



Photo by Kevin Powell

New Possibilities # 14: Take Me Home, Country Newsletter by J.R. Barner

I've been thinking, recently, about home.

I'm not talking about where I grew up, live now, or anywhere you can find on a map. What Seamus Heaney called "the tight gag of place." No, I'm talking about somewhere else, far more elusive than that. I haven't been to the former in decades, although I keep meaning to since there are some people there that I need to visit. Tragically, they aren't going anywhere, so there's no rush. When Heaney gave the first of the inaugural Ellmann Lectures at Emory University in 1988, he chose the theme "The Place of Writing." He endeavored, through a series of appreciations, in more or less chronological order, of the poetry of W.B. Yeats, to trace the journey of the poet from his mother's ancestral home of Sligo, where he spent his holidays in his youth to the decade or so spent at Thoor Ballylee, in County Galway, to the southwest. Heaney is quick to point out how neither of these places is 'home' to Yeats. They are both *imposed* and *imposing*, literally *and* figuratively.

The black tower of Ballylee, for example, in Yeats's conception, deliberately *lacks* a brick-and-mortar façade [in the titular poem](#), manifesting instead as the moonlight, the wind, the sounds the banners flapping against the bricks, and the steepness of the steps leading up from the kitchens. That's its homeliness, *heimlich* in German, [which Sigmund Freud famously juxtaposed](#) with the *unheimlich*, or uncanny—the unreal, hyperreal, unbelievable, fantastical, eerie, or strange. If we fear the black tower, Yeats tells us, it's not because it's from

beyond our wildest dreams or the darkest, most profound depths of our imagination, but because it's so damn *familiar*, but maybe just a *little* off.



Photo credit: [The Yeats Thoor Ballylee Society](#)

Similarly, Heaney's place where writing happens is in the askew, far away from the familiar, in the undiscovered country of the uncanny. "Always go a little further into the water than you feel you're capable of being in," David Bowie once said in an interview. "Go a little bit out of your depth. And when you don't feel that your feet are quite touching the bottom, you're just about in the right place to do something exciting." *Just about*. Home doesn't sustain the scene of writing but instead *initiates* it. Or, put another way, writers are always homeless in one sense and, in another, at home anywhere in the world. But not for long. We constantly feel the tide's pull and keep wading further out. For Bowie, as with Heaney, cultivating the *heimlich* happens in tandem with upsetting the apple cart and allowing the uncanny to unfurl like Yeats's medieval banners in Ballylee.

It's a vibe, to be sure, but this place is not a place. Not everyone can follow us there. They don't understand why we go there, what we do when we get there, or when we're expected back. If we're being honest, we don't even know those things, either. The place of writing is *necessarily* difficult because it's not real. It's not our home; we don't belong there. We are, like Yeats, holed up in his tower, just visiting. On holiday, as it were. But what writing gifts us are the memories, the images, and, of course, the words. Uncanny vistas that are often so beautiful that they are the only things we want to discuss. Still, they are

often so painful that we can't find our voice to express them, having already expended every sensible syllable onto the page. Things we wish we had done or said or thought or things we did do, say, and thought are given the complete cinematic treatment, the insightful, intellectual, or emotional comportment that comes with poetic license. Home always looks different after you've been away for a while. But, really, home never changes. We do.

What does home mean to you, dear reader? Can you really, truly go home again? Send your thoughts to jrbarnar@gmail.com

The Shiny Thing Diaries #5: Little Fires Everywhere

I wish I were going to talk about Celeste Ng's [compelling and beautifully written novel](#). Or the [equally mesmerizing television miniseries](#) (Kerry Washington absolutely *slays*). But I'm not (sad trombone music). I'm going to talk about my book, which is not yet out. Again! (more sad trombone). So, apologies to Celeste Ng, Kerry Washington, and you, dear reader, most of all.



Photo Credit: Ghislain & Marie David de Lossy / Getty Images

[Ask any mother and they will tell you](#)—every labor is different, and every labor is hard.

The only thing worse than a phone not ringing about the book is a phone ringing off the hook. There have been permission problems, production delays, and supply-chain hiccups. I was hoping to have an advanced copy in my hands by the first of the month, and now it'll be a miracle if it happens before the holidays. The holidays, by the way, are also *in the way*, from a production standpoint, so that only serves to exacerbate my

already past-the-boiling-point anxiety. The good news amidst all of this is that my release date is far enough in the future to weather all of these delays (so far) and has not changed. That helps assuage my worried mind.

I am not going to say that dealing with all of this hasn't been stressful. It has been and will continue to be. I am not going to tell you that I found solace in the inherent wisdom of the Serenity Prayer, with its talk of knowing what one is unable to change and meeting those immovable obstacles with a patience and grace that transcends the limits of our fragile and fallen humanness—I didn't. I [screamed like Veruca Salt](#) from *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* (1971) that I wanted my book NOW, and I don't feel a shred of compunction for doing so.

Every labor is different, and every labor is hard.

The fact is that, in today's publishing world, self-publishing authors and independent, small, or micro-presses bear the disproportional brunt of [production slowdowns and stoppages](#) because of the smaller quantities of stock they produce. The production facilities used to produce that stock are the same that large corporate entities use—the same printers, some warehouses, and the same distributors. But it's not hard to imagine that the publisher who has ordered (and already written the check for) many thousand copies will get them before the small press who ordered a couple hundred. First come is most definitely **not** first served. Moreover, since almost everyone uses the same supply chain, all the little presses fight to be next in line after the big ones get filled. This is deleterious to the usual solidarity small presses have for and with one another. It further stresses the community of writers who (whether we tell ourselves we do or not) work for them. Even self-publishers, who may otherwise claim some independence from this grind, circuitously take part in it. It's a creaky, old, and broken system from the [top down](#). And it doesn't have to be.

But every labor is different, and every labor is hard.

For now, cooler heads prevail, and Veruca, cathartic as she may have been, was most definitely a [bad egg](#). While away at my waiting game, I try to put out the little fires that pop up along the way as my tiny beast slouches toward the production line to be born.



Burning Questions with Lydia Rae Bush

Burning Questions is when I ask a writer I admire three (or four) questions and see where it goes from there. This month, I interviewed Lydia Rae Bush, a Best of the Net-nominated poet exploring themes of embodiment and social-emotional development. Her chapbook, Free Bleeding, is forthcoming with [dogleech books](#).

Now and again, a writer comes around who feels so of the moment it is best to drop everything and read them without letting another minute go by. That was my experience with the work of Lydia Rae Bush, whose work evinces a depth of emotion too often buried beneath the firmament of the formulaic. Bush's work, spread far and wide through online and print venues, is a rush of blood to the head, embracing the joyous abandon of language at its most free. Now, where did I put those questions?

JRB: What were some of your first poetical inspirations? I'm always interested in how people got to poetry or how poetry found them. What are you reading now?

LRB: When I was in middle school, I came across a Tumblr post, maybe? That was a free verse poem about the loss of innocence in becoming a teenager. I might have gotten called sappy or cheesy if I'd shown it to friends, but I thought it was

the most beautiful thing I had ever heard. The author used parallelism, repetition, or concrete detail to create a voice that evoked a mood, atmosphere, or aura, and I wanted to be able to “talk cool” like this “big kid” did. So, I sat down and tried... and it worked! Growing up, I had an interest in so many art forms, but as an ADHD kid from the 90's, I hit the jackpot when I realized I had enough of an aptitude for poetry to teach myself. I kept mimicking new voices, styles, or forms, and I kept painting new ideas through new stories... and—unlike a lot of other things I tried, haha—it kept working! I pulled inspiration from whatever happened to already resonate with me—
The [tongue-in-cheek nature of Relient K](#), or the [zingy one-liners of Rascal Flatts](#). I think I've ended up [borrowing a lot of rhythm from Eminem](#). And it just kept expanding. I've found a lot of validation in [The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes](#)—he has a ton of poems in the voice of the people, for the people, about the people. Just little character profiles, basically—tiny monologues. Some poets veer visual, some veer CNF/Fiction... He makes me feel good about veering theatrical!

JRB: You're prolific and write for quite a diverse selection of periodicals and journals. I've enjoyed searching for and finding your poems; they reward multiple reads like hidden treasure. Your topics skate on the ice separating lived, personal experiences, like in ["Clawing" from Serotonin](#) and "Spiral Down Staircase" from [Dulcet Literary Magazine](#), and something else entirely, like the shimmeringly metaphysical longing of ["islands on the other" from The Insurgence](#) newsletter or "Glow" from the 2019 [Pinnacle Anthology](#), with its fires blazing under pink skies and garbanzo bean clouds--magnificent imagery that would sit comfortably in either the oeuvre of [Bob Cobbing](#) or [a song by The Beatles](#). Please tell me how you bring these diverse experiences together.

LRB: Thank you! “Glow” is probably my favorite poem. My father-in-law gave me the prompt “Garbanzo Beans,” and I took some of my notions about how sexuality works and made up the imagery and plot. The more seemingly useless the prompt is, the more I love it. I value utilizing where inspiration naturally lies, but I like to think part of the discipline of writing isn't writing when you're uninspired, so much as learning how to find or create the inspiration!

I was once taught that a stool is more balanced than a chair or ladder because you need three points to make a plane—two being too few and four being too much. I think of my poems similarly now, too. I incorporate a ton of inspiration into each poem. Still, it's usually safe to say there's a more conceptual

aspect, a more concrete aspect, and then a more literary aspect that I tie together. I always knew I was terrible at writing “Occasion Poems” until I stumbled upon creating a “three-legged” one naturally, and that's when I decided that if that's the key to writing a good Occasion Poem, it's probably a good key for writing poems, generally! I'm not too fond of being indirect or passive in my poems, but I love infusing them with as much expression as possible. I think [I picked that up from Emily Dickinson](#), a bit. Her poems can seem simple despite being quite rich!

JRB: I'm not the only one, but I'm really looking forward to your forthcoming chapbook, with dogleech books, *Free Bleeding*. Can you tell us anything about it? How has the process of putting it together been for you?

LRB: Thank you so much! In the same way that I've started to think of my poems as “three-legged”, every chapbook manuscript I've created has been pretty three-legged—or has even had multiple layers of “three legs”, too. *Free Bleeding* explores the distinction between things like “hormonal” versus “hormonally imbalanced” or “emotional” versus “emotionally dysregulated” through the lens of PMS. So, it focuses on both the power of our embodied states and the dignity we have when they go awry.

From there, it looks at what living out that dignity looks like, whether we're in purely oppressive relationships, relationships where we're experiencing insecurity in the attachment, or relationships where we're experiencing security in the attachment. It cycles through emotions, larger quests for justice, and intimate relational dynamics on a loop, and I'm excited to share it with the world.

JRB: My final question addresses what my readers call a "writing community." How do you define a writing community? How does your sense of community and place define what you write? What advice do you have for writers just beginning to find their place?

LRB: I love this question. A large part of the point of publishing in lit mags or with presses for me is the idea of collaboration—Getting to contribute art, along with other contributors, to something an editor has curated and designers have designed. I just love the artistic community. It also blows my mind that people expose themselves to, read, and engage in my work. I know I like my work, but it blows my mind to realize publishers chose my work on purpose or that what I love about my work is seen at all by someone else—Like, I didn't make you all up

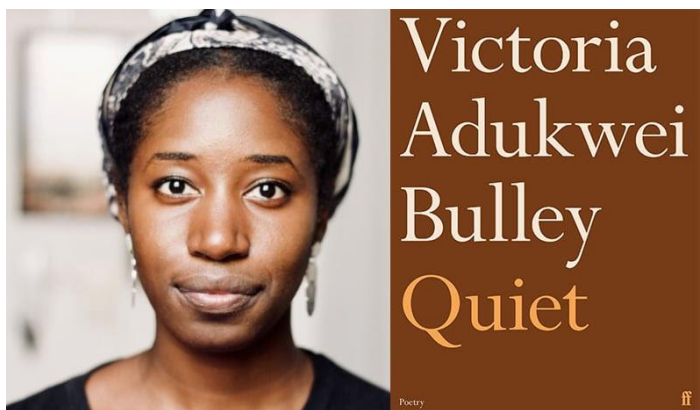
inside my head. I think “promo” gets a really bad name when we forget that it's perfectly possible to be about vulnerable, meaningful human connection.

I was at a loss for how to engage the literary community for the first, maybe 8 years of my career. I felt like I was not good enough to get published by people whose work I, quite frankly, wasn't even interested in. But I started to have “success” when—first of all—I was gifted with actual downtime and support. The other factor was stumbling upon an opportunity—I'd been sitting on the outskirts of literary Twitter when [Gutslut Press](#), whose vibe I'd realized I enjoyed, offered free copies of their work to people who would review it on Goodreads. That gave me an actual practical understanding of the authors with whom I resonated, and I connected with those authors by supporting them. I checked who else those authors worked with to then connect with them. The next time I found a similar thread to follow, I was encouraged, realizing there was a place my work could fit in, and I just became increasingly connected. I've realized I'm not going to grow by trying to become someone I'm not, so I try to expand and improve by finding people I respect to emulate, but to not spend my energy trying to learn from people I don't actually resonate with, haha, even if I think that they're “better” than me.

So, I'd just encourage new authors to do what actually compels you and what actually feels possible for you. You get to constantly define your art, your career, your journey, and your goals, and how you want to work to reach them. And beyond all that, seriously, just focus on connection. If you're getting to do any making or sharing of art that inspires you, hopefully with any people that inspire you, hopefully in any places that inspire you, start there, and you'll see where you end up by the time you get there, haha, each time you get there.

My sincere thanks to Lydia Rae for making time for this interview. Read more at the [Alphabet Ravine](#) and on [Instagram](#) and [Bluesky](#).

Reading and Listening This Month



Victoria Adukwei Bulley, *Quiet* (2022, Faber & Faber). I went to the shelf, and this fell in my hands, already two (almost three) years old and still speaking to me, quietly but assuredly. “check if you want to / but you won’t find any / lyric shame here,” Bulley states emphatically in one of the “declarations” that begin the book. *Quiet* starts as it means to go on, from there, with ruminations on death, love, and the tightrope walk between cultural observation and erasure of identity. It’s powerful but true to its title, not ostentatious. These poems don’t *pretend*. They don’t grandstand; there’s no imagined pulpit. Instead, they carve out a living space, a person-sized hole in the fabric of time and space, and invite us to step tentatively forward, without making a sound, to see if we fit.



Fabiana Palladino, *Fabiana Palladino* (2024, Paul Institute/XL Recordings). Some albums come into your life, and they’re there for the moment, and then, maybe, one or two songs stick around, get folded into playlists or heard on the radio, and are fondly remembered. Other albums seem to be solid, purpose-built works of art that testify to their craftsmanship. A well-made record is like a unicorn these days, and it is irreducible to the sum of its parts. Fabiana Palladino’s self-titled debut is one of those. Sitting down and paying attention to this album,

which is just over one-half hour long, is incredibly rewarding. The conscious lean into the late 80s/early 90s R&B feel is a perfect match for the team of musicians Palladino has assembled, including the incredible Jai Paul, long-time Heartbreaker Steve Ferrone, Sufjan Stevens affiliate Rob Moose, and Fabiana's no-doubt proud papa, fretless bass master Pino Palladino. At a time when so much darkness exists on the periphery of our world, *Fabiana Palladino* offers the opportunity to light a candle and dance until the sun comes up.

Oh, yeah, the poem...

Paying off the hangman

By order of the king,
& most solemn decree,
buried in some legislative
footnote, pitched in
the dustbin of history.
I squinted when I found it,
ran the figures in my head,
considered its veracity,
& implications
for the dead.
It's all there if you want to see it.
In perpetuity, I hope—
thirteen pence halfpenny:
one shilling for the
hangman and three halfpence
for the rope.

Disclaimers, etc.

You did this to yourself! Subscribe to the newsletter, I mean. Send the word UNSUBSCRIBE to jrbarner@gmail.com if you don't want any more. That is also the address if you wish to speak about happier subjects. I'd love to hear from you!

More 'New Possibilities' next month!

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