Waiting for the barbarians

By Constantine P. Cavafy (1904)

What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?

The barbarians are to arrive today.

Why such inaction in the Senate?
Why do the Senators sit and pass no laws?

Because the barbarians are to arrive today.
What laws can the Senators pass any more?
When the barbarians come they will make the laws.

Why did our emperor wake up so early
and sits at the greatest gate of the city,
on the throne, solemn, wearing the crown?

Because the barbarians are to arrive today.
And the emperor waits to receive
their chief. Indeed he has prepared
to give him a scroll. Therein he inscribed
many titles and names of honor.

Why have our two consuls and the praetors come out
today in their red, embroidered togas;
why do they wear amethyst-studded bracelets,
and rings with brilliant, glittering emeralds;
why are they carrying costly canes today,
wonderfully carved with silver and gold?

Because the barbarians are to arrive today,
and such things dazzle the barbarians.

Why don't the worthy orators come as always
to make their speeches, to have their say?

Because the barbarians are to arrive today;
and they get bored with eloquence and orations.

Why all of a sudden this unrest
and confusion. (How solemn the faces have become).
Why are the streets and squares clearing quickly,
and all return to their homes, so deep in thought?

Because night is here, but the barbarians have not come.
And some people arrived from the borders,
and said that there are no longer any barbarians.

And now what shall become of us without any barbarians?
Those people were some kind of solution.

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