

Waiting for the Barbarians

by Daniel Irving Rattner
adapted from the poem by CP Cavafy

PROLOGUE.

The back of a bar.

An empty stage.

A microphone.

A piece of paper stuck to the back wall.

A man enters and writes with marker, in large block letters:

WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS
WILL BEGIN IN
5 MINUTES

A minute passes.

The man returns.

He crosses out the “5” in “5 MINUTES” and replaces it with a “6”

Another minute passes.

The man returns.

He crosses out the “6” and replaces it with a “2”

Another minute passes.

The sign sits there, reading:

WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS
WILL BEGIN IN
5 6 2 MINUTES

I.

The man returns and steps onto the stage. He is not dressed to perform. Jeans. Boots. T-shirt with an open button-down over it. Hair mussed. He approaches the microphone nervously. He taps on it. It's something he's seen people do in the movies.

MAN

Hi. Um. Before we get started, I just want to thank you all so much for coming tonight. I think I know all of you because... well I invited all of you. Thanks for being here. Means a lot to me.

He pulls the mic down off the stage, so he is standing next to it. He doesn't love the spotlight.

I think this is going to be good. I think this is going to be fun. I think we all deserve a little fun. Given...

He gestures vaguely at the universe.

And if not, it was free so.

He shrugs.

OK. We're going to get started in just a few minutes, but, we're still waiting on a few people—someone very special to me is coming tonight—and I don't want to start before they get here. Are you guys okay to wait for a little bit?

Hopefully the audience says yes.

Great. While we're waiting, I'd love to do a little *placement*. I'm thinking it'd be nice if we all sat with different people than we came with, so we're next to a stranger or at least an acquaintance and not our significant other. Or our friend. Our babysitter. Our parole officer.

MAN walks into the audience and shuffles people around. As he does this:

Let's get some music in here while we do this.

MAN hands his phone to AUDIENCE MEMBER 1.

Can you put something on? Anything you feel like?

Hopefully some music starts. Once people are settled in their new seats:

Oh, and before we start: does anyone need a drink?

MAN holds up a half-full (half-empty?) bottle of wine or some kind of liquor. He fills up one or two people's cups until the bottle is empty.

If you don't have a drink, make sure you get one from the bar. And make sure you tip. But you'll want to have a drink for this.

In fact, to avoid a stampede to the bar, [AUDIENCE MEMBER 2], can you be responsible for getting a drink for anyone in [your section] who needs one during the show? And [AUDIENCE MEMBER 3] and [AUDIENCE MEMBER 4], can you make sure everyone in [your sections] has a drink too, if they need one during the show?

And [AUDIENCE MEMBER 5], can you make sure any latecomers who arrive get seated comfortably. And can you take care of any bags or coats, [AUDIENCE MEMBER 6]? And, last but not least, [AUDIENCE MEMBER 7], can I give you this stack of programs to hand out once the show starts?¹

MAN clambers back onstage. He finishes his own drink. He goes to refill his own glass, but remembers the bottle is empty.

Oh. [AUDIENCE MEMBER 8], now can you buy me a drink?

MAN hands AUDIENCE MEMBER 8 some cash to go to the bar. MAN notices the song that's playing. He changes whatever it is. Probably changes it to Robyn. "Dancing On My Own."

And now he checks his watch.

Um. While we wait, why don't I tell you a bit about what we're doing here tonight.² We're going to be doing a play tonight that is *audience engaged*. *Audience involved*. *Audience generated*. Yes, it's one of those. And I'm going to ask you guys to share some stuff about yourselves. No more than you're comfortable with, though we do live in uncomfortable times, but still—this is going to be about all of you. We're going to be sharing our anxieties. Fears. Hopes...

And we're going to be doing that through an adaptation of this poem called "Waiting for the Barbarians."

MAN glances at the door of the bar.

And yeah, why don't I give you all a little context on the poem? I like context. I think context is underrated.

¹ You can adjust the tasks here to fit the needs of the space/audience, and you can perform/assign additional tasks as well (e.g. someone put in charge if there's a medical emergency; someone assigned to help set up once the play starts; someone asked to monitor sound quality).

² If the space is small enough, MAN has abandoned his mic by now and is speaking casually with the audience.

Do any of you know it? By the way?

MAN scans the crowd for a sign of recognition.

“Waiting for the Barbarians”?

“Bueller? Bueller?”

It’s kinda famous. But no judgment if you don’t. No judgment.

If someone does know it, MAN talks to them a little bit about it (how they encountered it; if they like it; what they think it means, etc.).

Basically, the poem—and I should probably read it to you while we’re waiting—but basically it’s about this civilization paralyzed with anticipation that these barbarians are about to come and destroy them.

The poem has remained enormously popular over the last hundred or so years since it was written. It’s been invoked in everything from the Cold War to post-9/11 America to the government shutdown in 2013. So, there’s this enduring question of: who are the barbarians? And why are we waiting for them?

Our special guest has not yet arrived. MAN checks his watch. And then continues to stall for time.

Um. The poem is by this Greek poet – this old Greek poet – CP Cavafy. He lived from 1863 to 1933, so he was writing in like the late 19th / early 20th century. He was Greek, but he was diasporic Greek. Meaning he didn’t live in Greece: He lived in Alexandria, in Egypt.

And while he did publish some of his poems, most of them were simply distributed among friends on individual pieces of paper: he would give certain friends certain poems he thought they’d like; and other friends other poems. No one had a complete collection of his work, but everyone had a collection designed completely for them. An early 20th century mixtape.

And Cavafy thought of himself as much a journalist, as much a historian as a poet. Eventually. Because when he first started writing, he was writing in this decadent, fin-de-siècle style, these almost pastiche-y odes. Baudelaire, Rimbaud. Swinburne. Oscar Wilde, but without the wit.

But eventually, for reasons we don’t know and it would be too simplistic to ascribe some biographical cause to, in 1902 and 1903, he reappraises his entire body of work. He rejects nearly everything he’s written up to that point, and in 1904, now forty, embarks on a new poetic style. It becomes lean and sparse. There are few of the traditional hallmarks of poetry: metaphors, similes, imagery. There’s barely even any adjectives. Just simple statements of fact. Poetry without the poetry.

“Waiting for the Barbarians” is one of those spare, sparse poems from 1904. Though, it was published. And it’s longer than most of his other poems, which are mostly just: Well, our guest hasn’t arrived so we have time! We can read some. They’re all online. Which is pretty cool.

He opens his laptop and goes to cavafy.com. He selects a poem and hands his computer to AUDIENCE MEMBER 9, asking him to read:³

AUDIENCE MEMBER 9
(reading)

“He Swears”

*He swears every now and then to begin a better life.
But when night comes with its own counsel,
its own compromises and prospects—
when night comes with its own power
of a body that needs and demands,
he goes back, lost, to the same fatal pleasure.*

MAN

Other poems are just descriptions of men he knew in Alexandria.

MAN opens another poem on his computer and hands it to AUDIENCE MEMBER 10.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 10
(reading)

“Days of 1909, ’10, and ’11”

*He was the son of a harassed, poverty-stricken sailor
(from an island in the Aegean Sea).
He worked for a blacksmith: his clothes shabby,
his workshoes miserably torn,
his hands filthy with rust and oil.*

*In the evenings, after the shop closed,
if there was something he longed for especially,
a fairly expensive tie,
a tie for Sunday,
or if he saw and coveted
a beautiful blue shirt in some store window,
he’d sell his body for a dollar or two.*

*I ask myself if the glorious Alexandria
of ancient times could boast of a boy
more exquisite, more perfect—lost though he was:
that is, we don’t have a statue or painting of him;*

³ The two poems read here can be swapped out for other Cavafy poems if you think they would better suit your audience. The poems should, however, be sure to give a sense of Cavafy’s style as described in the lines above.

*thrust into that awful blacksmith's shop,
overworked, tormented, given to cheap debauchery,
he was soon used up.*

MAN takes back the computer and encourages the audience to applaud.

MAN

Poetry without the poetry. The world alone is enough. Cavafy understood that. And there are attempts – misguided, but well-intentioned, I think – attempts to identify what made Cavafy understand that in 1904. But we just know very little about him.

Except that he was super gay.

Picture it: Alexandria. 1900.

(If no one laughs, an ad-lib like “That was a Golden Girls joke you bunch of homophobes.”)

Cavafy would go out at night. He lived in a squalid apartment above a seedy bar. And he would go out at night, on a hot evening, and he would make his way down the street. He would stop outside his favorite bar. And wait. Once he went inside, he would know the truth. But in that moment before he crossed the threshold, anything was possible. So he would linger.

And then he would enter. Because we can't wait forever.

It would be dark inside. Sticky floors and dirty chairs, I imagine. Cavafy would walk the length of the bar towards the back. He would sit. And he would scan the room.

He knew what he was looking for. Blond hair. Blue eyes. 26. 27. Maybe 28. Never over 30. No fats, no femmes; no blacks, no Asians. Cavafy was what we would call today a body fascist.

Seriously. He doesn't have a poem where a man is described as attractive who doesn't meet those... qualifications. And yet: I hope it's okay that I find something admirable in the way he could recognize – appreciate – feel beauty in a way in a time that that was... frowned upon.

At the bar, Cavafy orders a beer. A little help for what he's about to do. The drink is placed in front of him. He feels its cool shell between his hands. He holds it up to his mouth and takes a few delicate, bird-like sips before he scans the room and let his eyes rest on: yes.

MAN makes eye contact with someone in the audience at this point.

And Cavafy watches him. Watches as he sits on a stool. Watches as he talks casually with his friend. Watches as he raises his own glass to his mouth, and watches as he pulls it away, letting some foam linger on the top of his lip. Cavafy watches as the man runs his hands through his hair. Watches as he glimpses back at Cavafy through the corner of his eye. Cavafy watches him, unascivously, unacquisitively.

This is enough, though he knows it will have to end. Knows it could end terribly. Or perhaps wonderfully, if the man—no he won't think like that. It will end terribly, if at all.

It's an awful thing to want someone, Cavafy thinks to himself. To need someone. To be unsatisfied by yourself, by—

The man at the bar's friend gets up to go. Is the man leaving too? No. He's ordering another drink. And while the man waits for his drink, he glances back over at Cavafy.

Is it possible, Cavafy wonders, is it possible he—?

The man meets Cavafy's stare, and Cavafy thinks to himself: If he makes eye contact with me for more than three seconds, I'll know. I'll know he—

They lock eyes. One, two—

And the man turns. The bartender has placed a tall glass of beer in front of him. Don't overreach, Cavafy thinks to himself. Don't set yourself up for disappoint—

The man turns back to Cavafy and meets his stare again.

One, two—

No. Let it be enough, to watch. Let it be enough, this encounter. Even if one-sided. No. Not one-sided. The man had stayed. Had he? Just a bit longer? Did he know what I – Cavafy – wanted? I should talk to him. Say something. Just a few words. But it would inevitably come out wrong. It would be clumsy, awkward, imperfect.

No, it would end terribly if it at all.

And so Cavafy stays for half an hour. Makes for himself an experience entirely erotic. Until the man leaves, without a word or a sign of recognition. Cavafy finishes his beer, and goes home where he writes, in large letters, on a piece of paper: "I swear I won't do it again." Cavafy, being hurt, would hurt himself even more. And so, night after night, it ends. And not terribly. And not at all really: how can something that never really happened, end?

I took all that from a poem Cavafy wrote in 1917. It was in a collection of poems he called 'Hidden,' ones he shared with friends but didn't want published. The irony of all of this: so public an encounter, locked away in a drawer somewhere.

But not forever. According to his notes, Cavafy did want it read some day. In a "more perfect society." His words. When "people made like him" – his words – could "live and read openly." Yes. Also his words. Translated. And paraphrased.

We are Cavafy's more perfect society. The future more perfect.

You have to laugh.

You have to *laugh*.

You *have* to laugh.

II.

MAN

Sorry for getting off-track there. Anyways, before we start the play, I do want to read that poem to you, “Waiting for the Barbarians.”

MAN takes out a piece of paper, unfolds it, and lays it on the music stand in front of him.⁴ He stares it.

And I think I’ve done enough talking by now. [AUDIENCE MEMBER 11], can you come up and read it?

Hopefully they get up, and as MAN goes to sit in their seat in the audience:

Actually. It’s best if two people read it. [AUDIENCE MEMBER 12]?

Hopefully both agree, and MAN instructs them on which parts to read.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 11

(reading)

What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?

AUDIENCE MEMBER 12

The barbarians are due here today.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 11

Why isn’t anything going on in the senate?

Why are the senators sitting there without legislating?

AUDIENCE MEMBER 12

Because the barbarians are coming today.

What’s the point of senators making laws now?

Once the barbarians are here, they’ll do the legislating.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 11

*Why did our emperor get up so early,
and why is he sitting enthroned at the city’s main gate,
in state, wearing the crown?*

⁴ This could be a moment, as it happened (unplanned) in the first production, where the bartender comes up to the performer and hisses in his ear loud enough for the audience to hear: “You know you only have an hour, right? You have to start soon.”

AUDIENCE MEMBER 12

*Because the barbarians are coming today
and the emperor's waiting to receive their leader.
He's even got a scroll to give him,
loaded with titles, with imposing names.*

AUDIENCE MEMBER 11

*Why have our two consuls and praetors come out today
wearing their embroidered, their scarlet togas?
Why have they put on bracelets with so many amethysts,
rings sparkling with magnificent emeralds?
Why are they carrying elegant canes
beautifully worked in silver and gold?*

AUDIENCE MEMBER 12

*Because the barbarians are coming today
and things like that dazzle the barbarians.*

AUDIENCE MEMBER 11

*Why don't our distinguished orators turn up as usual
to make their speeches, say what they have to say?*

AUDIENCE MEMBER 12

*Because the barbarians are coming today
and they're bored by rhetoric and public speaking.*

AUDIENCE MEMBER 11

*Why this sudden bewilderment, this confusion?
(How serious people's faces have become.)
Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,
everyone going home lost in thought?*

AUDIENCE MEMBER 12

*Because night has fallen and the barbarians haven't come.
And some of our men just in from the border say
there are no barbarians any longer.*

MAN goes back up to the mic.

MAN
(reading)

*Now what's going to happen to us without the barbarians?
Those people were a kind of solution.*

And he gently ushers the audience participants back to their seats, getting the audience to give them a round of applause.

So, as you get from the poem: The barbarians are some threat to disrupt or undo an advanced, civilized community and replace them with a new world order. And the word 'barbarian' itself originally meant any foreigner, because to the Greeks, people who didn't speak Greek sounded like they were just making noises: saying 'bar bar.'

MAN glances towards the door again. No luck yet.
Uh, before we start: does anyone have any guesses, interpretations as to who the barbarians are an analogy for, for Cavafy?

He turns out to the audience. Whatever their answers, eventually we result in:

There is a one pretty obvious interpretation as to who the coming barbarians were for Cavafy. Who, on the horizon, threatened the destruction of society and a new world order, for Cavafy. For Cavafy who lived in the first half of the 20th century. And who died in 1933... The same year as...

He turns out to the audience to let them solve it.
Hopefully someone shouts out "Hitler." Also maybe hopefully not? Either way:

Yes, Hitler. He did after all have a kind of solution. Didn't he? And it's not just Hitler. It's Stalin. And it's Franco. Dolfuss and Antonescu. Even here in the states, the KKK's begins to rise in 1933. Is that what Cavafy saw coming? Is that what Cavafy—

Ugh. I don't really want to talk about fascism tonight.

The MAN fidgets as he calculates his next move.

Ah! Let's do this Let's get ready to share things once my guest arrives and the play starts. Let's write down what we're going to share. Can I put someone in charge? [AUDIENCE MEMBER 13], can you hand out some paper and pens and have everyone write down:

The thing they fear most happening
The thing they hope for most to happen
And a story about a missed opportunity.

And actually, while you're doing that, this would be a good time, if any of you need, to use the tinkle shop, as my grandfather used to call it.

If anyone laughs.

Don't laugh. He's dead.

Just kidding, you can laugh.

MAN dashes out of the room.

Take your time! No rush! Brb

III.

Intermission. The MAN disappears for a bit, perhaps goes outside, perhaps goes to the bathroom, leaving the audience to fend for themselves.

As they write their answers, someone from the audience gets onstage. They change the music to something more fun. They find a bottle of alcohol. They distribute it to the audience. It's starting to feel like a party, hopefully.

IV.

MAN returns.

MAN

How's it going? Did you guys write things down? And did anyone leave while I was gone? And did anyone show up?

MAN refills his drink. Probably refills a few others. Maybe checks in on the tasks (e.g. If he sees someone with an empty drink, "Did [AUDIENCE MEMBER 2] get you a drink?")

He begins chatting with one of the audience members.

I was thinking while you were in the, um, the wiz palace, there's a flaw in the logic of connecting Cavafy's barbarians with fascism. Right? After all, the people in Cavafy's poem are disappointed that the barbarians never showed up. Those last lines, so easily ignored, after the barbarians don't end up coming: "Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians? / Those people were a kind of solution." And who would be disappointed that fascism doesn't arrive?

MAN is back at the mic. He turns off the music.

Actually, this guy I know, Charles, would be. Charles, who's definitely decadent. Charles, who's a monarchist. Charles, who's gay, if you hadn't already guess. Charles, who voted for the president.

I met Charles through a mutual acquaintance last year in a, possibly misguided but well-intentioned, I think, attempt, to "understand the other side." I met up with Charles a couple times because I thought it was important to *hear both sides*. To *escape my bubble*. To sit and listen to people say things like "The French Revolution is the worst thing to happen in modern history" and "Islam is a fundamentally violent religion" and "I think transgender people just want attention."

Charles is doing fine, thanks for asking. Charles is a white guy, if you hadn't already guessed. For Charles, this is a party. Just: No fats, no femmes. You know the rest...

But how nice for Charles. To be on the winning team. Because Charles has spent very little time on the winning team before this. In the primaries, he was a Bernie Sanders supporter.

And Charles grew up gay in Georgia in the '90s. So we cut him some slack. Right?

In fact, Charles fell in love in Georgia in the early '00s with a boy he met in church choir. Thomas. Charles and Thomas would write each other notes. Fumbling, awkward, teenage notes, they didn't understand at first.

And at first they passed each other pieces of paper in the hall. But eventually they began to share a notebook. In six months they filled up half a dozen notebooks. Charles gave them to me to read, and I saved some of my favorite letters on my phone. Most of the notes are just them finding any reason to talk:

"Mrs M is gone so we're watching some old, old movie of Julius Caesar right now"

"Hey! We're playing Serpentes in Latin today. We have a test on our Latin medical terms/derivatives on Thursday"

"If you want to eat or something after Jazz, I'll probably be going to Wendy's right after Jazz"
And they signed off each letter:

"Your friend"

"Your best friend"

"Your bestest best friend"

"Your brother"

"Your twin"

"Your bestest best friend twin more than a brother"

Until:

"Always"

"Your love"

"I love you"

Still, even then, they hadn't so much as held hands, until finally, one night: They were just- they were just sitting on Charles's bed watching TV. *Will & Grace*. Thomas had introduced Charles to it, and Charles had taken an immediate liking to Karen Walker. And they were just sitting there. And in Charles's memory, he looked at Thomas to say something to him, and Thomas started laughing, and he just sorta like fell into Charles and... they kissed! And he- he- god, Charles was mortified. And they were singing together that summer in this uh like Baptist choir, and they had rehearsal for that thing like 30, 40 minutes later.

And- and they drove - *Charles* drove - them down there. In complete silence. Absolutely mortified. Charles didn't go to rehearsal! He went and locked himself in a bathroom and sat there for an hour and a half. Because he had been told my whole life - at least in a religious context, and in a larger social- societal attitude - that homosexuality was not an option. Venturing into any kind of physical territory? That's just beyond the pale. He was so disappointed in himself. Charles sat there for an hour and a half in that bathroom stall. Because he couldn't leave; he had driven Thomas.

It was awkward after that, for a few days. There was nothing physical at all again, until they went to go see *The Day After Tomorrow* in the movie theater. And Charles had already tried telling Thomas at this point that this has got to be platonic: "I can't do this." Even though it was not what Charles actually felt. And they were sitting there, and halfway through the movie, Thomas took Charles's hand. And at that moment Charles said, "All right, I will allow myself to do this." He was- it was crazy.

Some weeks later, Charles wrote in the notebook:

MAN shares his phone with AUDIENCE MEMBER 14 so he can read the note.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 14

"Thomas,

A verse has been on my mind a lot lately: 'And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose.' (Romans 8:28). I think me meeting you has been something of a fulfillment of that... He sent you into my life, and 'every good and perfect gift comes down from Heaven...' In my eyes, you are good and perfect, and I know God sent you into my life to accomplish something in me. One thing I'm thankful for is that you make me feel like I am genuinely loved by someone. That's always been something that was hard for me to accept, but you've accepted me, flaws and all. You also make me want to be a better person. So do you see now why I said I'm indebted to you?

Bestest best friends,
Charles"

MAN takes his phone back.

MAN

And a few months passed, and, I don't know the exact context, but I think you can imagine what happened to two gay boys who fell in love in Georgia during Baptist choir rehearsal while George Walker Bush was president and Thomas wrote Charles a note that said:

"Forgive me for being the object of your affection that has caused you so much grief. We'll talk after school." And so it ended. Had it happened at all?

I don't know why I told that story except that we are all capable of being hurt and we're all capable of hurting. Charles was waiting for a more perfect society, and now things have turned out all right for him. For Charles, there is a new world order coming. But it's a good one. Who doesn't love barbarians?

Things can seem so awful and then it changes. And I don't know how it changes. But when George Walker Bush left office, the same year Charles saw Thomas again for the last time, reuniting accidentally after all those years (I promise I'll spare you the story), Bush's approval rating was 33%. And now it's 61%. So I think context matters, but maybe we miscalculate it. Our place in history. And the future more perfect.

Should Cavafy have been so excited for "a more perfect society"? So disappointed in his own time? After all, not two years after he writes the poem about the man in the bar, in 1919, in Berlin, Magnus Hirschfeld, the famous sexologist, writes and co-stars in this movie, "Different From the Others":

"Different From the Others" begins to play.⁵

It's considered one of the first pro-gay films. The movie tells the story of a violinist, Korner, who falls in love with one of his students, Kurt. Their relationship is discovered, and Korner is blackmailed. Eventually though, Korner stops paying the blackmail and they go public with their love, leading to Korner's imprisonment and suicide. Throughout, however, the film is punctuated with speeches by Hirschfeld himself, advocating for understanding homosexuality as something normal and decriminalizing it.

Hirschfeld couldn't have known when he made the movie that 14 years later, when he took a trip abroad to Switzerland, his Institute would be burned to the ground, nearly every copy of "Different from the Others" with it. He couldn't have known how drastically the world would change when he made that movie. And so he made it anyways and for a year it played to sold-out crowds in Berlin.

The movie continues to play.

The barbarians – as I'm sure some people then called the gays and the queers and the not normals – the barbarians were there. Inside the gates. In Cavafy's lifetime. And they were having a fucking blast. All over the world at this time! Gay weddings and gay parties in Russia. The pansy craze and drag queens on Broadway in the US! The Spanish Second Republic and Lorca, before he ended up dead in a ditch somewhere! And so we can have as much fun as them. Right now. Can't we?

MAN begins handing out copies of the poem, speaking over the following actions. He uses the following lines to get the audience riled up.

Because that's the thing—when you destroy civilization, undo it, give it a new way of speaking, you have an opportunity to create something better. Cavafy wasn't waiting for a future more perfect, that was already there. He was waiting for a future most perfect.

MAN has finished handing out the poems.

I want to read the poem again. I want to read it again and celebrate the barbarians. I want one person to read the beginning and when we get to the barbarians, I want you to shout with joy that they're coming.

⁵ You'll probably want to start the movie at about 5 minutes in, when Kurt and Korner first meet.

MAN pulls up AUDIENCE MEMBER 15, and they begin to read the poem.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 15
(reading)

What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?

AUDIENCE
(shouting, hopefully)

The barbarians are due here today!

AUDIENCE MEMBER 15

Why isn't anything going on in the senate?

AUDIENCE

Because the barbarians are coming today!

AUDIENCE MEMBER 15

Why did our emperor get up so early,
and why is he sitting enthroned at the city's main gate?

AUDIENCE

Because the barbarians are coming today!

AUDIENCE MEMBER 15

Why have our two consuls and praetors come out today
wearing their embroidered, their scarlet togas?

AUDIENCE

Because the barbarians are coming today!

AUDIENCE MEMBER 15

Why don't our distinguished orators turn up as usual
to make their speeches, say what they have to say?

AUDIENCE

Because the barbarians are coming today!

AUDIENCE MEMBER 15

Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,
everyone going home lost in thought?

MAN
(reading)

Because night has fallen and the barbarians haven't come.
Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
Those people were a kind of solution.

V.

MAN is back at the mic. It's solemn now, somehow.

MAN

A “*kind of* solution.” I don't know what to do with that—with that hesitance, with that irony, with that ambivalence. But I know it tells us to resist easy answers. To avoid binaries. How to live in a liminal time.

MAN turns to an audience member.

What time is it?

Off of the audience member's response:

I only have a few minutes left. No one is coming. The play won't start. You won't have to share anything.

But since I *do* have a few minutes left, I'm going to tell you what *I* think the barbarians are: When we talk about something that can undo our way of being, destroy us or make us better, something that can teach us a different way of speaking, whether a new poetic voice or incoherent babbling, in that sense, isn't love barbaric?

There's another love story I'm thinking about. I don't know the men involved, and they weren't famous. Both were poets, though: Manfred Lewin and Gad Beck.

Gad died in 2012, but in the years before that, throughout his life, he would remember his childhood friend Manfred. They met in Judaism School in Berlin, where they both lived. And they became close after being assigned the same cot to share during the school's air raid drills at nights. And I don't know what exactly led up to this moment, but one of those nights Manfred handed Gad a journal with poems he had written for Gad.

The poetry is... most of it's fumbling, awkward, teenage poetry. But there is a strange beauty to some of it, some of it which is just simple statements of fact. One poem:

*Night exists for more than sleep
which is why, my love,
we stayed awake so often.*

Gad himself, funnily enough, was critical of the poetry when he first read it. He couldn't know how much it would come to mean to him. He couldn't know that he would later remark: “The impression [of the book of poems] was not so deep like in this moment, because I didn't, I couldn't know what will be our next future.”

I know that in the years that followed, their relationship became sexual. I know that Manfred initially struggled with this but came to accept that “with Gad, it's all right.” I know that the last time they saw each other was in a transit camp on Grosse Hamburger Strasse, which had once been Gad's school.

The evening before that, Gad had gone to see Manfred and was horrified to learn that Manfred and his family had been arrested that morning. Desperate to see Manfred and refusing to wait, the next day, Gad went to Manfred's boss, a Christian named Mr. Herrmann. Mr. Herrmann owned an apartment building where Manfred had been working as a forced laborer—a fate Gad avoided due to his “half-Jewish” status.

When Gad told Mr. Herrmann Manfred had been arrested, Mr. Herrmann became furious, realizing that Manfred still had the keys to his apartment building. And so Gad told Mr. Herrmann his plan to get the keys back, and Gad somehow convinced Mr. Herrmann to lend his son's Hitler Youth uniform to Gad.

The uniform barely fit when Gad put it on. It had to be held together with safety pins. Still, Gad put it on and strode into the transit camp on Grosse Hamburger Strasse. He gave a “Heil Hitler!” salute as he entered, and if you look at young pictures of Gad you can see how the uniform and the salute may have been enough to let him pass, what with his blond hair and blue eyes and being 26.

Inside, Gad marches up to the first Lieutenant he sees and barks, “The Jew Manfred Israel Lewin was brought here yesterday.” The Lieutenant is taken aback by the directness from this young, delicate-looking man. And as he stands in stunned silence, Gad says, “Manfred Lewin kept the keys to our apartment building.” So, the Lieutenant calls for Manfred, and in a few moments he is standing there in front of Gad.

Gad, in his uniform, stares into Manfred's eyes: “You kept the keys! Come with me and tell us exactly which key goes to which apartment so we can get back to work.” Gad grabs Manfred gruffly by the arm and goes to lead him out of the camp, but the Lieutenant holds out a hand. Eyes narrowed, he asks Gad to promise he'll return Manfred immediately. To which Gad snorts back “What would I want with a Jew?” And they leave.

Once outside the building, Manfred and Gad walk another 50 meters, where they can't be seen. Gad stuffs a 20-mark bill into Manfred's hand: “Here's some money. Now go to my uncle in Teltow like we discussed and wait for me. I'll come as soon as I can.”

Manfred looks at the money in his hand. And then he glances up at Gad and says to him quietly, just above a whisper. “Gad, I can't go with you. My family needs me. If I abandon them now, I'll never be free.”

So Gad watches him leave, watches him walk back to the camp, and he says it's in those seconds, as he waited to watch Manfred turn the corner, that he grew up. The last time Gad saw Manfred. The last poem in the book Manfred wrote for Gad:

Images of the actual journal are projected onto the back wall as we flip through the pages.

*Often I see myself standing at the
edge of an abyss
Felt my utter abandonment
And the dizzyness when I let my eyes
look down*

*But suddenly from the blackest depths
A gentle voice came echoing
Looking down I wondered who might
be calling out to me*

*Although the voice was one I knew at once!
It was the voice of a sacred power
It was the sound of souls in harmony
It was the essence of our humanity
The quality we must never lose.*

*When in a single move Destiny
unleashes its terrible game
And sweeps you away to some far
distant land
When our exile stretches ever further
Will the last bonds of our community
be torn apart
Then don't lament
Even though the fire torments your
Heart
For there is one sure support
a voice that we call friendship*

Okay. Now I really don't have anything else to say. But you have something in your hands, that you've written, just simple statements of fact, a piece of paper as intimate as Cavafy's poetry, as the notes Thomas and Charles wrote each other, as Manfred's journal for Gad.

You can share it. If you'd like.

VI.

Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,
everyone going home lost in thought?

Because night has fallen and the barbarians haven't come.
And some of our men just in from the border say
there are no barbarians any longer.

END