Red Yarns: Poetry by a former Communist Party of Canada (Marxist-Leninist) activist

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Introduction

Throughout the best part of my twenties, 1970 to 1980, I threw myself into front-line action with the Communist Party of Canada (Marxist-Leninist) in Alberta and Ontario. Although I wasn't a CPC (M-L) member, my life in those years was never my own. I was bound to the Party. My devotion to the Party and to the broader idea of working-class revolution put me on an unconventional trajectory. For more than a year, before it became clear that what talents I possessed were not up to the standards needed to be part of the proletariat, I laboured in a variety of factory jobs, mostly in Hamilton. There and in Kitchener, I joined workers in a steel mill and a steel fabricating shop, in a glass bottle foundry, in a furniture and then a plastics factory. Even a few ghastly weeks in a Burns meat processing plant.

I was dedicated, but far from the most competent guy on the shop floor. In fact, I still marvel at some of the stupid things I did. Yet I'm doubly shocked by recalling the insanity of the tasks I was told to do. Sometime during that year, I concluded that I could not stomach the prospect of 40 more years of it. The tedium of eight hours spent cutting rolls of chain-link fence as they spun off a welding machine, the danger of stacking a flatbed truck with loads of rebar at five in the morning knowing that one slip could kill me, the impossibility of washing away the reek of melted plastic that clung to me after a shift beside an extruding machine—they all gave me nothing but admiration for the folks who persevered there. Even though it labelled me a traitor to the class I was supposed to aspire to, I called a halt to my sojourn among the proletariat. I set aside my checkered Mack shirt and steel-toed boots for special occasions, such as demonstrations, and I returned to academia. For four years, while ostensibly engaged in a Master's degree in history at the University of Waterloo, I was editor of *The Chevron*. The move did not mean leaving the firing line. In the late 1970s, that paper gained national attention, even notoriety, as the one Canadian student newspaper to adhere to CPC(M-L)'s line on the student press. Our political campaigns included fighting a nine-month struggle for reinstatement after the student executive arbitrarily closed the paper.

In a fit of cultural experimentation that came while I laboured among the working class, the Party urged comrades to make poetry, write stories, become cultural as well as physical workers. The one enduring outcome of that baffling appeal

became *Gold Earrings: Selected Poetry*, written by Party activist Sharon Stevenson. The toll on her of writing poetry within such a rigid faction we can only guess, as she took her own life. Not up to her standard, yet also not up to yielding before it, I fashioned these dozen attempts at what I imagined to be revolutionary working-class poetry. As so often happened, the Party soon moved on to other urgent diversions. On my own, I kept writing, but I never did get a verdict on whether my work met the Party's standards for working class art. Surveying them now, I see a glow of naivete and a forced optimism that reflected CPC(M-L)'s notions about the inevitability and imminence of revolution. Yet the poems also speak to the fervour of a youth who found himself a participant in a world-historical revolutionary moment. That moment is now past, but it retains an indisputable resonance.

Growing up in Calgary, I had limited political experience before I encountered the Internationalists, as CPC(M-L) was called from 1963 to 1970. We the dissident minority at the University of Calgary would have identified ourselves as New Left, in part because we knew no other left. Almost none of us had the slightest acquaintance with the Marxist classics. We made do with what we took to be revolutionary writing–Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice,* Abbie Hoffman's *Steal This Book*, and Theodore Roszak's *The Making of a Counter Culture*. Given the important place that China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution took in the world beginning in 1966, small wonder that when we did begin to venture beyond the standard New Left bookshelf we read Mao Zedong. Some of it was quasi-Marxist at best, but Mao's simple, folkloric-style parables were able to inspire some of us to dream of a popular revolution that would reach beyond our fellow long-hairs, who were pretty thin on the ground in Calgary. One of my early poems with a political tone contemplated the gauntlet that Mao threw down before would-be revolutionaries.

On Mao Tse-tung's Call to Action
The west wind scatters leaves over Changan,
And the arrows are flying, twanging.
So many deeds cry out to be done,
And always urgently...
Mao, "Second Reply to Comrade Kuo Mo-Jo," 1963

"So many deeds cry out to be done."
And can I
do no more
than hear?

I threaten—
when the factoried boxes
invade my pristine prairie hill,

then will I cry "Enough!"
and spring,
turn traitor on this glutted silence.

When decrees steal these,
my secret whisperings;
when polished leather,
boots and belts and
holstered authority
march to make arrests,
then will I take to my feet,
then will my fingers fist.

Over the hill,
iron heels score the earth,
there is battle.
A northern cloud glows red!

"So many deeds cry out to be done!"
And am I deaf?

Calgary, AB
October 4, 1972

An inveterate newspaper reader from early childhood, I was sometimes moved by articles in the conservative *Calgary Herald* to investigate just how closely—or distantly—announced business schemes corresponded with actual projects. This one was particularly bizarre.

The Rich Carve a Vault in the Rockies
All the monuments of a Rockefeller
would not survive one gust
of the air freshet
that daily inundates with spring
these Rockies.
Rommel, Patton, MacArthur
would fall on these mean rocks,
stumble before these unassuming fortifications.

Now profit,
born to conquest,
carves these stones to its will,

levels a tree line,
gouges a cavity
to build an age-defying vault.

Observed from afar,
the incipient Methuselah
exudes permanence.

Close examination
reveals
a hole
just grand enough to accommodate
one of Ozymandias' columnar legs.

Exshaw, AB
May 15, 1971

Moving to Hamilton in the fall of 1974 and throwing myself into industrial work at Burlington Steel fundamentally transformed my environment and attuned me not just to workers' real lives, but also to writers who invoked the experience of common folk. I kept a paperback copy of *A Tale of Two Cities* handy for the times when I could grab a quiet moment in the toilet or find a niche away from the foreman's scrutiny. In this poem, I tried to imagine Robbie Burns in a twentieth century steel plant.

Steelworkers' Chorus
O it's a heart-movin' sight
to see the sun shine bright
on the piles of rustin' scrap
at Hamilton Steel

With daylight playin' tag
on the mounds of glowin' slag
it's a sight that trumps the Alps
at Hamilton Steel

And Old Faithful's just a joke
nex' the plumes of bitin' smoke
from the furnaces of hell
at Hamilton Steel

At all hours, without end

modern gladiators descend
into the forum of production
at Hamilton Steel

Like those slaves of ancient Rome
we won't all depart for home
with bodies spared the wrath
of Hamilton Steel

For while Rome has had its day
smug patricians still hold sway
over plebs who sweat and die
at Hamilton Steel

But we'll soon demand our due
and give the thumbs-down cue
to each squealin' bloated boss
at Hamilton Steel

Then on our steel will stand
a free and socialist land
and forward turn the wheel
at Hamilton Steel!

Hamilton, ON
December, 1974

A wildcat strike is one of the most volatile moments in the working lives of union folk. A spontaneous eruption, sometimes by a minority of the plant crew, it issues a challenge to everyone. Raw outrage about working conditions is a visceral slap to the company, which demands an immediate halt to the embarrassment. Since there's a contract between the company and the union, bosses insist that union executives step up to enforce the contract's ban on strikes. Union officers, sympathetic as they might be with the action, are pushed to redirect workers' rage into the exhausting grievance process. And the explosion of activism is at least implicitly a complaint that union executives are nothing but bureaucrats, pork-choppers more concerned for their own desk jobs than for the rank and file. For fellow workers, the sight of an unexpected picket line poses a dilemma. In a big shop, the folks on the line might be strangers, but working-class solidarity nonetheless insists on respect for their picket line, which regrettably comes with a loss of a shift's pay. And the illegal shut-down of a major workplace inevitably brings cops out in force.

To live below the Mountain in Hamilton means being on intimate terms

with a colossal mechanical beast. Its rumblings and rancid breath are integral to people's daily lives; it invades everyone's waking and sleeping hours. An interruption in routine puts the city on alert. When 800 men refuse to work a night shift, Hamilton's heart beats erratically, troubled by the disturbance.

We'd known for weeks that anger was brewing among the guys at the coke ovens at the Stelco Hilton Works. It was the proverbial special place in the hell–infernally hot, pestilential, a route to early cancer. Several of our comrades, including two of my housemates, worked at Stelco. Living literally across the street from a major industrial plant, we didn't need any notice about the wildcat strike. The city breathed more quickly near eleven on the night of January 3, 1975, when the coke oven boys—young guys whose slight physique defied the stereotype of steelworkers—set up a spontaneous picket line as shift-change approached.

A knot of them threw up a human barrier at the Wilcox Street gate. Some had hastily-lettered signs—"On Strike Until Our Brothers Are Rehired!"—but shouts were the main way they tried to communicate with their fellows. "Don't cross the line!" "Aren't you union?" In the darkness, the confusion and tension were intense, made worse by the arrival of three vans of cops. At first polite, the cops soon created more trouble by trying to clear a lane for the men who decided to cross. That failed. The street was soon jammed tight with cars and men. The sympathies of several hundred men hung uncertainly. Talk of another entrance being opened sent a squad of strikers there, and we heard that police hauled some of them away. In an hour, the issue was decided. Most workers respected the picket line.

Production was disrupted for 24 hours. When the coke ovens cool, there's no getting them back into production quickly. Stelco was reported to have taken a one million dollar hit. But the strike did little to alleviate the misery of the coke oven guys. I translated the intensity of the moment into this small poem.

Wildcat Strike
I am brave because,
weaned on passivity,
abhorring sharp words,
counselled in the refuge
of solitary tears,
in the modest virtue
of deference,
a feather of flesh
in a mechanical gale,
I challenge the foreman,
demand my due.

We are brave when,
to cops who shove,

demand
"Let 'em through!"
we inquire
"Let our line be passed?"
Then give our tongues their cue.
"Hell no!"

We hold firm when,
as we knew,
the time comes
for
the ride downtown
the ride downtown
the ride downtown.
Wrenched from our arms,
courage congeals
in our agate eyes
flashing sparks
to comrades bound
in the patrol van's
deep night.

By this they have not won.
They've torn
not breached
our line.

Hamilton, ON
January, 1975

One of the purest days of joy in my working life was the cool morning I walked exhausted from the factory after a night shift, knowing that I would not have to punch in again for some time. The plant was strike-bound and would remain so long enough that I never did go back into that dreary hole.

Strikesong
We'll have no need
of a messenger
to call us
from the plant.

On that dawn

when sunlight
beams through
blast furnace towers,
brilliance unmarred by
open-hearth fumes;
when that solar blade stabs
untarnished
through streets
crying for our
night shift quota of steel—
that,
that will be
the morning of the strike.

He'll have no need
of a headline
spelling out the news
that our toil without end
ends now.
When the shop floor
falls unaccountably hushed,
machines struck dumb
by our daring;
when operators whoop,
hit stop buttons
with an exultant punch,
stride out to swell
the picket line,
the boss knows well,
he does.
That,
that will be
the morning of the strike.

Hamilton, ON
June, 1975

Moving to Hamilton severed a long-term romance that had descended into betrayal and recrimination, even as it retained a powerful emotional hold on both of us. In this poem, I struggled with the dilemma of how my emotional loss meshed with the revolution I imagined myself engaged in.

Signs
Words between them having withered,
his final long-distance communication
was a collection of shards
from their once and changing lives:
A maple leaf
sparked to scarlet outrage
by the approach of frost;
an acorn overlooked by squirrels
in their flurry of winter preparation;
a filigree medallion of steel—
a spent, once-fiery bullet
scraped from the foundry floor.

And a simple farewell.

Autumn is pregnant,
the earth astir.
We spring into the season of swift march,
retributive strike,
long-smouldering revolt.
Prepare the day
when
work-chafed
wind-burned
salt-sea-stung hands
span the continent between us
and clasp in Great October greetings!

Kitchener, ON
September, 1975

My brief moment as a mediocre high-school basketball player was the only time I indulged in superstition. I paid special attention to folding my uniform precisely, believing that repeating the same process would be a good omen for the next game. Perhaps the intensity of my plunge into political action with CPC (M-L) brought another—albeit minor—form of magical thinking. From time to time, I saw special portents in natural phenomena. In this case, a brooding moonrise turned my thoughts to the imminence of revolution. Perhaps that's implicit to a poetic outlook. William Wordsworth, famously, found relief from a "pensive mood" with the remembrance of seeing "a crowd, a host, of golden daffodils." And he envisioned the French Revolution as a new morning, writing "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, But to be young was very Heaven."

Rebellion under Heaven
Rebellion in the heavens!
The lowly moon
has stormed the throne
of Mercury and Mars.
Our lunar plodder has risen,
put to flight the messenger,
the warrior,
and shouldered their neglected tasks.
Now she sneers at Olympian spats
and with frightful oaths
chronicles the epic battles
waged here, on earth.

Why else this burnished, bloody moon
commanding the night sky,
but that conflagration rages under heaven,
where arsonists and sculptors
torch the old to build anew,
applauded by the crimson moon?

Kitchener, ON
May, 1977

In the tumultuous Long Sixties, CPC (M-L) activists distinguished themselves as gritty street fightin' men, and Party women were more than their equals. Still not much more than kids, they threw themselves into a maelstrom. Not since the 1930s had Canadian cops bashed heads with greater glee in a bid to drive political and countercultural dissidents from the streets. Militants with the Party stood their ground and they paid the price. By the early 1970s, comrades often spoke of the "2000 arrests" of Party activists over the course of the raucous previous half decade.

I added my mark to the statistics, arrested twice on the typical concocted charges—causing a disturbance by impeding pedestrians and assaulting police. In each case I beat the charge in court. But the process was a challenge and a revelation to a Calgary boy from a conventional household. At my first trial, my mother showed up and tearfully begged me to keep silent as a comrade who was charged with me denounced the judge and was dragged from the court and thumped by half a dozen cops in a corridor between the courtrooms. What I saw in the jails and courts was in fact the front lines of a class war. To my chagrin, only one of the two armies arrayed there appeared to have a steely consciousness about its role.

For many comrades, arrest was not the end of it. They took the battle fur-

ther, correctly denouncing the charges as political harassment. They refused to bow to judges or show respect for a process that was undisguised repression. Cops and judges treated this effrontery as intolerable and meted out official and unofficial punishment. Fists, boots, contempt of court terms, and extended incarceration for psychiatric assessments, all were used. And, as in the case of CPC (M-L) activist Jim Nugent, the subject of this poem, solitary confinement.

To a Political Prisoner
Everything in sight
they own.
Their grasping hands
and profit-rate-reciting tongues
are blights from the oceans' mineral floor
to the strategic skies, moon, planets.
Everywhere
they claim their stake,
stamp their brand,
strew their junk.

So they think it less than naught
to deprive you of sunlight and air,
for don't they monopolize
even those life-giving elements?

But keep heart, solitary prisoner
so dangerous to their stranglehold.
We have a shock for them.
See these billion fingers
flexing,
yearning for their necks?
Look to the day when we join our million fists
and hammer a yawning gap
in their prison walls
to let our sun and wind revive you.

Sun!
We have a skyful of it,
kindling sparks in every heart
that harbours hatred for their rule.
Wind!
It rises by the hour,
scouring stale tyranny

from the earth.

Of sun and wind
you'll have your share.

And from you we each take
one fibre of the might
that throws the brutes
from your cell.
One sinew of the frame of gut
that holds you taut
against the night's assault.
One note of the song
that haunts them so—
Arise ye prisoners of starvation!

Kitchener, ON
May 17, 1977

One of our most effective campaigns in Kitchener-Waterloo was a popular call to "Disband the Terrorist Tactical Squad." Influenced by intensified police methods imported from the United States and urged on by the Ontario Provincial Police, police forces in quiet cities across the province created special tactical squads in 1977. Within months, Kitchener-Waterloo's elite unit made itself notorious. A member of the squad killed a worker on his front lawn, and the squad brought the canine unit in to occupy the clubhouse of a local motorcycle club, forcing the members to kneel and promise to clear out of town, emulating the sheriffs of the American Old West. Our public meetings, leaflets, and demonstrations, combined with the cops' brutal high-handedness, led to the special unit being disbanded just a year later. Although it was temporary, the defeat was galling to the local cops. Kitchener-Waterloo is a small city and we were well known to them, leading to frequent runins. The sight of one of them jogging through the streets sent me to my typewriter.

Bronto to Be
A plodder still,
this uniformed thug in training
heaving his bulk
as if his exertions alone
could raise a bulwark against the people,
strangle their resistance,
salvage his world.
But his is a doomed vocation—

hired gun for the rich,
last of a line of mercenaries
approaching extinction.

They once ran as a herd—
tactical squad thugs in training.

Now he stumbles on alone,
a beached brontosaurus
dragging his primordial tail,
longing for the fetid carboniferous forest,
devising scheme on scheme
to return the Tsar to Petrograd,
breathe life to Third Reich ashes,
restore a rotting Shah.

Kitchener, ON
1979

Comrades were arrested so often—even the CPC(M-L) chairman, Hardial Bains, was held briefly after being picked up in a raid on the Party headquarters and four apartments in Kitchener-Waterloo in 1977—that the courts almost became our second homes. Just to intimidate us, while it existed, the tactical squad was sometimes assigned to courthouse duty, helping to reinforce the notion that we were a danger to peace and order. Sitting on unrelenting oak pews in several courtrooms gave me time to compose a small song of praise to bourgeois justice.

Our Day in Court
Imagination. Vision.
Virtues required of a judge.
For His Honor must imagine
respect
in downward eyes and wan reply.
"Yes, Your Honor."

His Honor's vision
scans the domain
arrayed beneath his oak throne,
finds habitual sinners,
unrepentant wretches.

Along the cold benches,

restive workers, youth, women, immigrants, Native people
are only just held back
from wreaking rough justice
on His Honor
by his mercenaries' steel,
leather,
lead,
and by his sycophants—
learned colleagues
reciting garbled tyranny
from fat official volumes.

His Honor
His Hirelings
imagine
seeing this prevail
without end.

Yet our day looms.

Kitchener
1979

To a great extent because of our influence, the student movement at the University of Waterloo persisted later into the 1970s and early 1980s than any other English Canadian university. In spring 1980, we were able to help mobilize student dissatisfaction enough to push the student council executive to support a fee hike strike against rising tuition. The student federation promised to use the summer to organize an action in the fall. During the summer, inevitably, with many students gone from campus, compromisers on the executive pulled the plug on the intended strike. The activism of the early days of the campaign, however, inspired this poem.

Talkin' Super Bowl Sunday Blues, and Reds
Dorm rooms void
of all but sock stench,
silent hallways
lamenting the lack of student din.

Had the Apocalypse fallen
on the innocents
in the residences
and, delighting in its capriciousness,

spared us righteous pilgrims
in a carnal world?

Our undelivered leaflets—
Fee Hike Strike!
Don't let the government impose the economic crisis on students!
Refuse to pay the tuition increase!—
turned limp
as we vainly searched for someone to engage.

Bewildered by a ghost dorm,
we found our way to the TV lounge.
Famished for a human audience,
we announced our presence
to a chorus of twenty-five bass groans,
and one perceptive jibe:
"You guys must be communists,
talking politics on Super Bowl Sunday!"

A venal Sunday sin indeed—
trying to talk politics
in the face of Super Bowl roar.

In retreat
we carried at least
that freshman-savant's
depiction of dissent
in the age of televised spectacle.

Waterloo, ON
January 20, 1980

In the fall of 1980, fed up with the conspiratorial violation of democratic process that was rife among people I thought of as my comrades and despairing of having even a modestly normal life, I opted out of active involvement with the Party. Inevitably, I was denounced and treated as a traitor to everything progressive. Although I boxed up and moved my 45-volume collection of Lenin's writing several times, the last trip, across the country, convinced me to pare down my load. By then CPC (M-L) had leached out of my daily reality and dissolved into growing insignificance.

Parting with Old Comrades
I've given away my collected works of Lenin.
Lev, who's cursed their weight
each time they're transported
or invoked,
rejoices.

The adopting librarian
strokes my hand,
promising a good home,
perhaps in Africa,
where any words on paper
hold value.

I envy their fate.
A place in the sun.
A project!

Perhaps in that climate
they'll kindle revolution.

In the failing sunlight of the autumnal West,
I contemplate my own prospects,
unencumbered by past tomes.

Vancouver, BC
September, 1983