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LEONARD COHEN,
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FIND ME, I AM ALMOST THIRTY
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Amit Ranjan

*Some verses touch hearts
Some touch other parts.
Someone said to me
That old man burns a hole
Right inside your soul.*

*He drags your pain out of your heart
And then draws an anatomical chart
Dissects you for fun
And some lazy pun*

*The old surgeon is so ruthless
He leaves no scar
He should have been dead
Or at least toothless
But look he's laughing at the bar.*

*Ladies and gentlemen,
Mister Leonard Cohen.*

Mister Cohen also has a sister Cohen: Esther Cohen. She passed away last year. I recently realized this, that she had passed away, and that the writer Esther Cohen who's very much around, is not the sister Cohen. I would have known this had I been a true Cohen fan, actively following the threads on the Leonard Cohen Forum. But I'm not. I am a lazy listener who listens to his songs, and tries indolently to write songs like him. I even wrote lazy emails to Ed Sanders, his manager, who lazily wrote back to me that he will try to show my poems to Leonard. Leonard never lazily read my poetry, or if he did, he never lazily wrote back to me. I have all the time to keep on writing, and I am sure he has all the time to know about the would-be Indian poet and indulge him a little. Time is

always full, it's we who go into a lull. Yes, I know 'full' doesn't rhyme with 'lull', but there's this thing called a slant rhyme which applies here. And do you know what another name for slant rhyming is? Lazy rhyming. If Cohen can make 'Marianne' and 'began' rhyme in the song 'So Long Marianne', I can try some odd combinations too.

Coming back to the matter of the deceased sister Cohen, the writer Esther Cohen must have been flummoxed, for there must have been anonymous readers of hers who thought it was *her* and not her. For the writer Esther is quite Cohenesque – her style of writing. She wrote on her blog that she receives Google updates about her name, and there were quite a few when the sister Cohen died. She also received a recent update about another namesake having written a book called *Epidermis*. So many homonyms, namesakes floating around in the deluge of information overload. Sometimes you feel it isn't worth working for one's name, for the number of namesakes and lookalikes and body doubles crashing around on the web. Unlike Cohen, who would go on to say, '*J'ai changé cent fois de nom*', we can't all change our names a hundred times.

Needless to say, there is only one Leonard Cohen – Mister Leonard Cohen who has lasted from the age of LPs to the rage of MP3s, from the age of being a radio star, a survivor from the time when he sang a song about getting fellatio from Janis Joplin ('Chelsea Hotel #2', *New Skin for Old Ceremony*, 1974), to when he crooned, 'I ache in the places where I used to play' ('Tower of Song', *I'm Your Man*, 1988). Of course, our man did not age that fast between 1974 and 1988, but it's a prophetic song. Cohen turned 80 last year, and celebrated the milestone with a new album, *Popular Problems*; 'Almost like the blues' from this album is still a rage. When he turned 70, Tim de Lisle came up with an article, 'Hallelujah: 70 things about Leonard Cohen at 70', in which he says with wry and celebratory Cohenesque humour, 'His vocals have gone from a limited but appealing wail to a heroically smoky rumble. Soon, he may be audible only to dogs.' Cohen himself has said that his voice can barely carry a tune. There are hundreds of cover versions of his songs, in perhaps more complex rhythms and more skilled musical milieus, and yet somehow it's his deep baritone, in which they sound perfect.



Mr. Perfect

Cohen has perfected the art of using the word ‘perfect’. The places where the word appears, the usage is expectedly ironical, but there’s something more to it. In a literary sense, it is a deconstructionist use, or in Cohen’s own inimitable words, ‘There’s a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.’ (One must mark the offbeat rhyme here too – ‘thing’ and ‘in’). Let’s take a look at some of the perfect uses of ‘perfect’:

‘Ring the bells that can still ring/
Forget your perfect offering/
There’s a crack in everything/
That’s how the light gets in.’

(*Selected Poems, 1956-1968*, and the song ‘Anthem’ from the album *The Future*, 1992)

‘The candles burned/ The moon went down/ The polished hill/ The milky town/ Transparent, weightless, luminous/ Uncovering the two of us/ On that fundamental ground/ Where love’s unwilled, unleashed, / Unbound/ And half the perfect world is found’ (Anjani and Leonard Cohen, ‘Half the Perfect World’, *Blue Alert*, 2006)

‘It was only when you walked away I saw you had the perfect ass. Forgive me for not falling in love with your face or your conversation.’ (Poetry collection – *The Energy of Slaves*, 1972)

There are three distinct flavours to the quotes above, and yet each of these *perfects* is about imperfections, about cracks, about dysfunctionalities. For the last quote and for many like that (for example, ‘they don’t let a woman kill you, not in the tower of song’) Cohen has never been accused of being a misogynist. This may be because there’s a certain gender neutrality, an air of universality, to his loneliness, to his desolation.

Another favourite Cohen-word of mine is ‘almost’. He has, however, never used the phrase ‘almost perfect’. Tautology is not Mr. Cohen’s business. Let’s begin with the latest – ‘Almost like the Blues’. In a career spanning almost five decades, there have been shifts in Cohen’s style, and that’s how he has almost survived, or maybe survived perfectly. His voice turns very political, intertwines the personal and the political, say, in his album *The Future* (1992) in which his dystopic vision condemns the culture of conspicuous consumption and the rapacity of the powers that be. ‘Almost like the blues’ is a part of this style shift – ‘I saw some people starving/There was murder, there was rape/Their villages were burning/They were trying to escape/I couldn’t meet their glances/I was staring at my shoes/It was acid, it was tragic/It was almost like the blues’ (Leonard Cohen and Leonard Patrick, *Popular Problems*, 2014).

Another place where ‘almost’ is almost unforgettable in ‘So Long Marianne’ – ‘We met when we were almost young/ Deep in the green lilac park/ You held on to me like I was a crucifix/ As we went kneeling through the dark.’ The ‘almost young’ haunts the listener here – it calls out to the young and the old, and maybe the dead. Also, the shift in the imagery from ‘lilac park’ to ‘crucifix’ is typically Cohen. The Sufis celebrated the intertwining *ishq majazi* and *ishq hakiki*, that is the carnal and the spiritual, but Cohen turns that idea on its head. He weds the Eros and the Thanatos, while retaining the tradition of wedding the secular and the mystic.

The packing of this intense energy is his signature – the man is notorious for spending years and years editing one song. He is clearly conscious of the irony of Wordsworth’s idea of poetry being ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings... emotions recollected in tranquility.’ The song that I have consciously avoided till now – ‘Hallelujah’, arguably the most celebrated Cohen song, took five years and eighty drafts to reach the studio version. Cohen says, ‘There are two schools of songwriting, the quick and me.’ That he has had only 13 studio albums in a career of fifty years is a testimony to this claim. In an interview, he says that being a poet is like being a daily wage labourer; one goes to seek something every day, but one is never sure if one will find anything every day.

Another place where Cohen uses ‘almost’ and which is most memorable for me, is a poem in *Select Poems* (1956-68). It goes like this – ‘Marita/ Please find me/ I am almost 30/ This is my voice/ but I am only whispering/ The amazing vulgarity of your style/invites men to think of torturing you to death.’

I do not remember this from the poetry collection, but from a documentary about Leonard Cohen, made way back in 1965. The documentary, titled *Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr. Leonard Cohen*, was produced by the National Film Board of Canada, and directed by Don Owen and Donald Brittain. The idea was a series of documentaries about contemporary poets, but the project was abandoned after the first film, for the others were allegedly not as charismatic as Cohen. In the documentary, it’s shown that Cohen has scribbled these lines – ‘Marita/ Please find me/ I am almost thirty’ on the wall of Le Bistro on Rue de la Montagne. The poets would gather at a lot of these pubs and bistros. Of Le Bistro, Cohen says in the documentary, ‘Le Bistro’s like an irresponsible sanctuary – you aren’t sure whether the hounds are waiting inside, or whether you’ve just left them.’

It was 2010. Cohen’s world tours had been on for a couple of years. His one-time secretary Ms. Kelley Lynch had defrauded him of millions of dollars. (Eventually she was sentenced to 18 months in prison in 2013, on grounds of harassing him with intimidating calls and emails.) Cohen who had retired from public life, had to start singing at concerts in 2008. They were a runaway hit contrary to his expectations, and his managers decided that this could be expanded into a world tour. So, in 2010, I was in Sydney on a scholarship, busy waking up Australians named John Lang (1816-64) and Alice Richman (1856-81) whom the world had quite forgotten. My scholarship and visa were both to end in October 2010. In mid-October I got to know from Nathan that Mr. Cohen was coming to Sydney in November (like I said earlier, I am a lazy fan). Nathan and I shared a very special relationship – I used to tell him about Lang, and he narrated stories about his eccentric great-grandfather, Sir Horace Eldred. He was doing a photography project of shooting people at dawn and dusk every day, and I was one of his models. We would share our

love and life stories – he about his wife, I about my girlfriend - listening to Leonard Cohen on a cliff at the Coogee beach, missing certain words of the sonorous man because of the crashing waves. So Nathan told me, and I said we could not miss that. I went to the visa office to apply for an extension, a new tourist visa. The lady at the counter asked me why I wanted to stay on. I said that I had been busy with work all this while, and would like to indulge in some ‘tourism’. She wasn’t convinced and gave me another date for another interview. The next time her probing questions made it clear that she suspected that I wanted to hang around for some time to vanish or find some odd job. The lady in question herself was of Indian origin, by the way. After her thoughts were clear to me, I looked straight in her eye and told her, ‘Look it’s not about Australia. It is about a Canadian singer called Leonard Cohen who is coming here. I need just nine days, I have been here nine months.’ Her eyes dropped, and the visa was stamped.

So there we were – Nathan, Liz and me at the Olympic arena, sipping on wine and cheering Mr. Cohen. Nathan said to me after a couple of glasses, ‘We are the biggest fans of this man who keeps singing “I’m your man”. We need to do something about it.’ I nodded. It was quite an experience to see the old man croon away for over three hours. He matched the chorus girls, who would also break into some acrobatics every now and then, in his energy and enthusiasm. There was an interval in between. The crew packed up, Leonard Cohen put down his mic. Nathan and I looked at each other, we both got up without exchanging words and shouted, ‘Leonard Cohen, find me, I am almost thirty!’ In the glare of those lights I wonder if he spotted us. But he stopped his colleagues with a wave, took a bow, and sang, ‘So Long Marianne’ which of course also features a line with ‘almost’ – ‘we met when we were almost young.’ He did not find us, but we had almost met him.

My memory may not serve me well, we all make up stories in hindsight. However, when I went to Sydney this year and asked what had happened that night, what Nathan recalled was not so different from what I just did.

I am almost aware that this essay is almost coded, that it assumes a pre-knowledge of Cohen and the Cohenesque. However, given that a

thousand websites will tell you a thousand things about him, I thought it best to peep than leap in linearity. This is ironic, because despite spending time in a college heavy on music with Dylan or Lennon or Floyd spouting out of every window, I did not know Cohen. I liked him precisely because he was not known, he was not Che Guevara or Zimmerman of the tee shirts. Cohen's world tours begin in Canada, go to the USA, Europe and Turkey and then take a leap to Australia. His under-doggedness in this part of the world has its own appeal. A senior had fought bitterly with his girlfriend, and was sulking listening to a cassette, the lyrics of which caught my attention. I suddenly asked him, 'What is this music?' He snapped back, 'You are not interested in what I am saying. Take the cassette and bugger off. It is a tribute album to someone called Leonard Cohen. Obscure, depressing man.' The album was *Tower of Song* (1995) with amazing renditions of 'Hallelujah' (by Bono), 'Coming back to you' (by Trisha Yearwood), and 'If it be your will' (by Jann Arden). I recently found a book gifted to me by someone some years ago, with an inscription, 'I can't believe you made me like the voice of that Bono guy in "Hallelujah."' I am contemplating suing Mr. Cohen for stunting my musical growth. His laziness made me too lazy to listen to many other people.

Leonard Cohen was almost a novelist. Some of his listeners, who are not readers of him, may have missed that. I often lapse into using the full name because of the documentary *Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr. Leonard Cohen* and also because I read once in my searches for Cohen news, on *Daily New NY*, someone said she has two dogs – one is called Leonard Cohen and the other Jennifer Lopez, and that they answer only to their full names, and that people turn around to see if celebrities are around. It's quite a leap from naming pets after lions and extinct tribes. So Leonard Cohen wrote *The Favourite Game* (1963) and *Beautiful Losers* (1966) apart from various books of poetry. He was a very successful poet; the documentary that's been mentioned was made because of his poetic prowess – he wasn't a singer yet. He had enough money to buy a mansion on Hydra, a Greek island, and spend time there writing his poetry. *The Favourite Game* is a coming-of-age novel, with a boy besotted with words and women. It has got Cohen's satire, dry humour and his

fine use of language. Pity that we lost a novelist to a singer-songwriter. *Beautiful Losers* is another story. It is so heavy that it took me several stops and restarts to finish it. Apparently, Cohen had written it in a couple of spurts at Hydra, fasting and leading an austere life to concentrate. And it resulted in a harsh, dense concentrate of symbolism. A folk singer, his native wife and his best friend, a member of parliament are a triangle – they are all sexually involved with each other, with the shadow of a lost figure from history, Catherine Tekakwitha, looming in the background. The *ménage à trois* novel received hostile reviews, and became successful only posthumously, that is, when Cohen left novel writing to be a singer. Good sense prevailed over Cohen and he became a singer at 35. He wore dapper suits, unable to change at that age, and was accused of abetting suicides with his profoundly cynical lyrics, but himself did not commit it, because he was no longer 27, the age that is famously the pocket hole of suicide for celebrities.

In the meantime, we have almost forgotten the matter of ‘Sister Cohen’. There are other sisters Cohen. Felicity Bruiski and Tanita Tikaram have been called ‘female Leonard Cohens’ by his fans. I am sure both of them despise the suggestion. And then, there is the ‘Sisters of Mercy’ – the song whose lyrics have been quoted in a million places – a song from Cohen’s debut album. Cohen packs romance, jealousy, grief, despair, empathy, self-critique and may be something else into this short song with lines like these:

‘Don’t turn on the lights, you can read their address by the moon.

And you won’t make me jealous if I hear that they sweetened your night:

We weren’t lovers like that and besides it would still be all right.’

Robert Altman, the filmmaker, had heard this song and others from Leonard’s debut album, and loved them. He had worn out a Cohen LP, and got another one, and then forgotten about the matter. He had finished shooting *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, when he heard Cohen’s music at a party again. It struck him like lightning that this was the music for his film. He called up Cohen and tried to cajole him by mentioning his

hit movie *MASH*. Cohen hadn't heard of *MASH*, but had seen his flop movie *Brewster McCloud* and had loved it. He agreed to give his music, but the movie was of the Brothers Warner and Cohen's records were on Columbia. Mr. Cohen arranged for everything just fine, and also ensured royalty for Altman on the music. This is a famous story – and there's more to it as well – but there should be at least one famous story. Leonard Cohen's songs have lifted many films, and it almost appears these pre-written songs were meant to be in these movies. Whether it be *McCabe and Mrs Miller* (1971), Werner Herzog's *Fata Morgana* (1971), 'Waiting for a miracle' in *Natural Born Killers* (1994), or *Duck* (2005) or many others, the songs are perfectly in sync with cinematography.

Apart from being a singer and one sung about, apart from being a lover and a beloved, Leonard Cohen also almost stopped a riot forty-five years ago. On August 31, 1970, at the Isle of Wight festival, the winds were blowing fast and distorting the sound system, and Jimi Hendrix did something in his aggressive performance to upset some of the audience. They started tearing down equipment and putting things on fire. Leonard Cohen was woken up from his slumber and he put the rioting audience to slumber. Stacey Anderson says in *Rolling Stone* in 2011, 'The sleepy musician grabbed his guitar and took the stage; his gentle, courteous attitude toward the audience and elegantly spare takes on his poetic tunes (including 'Bird on the Wire' and 'Suzanne') worked quiet magic on the mob. The 35-year-old Cohen kept the crowd spellbound, preventing further destruction and danger to all present.'

The one song that can almost sum up Leonard Cohen's life is 'Tower of Song'. He says, 'I said to Hank Williams: how lonely does it get?/ Hank Williams hasn't answered yet/ But I hear him coughing all night long/ A hundred floors above me/ In the Tower of Song.' Cohen is aware of his position in the history of literature and music, and he's also aware of the eternal loneliness of creative pursuit. He knows that the human condition is that of being born in a hole of memory – 'I was born like this, I had no choice, I was born with the gift of a golden voice.' And he knows that this hole of memory is not going to be disturbed by anything – 'And you can stick your little pins in that voodoo doll / I'm very sorry baby/ Doesn't

Leonard Cohen, Find Me, I am almost Thirty

look like me at all.' His secretary making him bankrupt, the heartbreaks, and the changing market of music – nothing dethroned Cohen, for he kept changing. The doll never looked like him at all.

I have almost betrayed the epigraph that this essay began with. One never really gets around to discussing how the old man burns holes in people's souls. He does, 'everybody knows,' as Cohen says. Almost at the end, let us look at the beginning of *Beautiful Losers*. Cohen begins the text with

'Catherine Tekakwitha, who are you? Are you (1656-1680)? Is that enough? Are you Iroquois Virgin?' He goes on to ask more.

Let us put him through the same.

Leonard Cohen, who are you? Are you (1934 – ruthless, but not toothless?)? Is that enough? Are you the Canadian Casanova? Are you a Ladies' Man? Or are you the Death of a Ladies' Man? You do not discuss your ladies or tailors with people. But do you discuss your ladies with your tailors, and your tailors with your ladies? Are you a Zen Monk? Or a monkey with a plywood violin? Did you not run away from Roshi having drawn a silly caricature with a silly excuse scribbled underneath? Have you led a wayward life to have a way with words? Did you make your secretary steal your money so you could wander again? Will you only make me listen to your songs, or will you listen to my songs as well? Is it almost like the blues?

Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr. Leonard Cohen. ■



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