

6 Poems By Charles Rammelkamp

Cross of Gold

“I would be presumptuous indeed,”
Willy began in that honeyed baritone,
with the effect of Antony following Brutus,
“to present myself against
the distinguished gentlemen
to whom you have listened
if this were a mere measuring of abilities.
This is not a contest between persons.
The humblest citizen in all the land,
when clad in the armor of a righteous cause,
is stronger than all the hosts of error.
I come to speak to you
in defense of a cause as holy
as the cause of liberty –
the cause of humanity.”

The crowd rose after every sentence,
moved by Bryan’s voice,
only to sit, still as penitents,
when he began a new one.

“Our Silver Democrats went forth
from victory to victory,
until they are now assembled,
not to discuss, but to enter up
the judgment already rendered
by the plain people of this country.”

The blue smoke of tobacco
hung like a shroud in the dim hall.
The delegates watched, open-mouthed,
not even smoking their cigars.

“There are two ideas of government.
There are those who believe
that if you only legislate to make
the well-to-do prosperous,
their prosperity will leak through
on those below,” he thundered,
his scorn for the rich man’s promise
wealth would trickle down like rainwater
to restore the fields of the poor
palpable as the smoky atmosphere.

“The Democratic idea, however
has been that if you legislate to make
the masses prosperous, their prosperity
will find its way up through every class
which rests upon them.”

“You come to tell us that the great cities
are in favor of the gold standard,”
he declared, invoking a vision of Sodom and Gomorrah,
“we reply that our great cities rest
upon our broad and fertile prairies.”

If this were not Jesus Christ
up on the podium,
it soon would be.

“You shall not press down
upon the brow of labor
this crown of thorns,”
he cried, raking his hands down
over his temples –
I could almost see the blood trickle.
“You shall not crucify mankind
upon a cross of gold.”
He spread his arms briefly,
a man pinned to a stake,
dropped them and left the stage.

Blood on His Hands

Less than a year after McKinley's re-election
the anarchist, Leon Czolgosz,
gunned the president down
as he shook hands with hundreds
in the reception line
at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo.
His revolver hidden under a handkerchief,
he held in his right hand,
Czolgosz plugged McKinley twice
just as the President offered his hand.

"Am I shot?" McKinley gasped,
just as bewildered as the crowd.
He slumped forward like a punched
sack of flour, gushing blood.
He died eight days later.

The yellow journals shrieked:
"If Colonel Bryan and others of his stripe
had not made so many speeches
stirring up class hatred..."

"That bastard! That God-damned bastard!"
Euclid Dunham blubbered down at Turner's.
"I bet he's *glad* this happened!
I bet Bryan's happy about it!"

Bart Metcalf just sipped his beer,
shoulders slumped, stared straight ahead,
stony-faced,
while Euclid sobbed beside him.

Tainted Money

Willy was like a terrier
tearing at the heels of the demon plutocrats.
He made headlines lambasting the ties
between corporate wealth and the academy,
all framed in his simplistic
“Good” versus Evil” rhetoric.

Of course, we were guilty at the *Sentinel*, too,
sensationalizing Willy’s moralistic tirades,
but he *was* a local boy, after all.

Rockefeller he called “an odious eminence,”
condemning a gift to the University of Nebraska
earmarked for a new building,
and when his own alma mater, Illinois College,
on the brink of financial collapse, dared
seek funds from philanthropical Andrew Carnegie,
he practically had a heart attack.
“Our college cannot serve God and Mammon,”
he wrote, swearing that by accepting the gift,
the college commended itself to “commercial highwaymen.”

“I had no sympathy
with Mr. Bryan’s doctrine of tainted money,”
the Illinois College president reminisced years later;
the gift left the college “perfectly free
to act according to conscience and principles.”
The Carnegie aid, he went on,
“saved Illinois College from extinction.”

Willy got the news in Hong Kong
that the college had accepted the dirty money,
having embarked with his family
on a trip around the world.
He cabled his resignation from the board of trustees.
“It grieves me to have my Alma Mater
converted into an ally of plutocracy.”

The Men from the Press Said We Wish You Success

“Jesus, can’t he at least close the door?”

the *Tribune* reporter muttered.

Years of hard eating and rushing about
had had their effect on Willy –
a bulging waistline, puffy cheeks;
gone the athletic build and the once-wavy black hair,
a shiny bald pate in its place.

He drank large amounts of water with his meals –
doctor’s orders – and often scuttled in a hurry to the john,
not always bothering to close the door.

“Bryan’s mellowed and sweeter,” Creelman,
the New York *Herald* reporter who’d covered
the feud between the Hatfields and McCoys
and once interviewed Sitting Bull, remarked.
No longer caricatured as the great bogeyman
stirring up class hatred and anarchism;
the press now saw him as an evangelical missionary.

“How can they be expected to despise in Bryan
what they have applauded in Roosevelt?”
an editorial in *The Nation* demanded.

Watching Willy zip up in that Omaha diner,
damp spots on his trousers, then wash his hands,
I crowded in front of the squeamish *Tribune* hack.
“Mister Bryan,” I gushed. “You’re advocating
an eight-hour workday, arbitration for labor disputes
and a national income tax?”

“And you are?” he asked, putting a moist hand on my arm.

“Jefferson Powers, *Salem Sentinel*.
I knew your daddy, Silas.”

I didn’t register in his eyes.
“Well, Mister Powell, I think those are fine ideas.
I think we should certainly consider them.”

When I'm Sixty-five

Look at us, we're wrecks.
Mary frets about my diet,
the sugars and the starches she says
are like striking a match to the kindling of diabetes.

But Mary's the one I worry about,
the dear girl wracked by pain, wheelchair-bound.
Look at me – time may have etched its signature
onto the canvas of my carcass,
my flabby belly, my pouchy cheeks,
but I'm still able to lecture,
touring the country with my messages,
“The Menace of Darwinism,” “Back to God,”
fighting the scourge of the atheists, the agnostics, the unbelievers
while she, dear girl, can't even dress herself.

And yet we've been blessed
with such a wonderful, beautiful life together!
“I love you better and better each year,”
she wrote in her birthday greeting,”
and I assured her, averring our partnership,
“Our work is not yet done.”

And so I sit beside her now,
grandchildren on my knee,
remembering her so vividly that day,
at the open house at the “Jail for Angels,”
the loveliest young woman in Jacksonville –
the loveliest girl in the whole world! –

Fool's Gold

“You have given considerable study
to the Bible, haven't you, Mr. Bryan?”
Darrow began his cross-examination
of my husband, and my heart sank.
I could see the ridicule coming a mile away.

Darrow's colleague, Arthur Hays,
pushy as New York Jews can be,
had shocked the throng of three thousand
on the lawn outside the courthouse,
where the judge had moved the proceedings,
when he announced, “The defense desires
to call Mr. Bryan as a witness.”

My poor dear William jumped to the bait,
certain his eloquence could stand up to Darrow's mocking.
Oh, the lure of defending Christianity from heathens,
glittering like false gold before his dazzled eyes!
How I remember the way he moved the crowd
at the Coliseum in Chicago with his Cross of Gold,
and how he persuaded millions of readers
with his reasoned arguments in *The Commoner*.
But he was no match for this circus master.

And then that snob Mencken nailed his coffin shut.
“He seemed like a poor clod like those around him,”
he wrote, “deluded by a childish theology,
full of an almost pathological hatred of all learning.”