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Poetry

The Black Ocean
Brian Barker
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"Before we are forgotten, we will be turned into kitsch. Kitsch is the stopover between being and oblivion."—Milan Kundera

So begins the opening poem in Brian Barker's second book, *The Black Ocean*, and that epigraph frames the poems that follow, for each one sweeps readers into worlds at the edge of ruin. In his first poem, "Dragging Canoe Vanishes from the Bear Pit into the Endless Clucking of the Gods," Barker moves readers easily through this transformation into kitsch, from the bears who watch the "god-faces" that "bob in the heat" and eat the grease and sugar that rains down on them, to the Indian warrior paid to be an act, and even to the poet as little boy who collects the requisite souvenirs—fudge, a theme park penny, a Polaroid in which he sees the "boy's face sloshed like milk from beneath / his cap."

From a theme park that features sheet metal teepees and "real" Indian chiefs to Gorbachev's memories of the Chernobyl disaster, the poet merges times, places, and perspectives fluidly and unexpectedly. Within the swallowing darkness of the end, the images in Barker's poems are like matches lit—suddenly readers find they are looking out from someone else's eyes, whether those eyes belong to Edgar Allen Poe, back from the dead, the memory-riddled Ronald Reagan, a person being physically tortured, or simply a lover addressing his beloved on the last night on earth. Amidst the sliding uncertainty that accompanies ruin, the voices in Barker's poems claim "I was here."

No matter how dark the world is, however, the poet elevates the desperation and ugliness through his ever-stunning marriage of image and sound that is almost synesthetic at times. He gives readers branches that "snicker together" and onions with a "pearly scent" ("Dragging Canoe"). In "Visions for the Last Night on Earth," he strikes with the mean sounds of "drowned corn, sick from sewage and tidesuck." Every turn of phrase and line break reveals a surprise that seems both spontaneous and carefully chosen, from "light raked loose / like salted slugs" in the

poem “In the City of Fallen Rebels” to “carbuncular toads” (“Poe Climbs Down from the Long Tapestry of Death to Command an Army of Street Urchins Huddled in the Dusk”).

A bold collection that commands attention, *The Black Ocean* won the 2010 Crab Orchard Series in Poetry Open Competition Award, which was judged by Michael Waters. All lovers of poetry will relish lingering over the language of Brian Barker’s poems and following him far into tragedy.

Jennifer Fandel