4-26-2013

Three Poems

Chris Harper Webb

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/booth

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/booth/vol5/iss4/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Booth by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact omacisa@butler.edu.
Three Poems

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

Keywords
poems, poetry, verse

This article is available in Booth: http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/booth/vol5/iss4/4
April 26, 2013

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.

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.
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, 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.
Three Poems

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.