



Photo by Kevin Powell

New Possibilities #6: A Monthly(ish) Newsletter by J.R. Barner

Hello! Welcome to the sixth installment of the newsletter. As I'm writing this, in the last week of February, Spring has not quite sprung. The chill in the air still follows me in the last few moments before the front door closes. Branches have yet to reveal their buds. Kids huddled at the bus stop still generate a small cumulous cloud about a foot above their heads, the floating visual composite of their respective exhalations. Although I've noticed the gradual shift toward longer days, it's like the light is losing a pillow fight because it still gets dark before the six o'clock news is finished, the sun admitting defeat under the suffocating cushion of night. Even by the time this reaches you, dear reader, right on the precipice of that anachronism, Daylight Saving Time, not much will have changed.

I'm sleeping better—a solid 7 or 8 hours, which, for me, is a lot. I'm walking a lot, but not so much for exercise as something to do to keep my mind occupied. I read a lot and listen to a lot of music, as always, and peek now and again at the television. But, no matter what I do, right before my eyes close at the

end of every day, I am reminded of one cold, hard fact: **I am not writing.**

About a week ago, I was looking at about 400 lines of work on *The Shiny New Thing I'm Not Ready To Talk About*, and it hit me. Like, all at once. I *felt* it go. I moved my cursor down the lines, highlighting them, then pressed "delete." I haven't written anything since then. What I have in its place is a kind of lethargy, like the girl in that Victorian painting, so wrecked from dancing she can't even get up off the couch, or read the copy of the (fashionable literary magazine) *The Yellow Book* that flops limply in her hand. I felt that kinship *viscerally*: generically tired, distracted, and rudderless.



Decadent Young Woman After the Dance by Ramón Casas (1899). [Musee de Montserrat](#)

What I (mostly) avoided, however, was blame. Writers are bombarded by talk of being “blocked” or “stuck” or “clogged” or whatever (what’s with all the disconcerting plumbing metaphors, anyway?). These are labels that play on our fears and insecurities. What’s more, it seems like so many offers exist that claim to “cure” all the blockages and stoppages but quickly reveal themselves to be no more than scams or efforts to take advantage of writers who may be under some external pressure, or just truly doubt their ability to carry on writing. In my opinion, and it’s only my

opinion, dear reader, **there is no cure** for not writing because not writing is **not a disease**—it’s not even a bad thing!

I know, I know, let me explain:

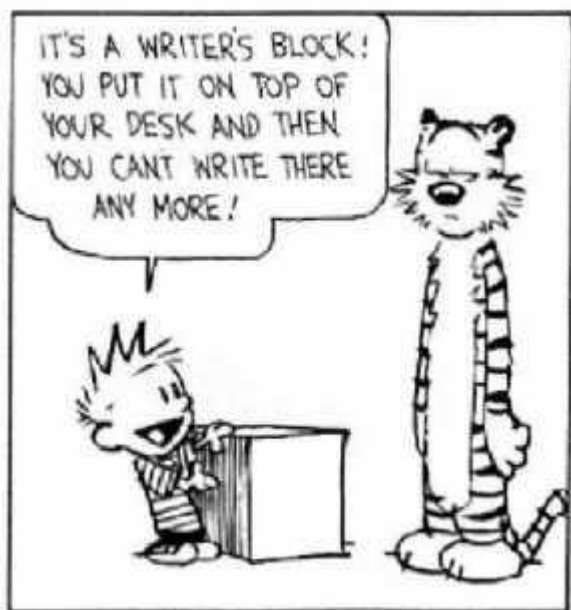
As Bill Hayes writes in [this wickedly funny and fabulous piece](#) for the *New York Times*, “not writing can be good for one’s writing; indeed, it can make one a better writer.” For myself, it often takes the form of my mind telling me it needs a bit of rest and recoup. Otherwise, I’ll take advantage of it to a ridiculously harsh degree. Writing the Shiny Thing on a deadline, prepping syllabi for both summer and fall semesters, and even writing this newsletter, without considering whether or not I’m overtaxing my abilities a little. I try to imagine my writing as a person. I’d never saddle another person with that many things at once without at least inquiring “you ok” every once in a while. Yet, it’s perfectly reasonable to subject myself to it, as most writers will admit.

I wonder why it’s like this. Why do I feel like my writing taking a little vacation is a *problem* I’m supposed to *solve*? Why does this connect to my naggingly low self-esteem and imposter syndrome and every other creature lurking in the dark recesses of my psyche that only comes out when the smell of fresh blood is in the air? Sylvia Plath knew this feeling all too well, [writing in her journal](#) (on July 7, 1958) that:

I must cure this very destructive paralysis & ruinous brooding & daydreaming. If I want to write, this is hardly the way to behave—in horror of it, frozen by it.

Plath hits on something interesting here that is similar to both Hayes’s and my own experience: this is about fear. Fear of not being able to *produce* something worthy. It’s a very commodified way of thinking. If I said that, next Saturday, we were going to spend the afternoon just writing whatever came to our heads and then have a bonfire and watch the ashes of what we wrote that day illuminate the night sky, you probably really wouldn’t fret that much if you only wrote, say, a page, or even a few lines. Thinking back on my deleted 400 lines, it wasn’t my muse deserting me, I

simply acknowledged that I wasn't producing what I knew I was capable of producing. In other words, my [shit detector went off](#).

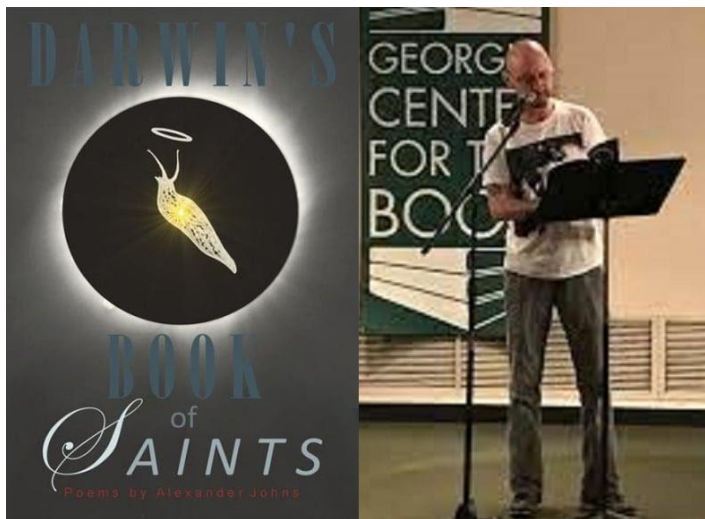


I suppose, by way of conclusion, we are left with what the [inestimable Anne Lamott refers to](#) as a kind of rag-and-bone period of shoring back up the creative space within us:

[It's like] a burlap sack of my memories, insights, visions, and observations, from which I will eventually construct the quilt of my stories. My job is to search out these bits of cloth and thread, of velvet and unbleached muslin and corduroy, red cords and dental floss and grosgrain ribbons. So instead of sitting at my desk in full clench and despair, I go about accumulating snippets and chunks of cool stuff

From the point of view of the rag-and-bone purveyor, collecting is just a natural part of the cycle. Not something to fear or pathologize, not something to cure or remedy, not something to bitch and moan about. You get up, roll the cart out into the cold light of day, find the magic in the little things, and watch our collection grow into something special.

What do you think, dear reader? What happens when the tap stops dripping and the tank is empty? Do you have any strategies for picking up, moving on, or waiting it out? Open a new window and send me your thoughts at jrbarner@gmail.com. And don't worry about me, I think I'm over the hump. In fact, I just managed to write a thousand words. Do you know who helped me do that? **You did.**



Burning Questions with Alex Johns

Burning Questions is when I ask three questions of a writer I admire. This month I spoke with [Alex Johns](#)

Alex Johns is an English professor born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia and currently residing just outside of Athens, Georgia. His most recent collection, *Darwin's Book of Saints*, was published in 2018 by Aurore Press. He is the recipient of the 2013 Pavement Saw Press Prize for his collection *Robot Cosmetics*, and a past Georgia Author of the Year nominee. Alex's poems have appeared in *Town Creek Poetry*, *Stray Dog Almanac*, *Chaffin Journal*, *Accents Publishing*, *The Oklahoma Review*, *Red River Review*, *Two Drops of Ink*, *The Journal of Language and Literacy Education*, *Kota Press*, *Scrivener's Pen*, *Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel*, *Bellemeade Books*, and other publications and were featured in the No Small

Measure Georgia BroadSides project. He is the managing director of *Word of Mouth*, a monthly reading series bringing together nationally known and local writers in Athens, Georgia, and Cincinnati, Ohio.

For my money, Alx Johns is the voice that contemporary American poetry *needs* to hear. His work is compelling, and provocative, with a fierceness that borders on the feral. Novel in both its structural complexity and willingness to explore hitherto unexplored areas of the human experience in an honest, unflinching narrative voice, Johns's poetry demands attention and finds new levels of expression off the page and in the performative realm. This is where Johns's stewardship of *Word of Mouth* provides the perfect conduit: an inclusive community of writers and readers founded by [the legendary Aralee Strange](#), *Word of Mouth* has flourished under Johns, despite a global pandemic, and continues to give writers from across varying disciplines, styles and genres, an inspiring and welcoming place to perform their work. I read my work out loud for the very first time at Word of Mouth, and have benefitted greatly from it. More than just feeling fortunate, I consider myself *damn lucky* to know Alx, to have shared many stages with him, and to call him a friend and fellow poet. Now, where did I put those questions? Ah, here we go:

JR: I know we both grew up in Atlanta, very much a part of the same music and arts scene that was evolving throughout the city. How important was that scene, especially its music, to the development of your poetic style? What were some of your early inspirations as you went on to pursue writing?

AJ: My time in the hardcore scene was one of the most important aspects of my aesthetic sensibilities and values. The notion that one could form a band, write songs, make records, and take a show on the road, all without any support from record companies or professional promoters seemed completely normal to me. It all came at the right time for me as an angry, disaffected, artistically inclined kid. The dominant culture of the Reagan era was about conformity, keeping up with the Joneses, and fear, lots of fear.

While it was unnecessarily violent and full of contradictions, the unbridled energy, camaraderie, and risk-taking of Atlanta's scene were essential in my formation as a young person. While my tastes and interests have developed and gone in many directions since then, I've always carried the DIY and punk rock ethic into my creative endeavors. I suppose the inclination towards extremity in music and art has carried over into how I approach poetry as a craft.

JR: *Darwin's Book of Saints* (2018, Aurore Press) seems, all at once, to encapsulate all of the best of something my old professors would have called "modernism after the Beats" while simultaneously setting whatever that thing is on fire and feeding it, one charred, noxious bite at a time, back to the reader. Works like "Nyquil on Pancakes" and "The Cat Died on the Pizza Box" combine a crazed and world-weary voice not too far removed from later Kerouac - I'm thinking specifically of "A Curse at the Devil" from *Scattered Poems* (1971, City Lights) - with these sublime moments of brilliant reflection and real emotion that are just gripping to the reader. What does the process that combines those two forces look like for you? How do you parse the emotional weight with the expository or narrative elements of your work? Where does your own life fit in? Would you characterize your work as autobiographical?

AJ: I'll start with the last question. Aspects of and moments in the work are autobiographical, but the voice behind them is a character, a sort of hyperbolic version of me, at times a cartoon version of myself. I try to have surprises in my poems, unexpected turns, and revelations at times. Tragedy and humor dance around each other. At this point, much of this comes naturally, and I don't think too much about the process, but for me, it is at its best a process of discovery. I try not to assert my will on the text in any macro-level way. Sometimes I'll notice that I've been building a scaffold around a certain subject, experience, or complex emotional state, but I tend not to take any of these on in a direct way. For example, a bird flying right through the security checkpoint in the airport was something I observed, but that image seemed to fit in a poem struggling to address grief. I

guess I just weirdly see the world. *Darwin's Book of Saints*, in retrospect, is made up of dispatches from a man disoriented by the stresses and perplexities of contemporary American life. Insomnia infuses the speaker's perspective on almost every aspect of his life, and he doesn't have the time or space to make sense of what he's doing and why. He lives in both the real world and in a delusional condition in which he imagines, for example, that he's been in a life-long battle against roaches, who've been following him and seeking revenge. Roaches have been an annoyance to me my whole life, but I don't think I'm in a secret war with them.

JR: As Managing Director of the Athens, Georgia chapter of *Word of Mouth*, a monthly open mic and terrific forum for new writers and writing, you have a front-row seat for something the readers of this newsletter would call a "writing community." What is your sense of where the community is, now, after 15 years of *Word of Mouth*? What advice do you have for new writers who are just starting to share their work with others?

AJ: When I became the director, I honestly just hoped it wouldn't disintegrate. I'm grateful that we're still going after so many years. I have tried to maintain the vision of a diverse community of poets of all different approaches and styles. It seems to have more or less remained a forum for writers to share their work in a warm, supportive, and vibrant environment. The idea is for poets at whatever level of their craft to have a regular audience, and to become more accustomed to the stage in addition to the page. Reading my work publicly has had a major impact on how I approach the craft, and I hope that *Word* provides that essential transaction for all the writers or potential writers who participate. Mutual edification is the goal. Aralee was very audience or reader-focused as an artist. She taught me to see writing as a transaction, to consider that in publishing a poem or performing it, I was asking something of the audience, their time and attention, and that, therefore, I owed it to them to make it worth their time. It sounds simple, but it made a big difference to me. My advice to new writers, for what it's worth, is to not write in a vacuum. Poetry is

not a solitary act. While people write for different reasons, good writing has an impact on the listener or the reader, not solely on the author. Hearing yourself perform your words and feeling the impact on the room can help you when you're crafting a poem alone in your room. I hope that *Word of Mouth* helps to cultivate this experience for everyone who participates. It's been amazing to see how many great writers have developed over the years. For a town of this size, Athens has a huge number of excellent writers, many of whom have moved on to other cities. I like to think that Word has played a significant role in elevating poetry in our area but also in the country.

My sincere thanks to Alx for agreeing to do this. Please check out Darwin's Book of Saints, [available through Aurore Press](#).

Reading & Listening This Month



Simon Armitage, *Book of Matches* (Faber & Faber, 1993). Another stone classic that celebrated a birthday last year, this thirty-year-old masterpiece proves yet again why UK Laureate Simon Armitage is “UK Laureate” Simon Armitage. Short works that, for my money, pack more punch with every syllable and turn of phrase than any ancient epic. In the time that it takes to strike and watch as a match burns down (a conceit introduced and explored in the opening “My Party Piece”) several life stories will have whizzed by. My only advice is to follow them, as fast as you can.

The Last Dinner Party, *Prelude to Ecstasy* (Island, 2024). Barely a month into the release of this debut album and it already seems like an obvious choice. By now, you are likely already very familiar with this critically lauded quintet, if not with this entire album then surely the singles that preceded it, “My Lady of Mercy,” “Sinner,” and “Nothing Matters.” As solid as each release has been, when placed in the context of this album, these songs, and every other song, for that matter, seem to only sound better and better, with each listen. Possessing the emotional sweep of something like Roxy Music’s *Avalon* crashing headfirst into ABBA’s *Gold* and crawling from the wreckage with all the panache and trenchant humor of the first four Divine Comedy records, *Prelude to Ecstasy* easily proves itself a genre-defining album and probably the most satisfying whole-listening experience I’ve had since I shoplifted a cassette of *The Bends* back in ‘95.

& Now, the Poem

Leisure Time in an Elegant Setting

I spent gap year working as a stock boy
at a small bookshop on the Somme,
boxing up the Diderot to be pulped
& sending letters home to mom
while American expats bought
up copies of *Eat, Pray, Love*
& looked down their plastic
pince-nez readers at me in my
Unknown Pleasures t-shirt,
listening to “Rise Above”
I lived right above the shop
with an unobstructed vista
of both the river & the Rue des Majots.
I’d sit on the window ledge,
smoking Gauloises, just taking in this perfect *tableau*
as all of Amiens dozed slowly off
in front of American television.
I’ve never returned & don’t know if I’m ever going to,
but there hasn’t been a night when I haven’t found myself
hovering above the Boulevard de Beauvillé,
dreaming of that view.

Disclaimers, etc.

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More 'New Possibilities' next month!
