our ceilings, I took a workshop, attended some virtual readings, and submitted to a competition. What I sent in didn't place, but I was fascinated with what went on in me during the process. It felt like magic. I both understood and did. not. understand. what was happening, so I was enthralled by the mystery of it, the creativity, and excited by what I was putting together on the page. Like a puzzle. A lot of it felt like a new section of my inner world had had

the lights turned on. There was a flow to it. An ease, in which I felt like I didn't have to obsess over "getting it right", because, unlike the other stuff I wrote, accuracy wasn't the point.

But I still primarily wrote [really prettified] prose—or thought I did—until different writers around me began to call my work "poetry". Hearing others reflect to me what they were receiving from my writing helped me accept that name for the words and begin to think about the work through that lens. The next year, I participated in an online arts conference, and read at their virtual open mic. From there, I plugged into different poetry communities—usually small, always life-giving. I began intentionally reading well-known poets and practicing all kinds of forms. Pretty haphazardly, but on purpose. Then I found Word of Mouth in Athens, and that brings us up to speed!

**AMANDA: How do you approach creative legacy, meaning, what do you want readers to leave the page with when they interact with your poetry? How much/little does this inform your process?**

**J.R.:** I need to answer your questions in reverse! First, let me try to address this in terms of process. In the narrative style of poetry that I tend to write, this idea has quite a bit of purchase, because, in addition to mood, atmosphere, or emotion, there is quite a bit of character and setting and allusion and detail that ends up there on the plate, as it were, for the reader. Telling a good story for my reader is what keeps me motivated. In that sense, I guess I start as a sort of stand-in for the reader, in that I'm the first one that I need to please. After that, it becomes either my internal sense of when a poem is done, which is constantly changing or, if I'm submitting a piece, an actual, living, not-just-in-my-head, external editor. There will be editorial expectations I'll need to meet, which is good because editors provide another layer of thought about audience reception: what the reader needs, what questions they may have, and whether those questions necessarily need answering directly or obliquely. That said, it's not a want or obligation I would ever put on the readers themselves. No one should feel like a poem is something they must "get" or have anyone tell them whether they've "got it" or not. It's there if you want it. Like a pool. Some days, you feel like just sitting in the sun, with just your feet in the water, and it keeps you cool and refreshed. On other days, you want to explore a little, wade out to the deep end, take a deep breath, and see how far down you can go. With my work, my sincere hope is that it can serve in either of these capacities or any place on the spectrum between those two extremes.

So, while I try not to impose a particular way of reading my work, I am always surprised by the responses I get from readers. One reader will come up to me and say one word or phrase from a poem, or just say the title, nod knowingly, and walk away, like

we've just shared a secret (and maybe we have?) Other times, people will sincerely tell me they have no clue what I am talking about, others may compliment my writing generally, or say a piece made them feel a particular way or reminded them of something or someone from their lives. One of my favorite recent interactions with someone was a woman who came up to me after reading as I was signing books and said, "I don't want to feel like your poems make me feel anymore, so I am *not* buying your book." I loved her! Someone else recently gave me a little pat on the back for referencing a beloved song and another, a street that a family member grew up on. Now, I have no way of measuring what kind of "legacy" I've left with any of those readers and I'm not sure I'm meant to, but I feel like these interactions speak to the fact that I've made some kind of impact, however small, on my readership. What's interesting is that I experience that impact a hundred-fold as I'm creating new work. I'm always chasing it, good or bad, large or small, because it shows me what I'm making influences other people, and that's why I share it in the first place. The what or how of it might not be up to me, but that's what I want every piece I put out into the world to do.

**J.R.:** Your recent collection, *Ache is a Passport*, is a collection of poems that explore the trauma associated with both living under and escaping from an oppressive or exploitative fundamentalism. But, within many of the pieces, I detect layers that move away from the thematic arc and into more personal narrative, Biblical exegesis, and even elements of confessional poetry, like Sexton's *Live or Die* or some of Plath's *Ariel* poems. How do you balance the autobiographical with the spiritual and therapeutic aspects of your poetry?

**AMANDA:** First, that is the headiest analysis that little book will ever receive, so thank you for making it sound exceptionally legit!

Second, for this book specifically, the subtitle informed everything I ended up choosing and writing for it. Beyond just spitting out pieces of my own story, I wanted everything to fit that theme of healing, and healing for a very specific type of reader. So, adding in the callbacks to religious ideas others would resonate with, plus whatever has been useful in my own experience of extricating myself from a cultish tradition, made sense.

As to "balance" in general, a lot of what I do at this point in my poetry feels instinctive. I'm chasing the feeling evoked by a moment, or the next phrase that fits with one I just found. It feels like an experiment, and some of it is just me telling a story, maybe one I'm tired of not talking about out loud and trying to transmute it into something that would meet a reader where they are. That part is intentional. So, if what's coming through as a result feels balanced, I'm thrilled! As someone who wants to

participate in the building of a better world, I'm glad those three elements are present because I think we need all of them—we need presence (the autobiographical), we need story and symbol (the spiritual), and we need tools to use both things well (the therapeutic).

But at the end of the day, I'm just meeting needs in my own life...to write, to name my own experience, to find something in it worth redeeming, to turn it into something useful for other people, and to be heard. I think this is one of the things people don't talk about enough: if we can name what we genuinely need, be honest about it, and then go after that, typically we're going to end up with something that serves a greater good, too.

**AMANDA: What are your thoughts on “Resistance” in writing practice? (Specifically, that nebulous experience defined in Steven Pressfield’s *The War of Art* as a perceived force that lodges between “the life we live, and the unlive life within us.”) Does it exist for you? If yes, how do you navigate it? If not, what are your theories on why it is a non-issue for you?**

**J.R.:** I remember when that book came out twenty or so years ago, flipping through it as fast as I could in some big box chain bookstore, because I couldn't afford to buy a copy and I thought it would give me some perspective on why I hadn't "made it" as a musician and was now on my way back to college, which felt a little like surrendering, to keep up the militaristic metaphors. My writing, which I'd shown to maybe five people, was stacked neatly in boxes in the back of a U-Haul, and wouldn't see the light of day for decades. My mother had even told me to look into publishing and my sister-in-law had gone so far as to mention me to her aunt, who wrote regularly for hit television shows. I didn't do anything. I stopped writing—I couldn't write. When I did write, I no longer shared it. When my sister's aunt came to visit, I pretended I was sick and stayed home while she took everyone else out to a fancy dinner on Hollywood's dime. A voice inside my head told me I wasn't ready but also that I would know when I was. As those neon lights of Borders or Barnes & Noble or Walden's or wherever shone down, I learned from Pressfield, just a few years and one massive check from Robert Redford past dumpster diving and living in his car, that I should fight back against that voice, that the voice was wrong and would keep me poor and my dreams unrealized. And the same was true for everyone. But, if that was true, I thought, why was he charging \$17.95 to tell me that? My voice, enemy within though it may have been, was *me*. And, it was giving its advice for *free*. Before I got to the last page, I silently closed Pressfield's book, slipped it back into the other self-help titles, nestled in there somewhere between *The Artist's Way* and a bunch of books by Thích Nhất Hạnh. I marched out of there. I did not look back.

I recount that memory not to denigrate Pressfield, or the self-help genre in any way. I leave it to others to [do that sort of thing](#). I hope I've done the opposite, because of all the different types of resistance there are out there (psychological, financial, physical, interpersonal, you name it), I've experienced them **all**. And I'm so glad I did. Because, I think, to be truly successful, we need to nurture our resistance. If we just go to war against it, like Pressfield states, and show up, be a "professional," or fake it until we make it, or any of those clichés, we shut off the part of ourselves that speaks to self-preservation, assesses our motivation, detects flaws in our thinking, and steers us away from sinking \$17.95 into somebody else's pocket. This sort of thing reminds me of *American Idol*. Every season some people have never entertained the possibility that they **can't** do something. When they find themselves on a stage where it becomes evident that they can't, it leads to this weird shaming moment where the judges or hosts are awkwardly laughing and judgmental. But what is perhaps most telling is the looks on the auditioners' faces. They look so *betrayed*. And they realize they've *betrayed themselves*, which makes it all worse!

I know people who write for all kinds of reasons. I know people who write because it is their therapy and it's the only thing that makes their life feel normal and worth living. I know people who view writing strictly as a commercial enterprise. They write to make money and have their name plastered all over things. I write because I always have and I don't do anything else very well, save maybe teaching within a narrow window of topics, and playing the drums. We will all encounter resistance. There are days I stare at the same word for two hours, without putting even a comma after it. There have been times when I've written things that I knew weren't good enough or weren't finished. I've taken work out of consideration for awards and publication. I've turned down opportunities. I still haven't returned emails and phone calls as I should. I doubt I'll ever get an agent or submit to a large press. I have worked hard on being okay with those things, or if I wasn't ok with those things, I have worked on finding a way to achieve or transcend them. It's THAT work that has made all the difference. Not writing a single word. Writing and sticking to a writing schedule, showing up and playing the game, etc. etc. contributed to making me a better writer, there's no doubt about it. But nurturing my resistance and understanding what Georges Bataille called a "limit experience," where one learns about what they can't do, rather than trying to convince themselves what they can, has ultimately made me a better person.

We will all find ourselves at that crossroads where we can either put ourselves out there even though the voice is saying "not ready" or listen, sit down, recommit, and recalibrate. I think this is the intersection where Pressfield and I both stand but he wants to run out there into traffic and I'm fine waiting for the lights to change. I don't have that Hollywood money, but I feel



incredibly comfortable in my skin, and I think I've got an extra \$17.95 lying around here somewhere.

**J.R.:** In addition to your writing, you engage in many amazing activities that support the broader community of writers and their writing, from coaching to marketing and self-publishing, to just writing *together*. It seems to me like this question of community is kind of a watershed right now, and people seem to be taking a stand on it. For instance, John Colapinto, staff writer for *The New Yorker* recently published on social media that “there is no such thing as a ‘writing community.’ Or if there is, avoid it.” What do you make of this? What does community mean to you, and where do you see writers like us fitting in in the broader social, political, and cultural climate?

**AMANDA:** *Mounts soapbox* I completely disagree with Colapinto! At least, with the surface-level verbiage. I'm assuming there was a broader intention behind the post, and I'll go track it down and read it later. For now, the reason I disagree vehemently with the statement is because I have, for years now, benefitted extraordinarily from “writing communities.” (My definition is any group of people gathering around the practice of writing.) Groups made up of poets, bloggers, nonfiction authors, novelists, grant writers, podcasters (they write!), and storytellers have all influenced my writing life...and for the better. These communities and the people in them are the primary reason I've continued writing for an audience rather than just my journal. They've offered me perspective, reminders of and access to what I don't know, as well as companionship in the pursuit of what can become an isolating experience (in your head so much, the need for quiet, etc., etc.). Plus, the inspiration, both energetic and conceptual, found in groups of writers is addictive to me. And there's freedom in knowing you're with people who “get it,” to whom you don't have to explain everything about the challenges, the joy, the questions.

There is, for sure, always a danger of getting stuck in an echo chamber, or being surrounded by folks who get their kicks by being hyper-critical (maybe these sorts of groups are what Colapinto is referencing); but on the whole, I think you can tell fairly quickly whether or not the participants are there in good faith, and whether the collective success of the group matters to them. (If not, then yes, avoid...but I've found this to be the exception rather than the rule.) *Exits soapbox*

Re: the last question, to me and my idealism, community is the actual end goal of the work of writing—the result of what we write is hopefully an impetus for creating a just and imaginative community beyond words on a page, either by bringing people together around an idea or practice, severing (an overlooked, necessary part of the process of community) groups into more informative segments, or even in uniting an individual with exiled

parts of themselves. (Gods, that was so theoretical...what I mean is, essentially, relationships. Of all stripes and types.) I see writing communities as part of the cyclical nature of things—we write because we have hope for healthier communities across our city, our state, our continent, and our globe. So why not begin where we hope to end? With people learning from and listening to each other?

**AMANDA:** Are you aware of any creative cycles at work in your processes? I've been paying attention for several years to the cyclical nature of my inclinations when it comes to creativity. My inner prompts often sync with the well-mapped seasonal cycles of the year, as well as other natural/cultural patterns and rhythms at work in and around myself. So, I'm always very curious to hear if other writers experience anything similar.

**J.R.:** You know, I really should pay more attention to that sort of thing! I'd say, just thinking about generally, that I'm usually more productive in warmer months than colder, and more productive in either late evening or early morning than afternoon. But these are just my best guesses. I will say that if I am writing in more of a character's voice, be it a character from history, some version of myself, or someone completely fictitious, it all goes out the window. They have to be ready to "speak." And, if they're not, all bets are off. I've had poems unfinished for *months*, maybe *years*. Then wake up from a sound sleep at three o'clock in the morning and that character is talking to me—I have to start writing it down! That's happened more than once.

**AMANDA:** Are you a holiday movie person? If yes, favorites, please.

**J.R.:** Yes, and no. Or no and yes. I suppose I am ambivalent toward the usual customary holiday standards. I will watch them, I am not opposed to them in any way, I am glad they are there every year. But what I like are holiday movies that aren't holiday movies. Like *Merry Christmas*, *Mr. Lawrence*. I love hearing "Silver Bells" and "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" in *Three Days of the Condor*. The party planning is my favorite part of *The Thin Man*. I don't think the holiday is ever mentioned, and it very obviously takes place in New York in the summer, but I still watch *Crossing Delancey* every Hanukkah. I guess I like my festiveness in small, easily digestible doses.

*I meant to but forgot to ask Amanda to reciprocate on that last question, so we'll be left speculating what her holiday cinematic favorites are. Thanks, Amanda, for a fabulous interview!*

**Some Light Holiday Reading & Listening**

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Here's a quick peek into what's on my stereo and bedside table:

Molly

Blake Butler



Winter can often be a time to contemplate mortality and this year seems, for me, to be especially laden with feelings of loss and (re)assessments of the lives of people who have passed on but whose impact on me and my work is evergreen.

Whether or not you knew [Molly Brodak or her exquisite writing](#), [Blake Butler's memoir](#) (Simon & Schuster, 2023) of their life together and the life that only revealed itself after her tragic death, is a stark examination of love, loss, and the messy intersection between the two.

With the loss of Shane MacGowan at the age of 65 on November 30th, the world had the opportunity to reach back into the musical catalog of his band, The Pogues, and in particular, [the band's seminal sophomore album](#) (Stiff Records, 1985), to discover what can only be described as a masterclass of lyricism, from the haunted ruminations of "The Old Main Drag," to the plaintive reflections of "A Pair of Brown Eyes."

I hope you'll consider these recommendations as a way to honor these two writer's lives and their words.

## **This Month's Poem**

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I tried warming up the December newsletter with a summertime poem, but I ruined it by setting it at night. Oh, well, here goes:

## **Puzzle**

I am that something dark & angular  
That you might grasp but will never  
Comprehend.

I am that cul-de-sac at the edge of your  
Understanding.

I am the void at the center of your need to  
Control the narrative, sucking in your words  
Like the drain at the bottom of a swimming pool  
That silently & meticulously obviates every vestige of  
Identity.

All of the scraps of memory, all your hot takes,  
All the comforts & confidences,  
Until nothing remains.

## **Disclaimers, etc.**

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You signed up for this! Or, at least I think you did. Send the word UNSUBSCRIBE to [jrbarner@gmail.com](mailto:jrbarner@gmail.com) if you don't want any more. That is also the address if you want to speak about happier subjects. I'd love to hear from you!

My website, [jrbarner.com](http://jrbarner.com) is brought to you by Squarespace.

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**More 'New Possibilities' coming in 2024!**

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