

Classic Poetry Series

Charles Harper Webb
- poems -

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Charles Harper Webb()

Charles Harper Webb is an American poet, professor, psychotherapist and former singer and guitarist. His most recent poetry collection is *Shadow Ball* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009). His honors include a Whiting Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, The Kate Tufts Discovery Award, a Pushcart Prize and inclusion in *The Best American Poetry 2006*. His poems have appeared in literary journals and magazines including *American Poetry Review*, *Paris Review*, and *Ploughshares*. Webb was born in Philadelphia, and grew up in Houston. He earned his B.A. in English from Rice University, and an M.A. in English from the University of Washington, and an M.F.A. in Professional Writing and his PhD in Counseling Psychology from the University of Southern California. He teaches at California State University, Long Beach, where he received a Distinguished Faculty Scholarly and Creative Achievement Award and the Distinguished Faculty Teaching Award, and he lives in Long Beach, California.

Honors and awards

2001 Guggenheim Fellowship

1999 Felix Pollack Prize, for *Liver*

1998 Whiting Writer's Award

1998 Kate Tufts Discovery Award, for *Reading the Water*

1997 Morse Poetry Prize, for *Reading the Water*

Academy of American Poets Prize

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?

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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.

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Loving a House

Sandi doesn't like Dan much, but loves his house. She comes over before he's home from work, to gaze into its window-eyes.

She wheedles her own key. ('That's good,' Dan thinks. 'We're getting close.') Now she can visit when he isn't there to interrupt as her bare feet caress the hardwood floors, as her hands linger on gleaming knobs and faucets, as she strokes the long, smooth balustrade, and explores every chamber of this heart she adores.

Though Dan's frog-belly makes her wince, his slobbery kiss makes her shudder, the feel of him inside her can only be endured if she is drunk or stoned, she marries him, pretending it's the house on top of her, the house into whose ear she cries, to whom she whispers, 'I love you. Good night.'

How awful when, after a year of bliss, Dan wins promotion to a better town.

The 'For Sale' sign in the yard pierces her heart.

She makes phone calls. She hires workmen and machines. Dan comes home with two First Class tickets, to find wife and house gone.

'We'll move from state to state,' she mouths through the rear window of the truck that tows her love. 'We'll paint, remodel, whatever it takes.'

When rain begins to fall, she climbs from the truck to the house, and as asphalt hisses by, kisses the wet windows one by one. 'It's hard for me, too, Sweetheart,' she whispers. 'Please don't cry.'

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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.

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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?

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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."

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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."

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The Animals are Leaving

One by one, like guests at a late party
They shake our hands and step into the dark:
Arabian ostrich; Long-eared kit fox; Mysterious starling.

One by one, like sheep counted to close our eyes,
They leap the fence and disappear into the woods:
Atlas bear; Passenger pigeon; North Island laughing owl;
Great auk; Dodo; Eastern wapiti; Badlands bighorn sheep.

One by one, like grade school friends,
They move away and fade out of memory:
Portuguese ibex; Blue buck; Auroch; Oregon bison;
Spanish imperial eagle; Japanese wolf; Hawksbill
Sea turtle; Cape lion; Heath hen; Raiatea thrush.

One by one, like children at a fire drill, they march outside,
And keep marching, though teachers cry, "Come back!"
Waved albatross; White-bearded spider monkey;
Pygmy chimpanzee; Australian night parrot;
Turquoise parakeet; Indian cheetah; Korean tiger;
Eastern harbor seal ; Ceylon elephant ; Great Indian rhinoceros.

One by one, like actors in a play that ran for years
And wowed the world, they link their hands and bow
Before the curtain falls.

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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.

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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.

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