

J O H N B A R R

Death of a Species

The earth doesn't need to be saved. 99 percent of all species have come and gone while the planet has remained.

—Lilienfeld and Rathje

The long republic shells the long republic
of itself. Large-minded calibers
open in front of us. Of their swell and pass
Hemingway observes, "The one that fucks you
you won't hear." Orwell muses,
"...not so much afraid of being hit

but that you don't know *where* you will be hit."
Staggered by airstrikes, our remaindered Republic
falls to an endless enfilade. Bulldozers
bury our dead while the single-minded calibers
of snipers pick and choose. An officer instructs you
on the animal filth you are: "Salute. Say Yes."

The brown sausage of your tongue, the boils and pus,
the Copacabana in your gut that gives you the shits
are gifts of the tiny goddess that infects you.
Despite the frantic scrubblings with carbolic
the life boils out of you. The plague ship sails—cadavers
for cargo, us for crew—on the ultimate in cruises.

We never expected rains, let alone the sluices
of Heaven. The sea's rise the land's loss,
the last of the surf-encircled summits disappears.
The known world shrinks to the waters where we sit,
fathoms above the top soils of our Republic—
or, given the lack of landfalls, maybe Timbuktu.

Watching the rivers freeze, the glaciers grow, what strikes you
is, there *is* a Hell and this is how it freezes
over. Knapped point hafted, held on a throwing stick,
we follow the herd that opens the snow in search of grass.
In the Great Depopulation birth rates plummet,
feeding chains collapse. Our species takes a number.

The moon's not right—the side-lit lavender sphere careers.
What are the odds a button of neutron star strikes through
our mere-most crust, taking a piece of planet with it?
The earth unbelts from orbit. Losing light and gases
it seeks a farther place in time and space.
Etiolate...hypoxic...and now we are relict.

And now you can declare it. Calibers
or spears, king or republic, what finally fucks you—
take it from the Muses—is: *This too shall pass.*

JOHN BARR served five years as a Navy officer on destroyers, including three tours to Vietnam. His first collection of poems, *The War Zone* (1989), came out that experience. Over the past 30 years his poems have been published in four books, four private press editions, and many periodicals. In 2004 he was appointed inaugural President of the Poetry Foundation, publisher of *Poetry* magazine, and served in that capacity for a decade. “Death of a Species” will appear in a forthcoming collection of new poems from *Red Hen Press*.