



Photo by Kevin Powell

## **New Possibilities # 7: New Morning, Changing Weather, A Monthly(ish) Newsletter by J.R. Barner**

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Hello, readers. I want to point you towards something...

Nestled just past the middle of Ted Hughes' *Crow* (1970, Faber & Faber), is a poem that, unlike most of the collection, combines its title and first line:

*Dawn's Rose  
Is melting an old frost moon.  
Agony under agony, the quiet of dust,  
And a crow talking to stony skylines.  
Desolate is the crow's puckered cry  
As an old woman's mouth  
When the eyelids have finished  
And the hills continue*

Morning often feels like that, possessed of an unearthly quiet. Time moves differently, sometimes in ways the watch can't measure. Birds seem to know when not to sing. It is almost as if animals respect a much wider and more fluctuating spectrum of subdivisions between day and night. At least, more

than we do, in our crude, circadian devotions. The family of deer that regularly wander past my back door may snort and wheeze if they come through at first light but are eerily silent just half an hour earlier when the sky is still black.

I do much of my writing in that deafened interstice, usually finishing by the time the house starts stirring and the pinks and blues of morning have started to peek into the periphery. It's a strange and solitary exercise, but one my body has become accustomed to, twitching awake automatically between two and four a.m. Provided I don't have any other pressing matters, I stumble back to bed and try to reclaim at least a little of the morning for sleep, or go for a long walk and return once the sun has fully risen and hurried away the last of the shadows.

Lately, I've turned my attention to the times of day when I feel inspired to write. It's not something that I've ever paid much attention to and I feel like I'm learning things about myself and my practice that have been neglected for too long. I've also started paying attention to those times that aren't as conducive to writing and using them to do other things, like listening to music, reading, or watching a film. Often, my brain thanks me for not "forcing it" by letting my thoughts relax or giving me a bit more depth than if I was trying hard. One film that never fails to get me thinking is kind of (at least to me) an unusual choice, but one I keep coming back to, year after year: Martin Scorsese's *The Last Waltz*.



Ostensibly a filmed record of The Band's farewell concert at the Winterland Ballroom in San Francisco on Thanksgiving Day in 1976, the documentary is something of a unicorn in the annals of cinema, with its idiosyncratic clash of filming styles (no fewer than seven cinematographers shot the concert, with resumé's that would go on to include everything from *Raging Bull* to *Smokey and the Bandit* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*) and mishmash of backstage interviews, montage footage, and stage-centric live performance, *The Last Waltz* seemed, in the end, to be a heady mixture of two somewhat competing visions.

The first, championed by Scorsese, was hardcore fan service to not only The Band but also the musical acts of the 1960s and 70s that surrounded them, including Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Neil Young, Van Morrison, Emmylou Harris, Neil Diamond, Eric Clapton and Dr. John as well as musical forebears like Muddy Waters, Paul Butterfield and Ronnie Hawkins. The second was a more nuanced idea of what being a musician during that time actually meant. There's real myth-making going on here, the weaving of a legend that vaults The Band and their cohort, *Zelig*-like, into the cultural milieu of the hippie era in America and the darker, grittier period that followed. The Band did that with their music, with lyrics that reflected on the country's troubled past to say something important about the present. Stripped of this purpose, songs about the Civil War or tales resembling works by Melville, Faulkner, or Twain, became lauded as "Americana" – a word that has never failed to make me, or any real musicians I've talked to about it, cringe. Not wanting to simply be thought of as a nostalgia act, Robbie Robertson, the self-styled leader of The Band, asked several poets to perform throughout the concert, many of whom represented the prevailing winds (still being felt in '76) of both the Beat Movement and the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance.

The poets in *The Last Waltz* are both links to the past, aspects of real life here and now, and strange prophets foretelling a future, or maybe several possible futures. [Emmett Grogan](#), the dandified leader of the infamous Diggers, started the proceedings, intoning

that “*what it all boils down to is pulse and breath. Songs are the breath. Music is the pulse. Poets are the...wizards...of the mysteries of breath, the speech of mind.*” Grogan then went on to introduce [Bill ‘Sweet William’ Fritsch](#). Fritsch, a one-time Digger and published poet, had become a Hell’s Angel and after joining the fracas at the Altamont Speedway Free Festival that resulted in no fewer than three tragic deaths, found himself on the wrong end of .38 revolver at a Fresno house party. He was paralyzed for years but taught himself how to walk again (aided by a large, imposing walking stick that rode shotgun on his hog) and found his way back to poetry. His words on that Thanksgiving night, with his arm mysteriously in a sling, not unsurprising, spoke of death, of what it means to live, and of freedom. Fritsch introduced Lenore Kandel and limped off, with his sling and his walking stick, back out into the cold San Francisco night.

Do you know [Lenore Kandel](#), dear reader? A Beat if ever there was one, her work is *at least* on par with the Movement’s men’s club of Ginsberg, Burroughs, Kerouac, and Corso. She started the introduction to her only full-length work, 1967’s *Word Alchemy* with the sentence-long manifesto “poetry is never compromise.” And it isn’t. And she didn’t. Ever. The night of *The Last Waltz*, while attendees were treated to full Thanksgiving dinners with all the fixings, thanks to Winterland owner and musical impresario Bill Graham, Kandel missed the food as she scribbled her contribution down standing over in a corner, announcing when she hit the stage, “this is a poem I wrote tonight. It’s about tonight.” She continued, without pause:

*I’ll be a tightrope.  
Come dance with me  
across my sparkling nerves.*

Kandel evoked the bridge, the stars, the carnival, the dance, and finally, herself, as conveyances toward something. Is it a beginning? An ending? Where the hell are we going? Kandel worked in a ritualized space, and the audience, even compared to the other poets and musicians who performed that night, was

eerily quiet. They *knew* they needed to *listen*. And, just like that, Kandel introduced San Francisco Renaissance poet and scholar [Michael McClure, who read the opening lines of the Prologue to Chaucer's \*Canterbury Tales\*](#) in the original Middle English. Again, the frame narrative befits Robertson's intention, to have his band of pilgrims go off in search of adventures and holy relics, or that the audience themselves were there to give thanks and praises to the preachers and prognosticators of the Holy Church of Rock and Roll. A church, that, Thomas à Becket in Chaucer, is dead already but still revered as if still alive and breathing. As Sweet William said, wherever we are going and however we choose to dance the last waltz across Kandel's bridge, death is sure to follow.

[Diane DiPrima](#), of both the Beats and Amiri Baraka's Poets Theatre in New York City, took the stage with a threat, of sorts. Introducing a "one-line poem from the Fifties," she stated, "get your cut throat off my knife!" Then, she read her own "Revolutionary Letter #4" and "The Fire Guardian," introduced, respectively as from the "Sixties" and the "Seventies, to bring us to where we are." All three poems keep with the theme of journeys, either toward or away from death and destruction, and, like the best poetry, let the listener (or reader) do some of the driving and pick what music to play on the way. DiPrima introduced [Robert Duncan](#), who read his "Transgressing the Real" with heady talk of "celestial caves" that hide a frightened populace away from the harsh realities of "the war." Duncan was already four decades into a 50+ year poetry career at the time of *The Last Waltz*, and all of his associations and accolades, including groundbreaking work with Hilda Doolittle, the Black Mountain School, and various aspects of the San Francisco poetry scene, would fill several of these humble newsletters. I'll spare you and, as Duncan did, with uncharacteristic brevity, just introduce "Freewheelin' Frank."

Another Haight-based Hell's Angel, [Frank Reynolds](#) worked his way up to Secretary in the motorcycle club's San Francisco hierarchy, overseeing much of its operations, both within and outside the law. Frank's freewheeling career started

strong, with the publication, in 1967, of an all guns blazing “autobiography” (as told to Michael McClure) covering roughly the same period as Hunter S. Thompson’s seminal book on the Angels published that same year. 1968 saw him publish a broadside of poems entitled *The Hymn to Lucifer*, the mimeographed pages illuminated with Halloween-colored orange, red, green, yellow, and black Magic Marker by the author. Don’t let that childlike scrawl fool you, readers, the poetry, just like his *Last Waltz* contribution, is **damn good**. Over time, however, the sins of the Angels were visited upon poor Frank, and he ended up in Soledad State Penitentiary, doing five years for arson, and finally quitting cold turkey the debilitating addictions to alcohol and drugs that brought him, more than once, to death’s door. Once again, his guardian angel (as it were) was the mighty Michael McClure, who introduced Frank to Zen Buddhism, nonviolence, and a different way of looking at the world. Spoilers: it took.

The last poet to take the stage at *The Last Waltz* was [the legendary Lawrence Ferlinghetti](#). His piece was probably familiar to most of the crowd, having had pride of place in the 1960 City Lights *Beatitude* anthology edited by Allen Ginsberg. However, Ferlinghetti, rather than try to pass off old stuff, dressed up his “Loud Prayer” with a sparkly new name to go along with the theme of the evening. The then-newly christened “Last Prayer,” in the film anyway, and mere moments from being wrongly cataloged in all once and future storage and retrieval systems goes a little something like this:

*Let us pray:*

*Our father whose art’s in heaven*

*Hollow be thy name*

*Unless things change*

*Thy wisdom come and gone*

*Thy will will be undone*

*On earth as it isn’t heaven*

*Give us this day our daily dread*

*At least three times a day*

*And forgive us our trespasses*

*On love’s territory*

*For thine is the  
wigdom and the power and the glory  
Oh Man!*

Hearing Ferlinghetti read this in *The Last Waltz* for the first time, years later, as a kid weaned on punk rock who saw the film as some self-congratulatory naval gaze for the generation whose revolution failed, I admit I didn't get it. That's my fault, *mostly*. The real power of "Loud Prayer" is disguised by both Ferlinghetti's delivery and some deliberate hokeyness. Like "wigdom." Twice. Really? Yes, it *is* an actual word. Here's a contemporaneous example, courtesy of Ruth Drake, in *Redbook's Complete Guide to Beauty* (1973), page 93: "You'd be right in the mainstream — frosted wigs *are* one of the biggest sellers in wigdom." People *actually* talked like that, and Ferlinghetti liked nothing better than to mock the squareness of straight society with a bit of their very own vernacular. The phrases, however, that immediately brought me back down from my high horse back then and made me think of the Sisyphean nature of it all, are tucked in there, nice and cozy, and if you blink you can miss them showing off their fangs. "Hollow be thy name/Unless things change" and "Give us this day our daily dread/At least three times a day" bubble with a nihilistic undercurrent that throttles *both* the last of the hippies and the nascent punks (I always have to remind myself that *The Last Waltz* happened in 1976. That same month, in New York, Blondie and the Talking Heads were playing CBGB, and the Ramones and Heartbreakers were playing Max's) with a big heaping helping of "told ya so."

If you've seen the film, the one actually *released* in April of 1978, forty-six years ago as I write this, and not the shaky audience shot, black and white footage, you know whose vision ultimately won out. Scorsese cut all the poets, except McClure and Ferlinghetti. The musical portion, due to either poor recordings or The Band and their guests being a bit too caught up in their celebrations to be able to play the songs, ended up being heavily supplanted by overdubbed studio versions. Even [the cocaine hanging out of Neil Young's nose got airbrushed away](#) by (then) state-of-

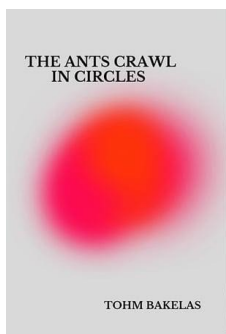
the-art special effects. Repeated watching has washed out the celebration and carnivalesque aspects of *The Last Waltz* for me, leaving something a little more somber and funereal in its place. I reckon much of The Band ended up feeling the same way, as Robertson returned to its stage (metaphorically, anyway) when writing the theme song to [Daniel Roher's 2019 documentary about The Band](#). Robertson sings:

*When that curtain comes down  
We'll let go of the past  
Tomorrow's another day  
Some things weren't meant to last  
When that curtain comes down  
On the final act  
And you know, you know deep inside  
There's no goin' back  
Once were brothers  
Brothers no more  
We lost our way  
After the war  
Can't even remember  
What we're fighting for  
When once were brothers  
Brothers no more*

So, why *The Last Waltz*? I don't know, really, but I keep coming back to it. I think it says something important about community and how fragile community is. I think, as Scorsese and Robertson intended, it's saying something about myth and legacy and being thankful, about leaving them wanting more, as the old showbiz adage goes, but also, it's a warning. It's a rallying cry. It's a rebel song. When they try to cut the poets from the movie, it's to their own detriment, not ours. Like those deer tramping through my yard, we are silent now, but when the time comes, you'll hear us.

Wanna talk about music, or movies, or wildlife? Send a message to [jrbarner@gmail.com](mailto:jrbarner@gmail.com). I'd love to hear from you!





## Burning Questions with Tohm Bakelas

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

Tohm Bakelas is a New Jersey-based poet, editor, and psychiatric social worker. He is the author of twenty-seven chapbooks and several collections of poetry, including *Cleaning the Gutters of Hell* (2023, [Zeitgeist Press](#)) and *The Ants Crawl in Circles* (2024, [Bone Machine, Inc.](#)). Since 2021, Bakelas has been the general editor of Between Shadows Press, a DIY, punk, handmade press that has published and reissued work by D.A. Levy, Bruce Issacson, Claire Richardson, Peter Finch, and others.

Bakelas' work is *alive*. The language is laser-focused, concise, and direct. The moments and metaphors are real and relatable, the characters so familiar at times it's a little frightening. This work is carefully constructed: built, moment by moment, from the hard stone and soft soil of everyday life. It deserves to be read and its language deserves to be savored. There is real care here, allowing voices long suppressed to rise up and be heard. Let's start the conversation:

**Your work is frequently cited as being informed by both punk rock and a thread of poetic rebels, from Dylan Thomas to Charles Bukowski and the whole *Open City* scene. I know growing up going to punk shows and playing in bands, while individual expression was stressed, legacy was also important. I wonder if that translates over to poetry for you. 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?**

**TB:** Yeah man, you're definitely correct, I mean, it's all interconnected. Punk, poetry, music, literature, all of it. When I first started making bands we didn't give a fuck about whether or not people would like us. We wrote for us. And when we finally recorded the songs, they sounded terrible, but it didn't matter because it resonated with people. And they learned the music and the words, and they sang along. And then when the bands died, that's when I started writing poetry. To me it was the same thing, only no singalongs. I wrote for me and then had all these fucking poems that I didn't know what to do with. So I did some investigative work and soon discovered the small press world. And then I took batches of poems that were terrible, and I mean fucking terrible—completely unedited and all over the place—and I sent them to these presses and sometimes they were printed, folded, and stapled in the form of a chapbook. Looking back now, I am a bit embarrassed by those early poems, but it was a good learning experience for sure, especially when it came time to start Between Shadows Press... but listen, you asked me some questions and I have yet to answer any of them. So enough of the bullshit, let's begin.

The first poet I was floored by was Charles Bukowski. My friend Chris Flynn handed me his copy of "Play The Piano Drunk Like A Percussion Instrument Until The Fingers Begin To Bleed A Bit" and I read it over and over again until I bought all of Bukowski's books prior to 1996, when John Martin bastardized the posthumous work. Sometime later I read that the Beats were supposed to be good. So I read "Howl" by Ginsberg and was impressed. I read some more of Ginsberg's poems before abandoning him for Kerouac and Corso, but they never made any fucking sense to me. And unfortunately, that's time I'll never get back. So I went back to Bukowski and he led me to Dylan Thomas, Li Po, and Dostoevsky. And then I was introduced to Kent Taylor through Lucy Wilkinson who runs Death of Workers Whilst Building Skyscrapers. Kent Taylor, in my opinion, is the greatest American poet to ever live. In 2021 I flew out

to San Francisco to hang out with him. I consider him a great friend and mentor. He's truly just the fucking coolest guy in the world. Kent led me to d.a. levy and Weldon Kees. The poets I am reading now or cycle through often are: Kent Taylor, d.a. levy, Everette Maddox, Franz Wright, Weldon Kees, Du Fu, William Wantling, Richard Brautigan, Steve Richmond, Scott Laudati, and Raymond Carver.

**As a social worker at a facility that provides care for people living with severe and persistent mental illness which all too frequently manifests as violence or self-harm, it is difficult to imagine how your work would not inform your poetry, and, in poems like “a dangerous thought”(from *Punk Poets are Pretentious Assholes*, 2021, Between Shadows Press) and “i wasn't even working”(from *The Ants Crawl in Circles*, 2024, Bone Machine, Inc.) you manage to address this from a very raw, open and honest place. I'm wondering how you mitigate the amount of autobiography that goes into your work. How does your life impact your writing and vice versa?**

**TB:** All my poems are true stories. I don't deviate from that. And I never will. When I write about a particular event that I witnessed, or a face-to-face encounter with a patient, or a story I was told by a coworker, then I keep it anonymous. That's the key and the true balancing act. If a name happens to appear in a poem, it has definitely been changed. I will never compromise HIPPA. I can't and I won't. At the end of the day my job pays the bills, not poetry. Since 2011 I've worked in multiple psychiatric hospitals, multiple medical hospitals, one county jail, multiple group homes, and have done in-home counseling for kids. I've witnessed countless episodes of violence, suicide attempts, electroshock therapy, psychotic episodes, murder, death, and everything in between. I guess what I'm saying is, there's no fucking way to know who or what or where I'm writing about because I've worked in so many different facilities with so many different patients. So in that sense that's how I mitigate things—through anonymity and mystery.



As for my life impacting my writing, yeah sure, that exists. I'm a full-time single father to two awesome kids, both who make appearances in my poems. I truly believe poetry is important, so I read it to my kids before their bedtime. They've also accompanied me to poetry readings which keeps me in check from jumping into the audience and assaulting any fucking idiot who snaps their fingers. And with kids comes responsibilities, like looking out for their well-being. I always complete a preliminary ocular pat-down of the reading before we go to assess any potential lasting psychological damages they may experience. And if the risk is low to medium, I'll bring them. They're little hecklers and usually get to scream one curse word into the microphone— if there is a microphone.

**As founder and editor of [Between Shadows Press](#), you have contributed so much to what people who read this newsletter refer to as the “writing community.” I know, since I've been reading the Between Shadows output, there are 6-7 poets that are among my current favorites I never would've found without you, so I owe you that debt of gratitude. You've also used the press to lift the voices of poets who otherwise may not be heard as well as accentuate the work of those, like D.A. Levy and Kent Taylor, who were seminal to various poetry scenes from Cleveland, Ohio to San Francisco, California. As a poet, editor, and publisher, what's your take on the writing community? How important is it to the work**

## **you're seeking to accomplish with Between Shadows Press and your output as a writer?**

**TB:** Listen, I'm just thankful there are people who actually want to work with Between Shadows Press. Publishing Kent Taylor was the highlight of my "career." His work has had such a profound impact on me, as both a writer and a human. Recently I published two d.a. levy poems that blew my fucking head off when I first read them. I've always tried to use Between Shadows Press as a platform to bring older poets' work to younger audiences, and vice versa. When I started Between Shadows Press in 2021 I had one thing in mind: minimalism. I bought the cheapest cardstock and the cheapest paper and I fucking made chapbooks. I modeled the entire operation off of Dischord Records. I have long maintained that poetry should be accessible. And to date, every Between Shadows Press release has been \$5. I also don't sell every release. A good deal of the time I'm giving releases away because I just want people's words read. I really don't make money off of this. And as far as money goes, I'm usually in the red. This year I actually broke even and made a small profit, but that went right back into buying ink, paper, staples, and printers. It also goes into the astronomical shipping costs to international orders. If I prohibited international shipping, I'd be in the black all the time. But that's not important, it's really not. Getting the word out is what's important. You know, for a while I exclusively published editors of presses because they never get the recognition they truly deserve. Running a press is such a thankless task, even more so than being a social worker. Apparently, I just really enjoy torturing myself.

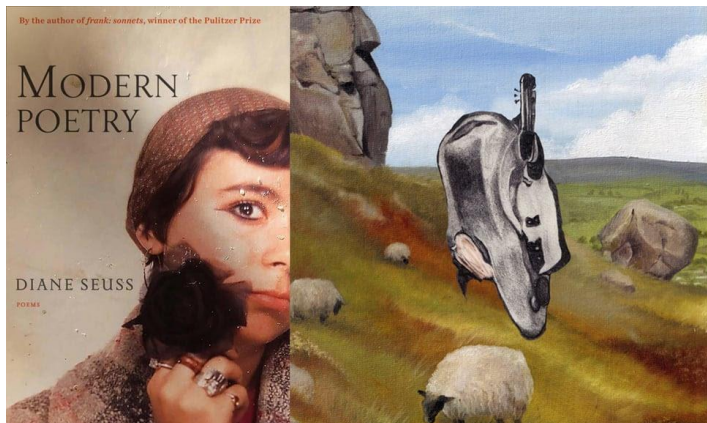


As for your questions... I think the writing community, especially in the small press, is a giant clusterfuck. It's a goddamn traffic jam and everyone's trying to inch their way toward an exit, but there is no breakthrough. It's incredibly incestuous, meaning if Between Shadows Press releases a chapbook for a poet in January, 9 times out of 10 that poet will be releasing another chapbook with another press in March, and then again in May. I'm all for writers getting their work out there, but at the end of the day, you're creating unnecessary competition with yourself and other presses. Last year, I took the initiative of reaching out to certain presses that I respect [[Two Key Customs](#), [Bone Machine, Inc.](#), [ClairObscur](#)] to discuss publishing schedules because we've all been burned by writers, and it's typically the same fucking people—repeat offenders. And to curb that we all talk. It sounds so fucking ridiculous but it's the shitty reality. None of us have money. Between Shadows

Press does not have money. I do this because I genuinely love poetry. I have a longer list of people I'll never work with than I do with those I will work with. Some people are in it to have their work published and others are there to form friendships. I prefer the latter. And perhaps that's because I first started in the punk world where all we had was each other. I don't fucking know, man. But I do know that I've made some really solid friends along the way, many of whom I speak with regularly: Kent Taylor, Mark Anthony Pearce, Danny D. Ford, Gwil James Thomas, Scott Laudati, Steve Zmijewski, Claire Richardson, Andrew D'Apice, and many many more.

As for your last question... my journey with poetry has been a giant learning experience— learning which presses to avoid, learning which poets are shitheads, and learning about myself too. When I first started, I believed in quantity vs quality. Now, I'm all for quality. It took a while to learn, but it came shortly after starting *Between Shadows Press* and realizing that just about every editor who rejected my poems was doing the world a favor, as well as me. I believe that belonging to a community is just as important as understanding who you are as an individual. Because at some point that community will change, or dissolve, or destroy itself. At the end of the day, you always have you. And besides, what the fuck do I know? I'm just some curly-haired, white suburban punk from New Jersey who loves pizza and poetry. Okay, that's enough, I have to go now. Talk soon.

*Thanks, Tohm for talking! Be sure to check out his work at *Zeitgeist Press*, *Bone Machine*, and, of course, *Between Shadows Press*. Tohm's work is also available on [his Instagram](#) and [his website](#). Support our poets!*



**Diane Seuss, *Modern Poetry* (Graywolf Press, 2024).** Pulitzer Prize-winning Diane Seuss gives me exactly what I needed, exactly when I need it, whether I knew I needed it or not. This collection, her sixth, is no exception. There is something about a writer writing about writing from a non-didactic, more questioning place that gives this collection a flickering, almost spectral presence while building to bawdy crescendos of self-analysis in the title poem, the pulverizing “Against Poetry” and the blissful, wistful, and wan meditation on Gertrude Stein.

**English Teacher, *This Could Be Texas* (Island, 2024).**Expanding on from, and exploding out of, the vibrant post-punk of 2022’s *Polyawkward* EP, English Teacher can still do things with words, drums & loud guitars. But there’s so, so, so much more here. And that alone is saying something in the current musical marketplace of ideas. More practically, the fact that I’ve heard a fair half of this album for months already, on the very day of release, and I’m still salivating with knife and fork, means that there’s something special being presented. It’s no *gimmick*, it’s not *styled*. I am *not* Jack’s target demographic. “Shelley and Byron will be on their way/Begging for my postal code,” sings Lily Fontaine in the staggeringly brilliant “Sideboob,” “To help me find the words to describe/Greater than great, go with sublime/They’ll be filling up my answerphone.” And, after listening to *This Could Be Texas*, you may believe, as I do, that they just might.



## HISTORY OF A DROWNING BOY

The dead man in the corner  
made very little noise.  
Which wasn't all that surprising.  
Still, his shattered glass laugh  
& stories of the shore  
still hung in the air,  
like those curtains he hated  
that were already there when  
he moved in.  
All he wanted, all he longed for,  
& everything he'd done  
was in fruitless pursuit  
of someone he'd once been.  
That boy left on the beach,  
he'd never be again.

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**Stay tuned, readers. In just a fortnight, there is a very special 'New Possibilities' headed your way!**

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