

Classic Poetry Series

Charles Harper Webb

- poems -

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Blind

It's okay if the world goes with Venetian;
Who cares what Italians don't see?--
Or with Man's Bluff (a temporary problem
Healed by shrieks and cheating)--or with date:
Three hours of squirming repaid by laughs for years.

But when an old woman, already deaf,
Wakes from a night of headaches, and the dark
Won't disappear--when doctors call like tedious
Birds, "If only..." up and down hospital halls--
When, long-distance, I hear her say, "Don't worry.

Honey, I'll be fine," is it a wonder
If my mind speeds down blind alleys?
If the adage "Love is blind" has never seemed
So true? If, in a flash of blinding light
I see Justice drop her scales, yank off

Her blindfold, stand revealed--a monster-god
With spidery arms and a mouth like a black hole--
While I leap, ant-sized, at her feet, blinded
By tears, raging blindly as, sense by sense,
My mother is sucked away?

Charles Harper Webb

Enthusiasm

"Don't overdo it," Dad yelled, watching me
Play shortstop, collect stamps and shells,
Roll on the grass laughing until I peed my pants.
"Screw him," I said, and grabbed every cowry

I could find, hogged all the books I could
From Heights Library, wore out the baseball
Diamond dawn to dusk, and—parents in Duluth—
Gorged on bountiful Candy dusk to dawn.

Not until a Committee wrote of my poems,
"Enthusiasm should be tempered,"
Did I change my song. I write now
The way I live: calm and sober, steering

Toward the Golden Mean. The Committee
Was right to withhold funds. I'd have bought
A hundred box turtles with lemon-speckled shells,
Flyfished for rainbows six months straight,

Flown to the Great Barrier Reef and dived
Non-stop among pink coral and marble cones,
Living on chocolate malts, peaches, and barbecue.
I'd have turned into a ski bum, married

Ten women in ten states, written nothing
Poetry would glance at twice, instead
Of rising at 5:00 as I do now, writing
'Til noon about matters serious and deep,

Teaching 'til 6:00, eating a low-fat meal
High in fiber and cruciferous vegetables,
Then bed by 9:00, alarm clock set
Five minutes late: my one indulgence of the day.

Charles Harper Webb

Giant Fungus

40-acre growth found in Michigan.

— The Los Angeles Times

The sky is full of ruddy ducks
and widgeon's, mockingbirds,
bees, bats, swallowtails,
dragonflies, and great horned owls.

The land below teems with elands
and kit foxes, badgers, aardvarks,
juniper, banana slugs, larch,
cactus, heather, humankind.

Under them, a dome of dirt.
Under that, the World's
Largest Living Thing spreads
like a hemorrhage poised

to paralyze the earth—like a tumor
ready to cause 9.0 convulsions,
or a brain dreaming this world
of crickets and dung beetles,

sculpins, Beethoven, coots,
Caligula, St. Augustine grass, Mister
Lincoln roses, passion fruit, wildebeests,
orioles like sunspots shooting high,

then dropping back to the green
arms of trees, their roots
sunk deep in the power
of things sleeping and unknown.

Charles Harper Webb

Post-Vacation Tristesse

The Jumbo Jet has barely shuddered off
The ground, and I'm depressed. My scuba mask
And fins, my fly rod and beach hat

Crush each other in an overhead locker
Dark as the bedroom closet they're returning to.
Already the week's good times melt

Together like caramels in a hot car.
My vow to "Do this more often!" recedes
With the jade palms and sun-stroked beaches

I can barely see through my scratched window
As the pilot thanks us for "flying
United," and climbs through ectoplasmic

Clouds into the jet stream that circles
Earth's head like a tedious tune,
And like a kick in the rear, hustles us

Homeward through a sky which, though it looks
blue enough to house heaven, is colorless
As life without you, and just goes on and on.

Charles Harper Webb

Reservations Confirmed

The ticket settles on my desk: a paper tongue
pronouncing "Go away;" a flattened seed
from which a thousand-mile leap through the air can grow.

It's pure potential: a vacation-to-be
the way an apple is a pie-to-be,
a bullet is a death-to-be. Or is the future

pressed into it inalterably—woven between
the slick fibers like secret threads
from the U.S. Treasury? Is my flight number

already flashing as cameras grind and the newly-
bereaved moan? Or does it gleam under Arrivals,
digits turned innocuous as those that didn't

win the raffle for a new Ford truck?
If, somewhere, I'm en route now, am I
praying the winged ballpoint I'm strapped into

will write on Denver's runway, "Safe and Sound"?
Was my pocket picked in Burbank,
and I've just noticed at thirty thousand feet?

Am I smiling, watching the clouds' icefields
melt to smoky wisps, revealing lakes
like Chinese dragons embroidered in blue below?

Lifting my ticket, do I hold a bon voyage,
or boiling jet streams, roaring thunderstorms,
the plane bounced like a boat on cast iron seas,

then the lightning flash, the dizzy plunge,
perfectly aware (amid the shrieks and prayers)
that, live or die, I won't survive the fall?

Charles Harper Webb

Silent Letters

Treacherous as trap door spiders,
they ambush children's innocence.
"Why is there g h in light? It isn't fair!"
Buddha declared the world illusory
as the p sound in psyche. Sartre
said the same of God from France,
Olympus of silent letters, n'est -ce pas?

Polite conceals an e in the same way
"How are you?" hides "I don't care."
Physics asserts the desk I lean on,
the brush that fluffs my hair,
are only dots that punctuate a nullity
complete as the g sound in gnome,
the c e in Worcestershire.

Passions lurk under the saint's bed,
mute as the end of love.
They glide toward us, yellow eyes
gleaming, hushed as the finality
of hate, malice, snake.
As easily predict the h in lichen,
choral, Lichtenstein,

as laws against throttling rats,
making U-turns on empty streets.
Such nonsense must be memorized.
"Imagine dropkicking a spud,"
Dad said. "If e breaks off
your toe, it spoils your potato."
Like compass needles

pointing north, silent letters
show the power of hidden things.
Voiced by our ancestors,
but heard no more, they nudge
our thoughts toward death,
infinity, our senses' inability
to see the earth as round,

circling the sun in a universe
implacable as "Might Makes Right,"
ineffable as tomorrow's second r,
incomprehensible as imbroglio's g,
the e that finishes inscrutable,
imponderable, immense,
the terrifying k in "I don't know."

Charles Harper Webb

Stuck in Traffic, the Talk-Show Psychiatrist Speaks his Mind

Hi There! I see you're enjoying the site, and just wanted to extend an invitation to register for our free site. The members of oldpoetry strive to make this a fun place to learn and share - hope you join us! - Kevin

Charles Harper Webb

Suitcase

Its silver clasp looks like a man grasping
his hands above his head in victory;
the latches, like twin hatchbacks headed away.

There are no wheels, just four steel nipples for sliding.
A hexagonal seal announces the defunct
"U.S. Trunk Company." The frame is wood—

big, heavy, cheap—covered with imitation leather,
its blue just slightly darker than Mom's eyes.
"It's beautiful. Much too expensive," she told Dad,

and kissed him. The lining is pink, quilted
acetate. Three sides have pouches with elastic tops—
stretched out now, like old underwear.

I watched Mom pack them with panties and brassieres
when I was so little she didn't blush.
The right front corner has been punctured and crushed.

(I could have choked the baggage handler.)
The handle—blue plastic doorknocker—
is fringed with wrinkled tags from United, Delta,

U.S. Air (which crunched the hole, flying
the suitcase back from Houston). I'd gone there
to see Mom in the "home," and save some boyhood

relics before my sister gave them to Good Will.
"Take mine," Mom said, hearing my suitcase was full.
"I won't need luggage, the next place I go."

Charles Harper Webb

The Death Of Santa Claus

He's had the chest pains for weeks,
but doctors don't make house
calls to the North Pole,

he's let his Blue Cross lapse,
blood tests make him faint,
hospital gown always flap

open, waiting rooms upset
his stomach, and it's only
indigestion anyway, he thinks,

until, feeding the reindeer,
he feels as if a monster fist
has grabbed his heart and won't

stop squeezing. He can't
breathe, and the beautiful white
world he loves goes black,

and he drops on his jelly belly
in the snow and Mrs. Claus
tears out of the toy factory

wailing, and the elves wring
their little hands, and Rudolph's
nose blinks like a sad ambulance

light, and in a tract house
in Houston, Texas, I'm 8,
telling my mom that stupid

kids at school say Santa's a big
fake, and she sits with me
on our purple-flowered couch,

and takes my hand, tears
in her throat, the terrible
news rising in her eyes.

Charles Harper Webb

The Wife of the Mind

Sharecroppers' child, she was more schooled
In slaughtering pigs and coaxing corn out of
The ground than in the laws of Math, the rules
Of Grammar. Seventeen, she fell in love
With the senior quarterback, and nearly
Married him, but—the wedding just a week
Away—drove her trousseau back to Penney's,
Then drove on past sagging fences, flooding creeks,
And country bars to huge Washington State,
Where, feeling like a hick, she studied French to compensate.

She graduated middle-of-her-class,
Managed a Senior Center while she flailed
Away at an M.A., from the morass
Of which a poet/rock-singer from Yale
Plucked her. He loved her practicality;
She adored his brilliance. Sex was great.
They married in a civil ceremony.
He played around, for which she berated
Herself, telling friends things were "hunky-dory."
Resentment grew... oh, you said "life"? That's another story.

Charles Harper Webb