

Poems by Charles Harper Webb

OLD WOMAN ASLEEP

The cat on her lap leads the way:
a black wheel rolling into dreams,
powered by the motor of its purr.

Her children chat, fear softening
their focus on her arms dwindling
toward bone, her wispy gray

hair with pink scalp burning through,
her cane—a third leg, thin
as the two which braid each other

by the heater flickering at her feet.
While her son rails at the economy,
she cartwheels off the high dive

at Ralph's Wharf, where real steam
paddle-wheelers used to dock.
Ringed by Feosol, Cytotex, Lanoxin—

incantations meant to hold Death back—
she's The Happy Flapper
in her freshman play, *Dixie Blackbirds*.

"Are you asleep?" her daughter asks.
Her eyelids creak, heavy as garage doors.
Someday soon she'll try to wake

and feel Death's lips cover her eyes,
Death's hand, scented with lilac, smooth
the last wrinkle of breath. But now

she answers, "No, Honey, I'm here . . ."
as her eyelids drop and she becomes
Lady Constance, in love with a gypsy

(Vernon Needles in real life);
she becomes the Soul of Dance, spinning
through her favorite play, *The Merry Whirl*.

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LANDSCAPES

Art does not render the visible, but renders visible.

—Paul Klee

To paint them seems, these days, redundant.
("What a lake!" the artist thinks,
and from his brush-spigot a miniature lake flows.)

There's still the pleasure, though, of honing skills:
painting this field of fireweed
so that it looks just like a field of fireweed.

There's the wish to capture what I love
and see it when I please—
the wish to tag the world's wall: "I was here!"

There's emotional expression: picturing the brown badlands
where my heart's river twists beneath maroon
storm clouds and lightning-blasted pines.

There's the thrill of pure imagining:
viridescent punch bowl valley, tarnished slough,
mountains repeating M's into infinity.

A few viewers will almost smell my skunk cabbage,
nearly hear my redwings *Kong-ka-reeee!*
above the slurp of bass. The rest will drift away

as Modernism tugs their legs, raising black impasto brows
above the *mons* of a corn field, or squatting
behind puce squares and crimson toothpaste-glops,

yelling "Look at me!" Still, I work in fading light
to catch the sheen of a full moon on onyx water—
to state in pigment, "That's the way it was,"

and frame the evidence for hanging where my guests
will see it as they rush in from the snow,
backs to a view that tacked an extra fifty K onto escrow:

shrubby moustaches poking through white drifts;
ducks in a buckshot pattern aimed for violet cliffs
which overlook the sea which flows into the sky

where, in the blue haze behind the smeared signature of clouds,
dead painters gaze like children from a balcony,
wishing they could touch the colors they still see.

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BIO

Charles Harper Webb's latest book, *What Things Are Made Of*, was published by the University of Pittsburgh Press in 2013. He is the author of *Shadow Ball* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009) and *Amplified Dog* (Red Hen Press, 2006). He earned a BA in English from Rice University, an MA in English from the University of Washington, and an MFA in professional writing and a PhD in counseling psychology from USC. Recipient of grants from the Whiting and Guggenheim foundations, Webb teaches in the MFA Program in Creative Writing at California State University, Long Beach.