



## Booth

---

Volume 5 | Issue 4

Article 4

---

4-26-2013

# Three Poems

Chris Harper Webb

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

---

### Recommended Citation

Webb, Chris Harper (2013) "Three Poems," *Booth*: Vol. 5: Iss. 4, Article 4.

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 administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact [fgaede@butler.edu](mailto:fgaede@butler.edu).

---

# Three Poems

## **Abstract**

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

## **Keywords**

poems, poetry, verse

[about](#)[archives](#)[shop](#)[prize](#)[submit](#)


---

# BOOTH



A JOURNAL

---

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.  
“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.

Pages: [1](#) [2](#) [3](#)

[← older](#)

---

[about](#)

[archives](#)

[prize](#)

[shop](#)

[submit](#)

© 2012 Booth, A Journal



follow us

[Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#)

elsewhere

[Booth](#) | [Butler MFA](#)

[about](#)[archives](#)[shop](#)[prize](#)[submit](#)


---

# BOOTH



A JOURNAL

---

[← older](#)

April 26, 2013

## Three Poems

### 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.

Pages: [1](#) [2](#) [3](#)

[← older](#)

---

[about](#)

[archives](#)

[prize](#)

[shop](#)

[submit](#)

© 2012 Booth, A Journal



follow us  
[Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#)

elsewhere  
[Booth](#) | [Butler MFA](#)



[about](#)[archives](#)[shop](#)[prize](#)[submit](#)

# BOOTH



A JOURNAL

[← older](#)

April 26, 2013

## 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.

Pages: [1](#) [2](#) [3](#)

[← older](#)

[about](#)

[archives](#)

[prize](#)

[shop](#)

[submit](#)

© 2012 Booth, A Journal

follow us

[Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#)



elsewhere

[Booth](#) | [Butler MFA](#)