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From the Dark Green Hill to Our Lady of the Harbour

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On the day that Leonard Cohen's death was announced, pilgrimages sprang up almost instantly in Montreal. Stacey Engels narrates the pilgrim body in 'From the Dark Green Hill to Our Lady of the Harbour', bringing her reader along to her old haunts and places of significance to the poet. In her travelogue-style vignettes, even a sausage sandwich becomes a sacred relic when mingled with community and intention.

Key Words: pilgrimage, Leonard Cohen, Montreal, musician pilgrimage, Canadian literature, travelogue, creative nonfiction, Enpuku-Ji Zen

Leonard Cohen's death was announced on November 10th, 2016, the same day his funeral was held in the city of his birth. He was born in Montreal as I was, a little over thirty years earlier. He grew up in a house near a park where I tobogganed, he went to synagogue a stone's throw from the home of one of my best friends, he lived across the street from Bagel Etc., where my posse sometimes ate breakfast in the nineteen eighties. He sang about Mont Royal, 'the dark green hill' on and around which the city is built, and the St. Lawrence River that flows around it. Leonard Cohen is engrained in what Montreal is.

I had mixed feelings about him, as a musician and a man. I wasn't keen on his electronic sound, and sometimes wasn't sure how I felt about his vocal range. I thought of him as a sleazy gentleman, a notion that stuck as the fedora became more of a fixture. When my roommate told me the fantasy he had whispered in her ear at a party, I was repelled: we were twenty, and he was over fifty.

My friend reproached me. 'But it's *Leonard*,' she said. She did not mean he got a free pass because he was a celebrity; she meant I had missed the point. Leonard Cohen, who was the only one who could raise our strange, beautiful, messed-up city to the level of myth, had given my friend a gift only he could give: a collection of graphic, intimate, tender words, meant just for her. Or, at least, that was how they made her feel.

Three weeks before he died, soon after the release of his final album, *You Want It Darker*, NPR replayed a 2006 interview with Cohen. He'd been seventy-two when it was recorded. Never in my life had a dirty old man moved me to feel compassion about his being a dirty old man - but *this was Leonard*, who had a sacred

talent for slashing through our ideas of things to their simple, poignant truths. His being a septuagenarian did not mean he no longer felt desire for women younger than himself; it meant he had to retrain himself, to accept they usually saw him in some avuncular way. He spoke about having always felt ugly; he spoke about joining a Buddhist monastery because he wanted to be at ease with himself, and leaving because Zen didn't mitigate his distress; he spoke about time ravaging the body, and the part of the self that looks on as it does.

I remember being in the small white kitchen of my Manhattan apartment, cooking and washing dishes as I listened to that deep, familiar voice. I was fifty, the age Leonard had been when he'd whispered to my roommate. I felt ragged by the end of the podcast, as though I lacked the tolerance I needed to listen to someone talk about a real life. Who, when he has on-air time, admits that he never changed in certain fundamental ways, but just learned to control himself? Who talks, straightforwardly, about the ways in which he has kept trying, and kept failing? Who makes it clear that, late in life, when he's had more adventure and success than most people, the bag he is left holding is full of disappointment, not just at himself but at what the world has become? And who does all that and manages to make you feel humbled and grateful to be a broken, finite human being?

Like starlight, the news of Leonard's death reached the public after the star was extinguished. It was some time before I learned that he had died in his sleep on November 7th, after a fall in his Los Angeles home. Even after I knew he had died the night before the U.S. election, I could not shake the conviction that his exit was timed; that he was making a statement.

Nor could I shake the desire that grew, over the following months, to undertake a Leonard pilgrimage. I was hardly alone; there were videos all over YouTube, showing mourners, fans, and well-wishers coming and going from Rue Vallières, where flowers and votive candles multiplied in front of his two-story house. There were articles with headlines about ‘sombre pilgrimages’ and maps and listicles of all kinds that aimed to capture ‘Leonard Cohen’s Montreal.’

Some of these focused on his early life in affluent Westmount: his childhood home, the sprawling synagogue to which he returned to record the choir for *You Want It Darker*, the Shaar Hashomayim Cemetery where he is buried in a simple pine box, next to his parents. Many focused on the bohemian neighborhood east of the mountain where I spent much of my twenties, and some of these recommendations struck me as more generic than truly Leonard Cohenish; any old-school Plateau resident would tell you about his house just off The Main, and Bagel Etc., and the Portuguese chicken rotisserie places and Schwartz’s smoked meat and Moishe’s Steak House and Schreter’s Wholesale and Retail.

There were editorials that went deeper into the questions that had stirred my desire to do a pilgrimage: what was it about Montreal’s unusual character that shaped Leonard’s? How might you find, in the way he put words together, parallels to the city’s inherent juxtapositions: old synagogues on streets named for saints, steeples towering over sex clubs, stone angels spray-painted with the circle-A of anarchy.

There was something a little haunting about seeing Leonard and Montreal exalted and dissected in *The New York Times* or *The Globe and Mail*. The place-names resonated in me like incantations, as though the forgotten first half of my life were becoming more real again, at a time when my life in the States was, whether I wanted it or not, getting darker.

I am late to meet the friend who agreed to go on the Leonard pilgrimage with me, and have texted to let him know. He is nowhere to be seen when I arrive. I stand in front of Bagel Etc., gazing across Parc du Portugal at what I am almost certain is Leonard’s house. There are two grey doors side by side and the houses - one brick, one stone - are attached. I think I know which is the right one, but on some level, I’d expected it to be more obvious. When Marianne Ihlen, who inspired some of Leonard’s early immortal songs, died in July 2016, it was a matter of hours before someone climbed a pole and positioned a hand-written sign - *SO LONG* - above

the sign indicating the name of the street: Marie-Anne. Yet it fits, too, that there is no plaque, no eternal flame, no framed photograph to draw attention to the poet’s sanctuary.

Though it is long past the normal hour for brunch, there is a line of people waiting to get in to Bagel Etc. I slip past them, into the restaurant, to see if my friend and I crossed wires; perhaps he is waiting for me indoors. He is not, and I am completely surprised by what is: a sweet, piercing pain in my heart that takes my breath away. I am simultaneously overwhelmed by the familiarity of the place and the feeling that it will never be mine again. I cannot remember if it is identical to what it had been, or twice as big. I cannot remember if it has always been a charming vintage diner, if it was always lit with red bulbs even during the day, if the silver-edged tables were always so close together. I begin threading my way toward the exit more quickly, barely turning my head to look for Matthew; though I know it is completely irrational, I am slightly afraid that, if I look too closely, I will see my twenty-year old self at one of the tables. ‘In Montreal, there is no present tense, there is only the past claiming victories,’ Cohen wrote in *The Favourite Game*.

Then I am back on the sidewalk, fifty-two and visiting from New York, and Matthew is walking south toward me on St. Laurent. We hug hello. He holds up a bag from Schreter’s.

‘I was due for some black jeans,’ he says.

‘You’ve just been to a sacred site on the pilgrimage, then,’ I tell him.

According to one of the post-mortem articles I’d read, Leonard used to buy slippers at Schreter’s. Sometimes he even wore them to the hardware store or the café.

There is no name engraved on the brass flap of the mail slots on the grey doors, no faded, handwritten *L. Cohen* on a label over the buzzer. There is no buzzer. Rather, there is, on the left door, something I’d completely forgotten existed: an antique manual turn doorbell, its metal plate and knob painted over so that it almost disappears into the wood.

Matthew does a search on his phone, and finds an address - 6 Rue Vallières - that doesn’t correspond with anything on the block-long street. There is a cartoon *RIP Leonard* in white on a black lamppost next to number 30 and a tiny Buddha figurine tucked up on the scalloped doorsill of number 28. Had I recognized the stickers on that door as being from two different

Figure 1 : RIP Leonard



Photo by Author

high-tech security systems, we would probably have stopped shuffling back and forth along the street, looking for something definitive.

There is one sign, on the brick wall of the corner house. CENTRE ZEN DE LA MAIN, it reads, in upper case brass letters, ever so slightly verdigrised, on a black ground. It is the kind of sign that makes an announcement and urges you to keep your distance at the same time. Cohen had purchased the house for the use of the Enpuku-Ji Zen community, with whom he shared the same Rōshi, Kyōzan Jōshū Sasaki. Matthew texts a friend who knows the abbess who founded the centre in the 80s. It has since moved a little ways up the street, but the sign remains.

Suddenly, a large man approaches us. He has a heavy accent, perhaps Israeli; the only thing we can make out, when he abruptly speaks, is *Leo-NARD Co-HEN*. We try to communicate what we know, but I give up quickly and back away. He is hard to read. He seems well meaning, but there is something a little wild about his eyes, his movements, the way he speaks. Then the

man is gone, almost as suddenly as he'd appeared. His quest for Cohen reminds me of seekers I had seen on the Camino de Santiago - they had become a little unhinged, perhaps through some combination of solitude and endorphins, a new bed and new landscape every day, the toll taken by seeking itself.

Matthew and I round the corner. Here, at the side of the Zen building, photographs are stuck to the windows; black and white images of children, an old lady sweeping the gutter being watched by a woman with a dog, a vase full of flowers in color. There is one of Leonard, probably in his forties, somber in a pale yellow T-shirt, and another of him as an old man, sitting next to a younger man; they lean into each other, smiling.

As we stand looking at the photos, two or three men approach and stand there with us, speaking to each other in Spanish. I wonder if there is something unusual about today, or whether this is normal: in the space of half an hour on a random summer afternoon, five or six pilgrims have come looking for Leonard.

Talking and walking our way down The Main, we duck into a Portuguese pastry shop and buy flans: small, flaky tarts filled with bright yellow custard. I am struck, as I so often am here, by how different it is from New York; no one greets us loudly. The woman behind the counter isn't looking at the next customer while she rings me up. No one is foisting a pile of seven or eight napkins on me. It is weirdly quiet.

Matthew's friend texts him back: apparently Cohen's son now owns the old Centre Zen. We pass a door, recessed from the street, on which is a street sign saying CUL DE SAC: *dead end*. It is completely papered over. There are old black and white photographs of Orthodox Jews and, under the masthead of *Le Fasciste Canadien* (price five cents) a full-page photo of dark-haired kids in an urban alley. There are photocopies of an anti-Semitic cartoon with a legend that reads, in French, *Money you spend in this store will support communism to defeat Christianity - Let's unite and buy only from Christians!*

While I have to presume this is meant to be instructive, and a reminder, there is no context, no indication that this is art or education or in any way meta. As I am standing, open mouthed, I see, on the other side of the street, the sign for an old Main mainstay: the hundred year-old family business dedicated to making funeral monuments. Berson & Sons was so much a fixture here that I do not really see what it is in front of me - I still

Figure 2 : Dead End Door



Photo by Author

see the rectangular slabs of grey stone piled neatly in the lot, some wrapped in plastic, some standing on wooden platforms as the names of the dead were carved into them and the stone was polished till it became a black mirror. I see the dust-covered men in caps, the trucks coming and going, the closed fence on Saturdays.

It seems to take forever to register that it is only the sign that remains. Later I learn that the business has moved to a show space nearby, where there is a large parking lot and easy access for delivery and pick-up of headstones. The lot is now a sculpture park of some kind, and the sign has become a monument itself, to The Main as it was and to one of the few battles won against what we used to call the language police. Berson, probably some time in the eighties, fought the Office de la Langue Française inspectors who decreed he must change the sign. He conceded on the English, changing the name of the business to Berson & Fils, but fought to keep the Hebrew word for 'monuments'

the same size as the French word, instead of half the size as required by Quebec language legislation. There was enough media attention and community uproar that the OLF let it be.

Now, though we have had our backs to him, I realize Leonard is watching us: like Dr. T.J. Eckleburg in *The Great Gatsby*, a nine-story mural of Leonard's somber, fedora-shaded face stares down from the side of a building. It is not the first time I've seen the mural, but it is different to see it now, today, when we are looking for Leonard and here, overlooking the grave of the gravestone place.

It strikes me as typical of my hometown that all the necessary paperwork could be processed, permits granted, machinery rented, and it could still take the mural painter by surprise to discover that another Leonard mural was being painted simultaneously. The other mural towers twenty stories over the city's downtown core; it, too, is of elderly Fedora-Leonard, who returned regularly to the city of his birth 'to renew his neuroticism,' rather than young, black-haired, black-eyed Leonard, who needed to escape it.

We continue down this aorta of the city, this street named for a saint - who, I am shocked to learn when I look it up subsequently, is the patron saint of archives, archivists, armories, armourers, brewers, butchers, chefs and a veritable laundry list of other labourers, including laundry workers. He is the patron saint of the poor, of students, stained glass workers and wine makers. He protects against lumbago and against fire, although I don't know this when we pass the

Figure 3 : Berson Sculpture Park



Photo by Author

intersection of what I still think of as ‘Pine and St. Lawrence,’ even though it has been *des Pins* and *St-Laurent* for well over three decades. Friends of mine barely escaped burning to death in their loft at this corner, when a fire was set in the failing restaurant underneath it.

I tell Matthew about these friends, one of whom was the first in our circle to get cancer; she has been dead almost seven years now. I tell him how I always think of this couple here, though they broke up long ago and the building’s façade is unrecognizable and the 4 Brothers grocery store, as we used to call it, is long gone. He tells me how the corner of Prince Arthur and St. Laurent does the same thing to him: he always thinks of a university classmate, someone he met decades ago when he first moved to the city of Montreal from the rural Prairies, who took him out to a bar and turned him on to good wine.

As we approach the Slovenia delicatessen, Matthew says, ‘I hope you know this is also a food pilgrimage for me.’ We enter, and he buys a sausage sandwich. I am surprised to find the display of meats here doesn’t disgust me, as butcher shops usually do. I am strangely moved by the orderliness of the imported European

Figure 4 : Slovenia Jars



Photo by Author

Figure 5 : Like a Bird on a Wire



Photo by Author

jams and pickles. I buy a chocolate bar for my father, who likes it very dark.

We pass a huge, intensely colourful mural dedicated to missing indigenous women, painted on the wall of the building that houses an anarchist bookstore. The boulevard slopes downhill to Metro Saint-Laurent, a station I passed through a million times in another life. At the south end of the lot outside the Metro, there is a wall on which you can see the tar outline of a building that used to abut it, but I don’t remember what used to be here.

Clusters of people are standing around a temporary installation called *Instrument à vent* – ‘wind instrument’ - a collection of huge pipes that appear to be growing out of the earth like a copse of bright metal trees. According to the artist’s statement, the work came out of his reflection on the absurdity of seeking silence in an environment where noise is omnipresent; if one can’t silence the world, he states, the option remains to play with its sounds.

Alone and in pairs, people approach the platform and call down into a wide metal pipe. Matthew and I do the same, and the *instrument à vent* picks up our incoherent harmony and plays it back, like a massive church organ.

We walk down and through Old Montreal, talking about the same subjects we usually do, which somehow never bores us: about our parents (mine, in their late eighties, the reason I have spent much of the summer here, and his, who, though long divorced, recently died within a year or so of each other); about

Figure 6 : Instrument a Vent



Photo by Author

writing (I'm not, really, and he has just returned from a trip to eastern Quebec, where he was reworking his novel to be true to details he had misremembered); about home (do I think of myself as being 'from' Montreal, where I was born and lived till I was twenty-eight, or 'from' New York, where I have lived just a few years less than that, and where all my books live? Is he 'from' Saskatchewan, where he is about to go walking across prairies for two weeks, over earth that speaks to his bones and his entrails, or 'from' Montreal, where he works and has friends and raised his daughter and learned about opera and wine?)

We have not articulated this, exactly, but we know the endpoint of the pilgrimage is Notre Dame de Bonsecours, the church overlooking the old port, topped by the statue of 'our lady of the harbour' in Cohen's *Suzanne*. I can't help thinking, when I first spot her, that her crown of stars looks like those on European Union flags, and that her two-arms-raised position reminds me of a rock star. Her bodyguards are angels. I stare at their wings and the folds of Our Lady's cloak, rendered in copper cladding that humidity and snow long ago turned green. In places, you can see the rusted seams where pieces of metal were fused together to form their robes.

Suddenly, I think of the time I was inside the body of the Statue of Liberty. For a moment, it really doesn't matter where home is.

Figure 7 : Notre Dame



Photo by Author