



Photo by Kevin Powell

New Possibilities #4: New Year, New You, New Monthly(ish) Newsletter by J.R. Barner

Welcome to 2024, and welcome (or welcome back) to *New Possibilities*. A much-needed vacation with family and friends in England gave me some space and time to consider some future directions, not just for the newsletter, but with forthcoming publications, live performances, and building that sense of community we're all driving towards these days. Amidst the delightful sightseeing and convivial dinners, there was just **more time to think**, I reckon. And I **needed** that.

All too often, I think we just power through aspects of our lives. That's kind of the fallacy at the heart of New Year's resolutions. It's this arbitrary starting point and ready...steady...go! No wonder so many of them get left on the side of life's eight-lane bypass, when there's no time for consideration, reflection, or just mulling things over, yeah? I was talking with someone recently about how success (whether it's in publishing or the various "industries": music, sport, film, podcasting, porn, whatever you're into) has a sustainability problem baked into it. That's not necessarily a reflection of talent, or interest, or reception, or anything. It's simply a question of time.

I've found that, across a wide spectrum of creative work, very little time is given over to, not just how to do the work, but how to do the work in such a way that it *produces more and better work moving forward*, without breaking the back of the artist. Often, it's the artists *themselves* who need to be reminded of this, because getting caught up in the wave of creativity leads to wanting to perpetuate that moment *ad infinitum*. It doesn't last, does it? And in those moments when I've tried to force it, it leads to work that, ultimately, when I do let myself get off the carousel

and look at what I'm producing, just doesn't live up to my expectations.



Boxer, from Ralph Steadman's illustrated *Animal Farm*

In academia, especially teaching, or in talking with writers, editors, artists, and publishers, I hear things (or hear myself saying things) that remind me of Boxer, the faithful cart horse in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, whose solution to everything is just to do more or work harder. Boxer doesn't reflect on much, just thinks in rose-colored future terms, and often misses it completely when he's being taken advantage of or when others don't have his best interests at heart. Boxer, in Orwell's dystopian vision, is the real tragedy at the heart of *Animal Farm*, not because of what happens to him, but the fact that it could have been prevented. That's the real tragedy. I've been Boxer. **A lot.** How 'bout you? How do we avoid it? What are some things that can prevent us and our resolutions, goals, aspirations, or art, from suffering the same tragic fate? Got ideas? Just want to talk about Orwell? Or the proletariat? Or horses? I got your back at jrbarner@gmail.com. Drop me a line!



Image credit: A Spoonful of Honi

And Then There Were None: Changing the Social Media Landscape, One Delete Button At A Time

So, on January 1st, I dropped several social media accounts. All but one. No instant messaging. No DMs. No apps on my phone.

And nothing changed.

At least, I didn't notice anything, at first. I maintained [Instagram](#), which was recommended by readers as a way to keep up with people and support their posts through the usual likes and shares. I also made a plan to drive traffic to [my website](#), which has a News section, and a sign-up page for this newsletter. Before midnight on the 1st, I let people know, and, sure enough, I got a few more Instagram followers, a few more newsletter subscribers, and quite a few more hits to the website.

So, it's been a week. What happened?

Well, there were a few things that I missed along the way that traveled through channels I wasn't on anymore. Nothing major. I found myself using some of the time I would normally spend on social media reading the news and, I suppose, felt a bit more *informed* as a result. But, most of that time was channeled completely offline. I played board games, I had long phone calls and conversations. I wrote. I followed up on projects. I wrote lists of things to do and crossed things off that list.

So, like I said, slow burn. Next month, I'll conclude the discussion of the "difficult" social media question with a summary of a month off the socials. See you then!

Burning Questions with Dorothy Lune



Burning Questions is when I ask three questions of a writer I admire and sometimes they ask questions back. This month we have [Dorothy Lune](#).

Dorothy Lune is a Yorta Yorta poet, born in Australia & a *Best of the Net 2024* nominee. Her poems have appeared in several online and print journals. She is looking to publish her manuscripts, can be found online [@dorothylune](#), & has a substack at [dorothylune.substack.com](#)

To my mind, Dorothy is one of the more vibrant, prolific, and evocative poets that I discovered in the last year or so. Her work is always visceral, her imagery tactile & cinematic. I was so privileged to have the following interchange while juggling time zones on my way to the UK.

JR: Do you remember the first poem you ever read? How did it make you feel? Does that feeling or influence impact your work today? Are there other influences? I know there have been bits from film, television, and popular culture throughout your poems, like Laura Palmer from *Twin Peaks*, and Marilyn Monroe in "[How to merchandise a woman & how to get revenge](#)." Where do you draw from when you're writing?

DL: In December of 2020 I read [Mary Oliver's poetry handbook](#) & that was one of the first times I remember reading poems. I'm a writer first actually—from 2017 through 2020, I was writing generic song lyrics about anxiety & transitioned slowly into strictly writing poems.

Even now that I write free verse, I still use songs as heavy inspiration but film & pop culture have been influences I incorporated in 2023, in empathy & strung together consciousness rather than intellect. *Fire Walk with Me*, for example, is a perfect match for writing poems, I've found.

JR: Your narrative voice is so compelling, especially when you use the first person. Like in "Mr. Snowman," published in *The Passionfruit Review*, you write "I am a plastic bead that does not melt, as sly as cooking oil." In "Vanquish," recently published in *Bruiser*, you write: "I'm not known to lie, maybe I won't grow because of it, maybe I don't have much in common with boys who dance until their feet expire, so yellow like newspapers." This sense of character, of persona, grabs the reader and invites them in. How do you conceive of this persona, this "I" - is it you, is it an invention, where are the lines between autobiography and the story being told?

DL: Thank you! The voice I primarily use was loosely inspired by [Allison Blevins' Slowly/suddenly](#) (VA Press). My poetry improved thanks to Allison's examples of what a great poem

looks like, & widened my usage of the present tense. That voice I wrote with is usually a bold one.

I adore using the present tense. Every “I” is a fragment of my personality/persona unless it’s clearly a fictional or historical narrative, for this to be possible without constant revision I conserve my identity as formless (not amorphous). This trick is also good for keeping my sanity.

JR: A topic that comes up a lot online is the writing community. How do you view your process? Are you a solitary writer? Do you share your work with others before passing it on to editors or submitting it for publication? What advice do you have for someone who may just be starting that process?

DL: I do my morning routine & read poems, I keep a word list on my phone so I add to it as I go through the day. At night after my shower I write in silence, using my imagination & my trusty word list, or also reading. My process is a personal project for joy. I strictly write poems for myself & make decisions in the revision phase for myself. I seek out publication because I want this to be my career— I’m not too sure if I’m contradicting myself here.

When I’m in a phase of not finding ideas I circle words in poetry books or journals with a pencil & number them in order of where I’ll write them down. I handwrite the first draft to then type it up on Google Docs that same night, once it’s typed I add & cut until I don’t feel like doing it anymore. The cycle resets.

DL: Do you struggle with trusting & feeling confident in your work?

JR: In short, YES, I do struggle with trusting and feeling confident in my work. I think every artist does, to a certain degree. I think where I might differ from my fellow poets and writers is in the ways I allow that trust to build and that confidence to grow. Because that’s the main thing: those things need to be cultivated, like roses. They are not automatic. They require care, attention, and most of all, time. Here are three things I try to keep in mind when I’m writing, particularly for things I’m looking to publish.

1. **Taking my time:** A poem is never finished for me, it just gets to a place where I can decide to let it out of its cage. I was writing and not showing it to anyone for years before I published my first piece. If I learned anything during that period, it was that I would know when I was ready to put something out there. I just kind of believed that and it worked! So, these days, if I’m unsure about something, I put some space between me and the work, and just let time work its magic. The worst case scenario is I have some work that is not ready to

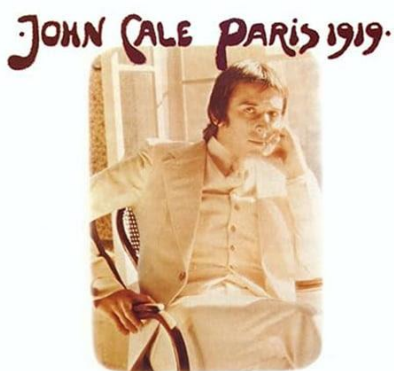
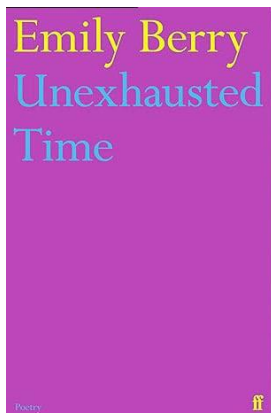
leave the nest just yet and that's ok, I don't mind the company!

2. **Being in charge:** I am not an overly confident person in my everyday life. So I must keep reminding myself, that when I'm creating, writing, producing, and even daydreaming, I am in complete control. I cannot make mistakes because there's nothing I can't change. When writers put other people or other expectations ahead of their creative self, they end up producing work that forgets that they are in charge, which, in my personal experience, makes me second guess my decisions, or gives me a terrible case of butterflies in the stomach, and so I freeze up and either can't write at all, or produce stuff that I'm not sure about and may take much longer to get to a place where I do feel good about it (see above). The trick here is to keep the focus on what I want to say, how I want to articulate it, and what my goals/interests are. Staying true to myself in these matters keeps me in the driver's seat, and produces, again, in my experience, confident work. This is NOT easy to do. So I am working on it. Every day.
3. **Keeping it simple:** Sometimes, poetry gets complicated. Meters are complicated. Rhymes can be complicated. Narratives can be complicated. Metaphors can be complicated. So, I try to keep my process as simple as possible. Within a set period (it's two hours every day for me right now), I write for as long or as little as I feel I can. I edit as much as I can stand. I move on. I go and live life. I listen to music, I read, I interact with people. I come back and do it again the next day. Simple. Routine. I trust that routine, so I tend to trust the work that comes out of it.

Now, here's the MOST IMPORTANT THING. I just read those three things again, and then I read your responses, and we're doing some of the same things! That's one of the reasons why I started this newsletter, is to get together and talk process, because, even if you have a really big and supportive poetry community, it's still kind of a solitary thing, and it's hard to cultivate that trust and confidence when it's only me and a blank page. Do you know what I mean?

DL: I didn't realize how similar our processes were!

Deepest gratitude to Dorothy for participating in the interview. Please check out [her website](#) and [subscribe to her Substack](#).



Emily Berry *Unexhausted Time* (Faber & Faber, 2022). Berry, who'd already entranced me with her 2013 Forward Prize-winning *Dear Boy*, has just set my world on fire with her latest collection. A fortuitous bookstore impulse buy in Lewes, East Sussex, and I'm already sure to still be talking about this book this time next year.

John Cale *Paris 1919* (Reprise, 1973). This masterpiece turned fifty in 2023 and, as a lifelong Cale fan, has served as something of a handshake and a warm blanket in the coldest months of this year and many prior. Risking hyperbole, I can't fathom either the trajectory of my musical tastes or much of the contemporary pop landscape without it. Lyrically, Cale shoots from half-court and takes on [Dylan Thomas](#), [Graham Greene](#), [Shakespeare](#), [Billy Wilder](#), and [a decent-sized chunk of European history](#) in one deliciously poetic verse after another and *swish*, nothing but net. It is, quite simply, a great album.

New Poem (Same as the Old Poem)

This is an older poem that was requested and, obliging writer I am, I saved it from the social media chopping block.

Distanciation

My words are those wild beasts never knowing
The merest inkling of a bridle, galloping on ahead
Of me until they can barely be seen.
As the dust of their pounding hooves blankets me,
Squinting into the distance, cataloguing their absence,
My thoughts turn inward.
I should have known better than to try & tame
Them, or to even imagine for a moment that
They could ever be tamed.
Or that I possessed the words in the first place.

Disclaimers, etc.

You signed up for this! Or, at least I think you did. Send the word UNSUBSCRIBE to 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!

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See you next month
