



Image of Attila (17th century) from Wikipedia

Christopher Bernard

Waiting for the Barbarians

The barbarians are gathering today in the capital.
The black suits dissolve in the cold morning air –
and iron spears flash, bright, in the sun;
bearskins, the skins of fox, wolverine, deer,
the heads of wolves riding the tangled manes
grow on their shoulders in the winter light. The wind
burnishes them. The cold gives them power.
The city lies at their feet, in glittering shards
of stone and glass, quivering to appeal and appease.
They are triumphant, so they are right
destroying to create, creating
to destroy, forever.
But they are silent, as though not quite
believing in their victory. How
could this have been so easy?

They opened the gates,

their enemies, and welcomed them with singing,
laughter, impotent chatter, sermons. Now
they are crying, the defeated, dotting the streets, their faces –
gentle and decadent and sweet, so very young,
they seem, even the old ones look like children –
looking up, dazed, half hoping, half despairing, wondering,
will they destroy us all? They cannot destroy us all!
Not this, the home we have made in the imperfect world,
to shelter our brief lives . . .

No (the barbarians
think), we will not destroy you all,
not all of you. Something like a smile crosses
their faces. In victory they are magnanimous,
for a time.

For a time silence spreads over the city, like rain.
Then the blond barbarian raises his hand for a sign.

Winter Roses

Despair is a cunning seducer.
Sneering at the virtuous under his smile,
he flatters the darkness with just
a flicker of a cinder of light.

“You *too intelligent to hope*,” he whispers:
“Let *the fools* feed on dreams.
Humans? What are *they*? Fluff
of lust, greed, rage, fear.
Where is hope? Not here, not there,
not anywhere.
The last gleam of light will be *mine* . . .”

Yet all the time he is preparing
your final, brutal humiliation,
as the lab rat discovers a palpable serum,
and a woman sings to a stranger’s child
in the rutted camps by the borderlands,
and a boy saves a broken-winged crow
blown by an autumn storm out to sea,
and a winter garden blossoms with roses,

and the sun rises, dazzling, in a young girl's eyes.

He is a cunning seducer.

Beware.

Knock Knock

Knock knock.

Who's there?

Ukrainian boy.

I have walked from far,

Over fields of snow

And ice of roads

And cities at war.

I don't know you.

Are there any with you?

My family is gone,

I don't know where.

I'm here all alone.

May I come in?

I have a number

On my hand. Can I call?

Not on my land!

There's a country

Down the road.

Try them there.

It's far, and I'm cold.

Knock knock.

Who's there?

Ukrainian boy.

Can I come in?

I'm so tired,

And the wind is so cold. . . .

Why are you here?

What is that

In your eyes? Is it tears?

Is it sadness or fear?

No, it is ice,

It is melting there.

*Go down the road.
There is nothing for you here.*

Knock knock.
Who's there?
Ukrainian boy.
Can you say where I am?
I saw ghosts on the road,
They looked like my papa,
My mama, my sister,
My brother at home.
Has anything happened to them?
Will you please let me in?
I'm so tired, I don't think
I can't walk any more.
I can't feel my hands.
May I come in here?
*What is that number
Written out on your hand?
When I call, there is silence
At the other end.
Come in and rest
On my bed. No, it's snow . . .
When you sleep you will never
Fear war again.*
No, no, I must go,
How will I get home
If now I don't go?
*Come in and rest,
Come in and rest,
Come in and rest
Until you must go . . .*

Knock knock.
Who's there?

*Who knocked at our door?
Show yourself if you're there!*

But there was no one there,

Only the sound of the wind,
And the snow in the air.

Dedicated to the children of war

Christopher Bernard is co-editor of *Caveat Lector*. His poetry collection *A Socialist's Garden of Verses* was winner of a 2021 PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Literary Award and was named one of *Kirkus Reviews'* "Top 100 Indie Books of 2021." *Knock Knock* was originally published in *Synchronized Chaos*.