



Photo by Kevin Powell

## New Possibilities #5: A Monthly Newsletter by J.R. Barner

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Hello, subscribers! February is here, at last! The month of January seemed so much longer than 31 days, or, perhaps, there just seemed like there was so much more to be done, so many more threads to weave together, to get a jump on all of those things on the list left over from the fever dream that was 2023. For me, it was all about jumping into the deep end of writing, managing submissions, editing work I want to send out (hopefully) in the first quarter, and, of course, the Shiny New Thing That I'm Not Ready to Talk About Yet. Yes, I know, I just mentioned something I'm not ready to talk about yet. I'm not good at building suspense! I'm a poet! Give it to me all at once! I kid, dear reader, and plead for patience, as all will be revealed soon(ish).

The result of such a *frisson* is that by the time February rolls around, I'm already feeling a little at loose ends, or pulled in many directions at once. This year has proved, or at least began, no different. There I was, racing around, doing all the things, and feeling absolutely **no enjoyment** in the accomplishments when I

stumbled upon one of the most amazing pieces of poetry-related advice I've **ever** encountered. In a comic book. Yes, a comic book. A brilliant, wonderful, **sensational** comic book. Here, take a look:



**She-Hulk # 12 (April 2023) by Rowell, et al.**

A little backstory:

In [Rainbow Rowell](#)'s *She-Hulk*, the titular green-skinned heroine is: a.) mostly **not** green; and b.) an attorney named Jennifer Walters. Her partner, the Jack of Hearts, is a poet and a grad student. And yes, they're both superheroes. Doing whatever it is that superheroes do. For the convenience's sake, let's call it "superhero stuff." In Issue # 12, it all catches up to Jack, and he (at first) tries to hide the fact that he is **secretly** doing superhero stuff because it's **easier** and less laden with judgment and meeting (or not) Jack's own expectations and the expectations of others. When he comes clean, Jennifer quotes Mary Oliver, and not just any Mary Oliver but "Wild Geese," **my favorite** Mary Oliver poem. At this point in the issue, I was like "Rainbow Rowell, get out of my head, and thank you so much for coming!"

Oliver's [poem](#) ends its first stanza with the reminder that, no matter what we choose or how slow or fast we move, "*the world goes on*" and the geese will fly home again when the time is right. The poem concludes by encouraging us, "*whoever you are, no matter how lonely/the world offers itself to your imagination.*" It's interesting to wonder in what context the half-human, half-alien

Jack would have used the poem's first lines, which Jennifer quotes back to him. It would seem like these are lines that eschew his more heroic tendencies for the imaginative life proffered at the end of the poem. In a nice reversal, Jack makes a different choice and takes a break from his poetry and his studies to go do superhero stuff. To which the larger meaning of the poem and its metaphorical center (go, geese, go) occurs to Jennifer, who replies, simply, "whatever you need."

I felt assured, reading Jennifer's response in *She-Hulk* # 12, that poetry will still be there for Jack when Jack is ready. My list of this and that and the other will still be waiting for me when I'm ready for it. The geese know when it's time to fly and when it's time to stay. After all, we all have superhero stuff to do. We are parents and siblings and coworkers and lovers and friends and those relationships and all the stuff that goes into them, are important. Perhaps, more important than even poetry (gasp!). Perhaps, the best poetry reminds us of that very thing.

What do you think? Want to talk about it? Got any thoughts on comics? On *She-Hulk*? On Mary Oliver? On geese? As always, the lines are open at [jrbarner@gmail.com](mailto:jrbarner@gmail.com)

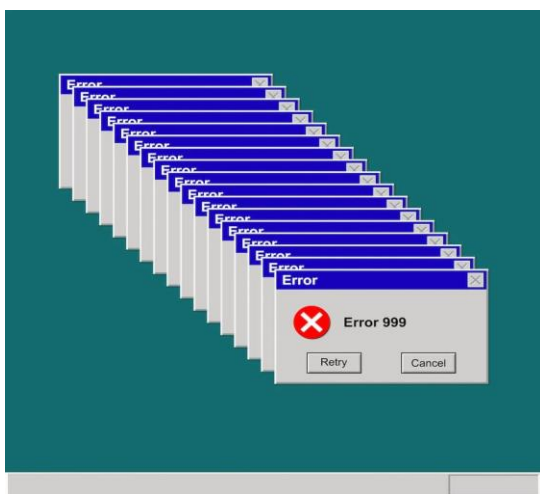


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# Answering the (Dreaded) Social Media Question

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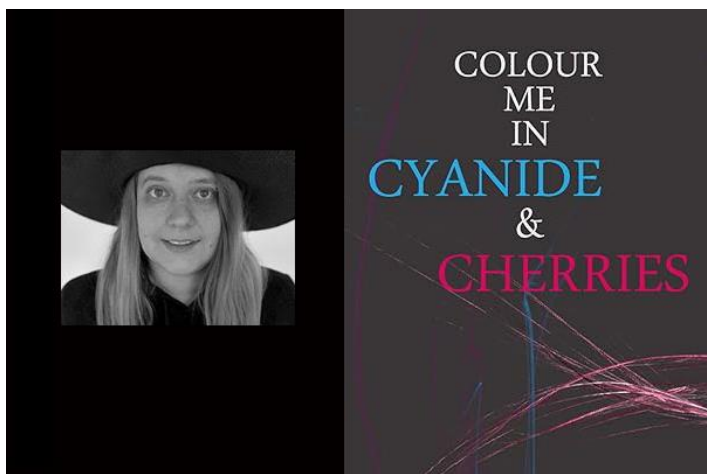
Wow, that's a portentous title. And what a way to end this discussion, for now. But, first, a little catch-up for new subscribers: I used to be on social media **a lot** and also on **a lot** of social media. I was on seven or eight different apps and tried to be fully “**on**” each one and it was driving me crazy. Like, really, I think. But, I'm a writer and I feared that if I dialed back my involvement on social media, I would lose touch with the bigger writing community, miss opportunities, see the business side of things slump, or [disappear completely](#). And that kept me up at night and kept me chained to the whole social media thing. So, on January 1st, I unplugged. **From all of it.** My website is my main Internet thing. My [Instagram](#) is now just a commercial for my website, or for when this newsletter comes out, and this newsletter, well, it's how I talk to **you**.

So, 31 days since pulling the plug, and here it is: the answer to the “dreaded” social media question.

For me, at least. And I guess that's the one thing I've learned about social media throughout this process. It's **so** subjective. The subjectiveness of social media, or the Internet in general, is what does my head in, right, because it's supposed to be a collective experience, a “consensual hallucination,” as the [science fiction writer William Gibson once termed it](#). But then it hit me. Gibson had chosen his words very carefully, way back in 1984. The word *consensual* isn't quite the same thing as collective, or mutual. It has to do with what we, as individuals, and *only* as individuals, choose. What we *consent* to. For a lot of people and a lot of artists, the social media environment is more about doing what one has to do [to keep up with the algorithm or appeal to targeted demographics](#). In other words, in my case, these things weren't about choice,

anymore. And I was starting to feel like I was losing control of when and how much I needed to post. **So I stopped.**

In the past month, I've felt better. I have hold of the wheel again. I feel good liking and commenting on people's posts and reels, and I no longer feel like I'm doing it because I *have to*. I am enjoying writing this newsletter and it feels like I'm writing *to you*, not making content *for you*, if that distinction makes sense. It's been a good 31 days, in that respect. I know that my experiences and what led me to quit almost all social media platforms are not everyone's experiences. I know that from the point of view of my work as an artist and a writer, I'm taking a risk, but, as Robert Simpson says, in [this article](#), ***"we are not obliged to quit, but we should be doing our part - whether we are working inside or outside of the social media ecosystem - to try to make our communications technology and practices better in the future."*** On that front, and my small patch of (cyber)land, I'm trying my best.



## Burning Questions with Mirjana Miric

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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 [Mirjana Miric](#)

I am genuinely (like, butterflies in the stomach) excited to talk with another of my favorite poets, one of my favorite visual artists, the best editor I ever had, and inspiring on every level Mirjana Miric. Mirjana is a writer, poet, photographer, and artist living in Belgrade, Serbia. In addition to works in many print and online literary magazines, Mirjana has three self-published collections, [Colour Me in Cyanide & Cherries](#) (2016), [Colour Me in Cayenne & Chlorine](#) (2023), and her latest, [Rorschach Spring](#) (2023). As I'm writing this, I'm just finishing up *Rorschach Spring*, and I have to say, it is **stunning**. Mirjana describes it as “*short poems, suburban, atmospheric, personal yet optimistic; the whole book, when read in one go, is one big poem, and it was written entirely during the course of one evening.*” The only thing I would add is that, if you love language as an art form, this is a collection you must have. On to the questions!

**JR:** What were some of your first poetical inspirations? I'm always interested in how people got to poetry, or how poetry found them. What poets do you read now? Where do you find poetry in music, art, and film? Do these inspire your work, as well? You seem to capture certain moments of everyday life in your poems, such as in “The Making of a Bread,” from your first collection, *Colour Me In Cyanide & Cherries*. To what degree does autobiography come into your work?

**M:** My first poetic inspirations were so, so many. I always hear how poetry is a journey. For me, it feels like poetry is the destination, I have always been there, and I have been exploring its haunted halls for years. One of my first inspirations was discovering a poem, written with a dark green pen, in Serbian, author unsigned, in my mother's teen-years diary. I would steal that diary and read this poem every chance I could,

enchanted. Back then, I did not have Internet access, not even a computer of my own, but this poem burned inside of me for years. I later found it again, in a Serbian literature course book for elementary school, and learned that the wordsmith was Federico Garcia Lorca, and the poem in question was his masterpiece [Romance Sonámbulo](#). Another poetic love came from watching *The Simpsons*, and their Halloween special which featured their rendition of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven*. *Tomb Raider*, the movie, poetically enriched me with William Blake's *Auguries of Innocence*, whose famous quatrain was featured. All places unlikely, perhaps, to have poetry. To this day, I appreciate any form of media that includes a poem, and feel happy when I see poetry in the movies, stories, and most of all: video games.

Thanks to the Internet and various forums, and seeing others express their thoughts in verse, I began my explorations, and the same places and people who shared that habitat with me encouraged me to write in English, which felt more comfortable expressing myself poetically than my mother tongue. Something is haunting in poetry, for me; something physical yet ghastly, and feeling it from indulging in poetry myself, is one of the proofs that spiritual things exist. You mention my poem "The Making of a Bread", which was actually the first poem I ever submitted for publication to an English publishing journal (which I thank for rejecting me so nicely; I read their magazine and chapbook publications for years).

During COVID, I lost my grandmother, the same one from the poem, and that poem stands now as her forever cooking advice, and perhaps some ghostly sign, since I am currently working on having the courage and a thick heart and submitting my poems to lit mags, after seven years of not submitting anywhere. If you or anyone else asks, my poems are 100% autobiographical, every single one of them. But in writing, photography, painting, beading, dancing

– all the arts I dive head-first into, sometimes to be seen, honestly, the real you, is not a pretty sight. It is often weepy, ugly, mad, unreasonable, whiny, dramatic, filthy, and weak, but there is still a burning desire to write, be heard, and be seen. That is why I use a lot of metaphors, personifications, onomatopoeia, archetypes, surreal scenes, and drizzles of melting nature, in my poems. The readers the editors and publishers want raw and real, but the vulnerability is often met with critique, and my poems often ask to be stripped of their riddles.

During a horrible time in my life, it felt like the least hurtful thing at the moment I could do was write poems. For me, they were as raw as you can get, inspired by real pain. I chose to submit one of those poems to a magazine, and the editor called the poem ‘immature’, welcoming me to submit again when I stopped being so dramatic. Not until a few months ago did it hit me that precisely that single comment put me off from submitting poems, and to share them less – and that is why self-publishing worked for me. I, for better or worse, in whoever’s eyes, am part of the World, and I have, proudly, decided to be in it – and write poetry.

I still read, of course. The old, mentioned favorites, but also A.E. Housman, who is my all-time favorite poet and whose *A Shropshire Lad and Other Poems* is resting at this moment next to my keyboard, Sylvia Plath, Vachel Lindsey, Wendy Cope, and poets of today where my favorites are Dan Holloway (whose ‘*i cannot bring myself to look at walls in case you have graffitied them with love poetry*’ rustles my soul many times a year, for years!), and most recent [S. Fey, whose upcoming collection ‘Decompose’ is my most excited for poetry book of the year \(JR: mine, too!\)](#) and I can’t wait for it to arrive at my door.





***Night-whispers*** (2023) by Mirjana Miric

**JR:** There seems to be a kind of shared energy between your poetry and your photography. They are, separately and together, so evocative, blending the organic and the surreal, almost magical together in really unexpected ways. For example, these brilliant lines from your poem “To Lady Autumn”: *“Under oaks and birches I will lie/questioning my desires/I’ll watch the leaves fall flying by/through horizons colored red like fire./Gray clouds cast shades on our faces/I am cleansed by the pouring rain/that falls with hope to cover the traces/of our loneliness and our pain.”* There’s the crispness of the metaphors and the lyricism, the meter and the repetition of trees, colors, and weather, that all swirl together

to draw the reader in, but there's this something else that's hard to put into words. A kind of Whitmanesque incantatory quality, like a spell. I notice the same ineluctable aspect to your photos, which are works of art unto themselves, calling them photos does not do them justice! They are windows to other worlds. Tell me a little about your process. Where does a work, either a poem or a picture, start for you? Where does your work take you? How would you define the "magic(k)" in your work?

**M:** All of the things I do creatively are about capturing the essence of a moment that I was present for, kinda like that story about discovering runic writing [on the ceiling of Hagia Sophia](#), and upon deciphering the writing learning it says "Halfdan was here!". Combined with life, itself, being a magickal thing, spawning magnificent things, and communicating beyond just language – it is why I find it best to describe my work always with collage and terms such as 'hybrid' and 'mixed media'. Some magickal moments I capture with a camera, some with a pen, and some I try to collage together so they try and capture a feeling. I've always loved experimenting with everything, and my poetry is often inspired by other forms of media, much like my photography or artworks are inspired by poems, and sometimes, each other. I likewise loved and still love reading fantasy, and playing fantasy-themed video games when I was a kid forever branded my heart with dragons, faeries, goblins, and creatures of all kinds; there were spells and incantations, and their rhythm always felt like something a tree would enjoy listening to if you were to read it to a tree, so I enjoy and partake when the muses stir me lyrically. I love the term *Whitmanesque* because it is not the first time my poems have been described as such! At one point, years ago, I shied away from reading Whitman because I was worried that the comments would say that I imitate him, and badly so, but now I just wish I could send him one of my poems in a letter and see what he would think. That's where my work starts, in a moment

that looks strangely beautiful, somehow familiar, a paused strike of the clock, and me, with a spray can writing 'Mirjana was here'.

**JR:** You have contributed a great deal to what, in the pages of this newsletter, I refer to as the "writing community." As a poet, a publisher, a visual artist, and [an editor of \*Suburban Witchcraft\*](#), a magazine that I adore as a reader and give so much credit for having helped me start publishing my work, you have seen this sense of community change and grow over time. What is your sense of where the community is, now, in 2024? What advice do you have for new writers who are just starting to share their work with others? What can we do to grow, help one another, and stay in touch, in a rapidly changing world?

**M:** I think the community, not just for poets, but for writers in general is very open, understanding, welcoming, and helpful; it is honestly a tearful joy to see poetry everywhere on the internet, on social media, read out loud in venues, in a room with a microphone and put on Youtube as a video, on Zoom and Discord. Opportunities for poetic expression are far and wide, and the community nowadays does so much against the imposed silences. I do however think the grander scales of community, or those in charge, are not doing enough for poets. I feel like there are a lot of negative concepts that they constantly float out there, some of them being propagating no pay but charging a fee to submit to publishing venues, vanity presses that somehow still exist, pushing the idea against long-form expression, the idiotic concept that once a poem is shown, it lasts for 5 minutes and then it becomes 'old' and the poet should forget about it, the constant pushes for fast poetry because of that and many more things that someone smarter than me probably notices. Last year, there were several poetic removals from venues, categories, and awards, and that just makes me sad, but as a part of a poetic community, I think we are doing a

great job by constantly creating poetry projects to counter these outrageous cultural crimes.

For the new writers, I have the classic – keep writing. You know you are going to. So write. Write what you know, what puzzles you, what pisses you off, write whatever you want to write, and do whatever you want to do with your writing. If you currently dream of programs of degrees in writing, do them; if you want to self-publish, do it. The community shares resources and opportunities and you should explore them if they call to you. I think the most important thing is to let your writing exist. Whatever you do in life when presented, might be rejected, and that's ok. Your poem is still a poem, and therefore it is forever Poetry. If you feel like fitting in boxes, go in them with your thoughts and pens; if not – explore, and create, from one genre and form to the next. If you read a poem that you love: save it, read it again, and tell the writer! Someday, someone might message you. Think of all the poems of love for other poems their dead creators cannot read at this very moment. No matter what else you do, besides poetry, you are still a poet. I'd say embrace it, grab another spray can, and on this wall, next to me, write "I, too, was here."

**M:** On showing your poems about the online and offline worlds, what would you say would be the dream reaction/commentary that you could get for one of your poems?

**JR:** I have very high respect for but very low expectations of my readers. When I offer a poem up to be read, whether that's by performing it aloud, or submitting its written manuscript for publication, my sole intent is that the poem is **read**. Full stop. Anything else: liking it, hating it, critiquing it, tearing it up into tiny pieces, and tossing it up in the air - that is an extra, a bonus, a level-up, gravy, the cherry on top. It is more than I could ever hope for because the emotions have been stirred. I have had an **effect**. And, good or bad, that effect has **power**. As John

Mowitt reminds us in [his fabulous book, \*Text: The Genealogy of an Antidisciplinary Object\*](#), the etymology of the word “read” originally had nothing to do with deciphering written symbols, but rather sorting through the entrails of animals to predict the future or interpret the meaning of a past event. It was fortune-telling or augury. It was a special relationship between the person (the reader) and the world around them. In my dream, my readers “read” my work and it tells them secrets about themselves.

**M:** As a terrified poetry magazine submitter, I am anxiously overwhelmed by long lists of criteria and demands, and most of all THEMES! How do you approach such opportunities/matters, do you scout and try to find your poems perfect fits of lit mag homes, do you see a theme call and chase it?

**JR:** I am afraid this answer is going to disappoint you. I don't submit to themed issues, ever. I don't even submit to themed issues when I have **already written** a poem that is 100% **about the theme**. For example, there was a call a while back about poetry about birds. The submission guidelines stated, “give us your poetry about birds. Any birds will do.” I have a poem about a bird. I did not submit it. I don't know what it is about themes, I just avoid them. Usually, when I am submitting, I will have read over at least one issue of the magazine or journal as well as the submission guidelines, and maybe perused the masthead. I pay particular attention to anything having to do with length because some of my pieces are long and I don't want to risk having a poem caught up in consideration if there's no chance it will be published because of length. I don't necessarily look for “fit,” because I'm not sure there is such a thing as “perfect fit” but I will accede that submission is a gradual, aspirational thing. I started with venues where I felt most at home and then worked my way out of my comfort zone. Very often, there are pleasant surprises along the way and, of course, there are always bumps in the road. Ultimately, I think a writer will

always find a sort of groove of submitting to a mix of comforting and challenging venues.

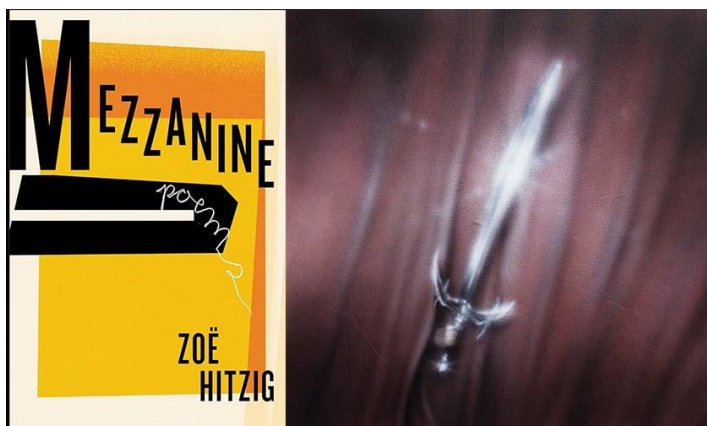
**M:** Your poems feel like dreamlike storytelling, with a perfect intermezzo for the reader to sink and swim into feeling them, and processing them with their hearts; is your process intentional and how did you come to treat a persistent motif with such tender discipline?

**JR:** Thank you so much! For me, writing is a combination of telling a story and researching the details that will help me tell that story. It does often start in dreams. I will dream about a person, or a place, or have just some fragment in my head and then I'll start the process of fleshing it out. If someone was drinking milk in my dream, I want to know what brand. If a famous person stopped by the house right at that moment to borrow some milk, I want to know what the famous person smelled like. And what street did it happen on? What does the light look like there, are there streetlights, or not? As you can see, the research process can happen very quickly and allows the poem to grow in whatever direction it wants to grow and, often, for my most recent writing, for as long as it wants to grow. I think in the editing is where I remove some of those details, preferring to leave some things a mystery.

*My sincere thanks to Mirjana for participating. Please seek her out on [her blog](#), [her Tumblr](#), and other [social media](#), and purchase her books through the links above or at [Lulu](#).*

# Reading & Listening This Month

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**Zoë Hitzig, *Mezzanine* (Ecco, 2020).** Hitzig does in poetry what Lars Van Trier attempted with his 2011 film *Melancholia*. Something captivating, beautiful, radiant, and utterly cold. These poems entice as much as they repel, they demand our attention and stay in our affections, frequently with haunting ferocity, but also stand still awkwardly while we try in vain to hug them. Hitzig's debut is triumphantly difficult and deliciously stentorian, blending its face-first intellectualism with a just-under-the-surface emotional intensity that keeps the reader following, even if they're hanging on for dear life.

***Courting, New Last Name* (Play It Again Sam, 2024).** Everybody's other favorite Liverpoolian four-piece is at it again, with a record so brand new that my first listen to the last song is fading out as I write this. I am going to start it over again as soon as this song ends. That says it all. If you are a fan of big, loud, lyrically dense, optimistic but meaningful songs that make the people in the other cars at the red light mistake your bodily enthusiasm for a seizure disorder, then run, don't walk, to purchase this record.

# & Now, the Poem

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## Summers in the Library

The heat is so oppressive,  
sweat pools in our tennis shoes.  
We try to forget it, burying our heads further  
into popsicle-pastel paperbacks,  
under blankets of dust motes riding  
blades of sunlight into the stacks.  
Stripped down to the  
bleeding edge of our modesty,  
we wring out our long sleeves into  
the water fountain drain.  
We pray for nothing more than  
air-conditioning like we'd never known the rain.  
By the time we walk our bicycles home,  
The darkening sky spills out  
above our heads, all black & ominous,  
like a widening stain.

## Disclaimers, etc.

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speak about happier subjects. I'd love to hear  
from you!

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## More 'New Possibilities' next month!

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