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Three Poems

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Three Poems

Abstract

Three poems: "Barbarians," "Be The Pack Leader," and "Fear Factor."

Keywords

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A JOURNAL

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Three Poems

by Charles Harper Webb

Barbarians

“ . . . what shall become of us without barbarians?”

—C.P. Cavafy

Lank-haired, logger-bearded, Josh and I shove
 into Sudsucker’s Pub like hungry bears
 down from the hills. Normally, we’d shun
 this den of cooler dudes than we.
 But we’ve lived two weeks in Canadian woods—

slept in my truck, wolfed fresh-caught
 Kamloops trout, *Life* cereal, *Wonder Bread*,
 speaking, for laughs, like Conan the Barbarian:
 swearing by Crom, who metes out dooms
 from his great mountain—who hates weaklings,

and gives his people only courage, plus
 the strength and will to kill their enemies.
 We’ve done our biz under towering evergreens,
 ransacked an old fishing lodge, and seized
 what pleased us, leaving the rest to rot and feed

the fragrant pines. Now, feeling tall
and hard as pines, we scorn these frat boys
and yuppies hot to bed the coeds,
secretaries, and receptionists who sip “Slow,
Comfortable Screws Against the Wall,”

and try to think they’re living high.

Two beauties—Blonde and Brunette—do
the coo-and-tease with polo-shirted frat guys:
a freckled red-head; a dark-haired pretty-boy.
“By Crom,” I say, catching the blonde’s eye,

“you’re a bright fish in white water.” “True,”
says Josh. “And you”—the brunette—
“bear twin mountains fetchingly.” “Who
are you assholes talking to?” snarls Pretty Boy.
“A miracle,” I say. “The dumb shall speak.”

I can’t believe we’re doing this; but
after weeks of practice, words flow easily.
“Tell me,” Josh asks Red. “What is best in life?”
“What the fuck?” he replies. “The fuck
is good,” Josh says. “Best, though, is to crush

your enemies, see them driven before you,
and hear the wails of their women.”
“Hear that shit?” Pretty Boy asks Red.
“You fags best boogie while you can,”
Red sneers, then pushes Josh. I raise my hand.

“Stay,” I command. “Let’s step outside and see
whose deeds shine mightiest.” “They’re crazy,”
the blonde says, and shoots a scorching look.
“No sweat,” Red says, flexing his fists.
“We’ll clean their clocks. Be back before

you can say *shit*.” “They’ll clean our cocks,”
Josh calls, “before they eat our shit.”
Outside, we’re wrapped in Stygian mist.
“Sorry, guys,” Josh begins, “I don’t know what
got into me,” then crotch-kicks Pretty Boy,

who drops and writhes. My kick—astonishing
to me as to Red—barely clips his hip.
He staggers. I scream, and swinging war-ax fists,
rain on him my rage at cities that kill
wilderness—at mobs that trample fish,

animals, birds—at lawyers, politicians,
brokers, bureaucrats who prate, *remit*,
accrue, *abate*, *comply*—the rich, popular,
lucky, whom I see, clear as a hawk
in mountain sky, will always lord it over me.

“Let’s go! Let’s go!” Josh yanks me off of Red,
then runs. My frenzy drops like a swiped coat.
“Cops could come,” I think, and—Jekyll
breaking free from Hyde—hammer for home.
When, in a week, I start my first job—teaching

8th-grade History—my hair will be short;
my knuckles, healed. Tonight, I slink
toward sleep while Crom the Merciless, who scorns
all prayers, does not attack from his mountain—
just spits my way, and turns his muscled back.

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Be The Pack Leader

cries the book my wife assigned to help my “relationship”
 with our dog, Jasmine—i.e., to make her obey, but not to pee
 when she sees me (which, my wife says, means she’s scared).

Is that so bad? Machiavelli thought it better for a leader
 to be feared than loved (though feared *and* loved was best).

But I don’t *want* to lead. That’s why I never ran

for president of anything. That, and suspecting I’d lose.

Too bad doing what I want goose-steps hand-in-hand
 with telling others what to do. My Cub Scout Leader,

Mr. Bimpfelberg—in khaki shorts and more ribbons
 than a commissar—could barely lead our troop in singing,

“Oh I had a little chicken / but she wouldn’t lay an egg . . .”

He never showed us how to scalp an enemy, spear a moose,
 hold off the U.S. Army with bows and arrows,
 or even shoot a bb-gun (which, anyway, Mom wouldn’t

let me have). Still, when I’m tempted to ridicule

life's Bimpfelbergs, or—right now—my son's Little League coach,
 who knows less baseball than I know Dentistry

(for which, mostly by brushing my teeth, I “earned”
 a Merit Badge), I remind myself, *I* could have volunteered.
 But no, it's tough enough teaching *my* boy to bunt and not to cry

when he strikes out. How could I lead twelve kids who lack
 my DNA? I'd forget who's up to bat, and couldn't bring myself
 to yell, “Good try!” when the pitcher, attempting

to throw, blacks his own eye. Years ago, as I boiled in eighth-grade
 angst, the Shangri-Las' “Leader of the Pack”
 gave me hope that, if I led a pack of bikers, Sherry Ames

might not equate me with that jock strap
 always kicking down the halls. The song, with its motorcycle
 revving, singers wailing, “No, no, no, no, / no, no, no!”

as the leader roared into his fatal skid, made pack-leading
 sound gloriously doomed. But even Dad nixed
 a motorbike for me: “I don't want to scrape you off three

hundred yards of blacktop with a hoe.” He earned my fear
and love the time he saved me from Foley's security.

“If you *ever* shoplift again,” he raged when we got home,

“I'll knock you through the wall.” Thanks to him,
 I can play Dictator to my kids (though not, I hope,
 the Auschwitz / Gulag kind). After I'd vowed to treat my first-

ever Freshman Comp class as “fellow-learners,”
 then learned they wouldn't let their fellow-learner speak,
 I slammed our text to the floor with an atomic BLAM!

“I'll flunk you all and ruin your lives,” I roared,
 “if you don't shape up NOW!” These days,
 I start off Stalinesque, then relax. Result: great student-evals,

and no thrown books. Clearly, people want strong leaders.
 Still, it's hard to believe that dogs *like* being bossed,

and are glad just to be part of the pack, which is why,

on seeing someone in the family—even our four-year-old—
Jasmine flattens her hindquarters on the floor and drags
forward like a paraplegic before bellying up, frog-

kicking her legs until we pat her and coo, “Good girl.”

I’ve bought the democracy ideal so completely, I feel bad
reading the (probably *mojado*) gardeners the riot act

as my Armenian neighbor does so cheerfully.
Raised in the USSR, he hates the “asshole leaders”
we elect. “This is best we have?” he demands, although—

a U.S. citizen for years—he knows our campaigns
favor the corrupt, hypocritical, power-mad.
I’ve read that medieval peasants were proud to serve

their “God-given” lord—that untouchables accepted
the caste system as just and right—that some slaves
in the U.S. embraced their lot. Can that be true?

Woody Allen says people will follow any order, however
asinine, if it comes from a deep, well-modulated voice.
When I talk to Jasmine, that’s how I make mine.

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Fear Factor

The woman knows she's smashing
 in her orange bikini, bottoms flashing half
 a red dragon tattoo. Her almost-fiancé
 ("We're committed *now!*") flashes confidence
 from steel-blue eyes hard as his pecs.
 His blonde hair lights a class-president grin.

How long will he need, he's asked, to dive
 into the icy pool, swim to the locked, fully
 submerged cage where his love will be
 freezing, holding her breath, and set her
 free? "Twenty seconds max. I'm
 confident." She—waving from her cage—

swells with her own confidence, which shrinks
 as water shocks her toes, then turns to terror
 as the shot ogles her down. Sir Commitment
 plunges (*Spwak!*), flounders down to her cage,
 and pokes the first of his two keys. Trapped
 behind pink goggles, her eyes plead.

He jabs the second key. When *that* won't work,

his confidence shreds like Kleenex
in a blender. He's betrayed—can't breathe,
heart clanging alarm. To hell with her!
He shoots straight up as she gives the rescue-
divers a crazed, throat-slashing *I quit*.

Shivering on camera, the couple try
No problem; it's just TV, holding their smiles
the way burned men hold on
their skin. Hand-in-hand, they churn
away. Then, not quite out of camera range,
she turns.

Charles Harper Webb's latest book, *What Things Are Made Of*, was published by the University of Pittsburgh Press in 2013. Recipient of grants from the Whiting and Guggenheim foundations, Webb teaches in the MFA Program in Creative Writing at California State University, Long Beach.

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