

# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Poems from the Occupy Movement

Preface by Pam Annas



PHOTO BY DANA BLANCHARD

**F**rom the beginning of the Occupy Movement, poetry has occupied a major supporting role. Both the New York and Boston encampments immediately set up a library tent, and poetry readings were a regular part of the camp's activities. I took the T to Dewey Square in Boston in October 2011 to participate in one of the camp's weekly poetry readings. It was raining. The tents stood shoulder to shoulder, blue and dripping with water, crowded onto an island in Boston's financial district. A 10 foot tall wooden statue of Gandhi on wheels gazed peacefully over the camp. I stood there looking up at him backgrounded by the black glass of a skyscraper housing a bank and talked with a white bearded Vietnam vet who said his back would not take living in the camp, but he came down every day to be part of Occupy, which he had been waiting for, for almost 40 years. There were about 15 of us reading that day outside in the rain, the camp bordered on all four sides by busy streets, busses, trucks, and car sirens and horns. We had a speaker system which kept shorting out from water dripping on it; one of our number periodically banged on the microphone to make it work as we took turns, water dripping off our hoods onto our poems turning into pulp in our hands. Sounds soggy, but in fact it was incredibly exciting. Politically, communally, and poetically.

The selections in this offering of poetry from the U.S. Occupy Movement come from the hundreds of poems written, read, submitted and collected during 2011 and 2012 on various websites and blogs, and in one print anthology so far. These poems were chosen to represent the scope of the Movement across the United States; to capture the look, sound, and spirit of various Occupy sites; to raise political issues central to Occupy protesters and their supporters; to showcase a range of excellent political poetry specific to a contemporary progressive movement; and to provide accessible, vivid, and well-crafted poems for use in middle school, secondary school and college curriculum on the Occupy Movement.\*

The poems here are mostly in free verse, though prose poems, haiku, found poetry and a duet with a rock and roll ballad are included—"After 99 weeks not working, dude, you'll never, no never go back." I did run across a tanka, a villanelle, a pantoum, a sestina, a sonnet or two, and a lot of slam/performance poetry. Play with the meanings, associations, and synonyms of the word "occupy" is irresistible. Provocative lists of grievances, bills of rights and declarations of independence from the abuses of monopoly capitalism are here, as well as powerful images of community and celebration. The people

rolled in wheelchairs, walked with walkers, rode in buses  
or ran with breathless abandon, carrying signs and banners,  
dancing to music and speeches,  
marching to whatever drummer they chose

or, more metaphorically, are "rag-tag surgeons of man's greed and waste" or crows noisy, ungovernable, who "like to nurse their/grudges and pass along your name." The camps: "boxes of carrots, battered apples, scribbled-on cardboard—/inscriptions like unloaded pistols, peace being swordless." The bullying 1%: "I mean who else lunch money would they steal and be able to get away with it." Occupy clearly caught the poetic as well as the political imagination of the country. The ghosts of Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman, each an expert on occupation, hover over the camps.

We hope you will enjoy these poems and find them useful in your classrooms, and that you will check out the hundreds more on line and in print.

### \*Sources for more Occupy poetry:

- The first print Occupy anthology, *Liberty's Vigil, the Occupy Anthology*, eds. Karla Linn Merrifield and Dain Wilder ([www.foothillspublishing.com](http://www.foothillspublishing.com))
- A print anthology in production, *Occupy SF: Poems from the Movement*, eds., Virginia Barrett and Bobby Coleman ([www.studioaraswati.com/occupy.html](http://www.studioaraswati.com/occupy.html))
- Poems from Occupy Wall Street ([peopleslibrary.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/occupypoems1.pdf](http://peopleslibrary.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/occupypoems1.pdf))
- 99 poems for the 99% anthology (<http://99poemsfor99percent.blogspot.com/2012/01>)

## Strike Day in Oakland\*

Joan Annsfire

A human tide of people swept into the port.  
We moved as one, wound up and over the bridge and came down,  
came out, came across, danced and chanted;  
like straw spun into gold, anger and pain transformed into victory  
that moment, that day, that army of the 99 percent.

In the silhouette of sunset,  
under the dark outline of cranes and containers,  
dwarfed by the massive equipment of the shipping industry,  
individual drops of water ran together as a mighty flood,  
heavy and purposeful grains of sand whipped into a swirling storm,  
becoming more than enough to clog towering structures of steel.

Self-proclaimed welfare queens, poets and rappers, old and young,  
rolled in wheelchairs, walked with walkers, rode in buses  
or ran with breathless abandon, carrying signs and banners,  
dancing to music and speeches,  
marching to whatever drummer they chose.

All declared, we are here, this is really happening,  
today reality is not virtual but actual,  
something being born, something growing,  
something new, something more.

The water lapped at the ships in port,  
the cranes bore silent witness, the sky went dark,  
the air stayed warm,  
the songs went on.

\*Joan Annsfire writes that the Occupy Oakland Strike of November 2, 2011, successfully shut down the Port of Oakland. 15,000 – 35,000 people came up and over the freeway overpass to the port at sunset.

"Occupy Your Mind"  
(Signs seen at Occupy SF, October 2011)  
Christopher Bernard

I Love the Smell of Nasdaq Burning in the Morning  
HONK! 4 REVOLUTION

Put Wall Street in the Stocks  
Hey 1%! I'm Learning to Share—How About You?  
No Billionaire Left Behind

Bank ROBBER of America  
(What Would Jesus Tax?)

Income Inequality: 45 Egypt, 81 China, 93 USA  
*The 99% Too Big to Fail*

(Take Back "US" in the USA)

.....The flutter of a.....Wall Street CEO's whim.....can ultimately  
cause a.....DISASTER.....all around the World!!!

THE WORLD WILL KNOW FREEDOM

Dissent is the Highest Form of Patriotism - Howard Zinn  
End Corporate Personhood!

(Attorneys Support the Occupation Too)

AND PEACE ONLY WHEN

Glenn Beck Can Occupy His Balls in My Mouth

The Deck is Stacked Against Us!!

Stop Off \$horing Our Jobs!!!

THE POWER OF LOVE

HONK If You're the 99%  
*The Buck Suckers Stop Here*  
**Student Loan Debt Is My Original Sin**

OVERCOMES THE LOVE

99 > 1

The Rest of US Taking Our Country Back

OF POWER

Be the CHANGE You Want to See in the World  
Be the CHANGE You Want to See in the World  
Be the CHANGE You Want to See in the World  
Be the CHANGE You Want to See in the World

## Wall Street Occupied

Peter Neil Carroll

Sprawled on damp concrete, the teachers scribble red-ink comments down the weary margins of homework, give praise or encouragement, a checkmark, the letter grade that causes a student's stomach to sink or swim, working on weekends in topsy-turvy times, to plead for their jobs.

From Jersey City, Brooklyn, the Bronx, street smart, accredited, saying 1984 IS NOT AN INSTRUCTIONAL MANUAL, they are fighting City Hall and the Governors in Trenton and Albany, vice-principals in charge of bondage and discipline, budget-cutters who believe number two pencils are the wave of the future.

This is Wall Street occupied by maniacs who haven't abandoned hope for the young, the gray-headed high school algebra expert reassigned by a clever administrator to teach pre-kindergarten classes so maybe she'll feel so demeaned or bitter she'll surrender and quit and be replaced by a less adroit but cheaper version so the dollar saved is a dollar unearned; only the students notice the difference.

A scraggily, black-bearded man is singing an anthem of hope while holding a sign written on a scrap of cardboard torn off a box:

BANK OF AMERICA  
MAKING AMERICA  
HOMELESS ONE CHILD  
AT A TIME

Someone starts drumming a bongo, a familiar tune rises, yes, and a hundred voices lift the melody softly, humming through the unsingable parts of the lyrical war cry to the land of the free—repeat, land of the free—FREE, FREE! Even patrolman Miele, armed with pistol, whistle, black baton, who tells me his worries that the young will run amok through Liberty Square, reveals a personal, tentative smile at the outlaws who terrify politicians with our national anthem.

Amidst soiled clothing, scruffy hair, no whiff of alcohol, tobacco,  
no drift of weed yields that stupefying buzz of the old-time protests,  
no distractions, no drama descends beyond the sheer reality of hope.  
Wall Street, home of America's fictional corporate individual  
claiming constitutional rights to buy politics, is no random target.  
*The only words these corporations know*, reports Occupied Wall Street  
Journal, *is more*. Reversing Jefferson's self-evident truths, life liberty  
pursuit of happiness, a woman's placard announces  
I AM A HUMAN BEING NOT A COMMODITY.  
*They are disemboweling every last social service funded  
by the taxpayers... IGNORE ME/GO SHOPPING/  
GREED KILLS...because they want that money themselves.*

Ghosts of the Great Depression—gray men grimacing  
on soup lines, apple sellers on city street corners,  
Dorothea Lange's Okie mother, bread winners no longer  
bringing home the bacon, forfeiting the love of their wives,  
young women hoisting skirts over their knees for a nickel.  
Not here, not now, not despairing, not yet, but hopeful,  
extravagantly expectant—naïve, I hear the cynics chant,  
foolish, idealistic, child-like dreamers—all true, of course.  
They sing, coming at last to the climax, home of the brave.

## EVEN HERE

Billy Clem

Yes, even here, nowhere in the midwest, acres and acres and acres from any place plausible, where corn, soybean, and wildflowers compete for the sun's surgical light; where barbed-wire was birthed to repair slavery, share cropping, prisons, gated communities; where bookstores, the grocery co-op, and the art gallery go routinely unattended; where the regional clinic's few doctors refuse HIV patients; where a fourth-rate university has yet to teach its first-in-the-family college students, locked in the Ponzi scheme of student loans for no jobs in medicine, law, education, or communication, much of anything they need or can use, especially today, a few persons, we're talking ten-to-twelve at most, a motley crew, children of this black dirt, a few CNAs in scrubs and plastic crocks just off a double; some white suits, tellers on their half-hour lunch from the local bank; two nuns chanting *HELL NO!* and swinging rosaries like their ancestors swang flails; three dykes taking nobody's shit, one on her bike roaring it and flashing a shit-eating grin you wish your cheeks had the courage to cut, her compañeras menacing delightfully; a Vet with paraplegia for Peace, Justice, and Prosperity brave whistles, batons, some passers-by not exactly honking support, and, almost hilariously, the quickly erected barricade, a ribbon screaming **CAUTION** taped to two stop signs, some brown shirt's idea of maintaining the peace, and take the corner of First and Lincoln where a clock, installed by the town's fathers' *illegals* and *boys* not long ago, gaudy, no hourly chime, a face barely visible, records in silence this now two-month operation that the chronically anesthetized patient will never feel. He might hear of this strange occupation of his chest cavity, later in recovery, some subordinate joking it, but he won't give a damn, rolling his eyes, faking a seizure, having had surgeries greater and scarier elsewhere in his diseased body's politics. And these untrained, rag-tag surgeons of Man's greed and waste carving out truth here in the heartland will keep scrubbing themselves against such resistant bacteria; will keep scalpels in hand; will keep working that corner to heal the sick and killing. They will keep, you know, and they will not be arrested mid-procedure.



## Bread and Circuses

Alicia Hoffman

In ancient Rome, a man wanders onto winding streets, wallows in the rich scents of olive oils, red wine, roasting legs of lamb, so sensuous he almost weeps as if the fruits and meats were all he needed to nose his way into a night of entertainment and escape. He makes his way to the gladiator dome, gnaws on the half loaf of wheat bread the officials freely give him at the entrance, and though it doesn't taste that great, it satisfies in a way hand-outs always have, establishing a cooperative system of the give from the rich and the poor who take. He pushes through the throngs until he finds what he came for, there, on the arena floor, a criminally starving man bludgeons his way to a beast. No way to escape, the slave is blanketed in blood by the time the animal wins. The bull always wins. Always, in this media crowd, the man has no thoughts of his life, the troubles he faces to survive another day. In this crowd, he has no voice other than that of a fan roaring for more of the same, and when the show is over, he goes home by the light of the Italian moon, the spectacle bedazzled and bright, past the glorious coliseums and collated prisons for the poor, and he is full of nothing but an ache to sleep away the dullness of his working life until the next working day. But this is a tale of antiquity, and in the modern age there is no parallel to this sordid story. Now, we can laugh and jest at the problems of the past. Now, we cannot mistake our existences for such ossified behavior. Now the populace is content in its success and this ninety-nine percent is a false figure, a figment and a myth occupying the wrong side of our collective brain. Our freedom is obvious and it is apparent that the minority complaining are lazy and whining and crying, and though more could be said on the subject, it is so very tiring; the exhaustion and hunger just set in and we have to work tomorrow to pay our medical bills and student loans and offset mortgages and the Jersey Shore is on the television in twenty minutes, the one with the epic fight between *The Situation* and his so-called friend, and for dinner we have coupons for buy-one-get-one-limited-edition McRib.

## Notes from Occupied America (Poem #17) Karen Lillis

In Erie, Pa., a handful of the dedicated  
were committed to camping in Perry Square  
overnight through January 31<sup>st</sup>. Through snowfall,  
through freezing rain, through winds hurling across the lake,  
through differences of age and opinion. They had the support of the board of  
permits, the chief of police, twenty to thirty at regular meetings, and someone  
who'd donated the sub-arctic sleeping bags.  
The first few nights were glorious.

Then the city reneged: *Oh, coffee pots? Tarps? Supplies? New occupiers signing on? No, there'll  
be no more sleepovers.* The tarps were taken down.

Oakland and Atlanta, Phoenix and Cleveland. The officials speak of "evictions" in terms of  
crowd control, noise control, disease control, pests; a dispersing; a sweeping out; a thoughtful act  
of sanitation. The decree comes down from the mayor or the city council, goes through the local  
police, and spreads to neighboring rank and file units like a cancer.

The protesters measure their time in daily challenges and general assemblies.

Occupy Oakland said, *We meet at 6:00pm everyday until we get the Plaza back.*  
Occupy Atlanta said, *We'll camp tonight in a baseball field, tomorrow in a private park.*

Occupy Cleveland said, *We're seeking a new permit through the end of the week.*

Across the lake, Occupy Erie voted to hold the Square in three 8-hour shifts:  
*We will remain around the clock, they said. We will occupy.*  
*We will stay awake.*

## Notes from Occupied America (Poem #43)

Karen Lillis

Occupy Lubbock is asking for sweaters. Though their nights are surely warmer than Occupy Fort Collins in Colorado, their evenings are much colder than Occupy Corpus Christi, and they've noticed the food supply dwindling more quickly since temperatures dropped.

If you care to reply, Occupy Lubbock needs your wool, your hot meals, your fleece blankets, your old sleeping bags, your extra windbreakers, your leftover canvas, and as many warm bodies as you can spare.

## Elvis Occupies

*(to the tune of Heartbreak Hotel)*

Catherine McGuire

Well, since HR went and RIFF'd me, had to find a new place—it's Hell!

It's down at the end of Bankrupt Street, that old SRO hotel.

(And now you know) the payday sharks own me baby, and now they  
won't loan me, baby

They won't loan me nothing—I could cry.

Foreclosure docket's crowded, but they still can find some room.

Your mortgage paper's lost in space, but they're gonna lower the boom.

(Then you know) You're gonna be homeless, baby,  
and you will go hungry, baby;

you'll be so hungry you could die.

Your résumés keep flowing, but they don't cut you no slack.

After 99 weeks not working, dude, you'll never, no never go back.

(And furthermore) You're off unemployment baby,  
no more unemployment baby.

Just keep tight'ning that belt until you die.

If you've been through unemployment and you've got a tale to tell,  
let's grab the placards, hit the streets and tell them all "Go to Hell,"

(And you know) we won't be lonely, baby—fourteen million of us,  
baby, all chasing so few jobs, we could cry.

Beit Sahur\*  
Fred Marchant

***Occupy Boston, Dec. 9, 2011***

Black plastic garbage bags flapping away,  
the wind said to be high tonight, half the spaces  
without tents and tarps, some naked ground,  
a rain-soft dirt underfoot, the rest just the dull  
paving stones of Dewey Square, all the colors  
muted, as quiet as the few who are left, those  
who have decided to be arrested. Stacking,  
packing up the camp library, the kitchen gear,  
counting. Here in the meditation tent someone  
is just taking a nap, his legs straight out, kicking  
as if in a bad dream, perhaps, of the sheer glass  
walls I passed on my way, the higher offices,  
the brick parapets and vertical cities, the *banca*,  
the lender's tables and their shirted servants  
at the windows looking down over the police  
in lime-green dayglo vests. An artist with  
a camera project in mind is shooting the shapes  
that tents will take when the frames are pulled  
and the nylon billows like a sail in an eager wind.  
There is no fear anywhere, only the sense that this  
first part is over. In a rough-hewn wooden box  
from the Sign Tent, bundles of brown cardboard,  
and in magic marker ink, the wit of the many  
birth pains of a language about ends and means,  
packed into a wooden trough, under the chiming of  
the South Station Clock, in this Shepherds' Field,  
Beit Sahur, "place of the night watch," and manger.

\*Fred Marchant notes that "Beit Sahur" is the phonetic Arabic name for the Shepherd's Fields outside Bethlehem.

## These Are Our Weapons

Hilton Obenzinger

1.

Occupy Wall Street Occupy Dream Street Occupy the Mississippi River Occupy Rocky Mountains Occupy Jet Stream Occupy Ozone Layer Occupy Business Ethics Occupy Temple Emmanuel Occupy Saint Patricks Occupy Bank of America Occupy America Occupy Smiles Occupy Baseball Occupy Florida Occupy Texas Occupy Wonders of the Universe Occupy Deep Hearts Occupy Dawn's Early Light Occupy God Bless America Occupy This Land is My Land Occupy Song of Myself Occupy Buddha's Eye Occupy the Bright Green Light Across the Bay.

2.

Occupy the small spaces in our hearts. Dream of possibilities and wake up with them done. Occupy the hopes that deserve those dreams. Sleep with the thoughts of all the kids who learn to spell their names. Occupy the sky and the stars that memorize their names. Eat with fingers that taste possibilities. Praise the teachers who speak those names. Occupy the small spaces in our hearts as wide as the sky. That's what a new world looks like. Now that all of us are awake, it's time to dream.

3.

Imagination comes from staying in places and traveling across futures, from Wall Street to Occupy the Tundra to Occupy Madrid singing Ode to Joy to Occupy Watsonville of farmworkers and ghosts of Filipino dance halls returning to wander through the fields, occupy the past so that it sets the ground for more free wild hopes—and gratitude for all, gratitude for people standing and walking and marching, for occupying public space with shared rage and dreams, thank you to those people in Madrid waving their hands, empty palms up, chanting "These Are Our Weapons," dangerous empty hands that can build imaginations across an entire planet. Gracias.

99%

Najaya Royal

What if the sky was yellow and the sun was blue?

What if the amount of money you make

Didn't decide whether you have a home next year or not?

Impossible, right?

We are the 99% that are not rich

We are the 99% who do have to worry about bills getting paid each month

But we are also the 99% with a voice that can be heard around the world

Hear our chronicles

Even though we are frowned upon by the 1%

Though we are the reason the 1% are rich

I mean who else lunch money would they steal and be able to get away with it

We are all against bullies

So it's about time we stand up to the biggest of them all

We all came into existence together

Before money all we had was each other. So why can't we all come together?

When did green paper decide where and how we should live?

When did green paper become a barrier and separate mankind?

Why can't we all live equally? This movement is going to change the world for the better

This movement will finally make us whole

This movement will bond the not so very different classes

Easing bad dreams that foreclosure signs seem to occupy

So we occupy the voice we still maintain

Letting our chants deluge the ears of the ones

Who brought fear into our lives

We can change the world

So the coming generation won't be discouraged before they can dream

We are the 99%

Dewey Square\*  
Alice Weiss

Dome tents and blue plastic tarps smudged like a street woman's topcoat, a  
ramrod straight plain-clothes cop in a piss-colored windbreaker,

standing like debt, boxes of carrots, battered apples, scribbled on cardboard—  
people in knit hats and blankets, in clusters, arguing, praying, airing

their tents—already mildewing from last night's downpour—drums and timbales,  
a sukkah, a stage, rolls of duct tape, a T-shirted apple-eyed string quartet playing

Beethoven, a portable larger than life-size statue of Gandhi, eyeglasses down  
his nose and everything bronzed, tied by a cord to what might be a disused

aluminum light post, Indian cotton bandana tied on his shoulders—gold thread  
entwined in the red figured weave—right hand open and stretched like a tap root

or a flambeau carrier balancing a torch of kerosene-soaked fire cloth, & wrapped  
tightly around the thumb of his left hand, an off-brand Band-Aid,

as if in all of us running to hang onto his fingers we had rubbed the skin  
raw and tried to heal it with whatever stuff we had around.

\*the park where Occupy Boston settled in among gleaming financial buildings and across from the venerable old  
railroad terminal, South Station.

haiku flock  
by Mickey Z.

truth spreads in pasture

we have more to fear from the

shepherd than the wolf



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