



Photo by Kevin Powell

## **New Possibilities # 8: (Finally,) A Shiny New Monthly(ish) Newsletter by J.R. Barner**

Poetry is **magic**.

There, I said it. If I were being precise, there'd be a 'k' on the end of that last word (and, if you know, you know). But, I'm not being precise. I'm being messy because I've written this sentence already, but you, the reader, don't know that. The computer dog ate my homework and I've started (again) from scratch, so what you're getting is a fabrication, a simulacrum. A copy of a copy. But, much [like Tennyson's wild winds](#), the truth of the above statement sounds out to all with ears yet to hear. It does not falter.

So, poetry **is** magic.

It took me a while to understand what that means. It took *years*. I had gotten to a place in my reading and writing where I was interested in what took words, just *ordinary* words, to something extraordinary. How was it possible? What was the skill needed to make this "magical" transformation? From what I was

seeing and reading, it came down to two things: order and chaos. The order part was easy: this was rigor, refinement, mastery, reading a lot and writing a lot, caring about craft, precision, and working and reworking a poem until everything was *just right*. For all that order brought me, however, I noticed that it often left me uninspired, overextended, or burnt out. Don't get me wrong, I'm happy my vocabulary is as large as it is, and that I know the mechanics of a sentence and various grammatical calisthenics, but the spark of the spontaneous just wasn't there. There had to be something else or somewhere else that housed the magic. So, chaos seemed to be the only way to go.

But, what *is* chaos? I wasn't sure but I knew that I was captivated by the idea of randomness or chance in art. There were so many works that inspired me, like John Cage's *Music of Changes* (1951), Jackson Pollock's famous "drip period" between 1947 and 1950, and Tristan Tzara's method for creating poems by pulling words from a hat, later refined into the "cut-up" (or "fold-in") method championed by Brion Gysin and William S. Burroughs and deployed in works by Julio Cortázar (*Hopscotch*, 1963), Hedwig Gorski (*Booby, Mama!*, 1977), Kathy Acker (*Blood and Guts in High School*, 1984) and David Bowie ("Life on Mars?," from *Hunky Dory*, 1971 and "Hallo, Spaceboy," from *Outside*, 1995). Reading these works, and reading about them, in every case led me to the *I-Ching*, the Chinese divinatory text from the 9th century BCE. I immediately ran out and got a copy.

More a work of philosophy than of cleromancy proper, the *I-Ching* is a complex and many-layered system that, denuded as it often is of its important cultural, linguistic, historical, and social contexts, presents a multitude of obstacles to even the most zealous Western enthusiast. There is much to be considered, thought through, debated, or discussed

(internally, at minimum) and calculated before one even begins using a system like the *I-Ching*. Feeling like I was sailing into unfamiliar waters, I realized quickly I needed a map! And, surprisingly, I found one, in a used bookstore. An already dog-eared copy of Steve Moore's *The Trigrams of Han* (1989, Thorsons Publishers) immediately became my constant companion and quickly proved well worth the investment.

I noticed how adept Moore was at both elucidating some of the stickier aspects of the divinatory system but also allowing other things to go unexplained, rather than trying to fashion a Westernized supposition. This aspect, Moore explained, was central to the divinatory system and maintained its holistic intent. Counter to the typical Western scientific method of “controlling for” or “excluding” variables that are beyond the ken of the experimenter, Moore noted that, while neat and orderly, this only delivered a partial picture. Allowing some factors to be, rather “unknowns” within a superimposed aspect of “pressure” allowed the *I-Ching*-influenced experimenter more freedom to collect data, and more conclusions to draw from to explain various phenomena (see *The Trigrams of Han*, p. 47). The influence of the *I-Ching* on Cage, Tzara, Burroughs, Bowie, and others was clear to me, now, and whether we were talking about words, notes on a piano, or drops of paint on a canvas, there was a sense of universality that permeated through the work. It all had to do with, Moore said, your intention.

Two things resulted. The first was that I was spending more time with *The Trigrams of Han* than *The I-Ching*, taking it around with me everywhere, struck by Moore's writing. The second was that I was feeling more confident with the chaos inherent in making my art. Comfortable, even. I didn't want to tell anyone

this, lest my confidence be misconstrued as egotistical. It occurred to me that maybe I could contact Moore himself, but my gargantuan case of imposter syndrome quickly disabused me of the notion, convincing me that an Asiatic scholar like Moore wouldn't want to hear about me and my "silly poems." So silent I remained. But I kept reading Moore.

Soon, my well-worn copy of *The Trigrams of Han* was supplemented by Moore's co-edited volume, *I Ching: An Annotated Bibliography*, published in 2002. Thanks to the internet, I learned more about Moore himself. In addition to his scholarly work, I learned that he was a creative writer himself, producing novels and writing for film, television, and comics. It was through the Internet that I found out about his monograph on the Greek moon goddess, Selene, and the magical and creative cult that grew up around her in ancient Greece. His latest project, I learned, was a thinly fictionalized novel, detailing his contemporaneous magical evocations of the moon goddess, which were, ostensibly, fueling his art and creativity.

Reading all of this made my head spin a little, I admit, but what stuck with me was how Moore's idea of intention brought the worlds of order and chaos together. As Moore noted in his work on the cult of Selene, even the word for poet, in Greek, *poiētēs*, means "maker" and probably has to do with the fact that the songs, rituals, and hymns offered up to the gods and goddesses had to be *made* by those who were *both* literate and who possessed some literary gift, much like the word *craft* is, throughout the various knots and tangles of English, Norse, and Germanic languages, ineluctably tied to the meaning "small boat," leading one to believe that those who were most adept at their jobs on dry land were likely

the most skilled navigators. It's the idea of magic (or talent, or *je ne sais quoi*, or whatever you want to call it) as something that responds directly to the intention of the maker, doer, crafter, believer, etc.

I needed to put my intentions to the test. I began to compose a poem, inspired by Moore's work on Selene, and his novel *Somnium* (2011, Strange Attractor Press) and created, almost completely, using a randomizing method based on the *I-Ching*. I was going to go to London and place it in the man's hand, himself. This time, I told myself, I was really going to do it. Time passed, but I eventually finished the poem just as dawn was breaking on March 26th, 2014. That morning, I made a cup of tea and sat down, exhausted but pleased with finally completing the poem. As my research involved regular and sustained web browsing for Moore and Moore-related information, I casually typed his name into the engine and pressed "search."

And then I found [his obituary](#).

He'd been gone nearly ten days. The tenth hexagram of the *I-Ching* is the theme of "continuing" or "moving on to". While its lower trigram can represent a swamp or murky depth, the top trigram is tian (天), one of the oldest Chinese characters. Despite its age, its meaning is clear: "heaven."



**Photo by Kevin Storm, from Pádraig Ó Méalóid's obituary for Steve Moore.**

Steve Moore taught me that writing and art are magic, and I never got to thank him personally for that lesson. The poem I wrote for him, "Selene," features in my collection *Little Eulogies* bearing a dedication to him. Steve's lesson also continues through others he worked with, like Alan Moore (no relation), the novelist, magician, and comics auteur. I did not know Alan Moore's work, except through his association with Steve Moore, but now sing the praises of *Watchmen* and *V for Vendetta* and his incredible novel *Jerusalem*. I think I'll give Alan the last word, for reasons that will become obvious:

**There is some confusion as to what magic actually is. I think this can be cleared up if you just look at the very earliest descriptions of magic. Magic in its earliest form is often referred to as "the art". I believe this is completely literal. I believe that magic is art and that art, whether it be writing, music, sculpture, or any other form, is literally magic. Art is, like magic, the science of manipulating symbols, words, or images, to achieve changes in consciousness. The very language about magic seems to be talking as much about writing or art as it is about supernatural events. A grimoire, for example, the book of spells is simply a fancy way of saying grammar. Indeed, to cast a spell is simply to spell, to manipulate words, to change people's consciousness. And I believe that this is why an artist or writer is the closest thing in the contemporary world that you are likely to see to a shaman.**

Got any extra bells, books, or candles? Open for trades or just a chat at [jrbarner@gmail.com](mailto:jrbarner@gmail.com)

OK, OK, about that shiny thing...



By the time you read this, dear reader, my website will have been updated, announcing that my new collection, **The Ocean, Underground & Other Poems**, is to be published by Nightmarathon Press in January 2025. It feels both exhilarating and terrifying to announce it like this and the redesigned site will have a bit more information, but, I made a promise, way back in issue # 2 or # 3 of this newsletter that you, dear readers would be the first to know about said shiny thing. This, my first collection of all-new material, has been nothing short of a labor of love and I'm excited to share more with you in the coming months as we edge closer and closer to the precipice of publication. Watch this space!



Scarlett Ward

**ache**



VERVE  
POETRY PRESS

## Burning Questions with Scarlett Ward

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

**Scarlett Ward** is a Black Country Poet, performer, and workshop facilitator, currently living and working in Brighton. Her poetry focuses on the issues revolving around mental health, recovery, and what it means to find love for another whilst still uncovering love for one's self. She has been nominated for Best Spoken Word Poet by Sabotage awards in 2019 and came runner-up in Wolverhampton Literature Festival, [Mother's Milk Poetry Prize](#), and [Lord Whiskey Poetry Prize](#). She has been featured on Brum Radio and [People's Poetry Podcast](#).

Scarlett's debut collection, *ache* (2019, Verve Poetry Press) was shortlisted for a Forward Prize. Her work has recently been featured in Under The Radar magazine by Nine Arches Press, Eyeflash Press, and Fly on the Wall Press. Scarlett was also featured in the first Verve Poetry Press Anthology, [Wild Dreams and Louder Voices – The Poetry Jam Anthology](#) edited by [Anisa Haghdati](#). Scarlett is, from 2021, the founder



and general editor for [Fawn Press](#), a publisher of exceptional poetry pamphlets and anthologies.

I feel fortunate to live in a time where there is so much strong, creative, and engaged writing being made. Where there are new and interesting voices to be heard, read, and experienced. Frankly, it leaves me a little spoiled. A little self-satisfied. Feeling like I have seen it all. Unchallenged. That changed from the very first line of the first page of *ache*. I can count on one hand the number of times I finished a collection in a sitting. I read *ache* **twice**. I didn't move a muscle until I'd read the last page, riveted by every poem. Scarlett Ward has, with this work, set me, and many others, back on our heels with a truly unique voice and deftness of language that is as warm and familiar as it is unsettling. There is a sense of place in these poems, an environment that is bursting with light and life, but one that doesn't fail to acknowledge the shadows that may loom at its corners.

Question time!

**JB:** First, I want to be completely honest with you. *ache* is one of the most impressive debut collections that I've ever read. Its naturalistic tone, emerging from the very first lines of "We're going to have to talk about it at some point," and continuing through the book, in poems like "I grew" and "The smiling yellow pistil," reminds me somewhat of another debut collection, Ted Hughes' *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957, Faber & Faber). Both books populate their deeply personal reflections with surrounding flora and fauna in similar ways. Diverging from that comparison, I was also struck by how your voice is so singular and strong throughout *ache*, and I love how the Midlands exists as a character of sorts, weaving in and out of poems like "Culling Season" and "How I can bear to drive past your address." 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 are you currently finding inspiration? How does the world around you—plants, animals, people, buildings, and everything in between, find their way into your language?

**SW:** Thank you so much for the kind words, I'm very honoured to have my work compared to Ted Hughes! I am a born and bred Midlands'er and although I recently moved to Brighton, I feel very called to return home. Nowhere really compares. I was recently speaking with a friend about the difference between green spaces and other natural areas, for example, the ocean is readily accessible to me now for the first time in my life, but despite that, I feel very cut off from nature in Brighton because there isn't as much green space as back home. Perhaps because I have always grown up a child of the outdoors, always in the garden, always daydreaming, my view of life has often been through a lens of nature. Nature lends itself so well to our human experience of the world, and through natural metaphors we can better understand our emotions, our place, and ultimately our belonging.



At the moment I am reading [US poet Laureate Ada Limón](#), as I love the ways in which she weaves natural references and anchors them into modern pop culture. Her voice remains so authentic and urgent, but at the same time, there is a definite daydream quality in the way she writes about blackbirds and horses that you can utterly lose yourself in.

I think I try to collect vocabulary as one might trinkets or antiques. It is a fun writing exercise actually, to build a bank of language in one sphere and utilise it to write about a contrasting topic- so for example write about a flower with vocabulary you might use to speak about a car in order to examine and explore narratives about the two topics. I try to do this in my poem “Millennial” In Nine Arches’ Under The Radar

Magazine, in the line “*the eye of a blackbird contracts with camera-lens precision*”. I go on to speak about the alienation and disconnection between my generation and the natural world in the wake of electronic developments. The more shiny language trinkets you can gather, the prettier picture you can paint with them!

**JB:** I also want to thank you for the bravery, transparency, and openness you’ve offered regarding your health over the past two years, detailing some of the struggles related to living with Relapsing-Remitting Multiple Sclerosis (RRMS). This disease left you comatose and variously robbed you of your ability to read, write, walk, talk, or swallow. As you have battled this disease and regained each of these abilities, you have continuously referred to your identity as a writer, educator, and publisher, as an accomplished equestrian, a lover of animals and the outdoors, and life in general, as positive vehicles for aiding in your recovery and journey towards your latest remission. In my work as a social worker, I’ve so often come across clients who are left bereft by their struggles, whose identity has been subsumed by the “diagnosis” and stresses that come with the label. What advice do you have for others who may be struggling under the weight of getting better? How have your recent battles with the disease informed your work? What changes have resulted from your recovery?

**SW:** Very big question. I am still fairly newly diagnosed as my coma was only two years ago so I still feel like I’m coming to terms with my new disability. I lived 28 years thinking I was immortal, as I’m sure many 20-somethings believe they are, and became disabled almost overnight really. Writing has always been a way for me to process the world around me so it was natural that I began to write as a way to

process, to fathom. Multiple Sclerosis is an incurable disease, so where I may have recovered from this relapse, it is still a progressive disease and sufferers with RRMS will recover a little less after each episode. I think I struggle with discovering who I am outside of my diagnosis, and of course, there is a terrible pressure in creative spaces to ‘trot out’ your traumas and suffering in front of an audience, because there is a sense of “if I can’t at least make good art out of it then what’s the point of it all?!”

Of course, this is yet more pressure that I add onto myself, and I realized that I had to allow myself time and space to write terrible, terrible poetry that will never see the light of day, just because I had to process what I was going through. Maybe it’s because we live in an age of social media that we feel we must perform, or maybe it’s the way of the artist, but I think there’s a lot to be said for the act of withdrawing, of taking time for yourself, to inhale before you consider your next moves.

I get a lot of brain fog now, and the fatigue is a terrible thief. Thankfully though the evenings are getting longer now and as I write this email it is light at 8 pm! Joy! I think finding joy in life is the key to surviving. That sounds terribly trite, doesn’t it? But acquiring a disease has totally changed my outlook. The more I paid attention to the ‘mundane’ things, the more I realized nothing is ever really mundane. Luckily that’s a skill one really needs to hone as a poet as well!



**JB:** As founder and editor of Fawn Press and a dedicated workshop facilitator, you have contributed so much to what people who read this newsletter call the “poetry community.” Tell me about Fawn Press! The pamphlets and anthologies you’ve published just in the first few years are very impressive. As a poet, editor, and publisher, what’s your take on the writing community? How important is it to the work you seek to accomplish with Fawn Press and your writing output? What can we expect in the coming months?

**SW:** Thank you so much! I started Fawn Press in 2021 when the world was just waking up from lockdown. I come from an incredibly fertile and supportive poetry community in Birmingham and Staffordshire, and I was inspired by the likes of Emma at [the Emma Press](#) and Jane Commane at [Nine Arches](#). (Two incredible Midlands publishers.) When I stepped onto the poetry scene as a graduate, I began in performance circles, visiting every poetry night I could, not just to read and get my name about, but to learn from others. This, I think, is the most important aspect of the poetry community, wherever it may be. Be a much bigger consumer than you are a contributor. Go to shows to just watch. Go to book launches and purchase magazines. Follow social media pages and read poetry websites. Join collectives and workshops. Be a good member of the lovely little niche we find ourselves in.

This is how I discovered my passion for publishing. I'd been leading workshops and mentoring groups, and after my debut collection was published, I knew I wanted to help other writers starting in their careers. Fawn Press will only publish pamphlets, which differ from collections in that they are almost like mini-books (20-30 poems rather than 40+) to help encourage writers to establish their voice before moving on to the full collection.

I also launched The Thicket magazine to showcase poets who might not yet be at the stage where they have a sample of poems and just want to publish a single work, so we aim to bring out an issue every few months (depending on my health.)

I'm also delighted to say that Fawn Press is now Arts Council Funded, meaning that the next wave of poets is assured, and submissions for the writers development programme will be taking place this summer. (Details TBA) It is extremely important to me that I help to establish just where marginalised writers are experiencing barriers, and fight to dismantle them, so I am working with charities and organisations across the country such as the Women's Poetry Prize and Rebecca Swift Foundation, and Creative Lives to really understand how Fawn Press can platform emerging writers that historically, publishing industries would have marginalised.

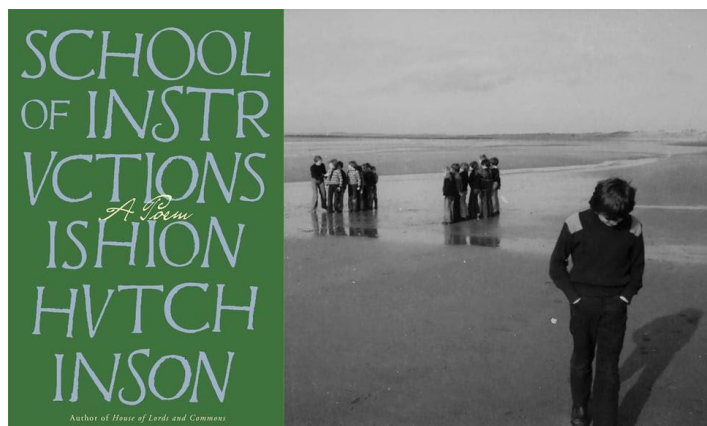
In my personal work I have completed a second collection of poetry, for which I am just looking for a suitable home, but I'm afraid you'll have to wait to hear more about that project!

*My sincere thanks to Scarlett for taking the time to talk with me. Be sure to check out ache through Verve Poetry Press and all of the wonderful offerings of Fawn Press. Scarlett is also available through her*

*Instagram and the Fawn Press website. Support our poets!*

**Photo credits:** [Verve Poetry](#), [Fly on the Wall Press](#), [Scarlett Ward - Instagram](#), [Fawn Press](#), [Creative Lives In Progress](#)

## Reading & Listening This Month



**Ishion Hutchinson, *School of Instructions: A Poem* (Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2023).** It is a modern epic that takes the 20th century and stretches it like so much spent bubblegum until it begins to fray in the middle. Hutchinson is in top form, as his spellbinding verse already shone like a bright light in 2010's *Far District* and 2017's *A House of Lords and Commons*.

**Maruja, Connla's Well EP (Self-Released, 2024).** I refuse to believe this outing from the Manucuan 4-piece is an EP because, at last count, I've hit repeat 73 times. This is intense, committed, concentrated music that packs all the punch of hardcore, with all of the savvy of free jazz, and the melodic, emotive storytelling that contains everything from Gil Scott-Heron to Future of the Left. If you spend any money on any one thing in the next 48 hours, it really should be [this record](#).



# & Now, the Poem

## THE GHOSTS ON ELIZABETH STREET

At Toronto General  
I had a job pushing a broom,  
working midnight to noon  
in the Emergency Room.  
I spent most days  
painting the walls  
'Hospital Green'  
& cleaning the screens  
of the life-support machines.  
I'd change the sheets  
but the stains would come  
back every night.  
The only company I kept  
were what the nurses called  
the ghosts on Elizabeth Street.

## Disclaimers, etc.

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## More 'New Possibilities' in a month or so!

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