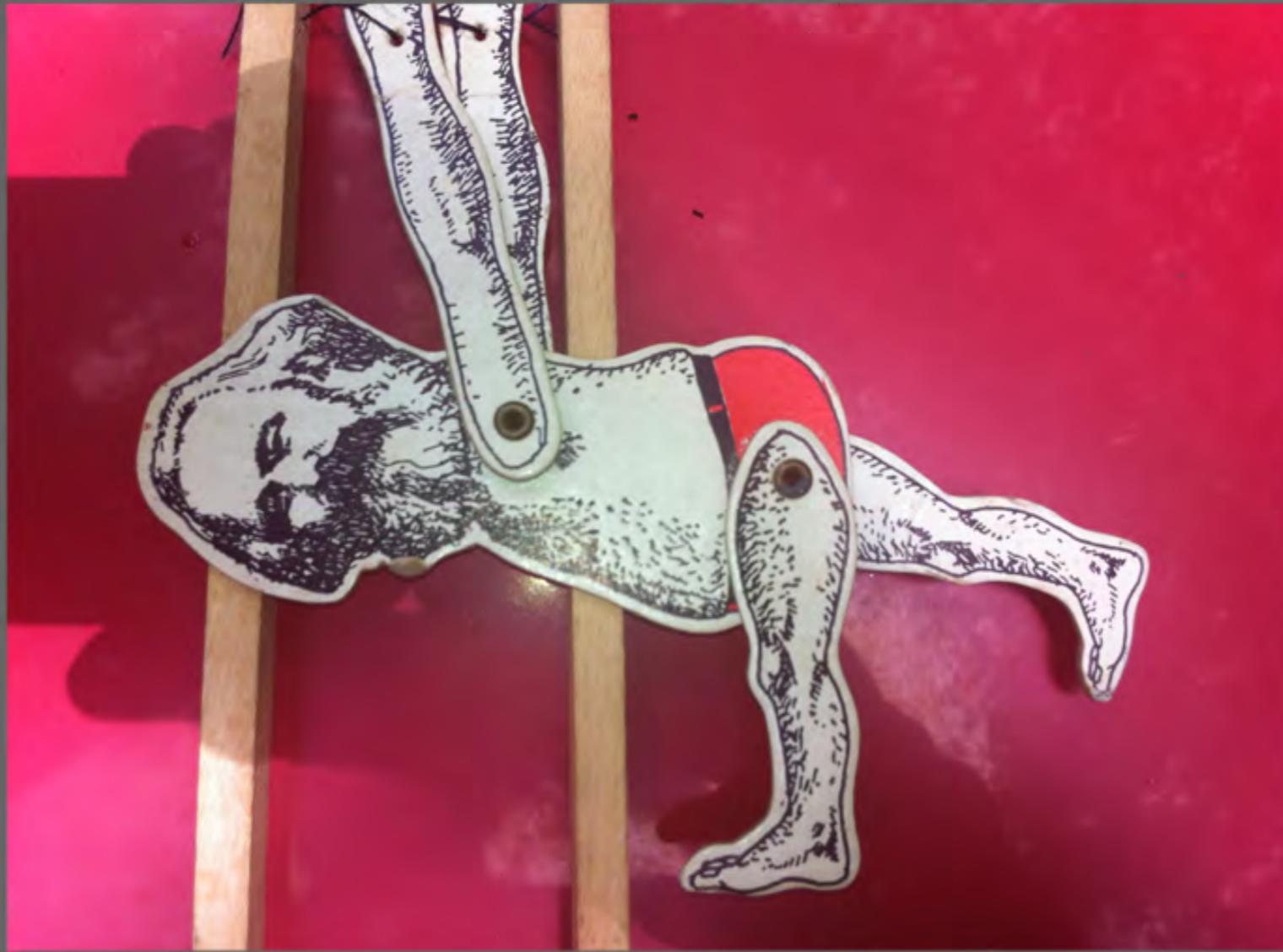
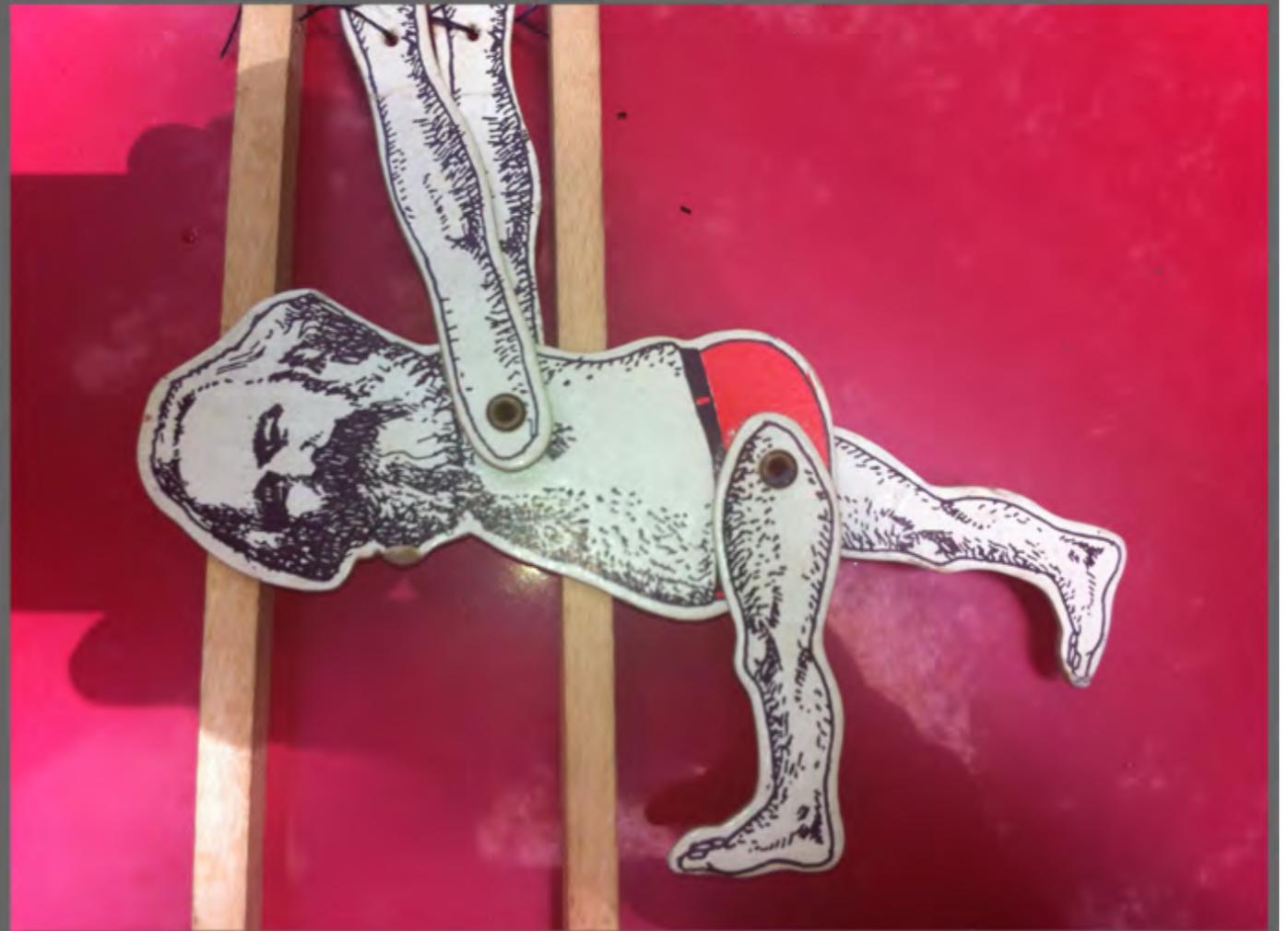


THAT CLASS THING

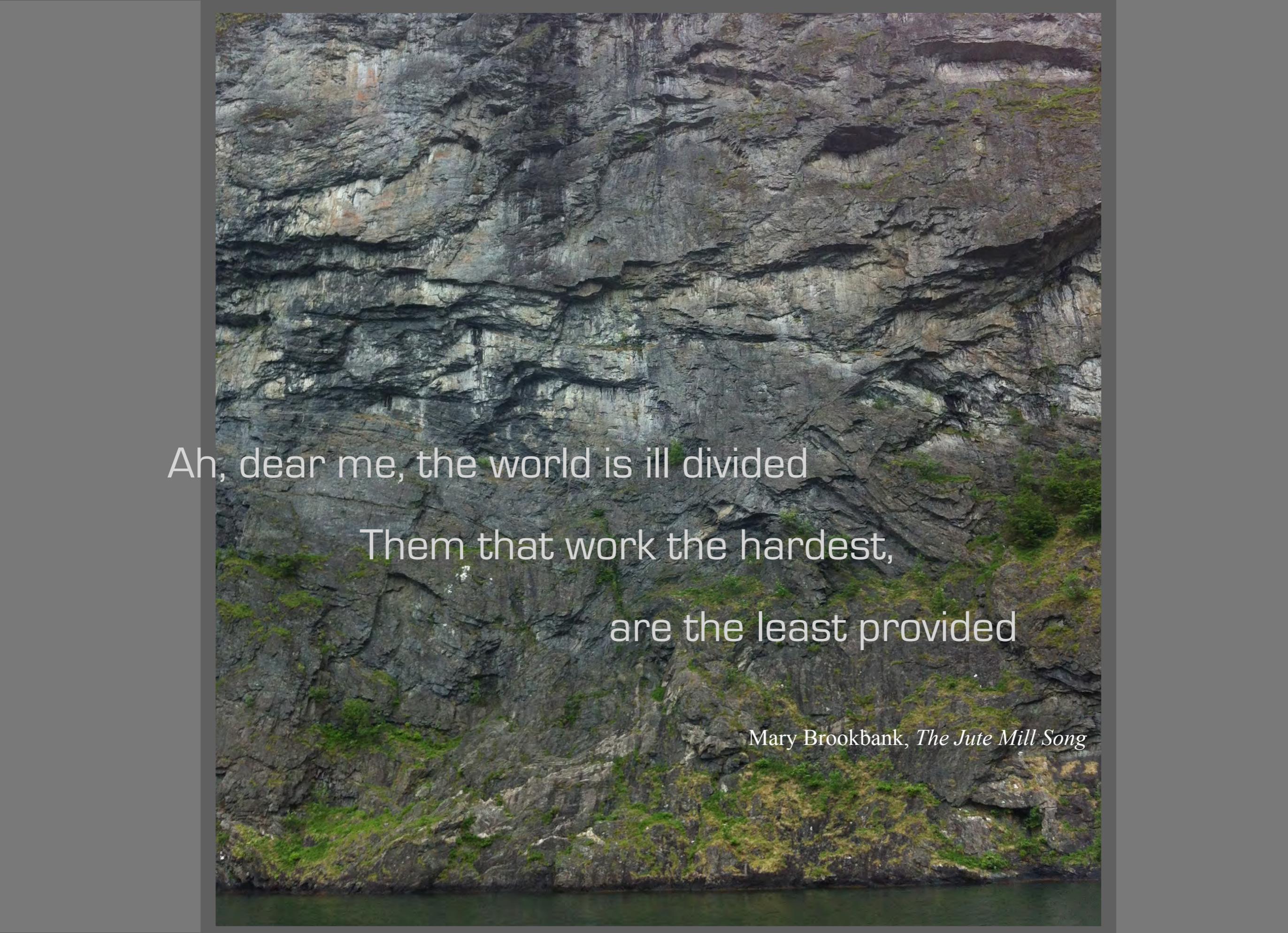


ROBIN PACIFIC

THAT CLASS THING



ROBIN PACIFIC



Ah, dear me, the world is ill divided

Them that work the hardest,
are the least provided

Mary Brookbank, *The Jute Mill Song*

FROM the moment I learned to read, books became my refuge, my delight, and my solace. Words sluiced over me, burned through me, lifted me up, and at the same time, grounded me. I read and re-read *Anne of Green Gables*, *Heidi*, *The Princess and the Goblin*. Raised in an atheist family, these were my unconscious images of God. Matthew Cuthbert dying over and over. Heidi's uncle. The beautiful, magical old woman who gives Princess Irene a ball of thread made of moonlight. Whenever she is lost, she has only to put her finger on the thread.

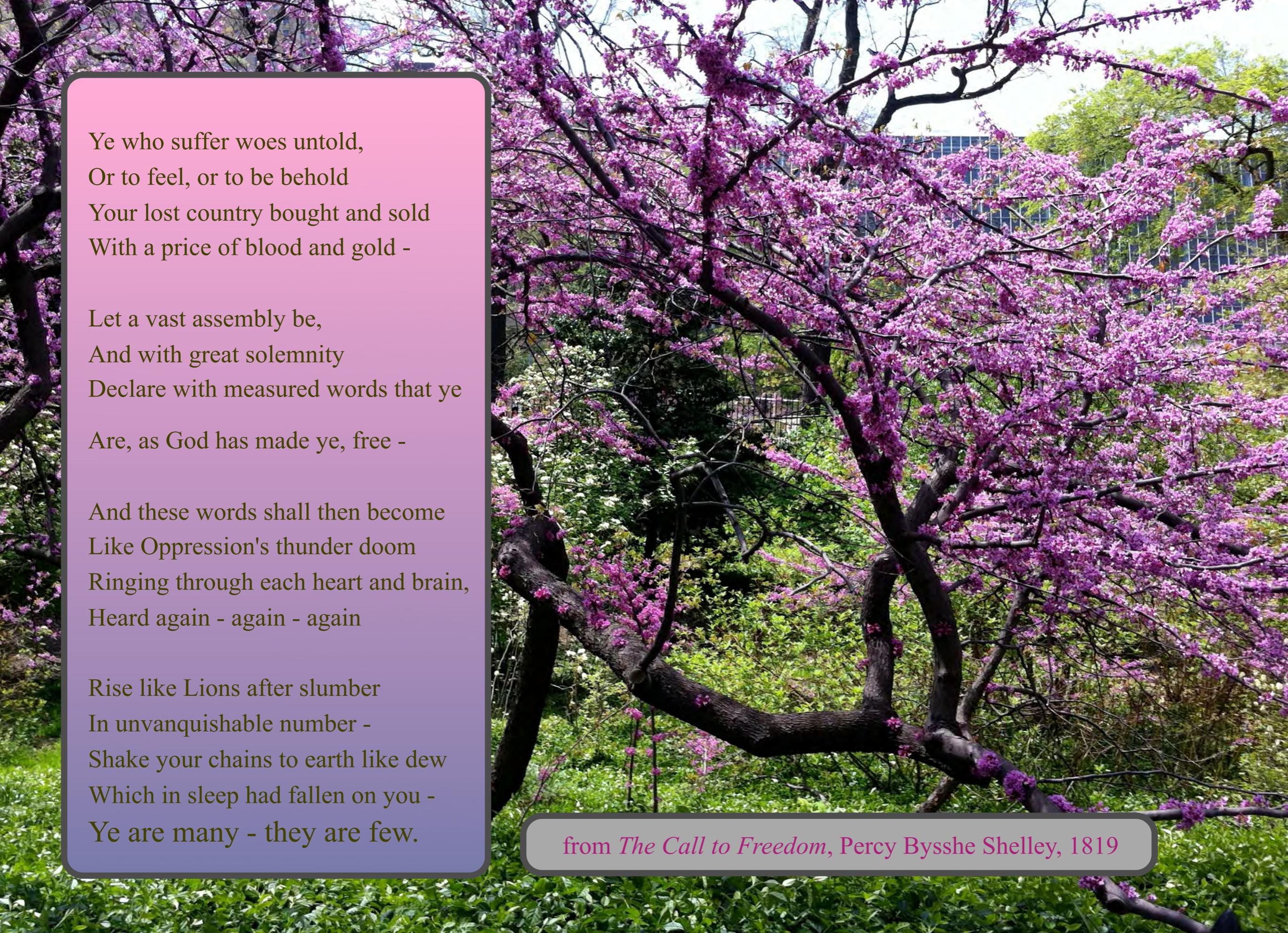
EVERYONE in my family was very smart and very funny, but the humour was always barbed. You laughed as you pulled out the shaft of the arrow. By ten I was an obnoxious little smartass, constantly being sent to the principal's office for 'talking back'. I hated being a child, I wanted to be grown up so I could understand grown up books. When I started university -- at last! freedom from the grinding tyrannies of high school -- I was so hungry for knowledge my brain felt like a crocodile. The canon of English literature was to become my rock and my redeemer.



I CONTINUED with my argumentative, obnoxious ways, continually mystified when people got offended – wasn't that just how you communicate? I raged against all injustices, personal and social, with no context, no concept of what would be productive or useful. I was like Moses killing the overseer, lashing out and only succeeding in hurting myself and others. But when the Vietnam War protests began, and when second wave feminism came sweeping across the campus, I had an outlet for all that rage. Suddenly, everyone else was mad too!

FOR the first time I felt part of something. Shaking with fear and anticipatory shame, I began to speak up at meetings. I was in a maelstrom, but none of it made any sense. I couldn't grasp the purpose of it, couldn't find the fairy godmother's magic thread. I cast aside my books of poetry, my Renaissance epics, my novels, and began to read economics, political theory, sociology. And one day I read the words: *There is a spectre haunting Europe*. A thrill went through me, a sense of shock, a sense of ecstasy. I knew, I just knew, that my life was about to change, and change profoundly. I had found The Truth, The Life and The Way – Karl Marx stripped away the surface of society and showed me its logical underpinnings. The world made sense. Yes, it was chaotic, but it was chaotic for a *reason*. The expropriation of the expropriators. Surplus value. The withering away of the state. It is the task of intellectuals not only to understand the world, but also to change it.

YES, Karl Marx was the man with the plan, and I was the woman who was going to be his disciple. I spent the next decade organizing, marching, going to meetings, making speeches and writing pamphlets. I believed, with my whole being, that if we could win enough people over to the truth, and the correct revolutionary form of action, we could create a free, democratic, socialist Canada.



Ye who suffer woes untold,
Or to feel, or to be behold
Your lost country bought and sold
With a price of blood and gold -

Let a vast assembly be,
And with great solemnity
Declare with measured words that ye
Are, as God has made ye, free -

And these words shall then become
Like Oppression's thunder doom
Ringing through each heart and brain,
Heard again - again - again

Rise like Lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number -
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you -
Ye are many - they are few.

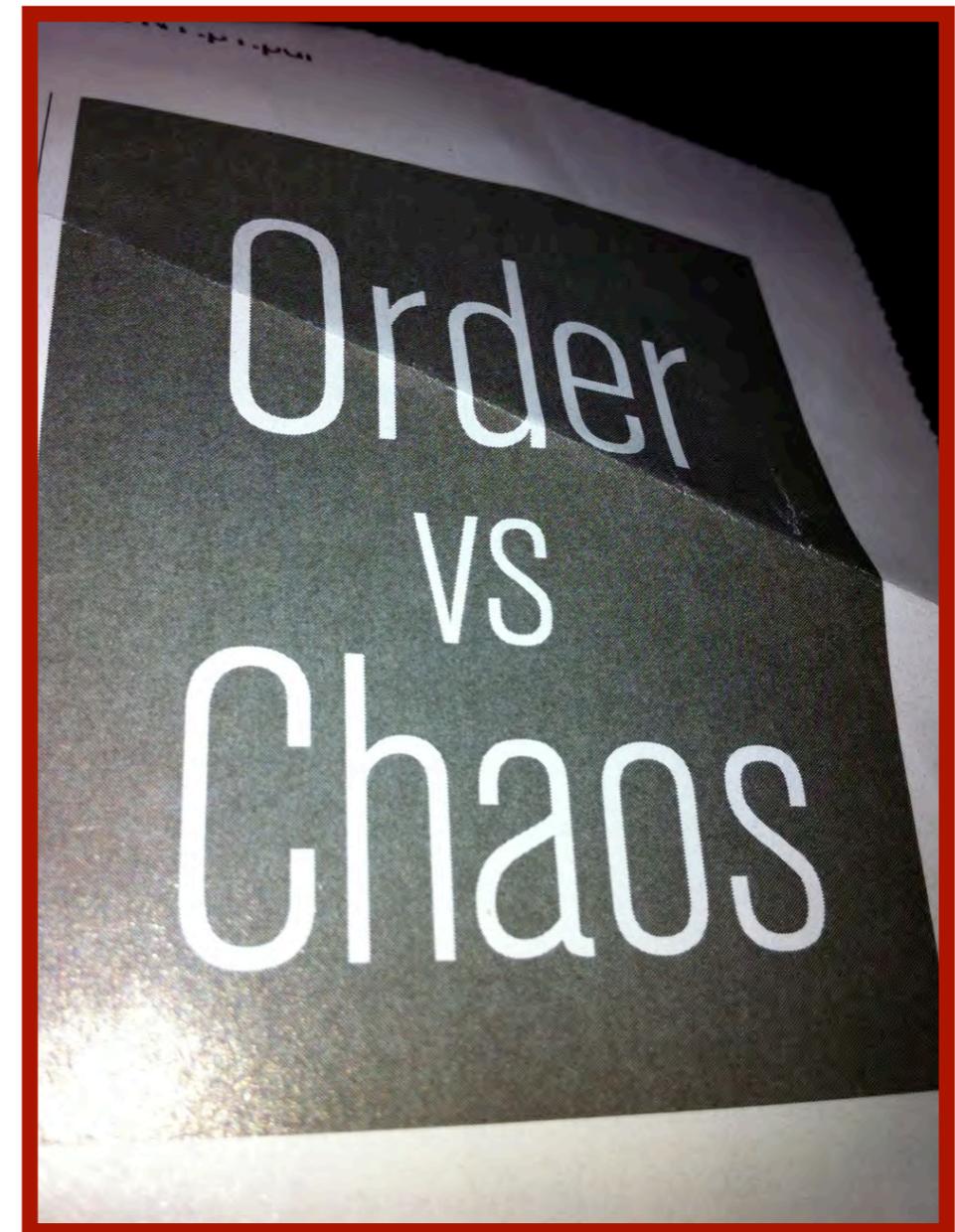
from *The Call to Freedom*, Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1819

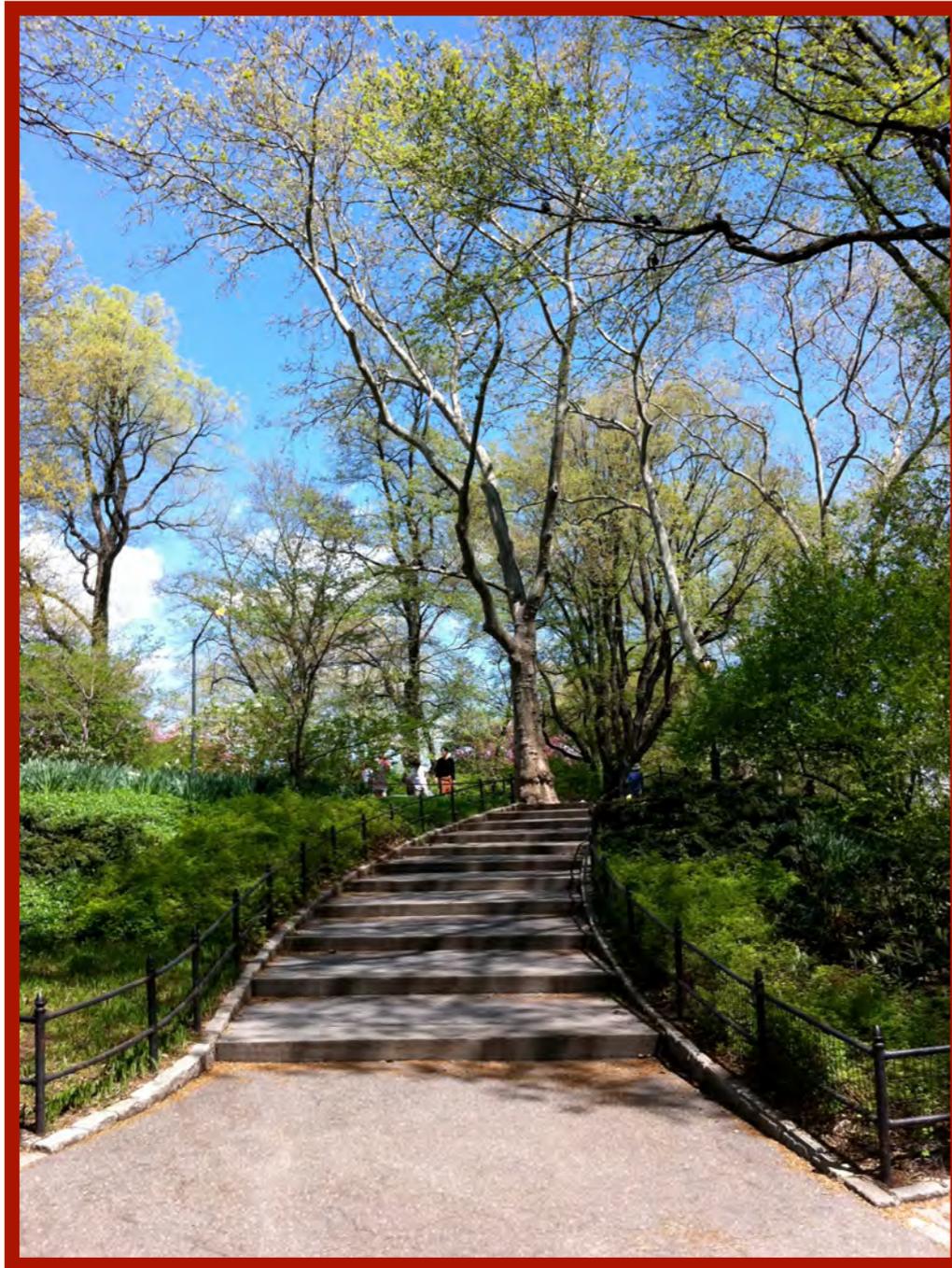
READING Marx, Engels, Mao and particularly Lenin, I soon came to believe that I wasn't going to make the revolution on my own, or even with a group of friends. I started looking around at the different left wing groups and political parties on campus. I rejected the Trotskyites – too fractious, and the New Left – too disunited.

I FLIRTED for a time with the Maoists, who called themselves the Communist Party of Canada (Marxist-Leninist), (China aligned) to distinguish themselves from the Communist Party of Canada (Soviet aligned). They had weekly lunch hour meetings and invited me to come and speak on a topic of my choice. Like a left wing sorority rushing.

I DECIDED to speak about Franz Fanon, whose books, *The Wretched of the Earth*, and *Black Face, White Mask*, were formative for me. In the middle of my talk, the Maoists rose up as one, furiously waved their little red books in the air, and denounced me, *their invited guest*. (I think it was for being bourgeois, something that I was always being criticized for throughout my sojourn with the revolution).

SO I didn't become a Maoist.





THERE was an older woman on the left scene (well, she wouldn't seem old to me now) named Phyllis Clarke, who had returned to the University of Toronto to do a PhD in political science. She had been a teaching assistant for the great Canadian historian and communications theorist, Harold Innes, in the 'forties. One day he called her into his office and told her there was no point in her getting a Ph.D., because she would never be hired. First, she was a Communist. Also, she was a Jew. But most of all, because she was a woman.

IT MUST have been such a vindication to return to graduate school twenty years later in the midst of the great foment of second wave feminism. I formed a Marxist study group and asked Phyllis if she would lead it. Her calm, steady and wise responses to my often outlandish questions impressed me, and I joined the Communist Party of Canada. ("How fifties", remarked a friend, steeped in the teachings of Harold Innes' acolyte, Marshall McLuhan, "like listening to the radio!").



**A new direction—
new policies for Canada**

**Curb monopoly!
Break U.S. control!
Put people first!**



COMMUNISTS STAND FOR

- Jobs or adequate incomes as a right for all Canadians, full employment without inflation, higher living standards.
- Equality and the right of self-determination for Canada's two nations.
- Genuine Canadian independence based on public ownership.
- A new Bill of Rights enshrined in a made-in-Canada constitution.
- An independent foreign policy of peace and peaceful coexistence.

To achieve these goals ELECT the Communist candidate in your constituency.

THE COMMUNIST ELECTION PLATFORM

Their graphics style was certainly from the fifties!

Sung to the tune of Gordon Lightfoot's "That's What You Get for Loving Me"

That's what you get for joining the CP
Thought you were gonna smash the state,
But you're too late
We're only gonna curb monopoly

EVEN though I was critical of much about the Soviet Union, I wanted to be part of an international movement. I became a member of the University of Toronto Communist Club, because here I found the smartest and wittiest people on the left – in fact, they were quite a lot like my family! I soon learned that we were on the outs with the Stalinist Party centre, (who we called “the Dogmatists”, Dogs for short) and who called us “the Revisionists”. (They weren’t smart enough to come up with a good nickname.) The Dogs denounced all feminists and “intellectuals” i.e., students, as bourgeois deviationists. Only workers could be true Communists.

ALSO, we U. of T. Clubbers dared to question, nay criticize, some of the policies of the Workers Paradise.



Pearl encrusted hammer and sickle Christmas tree ornament, made for me by one of the U. of T. Communist Club comrades.

THE U. OF T. COMMUNIST CLUB INVITES YOU.....

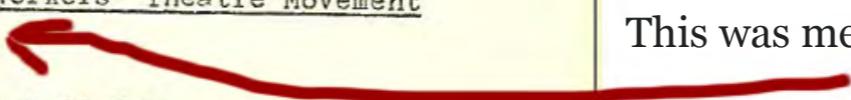
TO A SERIES OF EDUCATIONALS ON CANADIAN POLITICAL HISTORY

1. September 26: Trade Union Organizing, 1930 - 1939
Phyllis Clarke
2. October 17: The Canadian Workers' Theatre Movement
Robin Endres
3. November 14: Canada and the Cold War
Nelson Clarke
4. November 28: Communists and the Crash
William Kashtan, General Secretary, C.P.C.

FRIDAY EVENINGS AT 8 P. M.

56 ST. CLAIR AVE. W. #5

This was me, before I changed my name.



YEARS later I was at a dinner party, and one of the guests was talking about how pansies were the emblem of her college sorority, and whenever she travelled she collected pansy memorabilia for her sorority sisters. In the midst of this, our hostess said, “Well, Robin was a Communist when *she* was in graduate school!”

SO I had to defend myself to this pansy collecting woman and her husband, for fighting for workers rights, women’s rights, the rights of the Vietnamese, of people of colour, of people in the third world.



I have no regrets.

OKAY, I have one regret. Like every other group on campus, we deeply believed that our analysis, and only our analysis, was the right one. So we were always looking for signs among unaligned leftists that they were coming around to our position, and we would report this back to Club meetings. I’m appalled, now, by this evangelicism, the duplicity of it.

DID we effect any change?

ALL that marching and debating and struggling – did it serve the higher good? Did it help anyone? As chair of the York University Chile-Canadian Friendship Society, we did manage to help some faculty and students escape from the Pinochet regime, but at the time that was scarcely as important as the feud I was carrying on with the Trotskyite members of the committee.

I DO remember hosting a party at my house for some of our comrades and those Chilean Communists. For once, the dogs and the revisionists set our differences aside, and when the Chileans led us all in singing the *Internationale*, they in Spanish, we in English -- well, I did think there was something to be said for an international movement, one with a history as noble as it is ignoble.

Arise, you prisoners of starvation!

Arise, you wretched of the earth!

For justice thunders condemnation.

A better world's in birth.

No more tradition's chains shall bind us.

Arise, you slaves, no more in thrall!

The earth shall rise on new foundations.

We have been naught, we shall be all.

'Tis the final conflict;

Let each stand in his place.

The internationale

Shall be the human race.

Eugène Pottier, 1871; English lyrics by Charles H. Kerr

I GOT TIRED. I got disillusioned. I stopped being so angry. I was reading deeply the works of the jailed leader of the Italian Communist Party, Antonio Gramsci, which led me to question classical Marxism. I no longer thought it was enough to hold up placards with the answers; I wanted to explore the psychology of how people change, I wanted to understand the role of creativity in changing consciousness, and—heaven forfend!—I wanted to think about spirituality and activism. I quit the Party, and published a piece in the feminist journal *Fireweed*, called “Why I Left the Left to Write”.





I CAME to believe that making art in a community context could be instrumental in change, that people could transform themselves from passive consumers of culture to active creators of it. That this could, I hoped, lead to civic engagement. I started a community theatre company called Pelican Players. I hired young, non-professional actors, paying them with Manpower grants. After a hiatus, I helped to start Art Starts Neighbourhood Storefront Cultural Centre, working with people from diverse cultures, of all ages, in a range of artistic mediums. Twenty odd years later Art Starts is still thriving.

Terry McAuliffe, 1936-2003

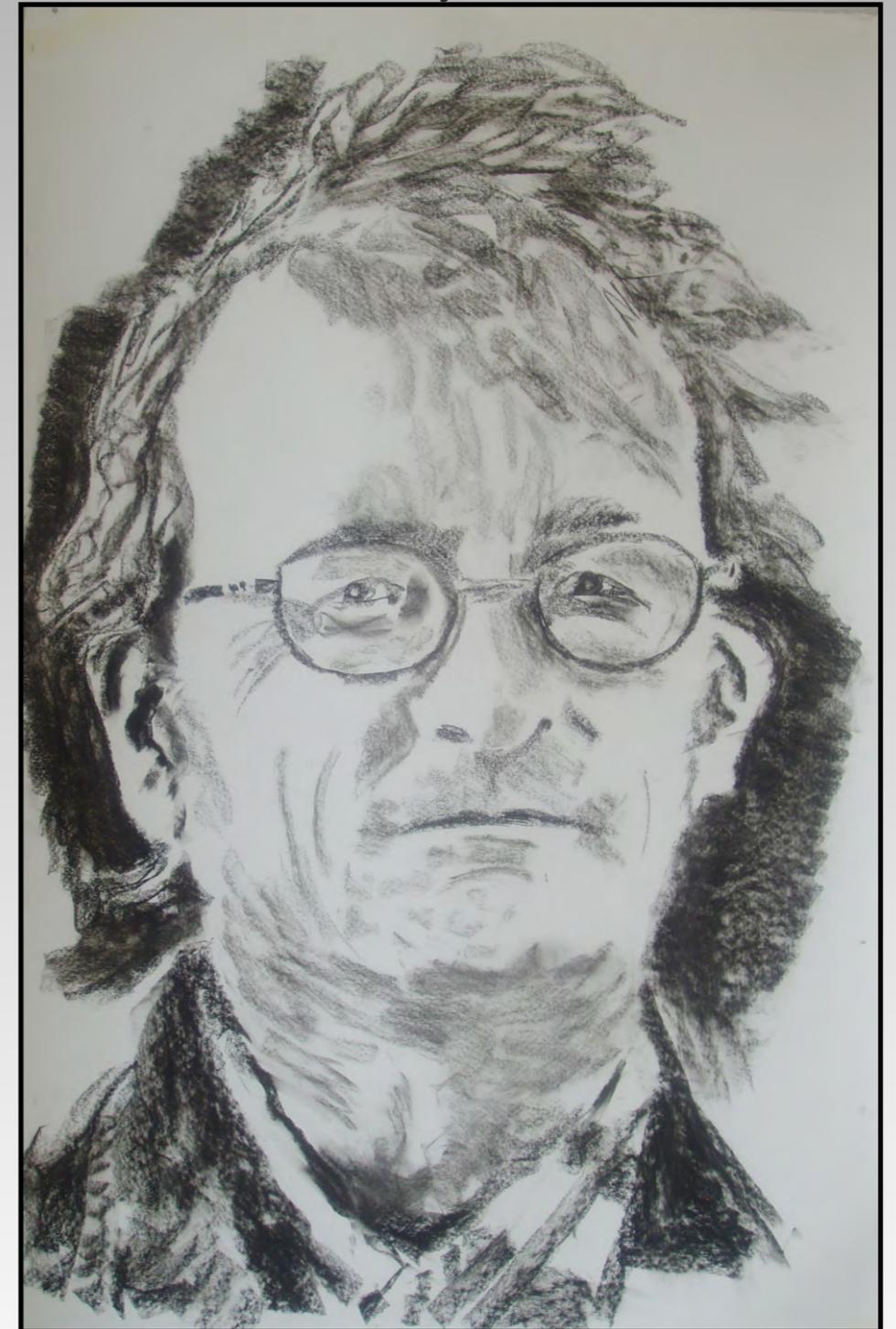
THEN my husband developed a brain tumour and died. Grief is very solipsistic. I stopped caring about the rest of the world.

The only community I was interested in was the community of mourners like me. I spent eight years making art about grief, death, loss and mourning.

I HAD a series of religious experiences and started going to church. The Anglican liturgy had the cadences of the English literature I had so loved when I first went to university.

I WENT back to school and studied theology. I met some brilliant and committed people who are working for social justice from a place of love, instead of anger.

I BEGAN to integrate creativity, spirituality, and politics.



WHEN I surfaced I realized that class divisions are not only still with us, they are much, much worse. The industrial heartland in North America has been gutted. Hundreds of thousands of jobs have been outsourced to the third world, where conditions of work are no better than the worst plight of the factory and mine workers in Victorian England.

THE DISPARITY between the haves and the have nots is growing astronomically. Apart from a few arcane enclaves in the academy, Marxism has lost all credibility. The collapse of the Soviet bloc, the race to the middle of labour parties, and the death grip of the media on any dissent, have buried any socialist ideals. Working class culture is mocked and derided.



Globe and Mail, Oct. 10, 2011

Much of reality television is about the conquerors making fun of the conquered.

ON my 65th birthday, I watched the G20 riots in downtown Toronto on television, with chagrin and remorse. Why wasn't I there protesting? Had I sold out, become the person I condemned when I was a young revolutionary? Heads were getting bashed, and I had my feet up on the sofa.

COMMUNISM!!

SOCIALISM

CAPITALISM

ONCE I believed that the world could be made a better place, by my own and others' conscious efforts. I believed that socialism would create a utopian society of equality, justice, fairness. It was a story with a beginning and an ending. I see now how it mirrors the story of Judaism, and indeed of Christianity, which has a Messiah but awaits the second coming. It's a story that believes that history is linear, a story that believes in progress.

FEUDALISM

Actually, Marx believed that history is a spiral

IRONICALLY, it was when I started actually reading the Old Testament that long simmering doubts about the notion of progress came to the surface. I was shocked at how much of the Bible is about war. People were just as bloodthirsty four thousand years ago as they are today; man's inhumanity to man is impervious to time and geography. So why bother? Why work for change?

I'm not sure I ascribe to either a linear or a circular view of history, but perhaps a parallel one. Just as injustice and brutality have always been with us, so too have acts of selflessness, of liberation, of generosity, of people acting together for justice. I take comfort in the sure knowledge that human beings in all times and places have created beauty, have fashioned poems, dances, stories, buildings and music. Somewhere between utopianism and despair, there is hope. And there is community. One can choose to exist with the forces of goodness and beauty, to try, in one's own small way, alone and with others, to build up the store of loveliness and justice in this sad and bloodthirsty world.



Jews believe that God creates an imperfect world on purpose, in order that we might co-create its perfection with him. This is called Tikkun Olam, and goes far to explain why so many early socialists and trade union organizers were Jewish. Many Jewish and Kabbalist legends speak of God creating light by breaking clay pots. The sparks which flew out became people.

The Breaking of the Vessels

Before God made the worlds
the whole universe was filled with his light.
In order to make room for creation,
he removed some of the light,
stored it in large clay pots.

But some of the earthenware broke,
shattered into fragments
by the expanding force.
The light became living souls,
but the clay fragments
were sharp and cutting,
the source of human pain.

Now only humans can collect the fragments,
put them together to repair
the broken vessels,
make the world safe
even from God's light.

Elizabeth Brewster (used with permission of Oberon Press)

O, dear me, the mill is running fast
And we poor shifters canna get nae rest
Shifting bobbins coarse and fine
They fairly make you work for your ten and nine

O, dear me, I wish this day were done
Running up and doon the Pass is nae fun
Shiftin', piecin', spinning warp, weft and twine
To feed and clothe ma bairnie offa ten and nine

O, dear me, the world is ill-divided
Them that works the hardest are the least provided
But I maun bide contented, dark days or fine
There's no much pleasure living offa ten and nine

Mary Brookbank, *The Jute Mill Song*



THE END