

POETRY / POÉSIE

Helen Armstrong, Hello Girls and Hellions

Giovanna Riccio

Set that red-gilded spring in stone,
raise a monument born out of the post-war rumble
when Winnipeg's promised spring of cherry blossoms
and fair play faded to a fool's paradise;
instead, a Red Scare rifled the breeze,
Liberty on-the-run, blood-smeared, barred,
for calling-out cabinet minsters flying cover for bigwigs
gutting worker's wallets, giving Justice the cold shoulder.

Carve, from a phantom rose of the Luxemburg variety,
Helen Armstrong, vanished from history but true,
wielding a sabre tongue that lacerated colonels
conscripting the hoi polloi for capital's war chest--
stumping, now, for one-legged heroes gimped
in shell-shocked breadlines, for the withered mother
willing her wing-torn child to fly. Right the "Famous Ten"
to a truth-telling eleven—admit that rabble rousing *Bolsheviki*
crimsoned for capsizing the unseeing lady's crooked scales.

Helming the Women's Labour League, Helen preached union;
 as the Labour Temple's ever agitating angel, she incited
 the Bread and Cake Girls to organize and match,
 blow for blow, the masters' union clout guised
 in the stock exchange, banks, and bootlicker Ministry of Justice,
 so bread, pastry and candy-makers could cook up
 a sweeter deal from the manna-hoarding Canada Bread Co.,
 and a year before that 1919 shutdown, Helen wrangled
 with politicians over women's minimum wage, wangled
 victory for Manitoba femmes, sparking the second sex
 to school themselves in the licit poetry of equality.
 The only female delegate to the Trades and Labour Council
 she claimed TLC for iron workers chained to long shifts and short-shrift
 for bone-chilled vets rattling a St. Vitus dance on park benches
 and raw-boned women nailed to the night.



A soap box pugilist, Helen punched above her weight
 boxed the ears of boom-town tycoons feeding on rickety slums.
 Aching for equal distribution of sun, rain and air,
 she ploughed a good earth sprouting loaves
 purged of Crescentwood weevils in pinstripes
 sipping estate wine behind filigreed windows and fretwork iron gates,
 their hardboiled tickers bolted against sharing the dough
 with bricklayers and welders sick of seeing each day end in the red.
 And 'round May Day, building and metal workers hit the bricks,
 looking to hammer out a living wage instead of buying
 threadbare clichés about the high cost of doing business,
 but high-life moguls dicker, offer stale fare or day-old rhetoric.

If there's clout in dollars, there's moxie in numbers,
 avers the Central Committee; coining One Big union
 as more than a pipedream, they rally a general strike

First to hearken, the Hello Girls, took the Mayday call—
 five-hundred smooth-talking switchboard operators
 bound business, bluster and *number please* class
 to silence the company's yessir, no sir mic;
 all heart, they warmed to a sympathy strike--sundered
 the power cord, unplugged the boss's reach,
 beguiled the mid-May morn with Liberty leading the people—
 grace and guts rewiring doublespeak, diverting speech.

And lickey-split, they spurred a blushing tide
 of *strikelets* quitting sweat shops, restaurants, hotels and offices,
 for shirt makers, cleaners, candy-makers, clerks
 had cause to quarrel the gender short-change,
 had reason to turf Big Daddy's life sentence of daughter,
 wife and mother condemned to pussyfoot and soft-shoe,
 shackled to manly moolah, playing second-fiddle
 to the bogus family wage.

And because women ken the gravity of daily bread
 Helen and entourage whip up the Labour Café --not
 the usual women cook and men eat, food kitchen,
 No—but one dishing out even-handed victuals
so no girl need want (and no boy either).

And when double-crossing society ladies,
 bored bourgeois daughters, or single mothers lured
 by salary hikes spurned the picket line, vexed sisters
 turned to head-on hellions; stoning retail turncoats
 skulking in busses, chasing down backstabber drivers,
 ditching their lorries and mangling shifty merchandise,
 they took up the torch of intrepid *petroleuses*
 scaring the pants off saboteurs and cops
 dispatched to quell virago fire.

Labelled Bolsheviks, anarchists, aliens,
 jailed, maligned, gagged and loved—the women of 1919, lurk
 like footnotes down at the heels, in margins of books
 ruled by men. Moonlighting in blanks between words—
 marching, struggling to feed families or mourning
 that Bloody Saturday, they rise in bread, bloom in roses--voices
 wanting vital ink—to pair in heroic couplets,
 dovetail with Winnipeg's striking epic.