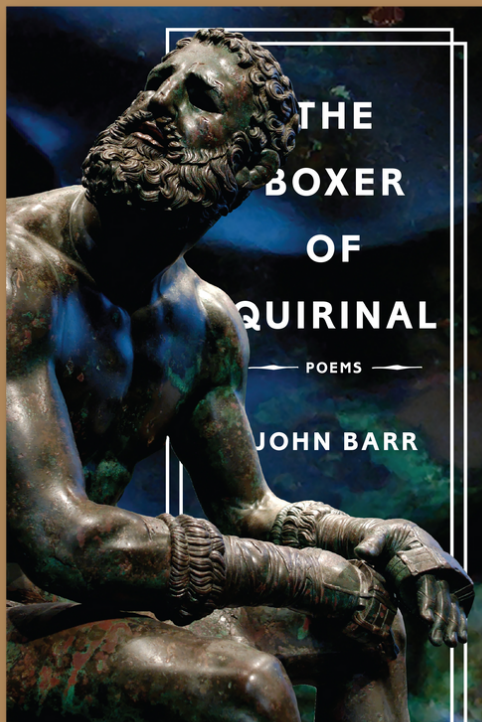


# A Reader's *Companion to*



*by John Barr*

## Introduction

A Reader's Guide—which this is not—typically explicates a poem for a student. But if a poem succeeds, it needs no explanation by the poet. A Reader's Companion is different. These notes offer context, the penumbra of circumstances that surround the poem: The personal moments, the uncertainty and the source of wonder that make possible the displacement of language into fresh response that becomes the poem. Without the wonder, there is no poem.

Every reader of my poems is also a source of wonder and appreciation. I offer this Companion to you, dear reader, as a gesture of my gratitude and in the hopes it delights.

## Heron (page 17)

*for Warren Douglas*

He comes when the light is right,  
banking the pond's perimeter  
to land and step into a statue's stillness.

When the light is right the fish come in to feed,  
feeling it safe to nose among the weeds,  
to risk the proximity of feet, of legs  
that rise like reeds to a distant body above.

Once I saw him come in heavy rain,  
knowing it would roil the fisheye view.  
I watched his neck—a question mark—release,  
his beak harpoon a startled shape,  
and saw it go head-first down the hatch.

Perfect hunger. Perfect hunter. Perfect prey.  
I wait for the heron to come.

## Commentary on Heron

Hunter or prey? As living things, how can we not be both?



## Albatross (page 18)

*For its first five years the bird does not return to land.*

Home is not land's end,  
a fledgling nest  
of food and rest.

Home is the wind  
you glide, the sea  
you glean unendingly

until a hunger comes  
to *Wheel* and *Go*—  
not *Home*

but what you can't yet know:  
the clambering of kind  
on kind.

## Commentary on Albatross

The albatross is a bird of legend. It carries the souls of drowned sailors. It brings bad luck to any who kill one. Here's Coleridge in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner":

*Ah! Well a-day! What evil looks  
Had I from old and young!  
Instead of the cross, the Albatross  
About my neck was hung.*

Modern science finds the albatross equally remarkable. It has the largest wingspan of any bird—more than 10 feet. It mates for life and once it leaves its natal nest, it spends its life in flight over the Southern ocean waves, never landing for years at a time. It returns to the headlands of its birth only to mate, and no one knows how it finds that place.



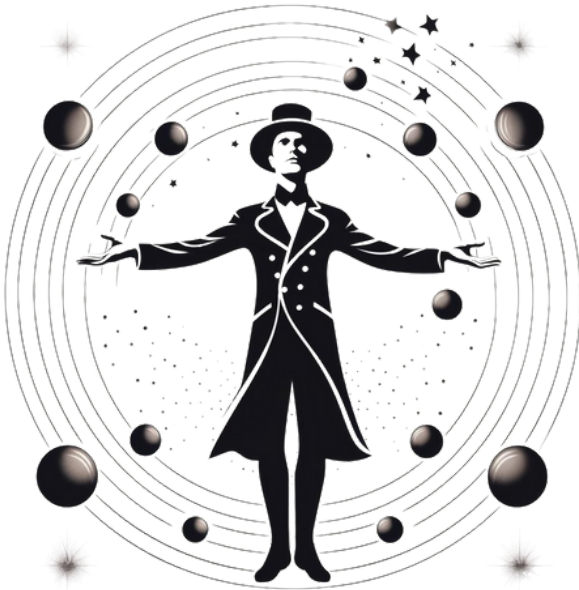
## **Eight Minutes Out (page 19)**

Like a ringmaster in the center ring  
he keeps the planets circling perfectly;  
the comets he allows to have their fling  
but brings them back precisely on the day;  
the asteroids trumpet and kneel on cue  
while all the while he sends his radiance  
to neighbor stars, across the Milky Way,  
and on into the boundless provenance.

Hardly important—even worth noticing,  
if a sliver of his bounty, minutes out,  
barely 90 million miles away,  
should in its last ten feet change anything—  
even if extracting life from light,  
a green exception to a winter's day.

# Commentary on Eight Minutes

Extracting life from light is a miracle. Chlorophyll has turned the planet green. Without it there would be no plant or animal life. Every feeding chain starts with it—except that some forms of life do not depend on chlorophyll. (See the next page.)



## Season of Spores (pages 22-23)

One rain and they appear.  
Along the trails—*Tranquil Bluff*,  
*Croghan, Juniper*—  
a cadence of feeding on the forest floor.

The scatter of moon-colored stuff  
erupts from the mire, unfurls  
a bric-a-brac of fluke and ruff,  
lavender cap, topiary puff.

But no more!s  
This field of mortal fruit  
battens on decomposing soils,  
is only good for witches' spells—

and fun. Architects of the minute,  
a fleet of tiny galleons sails;  
a solitary minaret  
warns the faithless of their fate.

All rubbery flesh and radial gills,  
so alien to what we know,  
they are strange to the kingdom of chlorophyll  
as marsupial to mammal.

We call out their colors—*gamboge, ecru*—  
give them lofty airs—  
*Whose woods these are they think they know.*  
But what they do, and do with a will, is grow.

## Season of Spores (continued, pages 22-23)

Outriders

from a parallel universe.

Foragers. Reconnoiterers.

## Commentary on Season of Spores

Mushrooms, neither plant nor animal, have a kingdom of their own. They grow in lightless dark and scavenge their nutrients from earth or decaying things. Mushrooms, for me, come from a parallel universe that feeds off our own. Speaking of which, the recently discovered life forms that thrive at the volcanic vents on the deep-ocean floor are from yet another parallel universe. Will we find them under the seas of Europa?



## The Möbius Strip (page 26)

*That day she put our heads together,  
Fate had her imagination about her,  
Your head so much concerned with outer,  
Mine with inner, weather.*

—Robert Frost

What if there's not a strict divide  
Between the two realities?  
Möbius took a paper strip,  
Twisted it once then glued the ends.  
The figure a poem makes likewise mends,  
Along the loop of its seamless trip,  
*Inner* and *outer*: as our two eyes  
Make one in sight, they coincide.

## Commentary on The Möbius Strip

The rhyme scheme in this poem must have a name but I don't know what it is. The mirror image of the rhymes converging seeks to convey the experience of a round trip on the Möbius Strip.



## The Hoard (page 27)

A weekend seeker, sweeping his detector  
through abandoned fields, hears the tone.  
Digging deep he finds no urn of coins,  
penannular pins, but a box—locked

and full of unsigned poems. Words  
beaten thin and fitted to a face;  
the shaped whistle of a master's voice  
from a world not ours—overheard.

Fascicles in an Amherst attic,  
bulls on cave walls in Dordogne:  
Troves of inner gold, hidden—  
but why? And if not us, who for?

## Commentary on The Hoard

Another poem built on the mirror image of converging rhymes.

*Fascicles in an Amherst attic:*

You can find “[An Homage to Emily](#),” my short essay on Dickinson as our first Modernist, on Medium.com.



## Black Powder (page 29)

*for Kate*

*Saltpeter*, to sailors who swore the cooks  
put it in the eggs to keep their cocks in check;  
*Nitre*, to alchemists who dreamed  
of turning lead to gold;  
*Potassium Nitrate*, to the druggist who asked  
the boy what he would do with that.

The ancient Chinese recipe:

*Mix with sulfur, charcoal*

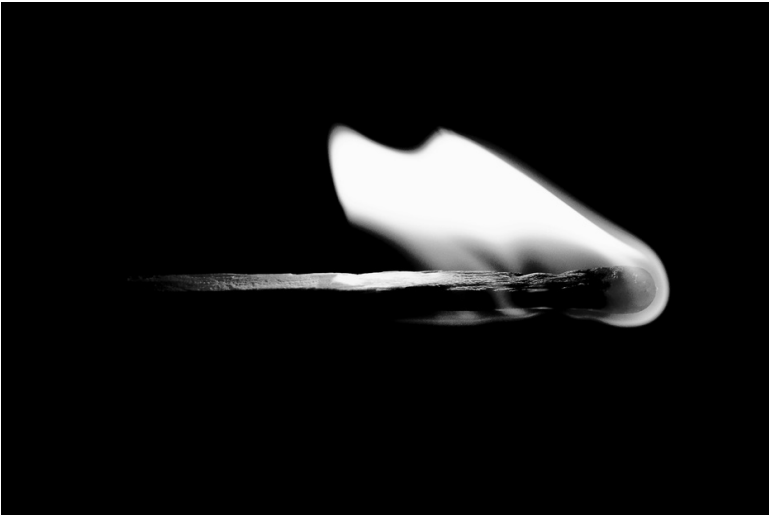
*seven parts to one to two.*

*Grind it fine as talc.*

What he would do is strike a match, then watch  
the blaze of self-discovery—  
the boyhood burn to master  
the forbidden and impossible—  
choking the basement with smoke  
from what could sink a ship at Scapa Flow.

## Commentary on Black Powder

The inspiration for this poem came from Kate Gale's "Scapa Flow," a beautiful poem about steel from the sunken fleet at Scapa Flow.



## The Power & Light Company (page 35-36)

*for Mary K. McIntire*

Under the Used and Useful Principle  
a public utility may charge customers  
only for assets that are used and useful  
in providing service to those who pay for it:  
power plants, transmission lines, the sum total  
of what it takes to deliver power and light.

Most of those with needs for power and light  
in their lives work from a different principle.  
Power—prerogative with impunity—is total  
by nature, not a thing to sell to customers.  
Those who gain it keep it. Having it  
befits them, whether used or useful.

Light, on the other hand, is useful  
when it gives illumination; think how light  
reflecting off the moon reveals it, renders it.  
Whether gaining and keeping is the principle  
or giving is, matters to customers.  
The one's cost, the other's benefit is total.

Can those receiving service unbundle the total,  
choosing the light, which is nothing if not useful,  
but not the power which is not for sale to customers  
in any case? Does having the light  
without the power offend some principle  
of commerce? If so, are we compelled to honor it?

## The Power & Light Company (continued, pages 35-36)

Power, we know, excoriates what it  
can't control; antipathy is total  
and portends the death of principle.  
If we take only the light, can it be useful  
without the power? If not, of what use is the light?  
That is the quandary for customers.

And face it, our lot is to be customers:  
Something received, things taken in return for it.  
Light without power or power without light.  
How do we keep the dark from turning total  
when we ourselves would be the used and useful?  
When giving our lives a purpose is the principle?

Caveat emptor, customers. The game is total,  
your lives for it: You will be used if you are useful.  
But as to power and light, let light be principal.

## Commentary on The Power & Light Company

I always swore I wouldn't write a sestina because the word repetitions at the end of lines looked facile and didn't give me the satisfying "click" of rhymes. Little did I know the bone-cracking effort the sestina's form requires. After writing this one, I swore I'd never write another. Then I wrote another, "Death of a Species" (from my previous book *Dante in China*).



## The Boxer of Quirinal (page 41)

*For two gross of statues,  
For a few thousand battered books.*  
—Ezra Pound

When Goths cut the aqueduct  
the Romans buried you with care—  
a bronze presence to protect.  
Lost a millennium and more,

you were found, foundry-perfect:  
hide-wrapped hands, ruined head—  
battered nose, ears, neck  
still fresh with copper flecks of blood.

You look up, spent utterly  
by what laurels cost the victor,  
see with an explosive vacancy  
Europe girding for the Great War.

## Commentary on The Boxer of Quirinal

My favorite ancient sculpture. No one knows why he looks up. To hear if he is the victor or the vanquished? I think we are intended to know only the struggle, and to know the outcome doesn't matter.



## Dante at Shiloh (pages 42-43)

I.

I found myself in the aftermath.  
Cannonades had set the woods ablaze,  
felled whole trees, swept the earth

with canister and grape. From bodies  
and body parts heaped up by musketry  
(*Aim low and be deliberate, boys.*)

a strangeling crawled—Blue or Gray  
I couldn't tell—from the Minié balls' last meal.  
Straining to break their cannon free,

dead horses, still in harness, hauled.  
Voices out of the burning undergrowth  
wept for water as the field fell still.

At the iron dice of war, both sides lost.  
Wild pigs won, squabbling over their feast.

## Dante at Shiloh (continued, pages 42-43)

II.

It started to rain and with it came a troupe  
of orators—men of God,  
carpetbaggers of every stripe.

Gingerly, to avoid the mud,  
they stepped from one corpse to the next,  
crossing the swamp, slipping on blood.

One started to speak, “Brethren in Christ . . .”  
but stopped, perplexed, to see another man  
wearing his face. This progressed,

speaker after speaker, until soon  
each searched in panic through the group,  
and when he found his stolen face, that one

he mounted and buggered, like boar on boar—  
in self-love or -loathing, I wasn’t sure.

## Commentary on Dante at Shiloh

Shiloh was a major, early battle of the Civil War. Confederates won the first day, the Union the second. Casualties for the two armies, at 23,000, came as a shock to both North and South.

In this poem the ancient shade of Dante visits the battle's aftermath. The double sonnet is written in the form invented by Dante when he wrote his *Inferno* 700 years ago: three-line stanzas with interlocking rhymes.



## The South China Sea (excerpt, page 61)

*The Gods of War*

With twilight closing in, more ships arrive:  
gray hulls of the Seventh Fleet,  
gray hulls of the Chinese Coastal Fleet.  
Opposing columns make ready to engage.  
Ships swing, unmasking batteries,  
bringing torpedo tubes to bear.  
From circling planes, flares and float lights drop.  
Thin white cones of searchlights probe where ships  
show battle lights: green-over-white-over-green.  
The ocean glistens with a delicate sheen.

## Commentary on The South China Sea

The other war poems in this book look back in history. This one looks ahead to what could happen when China and the U.S. start shooting in the Sea of China. It could happen any time.



## The First Emperor (pages 71-72)

*The tomb of Qin Shi Huang (259–210 BC)  
was discovered in March 1974.*

Nothing if not careful, Qin Shi Huang,  
Master of All Under Heaven, spent his reign  
ensuring he would live forever.

38 years work never ceased  
on his necropolis: city-sized model of his Empire—  
plains and mountains, the Great Wall and beyond.

The Yellow and Yangtze flowed in mercury  
(elixir, water of immortality)  
down to seas of mercury.

Gems in the ceiling fired the firmament,  
candles of whale oil, big as men, lighted  
the sarcophagal center of the universe.

Defended by terracotta soldiery  
(generals in chariots with war drums,  
pikemen, bowmen, infantry);

protected by spells of sorcerers,  
by booby traps (for tomb robbers  
crossbows on hair triggers).

Necropolis complete, artisans and work gangs  
buried alive to keep its secrets safe,  
a mountain raised to hide the site.

## The First Emperor (continued, pages 71-72)

Quicksilver pills he took with wine would—  
his alchemists guaranteed—prolong his life  
at least a hundred centuries . . .

but speech faltered, fingers fumbled.  
Qin Shi Huang, First Emperor,  
dead of erethism at 49.

*Necropolis lost 2000 years,  
discovered by farmers digging wells,  
the tomb remains unopened to this day.*

*For all we know he may be reigning in there still:  
a day sail down the Yangtze to the sea,  
tonight magicians, strongmen, acrobats.*

*Concubines, interred to please his every whim,  
toast another perfect day, pretending  
not to hear distant shovels, the tinkle of picks.*

# Commentary on The First Emperor

Even emperors die, although not for lack of planning to live forever.



## Water's Way (page 74)

*It takes 500 years for the ocean's water  
to complete one trip around the earth.*  
—National Geographic Society

The prodigal returned, a bride running late,  
it races from the street,  
climbs the plumbing in the walls  
to the bathroom tap, then halts.

Water is weather. Pulled from swells  
out where cyclones make the only news,  
its vapor ladders latitudes to the pole,  
refreshes bergy bits, brash ice, floes—

or crosses longitudes to fall  
as *shoures soote* upon us all,  
then drain away to aquifer.  
Weather is God's will writ small.

Water is extended metaphor:  
Its antecedent, alchemic character  
commonly denominates  
all things, in compound or by temperature.

4 a.m. Fill the glass.  
Let the molecule from Christ  
stand again in human state  
even as it quenches thirst.

## Commentary on Water's Way

For many years I've wanted to write a poem about water. Its triplicate states: as wind-borne vapor, as boundless oceans, as ice at the polar caps. Water is life. Without it, Earth would be Mars.



## Immortality Sweepstakes

Home burial is what I have in mind.  
Not a cadaver in the flower bed  
but a buried jar with a swipe of DNA  
and a note: *Available for cloning.*  
*Elderly gent writes poetry*  
*but never learned to dance.*  
And a headstone with its epitaph:  
*You won't shut me up this easily.*  
And maybe, on acid-free paper, a copy of this.

Poetry's pursuit is permanence.  
Flotsam on oceans of the digital,  
our poems scheme to stay discoverable.  
If not, *Carve the runes, then be content with silence.*

What exactly do we mean, *survive*?  
Realia? Washington's false teeth.  
Remains? The lead coffin of John Paul Jones,  
recovered from a forgotten cemetery,  
reinterred as the Father of Our Navy.  
What do we mean by *immortality*?

In 1974 a hominin,  
*Australopithecus africanus*,  
was discovered in Ethiopia.  
The skeleton, 40 percent complete,  
three million years old, caused a sensation.  
A world tour followed. Lucky Lucy.

## Commentary on Immortality Sweepstakes

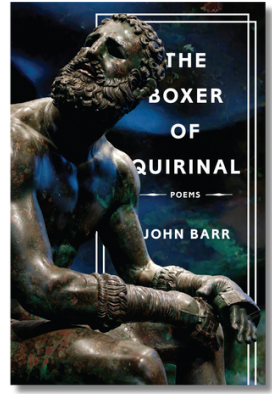
Is there an afterlife for us? I've been a hopeful agnostic, but less so now. The questions in this poem are as far as I have gotten. What exactly do we mean, “*survive*”? What do we mean by *immortality*?



## About the Book

*The Boxer of Quirinal*  
by John Barr

All animals—from majestic herons to humble inchworms—face challenges in their quest for survival. But humanity must confront an additional obstacle: the ongoing presence of war. So, how do we live with it? The poems in *The Boxer of Quirinal* by John Barr, a Vietnam veteran, delve into the heart of this profound and unanswerable question. With meditations on events as small as the albatross breeding and as monumental as the fall of Rome, the Battle of Shiloh, and the Normandy Landings, Barr interweaves past and present, nature and history, inviting readers to contemplate the connections.



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## Praise

“Barr offers pleasures that are seldom found in contemporary poetry: a strong formal imagination and the company of an adventurous mind.”

—*Adam Kirsch, author of The Discarded Life*

“Like his titled boxer, Barr contends with all sorts of challenges, and he prevails, whether encountering a haruspex or a utility company!”

—*Susan Kinsolving, author of Peripheral Vision*

## About the Author



John Barr grew up in a rural township outside Chicago. An honors graduate of Harvard College and Harvard Business School, he served on Navy destroyers for five years, including three tours to Vietnam. His poems have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Poetry*, and *Flaunt Magazine*, among many

periodicals, and in anthologies published by Bloodaxe Books, National Geographic, and the Anthology of Magazine Verse & Yearbook of American Poetry. He was president of the Poetry Foundation, publisher of *Poetry* magazine for its first decade. *The Boxer of Quirinal* is his fifth book of poems to be published with Red Hen Press, and his tenth to be published over the past thirty years. He currently resides in Greenwich, CT.

## About the Illustrations

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