

Black Powder

John Barr

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.

John Barr was born in Omaha, Nebraska, and grew up in a rural township outside of Chicago. Graduating from Harvard College on a Navy scholarship, he served five years on ships including three tours to Vietnam. Over a thirty-year career as an investment banker, he was Managing Director at Morgan Stanley and founded three startups. He has taught in the Graduate Writing Program at Sarah Lawrence College and served on the boards of Yaddo, Bennington College, and the Poetry Society of America, the latter two as board chair. In 2004, he was appointed the inaugural president of the Poetry Foundation, publisher of *Poetry* magazine, and served in that capacity for a decade. *Dante in China* is his ninth collection of poems. He lives in Connecticut.