

WHAT THE FUCK AM I DOING HERE?

an anti-folk opera about anarchists and the 2012 student strike in québec



What the fuck is this?

This is an anti-folk opera. So it's sort of like a rock opera...except it's folk music...except it isn't folk music, it's anti-folk. Anti-folk is sort of like folk only maybe weirder or doesn't take itself seriously or kind of makes fun of folk music or at least plays with the genre a little.

This is a work of fiction. I wrote it in the summer and fall of 2012, based on my own experiences with the strike and based on stories I'd heard and things that I'd observed or read. I'm an anglophone, a white middle class post-secondary dropout, a displaced newfie from alberta, and a queer woman, among other things. I am also an anarchist, and I talked to many anarchists while writing this, but I am certainly not attempting to speak for all anarchists.

Thanks to all those who shared the experience of the strike with me, and helped me tell this story with their brilliant ideas, their bitter cynicism, their heartbreaking hopefulness, their enthusiasm, and their great sense of humour.

- Caytee

(and thanks to Hayden for the amazing drawing!)

Opening Song

we didn't start the fire
it was always burning
ever since there have been people
trying to stomp on other people
there've been people trying to push them back

this particular struggle may find its roots
in post war france
where the radicals who fought against
the fascist occupation
went back to school and found a brand new stance

they called it "syndicalism de combat"
and they said fuck those old student federations
they collaborate with fascists and they're
nothing but reformists
serving the interests of the state

so their new student unions
built up a student movement
and together with the workers
they most famously struck in may 1968

but that struggle in france
wasn't miraculously born
maybe we can trace it back
to anarchists and communists
who fought franco in the spanish civil war

but they didn't start the fire...
(chorus)

so in quebec the youth were getting radical
in many different channels and streams
and they came together in a big bad river
and flowed out into the streets

it was the 60s, and their nation was changing
the liberals came into power
they promised free education
and a kind of liberation
from conservative traditional ways

but it wasn't enough, and by 66 they were gone
and after may 68 the students felt strong
so some kids occupied their school
kicked out administrative rule
and sparked the first student strike
quebec had seen

you might say it was successful
or at least a big deal
they won a freeze on tuition that lasted 22 years
but they didn't stop fighting
and they didn't stop lighting
torches to pass on and on

but it wasn't easy, there's always been a divide
between those who think this is
about turning the tides
and those who'd rather win a few measly concessions
from the bastards handing out the cards
of privilege or oppression

and though it's never been about
just schools and tuition
throughout history these movements
mostly failed at their mission
of uniting the students and the working class
though more than once they came together
and they made quite a splash

but they knew that they didn't start the fire...
(chorus)

but we're not the only ones holding torches
we're not the only ones who want to
burn down the fortress
all around the world there are people standing up
and fighting the fuck back

'cause it's a new age of austerity
which means cuts cuts and the fucked get fuckeder
and governments around the world
are clinging to their money
crying crisis to their people
and it isn't even funny

that the joke is on the ones
who can't afford to laugh
but they're not gonna take it
they're gonna fight back
there was a full on insurrection in greece
immigrants, workers and youth, taking to the
streets

in california in 2010
there was a mother-fucking shitstorm when
schwartzenegger raised tuition by a hell of a lot
but the students all dug in their heels
and they fought

they cried occupy everything! Demand nothing!
All over the world students are saying something
from colombia to chile to the UK
and students aren't the only ones
who think there's hell to pay

some people occupied the capitol in wisconsin
and man that arab spring it was really something
public squares were occupied by indignados in spain
and in north america "occupy" did the same

and you might say it's just
glorified political camping
but it gets harder to deny
that there is something happening
with every passing day as the stakes get raised
and the bosses and their dogs
tighten their grips on the reins

but we didn't start the fire...
(chorus)

Part-Time Waitress, Part-Time Revolutionary

she's a part-time waitress, part-time revolutionary
she's running around your neighbourhood
fucking shit up looking real real scary
with a mask on her face and a rock in her hand
she's working in the morning
but tonight she makes her stand
she's a part-time waitress, part-time revolutionary

the boys that she rolls with
think she can't throw for shit
as if they'd topple the state
with a well placed hit
but she doesn't care
because she's got her girls there
and it's easy to attack
when your friends got your back

and they know, that their scrawny little arms
and their fists full of firecrackers
won't make much of a dent in the full-body armour
of the long long arms of the law

but it's less about the physical damage
that they do
and it's more about the message
that it sends when a few
people are willing to stand their ground
when the cops start to charge

and grenades start to sound

she's a part-time waitress, part-time revolutionary
if you tell her that she's deligitimizing
your movement
you might find her quite contrary
she's a part-time waitress part-time revolutionary

so november tenth rolls around
students come from all around
her friends say yeah let's take the streets
people have been talking about it for weeks
so she joins the crowd
and she finds her friends
and they change their clothes
and they're ready to go

and most of them have never seen a crowd this big
there are thousands upon thousands
and there's not a single pig in sight
look to the right, look to the left
look to the front
the people just seem endless
and it's only at the edges

that the cops with their vests
and their helmets and batons
are drawing thin blue lines
between the rights and the wrongs
of the people surging forward
with their hope and indignance
full of witty slogans and their talk about
resistance

so she takes it all in
and she's feeling kind of nauseous
'cause her body's always erring
on the side of being cautious
in her head she's feeling reckless
and maybe kinda desperate
that they make it downtown
before she has to get into

the train to go to work to serve the
yuppies and the jerks
there's a jerk she'd like to serve
and she thinks that he deserves
at least a paintbomb or two
and she brought more than a few
now they're nearing charest's office
and it's time to make it happen
all of her friends are getting ready for the action

so they push through the crowd, say ready,
and throw
and the paint splatters all across the windows

and yes, charest in particular is awful,
but she hates all politicians
and she wants to paint them for the clowns they are
and this little joke was just a start

but for now she's gotta go yeah, she's gotta run
she's gotta go to work
there's no more time for fun

she's a part-time waitress, part-time revolutionary
she hates the bourgeoisie
unless they're paying her tips
and when they turn their backs
she's stealing all she can carry
she's a part-time waitress, part-time revolutionary
yeah!

What the Fuck Am I Doing Here? #1

in a dank dark room in a dungeon somewhere
sometime between the winter and spring
some anarchists met up to talk about
the student strike
and the struggle it would bring

she went to check it out, throw some ideas about
maybe try to help find a solution
to that itty bitty question always on their minds
of how we gonna make a revolution??

so they talked themselves in circles
for a little while
and made a few tentative plans
but when the talk turned to the student
federations*
they all just threw up our hands

they felt inevitably they would be betrayed
because they'd seen it happen time and time again
why would things be any different this time
the federations would sell out in the end

so they said "what the fuck are we doing here?
what the fuck are we doing?"

in a really big meeting at a really big school
that he thought was a really big deal
he voted for the strike
'cause it just seemed right
but in the end he didn't know how to feel

'cause the fuckers holding on to his tuition money
didn't care whether or not he went to class
but if he tried to stop others from going
they would probably try to kick his ass

he was here 'cause he could afford to be
with just a few years of looming debt
but some people couldn't even get
their foot in the door
a fact that seemed easy to forget

when the public called them greedy,
called them lazy and spoiled
they just didn't seem to get
it wasn't just for themselves
but for the future generations
they were sticking out their necks

taking stupid risks for next to no returns
'cause there were no negotiations in sight
throwing away a whole semester, it felt so useless
it wasn't gonna win this fight

so he thought "what the fuck am i doing here? What
the fuck am i doing!"

they woke up at the crack of dawn
dragged themselves out of bed
to the place that they said they would meet
and very few knew what the morning had in store
other than turning up the heat
on this stewart brewin city
it was high time to shake things up
and all these zombies sleepwalking
their way to work
it was time to wake them up!

If the workers can't work
then the money can't flow
to the bosses at the top
and if they wanted to put pressure
on the fuckers with the power
they would have to make their system flop
jamming wrenches in the gears
or for today just jamming up the traffic
when you're standing with your comrades

on huge ass highway
it seems a little less romantic

'cause these pissed off people
just wanna get to work
and get another measly day's pay
and you're just some dumb punk
with political ideals
standing in their way
how come they can't understand
that you're on their side?
against the bosses and the cops
was the meaning of this action clear?
or more likely than not

were they just pushing pushing pushing
pushing people
over the edge, turning them against their cause
and when the time came for another election
who would pay the cost?
for alienating the public
would all the stunts they pulled force the vote
into the paws of the liberals
was that the price to be paid for rockin the boat?

So they said "what the fuck am i doing here? What
the fuck am i doing?"

*ok, so for those who do know, i realize that i'm
simplifying this (like a lot). For those who don't
know, what i'm referring to here is FECQ
(*féderation étudiante collégiale du Québec*), FEUQ
(*féderation étudiante universitaire du Québec*), and
also CL/ASSE (*Coalition large de l'Association pour
une Solidarité Syndicale Étudiante*) which for the
record are all pretty different and i am
simplifying here for the sake of brevity. But I
guess I'm also intentionally lumping them together
as "bad guys", because these are political bodies
that represent students, and so are also in the
position of demanding things from and negotiating
with the government, and claiming false bullshit
victories and speaking for an entire movement that
doesn't necessarily want to be spoken for and blah
blah blah, so who really cares that they're all
just slightly different kinds of awful.

Beautiful/Horrible

it's beautiful to see you all here
beautiful and in your sunday best
and i can guess that i
will see you later on
in a different set of clothes
but those eyes i will recognize
as you wink at me and then run off
to go smash a window
and i will wonder what it means
while trying not to cream my jeans
over the size of this black bloc
the cops can't fuck with us today
le 15 mars, le vengeance*
je pense que c'est trois fois plus grand
que last year, have no fear
they can't even surround us
we are many, they are few
and for once that does ring true
and they can try to split us up
but we'll just keep fucking shit up
and tomorrow the papers
will be plastered with pictures
of that media fixture
that one smashed up cop car
but they missed the point,
they always do,
i'd forget em if i were you
just take my hand, take this rock
let's take a jog around the block

it's horrible to see you all here,
horrible, i think half of you are drunk
as fucking frat boys, i feel like i'm gonna puke
it's like the most boring parade of all time
and i can't get the slime
of these politicians out of my eyes
the paci-flics** were sizing all us up,
i'm surprised we didn't get jumped,
it's not enough to be harassed
just for covering your ass
they're holding up their peace signs
in front of the cop lines
don't they remember two weeks ago?
when their pacifist chants
were beaten out of their chests
yes it's all fun and games
until someone loses an eye
i should have just stayed home
it's better to be alone than to be one in 200 000
fucking social democrats, nationalists

reformists, optimists
these people make me sick,
i'm going home!

it's beautiful to see you all here,
beautiful, in fact i can't believe my eyes
though i'll try, 'cause i want it to be true
and i don't know how we got here,
i hope although it's not clear
this is not about tuition
though that old man's on the mic
making jokes that are not funny
about how we want his money
but what we want is for him to fuck right off
with his plan nord, plan mort***
and all the death and destruction it will bring
to those people living on the brink
of total annihilation
'cause the white folks in this nation
think that everything is ours to exploit or extract
so we react, with smashing glass
and painting the town red
the cops are dead on their feet
it's been an awfully long week
and i think we're winning
it looks like we might be winning
and what would we do, if we were winning?
it looks like the same shit that we always do
except more of it, and when we're through
we'll go home with a good story glory glory
oh but it's still beautiful to see you all here

it's horrible to see you all here
horrible, last week was fucking brilliant
half a million people saying fuck the truce****
and i'd never felt a part of something
like i felt a part of something then
with all those strangers, lovers, friends
and all the things we did to defend one another
now i'm shuddering at every evil eye in this crowd
feels directed at me
and they beat up my friend
and pulled off her mask
and tried to hand her to the cops
thankfully we stopped them
they call us violent, well fuck they should try it
it doesn't feel like much of a fight
when it's this unfair
i'm just an animal with claws against the law
they've got helicopters, guns and armour
we've got rocks in our pockets
and we've got friends in jail who we'll bail out

tomorrow
borrow money, pay the lawyer,
and then go home and cuddle
'cause their system is violent,
everyday it is violent
this world it is violent
so don't call us violent
'cause we haven't earned it yet!

*translation: "march 15th, revenge", a reference to the yearly demonstration against police brutality (or just police, depending on who you ask) in Montreal.

**a portmanteau of the words "pacifiste" and "flic" (cop), basically the "peace police", or people at demos who try to stop people from being violent, sometimes by putting their bodies in front of targets such as cop cars or private property, sometimes by de-masking people, threatening them, beating them up, or assisting the police in arresting them.

***translation: "plan north, plan death", a slogan coined at the april 20th demo against the "Salon du Plan Nord", a job fair and conference centred around the Quebec government's plan to develop the northern regions of the province

****this is a reference to the first of over one hundred consecutive night demonstrations, which was called in reaction to a truce agreed to by the student leadership during negotiations with the government

Betrayal Song

my more cynical friends
told me you'd break my heart
but i didn't listen
i plunged right in
i grabbed your hand
and we yelled fuck you
to that police man

we built barricades
and they tore them down
we made a big big sound
that they couldn't drown out

though they tried
and they're still trying now
i'm screaming
but you can't hear me shout

do you remember?
linking arms with me
do you remember?
we thought we might get free

we threw snowballs
and then bottles and then rocks
striking fear into the hearts
of those damn cops
and baby don't you tell me
you forgot
when they turned and ran from us
you have got
to remember

do you remember?
I hope you haven't forgotten
you've got a big meeting
with a big man today
on the radio i can hear them play
that deal they are dangling for you
baby please don't take it
i'm begging you, please don't take it
come back to me
come back to the streets
we screamed they were ours enough times
but maybe you didn't mean it
maybe you were just caught up in the moment
but i meant it
i meant it

we threw snowballs
and then bottles and then rocks
striking fear into the hearts
of those damn cops
and baby don't you tell me
you forgot
when they turned and ran from us
you have got
to remember

come back to me
come back to me
come back to me
come back to the streets

What the Fuck Am I Doing Here? #2

it'd been a real long day, and a longer week
and frankly he was just exhausted
the thought of another demo was making him crazy
when he already thought that he'd lost it
so he kicked off his shoes
and he took off his socks
and he called it a night
and he made the decision to just stay home
and it felt alright

but the next thing he knew, he was stuck the screen
pulled into the net
and every other tweet that showed up on the feed
filled him with regret
another window smashed, a clever chant
it sounded like such fun
the tweets were making wild estimations of numbers
and he could be another one

but hey wait a minute, hadn't he decided
that he should stay home?
He was concerned for his friends
but they would surely be fine
it wasn't as if they were alone
what was the point of staying home
if he couldn't relax
and get his mind off the strike
so he shut off his computer, called up a friend
and tried to do it right

they said "on s'en calisse, #manifencours"*
made some popcorn, watched a movie
they tried their best to keep their cool
but their fomo got the best of them
twitter lured them into its trap
and they found themselves glued to the screen again
even though they didn't give a crap

so they said "what the fuck am i doing here?
what the fuck am i doing?"

she had been proud to be on the riot squad
she had felt like a super hero
beating back the drunken hooligans
protecting the average joe
but things were feeling a lot less simple lately
getting real political
she was feeling the burn of the public scorn
why was everyone so critical?

there are consequences for breaking the law
and sometimes consequences hurt
but she had never truly looked into the faces that
she was smashing into the dirt
but then she looked and saw their disgust with her
and the righteousness in their eyes
these people were just fighting
for what they believed
it really cut her down to size

she could see the situation clearly now
she knew that she'd been wrong
she could see the line drawn in the sand
and she saw which side she was on
on the side of the bullies, on the side of brawn
on the side that needed armies
to enforce their laws
that were supposedly decided
by the people democratically
but their system is a sham and she saw it's flaws

these feelings grew slowly inside of her
as time went on and on
and every time she got that call of duty
it just felt more and more wrong
to stand there and protect
the property of the rich, above all else
she couldn't keep pulling this bullshit
if she wanted to live with herself

so she said "what the fuck am i doing here?"
what the fuck am i doing?

she got the things she needed from the friperie
and from the hardware store
this was all becoming a bit routine
even the anxiety felt like a bore
she had started to question her motivations
for going through all this again
it was all starting to feel kinda meaningless
or like a sick kind of entertainment

sure her heart was still in it
for anarchy, 110 percent
but her actions felt so disconnected from that
she was starting to resent
putting herself on the line
putting herself through this stress, and for what?
compared to the giants they were fighting against
her actions didn't feel like much

but who was she to be a coward?
who was she to give up? she was oh so privileged
that doing nothing was being complicit
in the system she had pledged
to fight against, so what was she to do?
anything was better than nothing at all
so she went on with her little routine
and made the usual calls

showed up at the demo, rolled out with her crew
pulling their usual shit
too bad they didn't notice the undercover
following and watching it
so they ended their day in a jail cell
and the charges were ludicrous
and the conditions of release were even more absurd
was it a joke or were they serious?

she felt so torn up, sitting there in her cell
how could she have ended up here
for something she still felt so confused about
the consequences seemed severe
but she would gladly take those consequences
if this fight felt like her own
but she had taken a hit playing someone else's game
and they had left her all alone

so she said "what the fuck am I doing here?
what the fuck am I doing?"

*this is a reference to two things: the first - a
popular chant after the special law was passed (On
s'en calisse, la loi speciale—we don't give a fuck
about the special law), and the second -
#manifencours, a twitter hashtag devoted to
updating people about where, when and how
demonstrations were happening

Casserollin'

i'm casserollin', they hatin'
patrollin and tryina catch me casserollin
tryina catch me casserollin
tryina catch me casserollin
tryina catch me casserollin

take a look around and see
families in the street
and for a second it will fill your heart with joy
but then you look again
and feel like these people aren't your friends

their petty indignation does nothing to destroy
the systems they denounce
so does it really count?
If this form of dissent is ruling class approved?

but why does it still feel powerful?
That video's going viral
torn between feeling unimpressed and moved

(chorus)

this is the moment, a turning point
to either take advantage or disappoint
so let's take this fight home to our neighbourhoods

there's potential for something great
but there's potential for them to take
everything we've earned so far and fuck it up good

with an election around the bend
we're gonna have to defend
our political project from electoral bullshit

'cause you know they're gonna make it about them
even though we've realized we don't need them
we've figured out how to make things happen
and voting ain't it

(chorus)

this summer feels like a bit of a bust
so we'll prepare for another thrust
and when classes start again in august we'll strike
harder

and yeah fuck law 78
on s'en calisse, anyway
we'll keep on fighting together and we'll take it
farther

we'll even call up all our friends
call em from every end
of the continent, and then we'll call it a
convergence

we got momentum on our minds
if we've lost it, if we'll find it
bringing the pot to a slow simmer before our
resurgence

and then...

Ce N'est Qu'un Début

ce n'est qu'un début, continuons le combat
et si la greve est morte, ben vivre la greve!*

this wasn't the beginning and it won't be the end
so let's not even pretend we're in mourning
let's take time to reflect
and learn from our mistakes
'cause that's what it takes to keep going

remember our victories
they are good stories to tell
when we're not feeling so swell we can share them
remember our failures, opportunities lost
lack of foresight that cost us so dearly

so here we are now, did we win or did we lose,
and what will elections prove? I say nothing
'cause it's not over, no matter what they say
and if the votes don't go our way
we'll still keep fighting

ce n'est qu'un début, continuons le combat
et si la greve est morte, ben vivre la greve!

this is the time to act, it has always been now
seems like lately somehow we forgot it
it's not as if before the strike
we were just sitting on our asses
they will go back to their classes
and we'll go back to the strug

but we'll be better, we'll be stronger
we'll be smarter
we will fight even harder
now that we've had a taste
and there are more now who are ready to fight
there are more people who might stand with us

against the cops and the judges
the fascists and the state
the things we will not tolerate
the things we're itching to destroy
well yes, free education is an admirable goal
but all truth be told
that's not what i was in it for

you can take your free indoctrination
and stick it up your ass

they're just building a new class
of experts and professionals
who will only succeed if they justify this system
if they're happy with their prisons
and their undeserved privilege

i'm glad to have found new friends
but if you think this is the end
well i guess you're no friend of mine
but there are many who have seen through their lies
who have come to despise every single institution
every shred of authority, every prison every cage
we'll find each other in our rage
and we'll fight and grow together

ce n'est qu'un début, continuons le combat
et si la greve est morte, ben vivre la grève!

*translation:

this is only the beginning, continue the fight
and if the strike is dead, well long live the
strike

(the first line is a popular chant at demos)