

Cry of the Renegade

An Editor's Note

The title of this essay comes from a poem by José Domingo Gómez Rojas, which appears here in English for the first time. In 1920, Chilean authorities found Gómez Rojas' verses to be subversive and considered the poet an anarchist and, worse, insolent. "I do not have, dear minister," Gómez Rojas told his interrogator, "sufficient moral discipline to assume [the title of anarchist], which I will never merit." At which point, Gómez Rojas, much like the resister Olaf in E. E. Cummings' poem of war, was thrown into a jail, where he died.

This edition of *New Letters* could be said to expose idealists among us. They come as aspirants, mostly, unsure and often humble; they admit to feeling ridiculous at times, as, apparently, it must be. Even Clarissa Hay, "Cassie," tough as they come on the roller-derby track, wants to be part of a big, beautiful vision of the world—Yes, she says, "I want to be part of it"—which is why we love her memoir. Photographs of "Occupy" demonstrations in Paris, France, and Kansas City, Mo., foster politics less than expose a certain innocence, an appearance, at least, of naiveté, which seems to have become almost inexplicable in these times. I am reminded of a poem by David Ray, "Stopping Near Highway 80," published in his 1974 collection, *Gathering Firewood*, which ends by asking if the distrustful folk in an Iowa town can teach us anything, "we'd ever want to know / of living lives as gentle as we can."

That ending line has stayed with me since the day I first read it, freshly published. It has not lost its power. On the Internet, one now can find an interview conducted by comedian Stephen Colbert with two Occupy Wall Street participants, a young man, Justin, and a young woman, Ketchup. Televised Oct. 31, 2011, the video has been circulated as proof to some people that Occupy protestors are silly, naive, and whacko. I thought so, too, when I received the video from a friend. I squirmed in my seat when Ketchup identified

herself as a “female-bodied person,” and when Justin first twinkled his fingers downward to express disagreement with Colbert’s mock bluster and wisecracks. Hands in the air, another Occupy gesture, can be seen in our Paris photos, gauging consensus.

There I was, admiring Colbert’s wit and averting my eyes from the moon-faced pair, in whom I wanted, really wanted, to put my faith. Say something cutting and witty back, I nearly screamed at the screen. Instead, they sat buoyantly bantering with a professional wag, certainly understanding their own strangeness, I believe, and unerring. I felt a great sadness. Please don’t tell me they were actors. Or do tell me; it doesn’t matter, because fictions also hold truths. The girl, Miyoung, in Angie Kim’s story “Backward” is fictional, I admit without reservation. I admit that Shifra Sharlin, in her essay here, really does care about the nature of the soul, even as she can hardly believe her own fall from more “sophisticated” thinking. To look like a fool, or feel like one, at times, often exposes the idealists among us. “A fool who persists in his folly,” William Blake nevertheless asserts, “will become wise.” Let us hope.

“Is this restoration?” Janice Harrington asks in her poem “Prairie Blazing Star,” in this issue. The wands of the blazing star plants reach upward, as the hands in these Paris photos reach up to express agreement. Surely Albert Goldbarth caught that moment in his opening poem here, “Tables,” when the pentecostal congregation, “having lost / themselves . . . gained a place in something larger / than their selves.” I would love to hear Goldbarth spar wits with Colbert, not to assess, as with a political debate, a winner, but to enjoy the brightness of their retorts, the prairie-wide windows of their humor. Let us call this edition of *New Letters* a collection of strong minds and wills applied to the celebration of life, all of it. If dear, red-haired Ketchup can aspire to a life, as she told Colbert, “where my comfort and happiness are not born of the suffering of others,” maybe even that naive, misguided, foolish, renegade of a girl can show some of us a way to *live lives as gentle as we can*.

—Robert Stewart