

Poetry Porch: Poetry

No One Expects the Barbarians

By Robert Knox

But they did expect them once, a long time ago.
C.P. Cavafy reported this predicament,
his poem, written in 1898,*
depicting an event presumed to have occurred some time
during the decline of a great empire.
Roman, perhaps? Byzantine?
The emperor and high courtiers
dress in their finest, their gold and jewels,
shiny things, they've heard, impress the barbarians,
planting themselves at the gate to the city
to await the predicted arrival of that irresistible horde.
An entire city's populace crowding the hours,
waiting on fate.

And yet, in an immortal piece of timeless irony,
expectations are disappointed when the horde fails to appear.
What do we do now, people ask one another?
In a way, the poem concludes,
they were a kind of solution.

So perhaps we should be thankful
for the mob of tattooed, costumed insurrectionists
who pounded on the gates of our Capitol,
and found only the image of authority,
a *papier mache* Emperor's Guard easily punctured,
yielding up the body politic to the invaders
at the first hard knock.

Grateful, that is, for an enemy's gat-toothed grin,
the philosophical underpinning of a looney-tune nation
enamored of close-held ignorance and bad-boy grievance,
nurtured at the breast of a me-first civilization
that played with the shiny toys of the First Amendment
while their idiot children gathered in their caves of angry self-regard.

Emerging now, with their threats, their delusions, their trivia,
our barbarians offer a new blank slate for self-reflection,
depicting the problem, but not, I fear, a character,
letter, or glyph of solution.
For that we must kindle fires of our own.

*"Waiting For the Barbarians" by C. P. Cavafy