

PRRB the Pacific Rim Review of Books

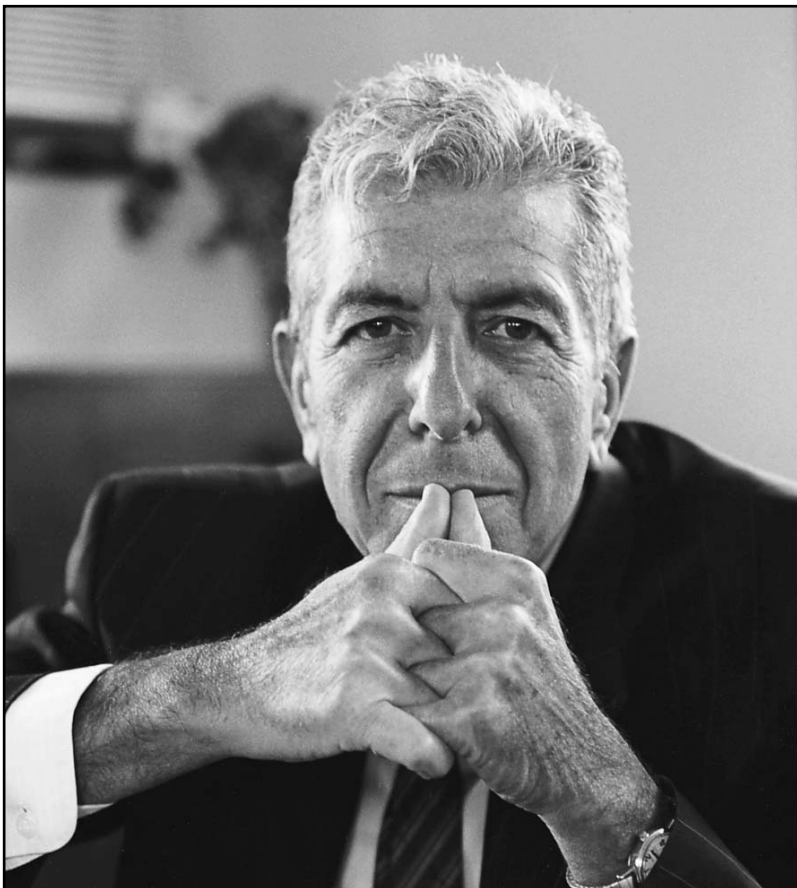
Issue Four, Fall 2006

Publication Mail Agreement Number 4123503

ISSN 1715-3700

\$4.00

SPECIAL EDITION



Cohen's Recursive Longing

SOUL POET:

JOSEPH BLAKE ON SAM COOKE

REMEMBERING
CID CORMAN, PART 2
BY GREGORY DUNNE

DIPLOMAT REG LITTLE ON
THE WORLD OF BLOOD AND OIL:
THE NEW WORLD AT WAR

ANDREW SCHELLING GOES
OVER THE RIVER

WHY OLSON MATTERS
BY PETER GRANT

TRANSLATOR RED PINE ON
DANCING WITH THE DEAD

APIS TEICHER ON
THE CRYSTAL PROSE OF
KATHERINE GOVIER

TANGIER RENEGADE:
IRA COHEN INTERVIEWS
PAUL BOWLES

LINDA ROGERS ON
DEDE CRANE AND
PATRICIA YOUNG

**IN FORMLESS
CIRCUMSTANCE...**
TREVOR CAROLAN ON
LEONARD COHEN

**RUMI: ENCOUNTERING
A REMARKABLE MAN**
BY HUSSEIN SAMET

BOOK OF LONGING

Trevor Carolan

Book of Longing

Leonard Cohen, M & S. 232 pp. \$32.99

*All busy in the sunlight / The flecks did float and dance /
And I was tumbled up with them / In formless circumstance*
Leonard Cohen

It's not everyday that Leonard Cohen releases a new collection of his poetry. Twenty years have passed since his last volume. Meanwhile, his albums of songs keep piling up—17 at last count. Who at one time or another hasn't been captured by Cohen's plaintive meditations?

Cohen has always been a bard of flesh and melancholy. An arch-romantic, his fleshy lyrics have figured in more seduction scenes than Elizabeth Taylor, so his new title, *Book of Longing*, is worth having. For most Canadians of a certain age he was the first living poet we actually read for pleasure, or employed in getting to the heavy breathing after dinner with a consenting partner. Forget the instruction manual, keep old loverboy Cohen on your bookshelf.

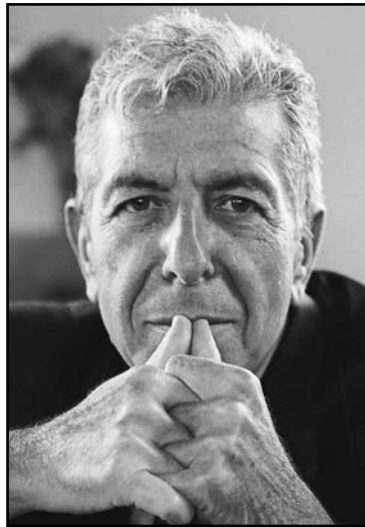
From his tragic amours, to his angst-filled business affairs, to his recent concert documentary produced by Mel Gibson, there's a lot of Leonard Cohen in the air these days. At 70, his latest collection hints at it all. In one poem here, "Love Itself", that appeared on his last album, *Ten New Songs*, Cohen offers the Zen-inflected phrase "formless circumstance." As bumper-sticker wisdom has it, Shit Happens, and it seems that's the news, in part, he brings us from his five year sojourn as ordained monk in the Zen Buddhist tradition of his master Kyozan Joshu Roshi. *Book of Longing* packs it all in: the good, the slight, and the ugly of being a Montrealer who struck it big in the world.

As poet, Cohen has kept it reasonably simple since first making headlines a dozen books ago with *Let Us Compare Mythologies* and *The Spice-Box of Earth*. It's easy to forget his first books were contemporaneous with those of Kerouac and Ginsberg. Cohen's images are clear and uncomplicated. Like Shelley, he speaks from the heart, and therein lies the secret of his popularity. Coming up at a time when Canadian poetry and literature was cloaking itself in nationalism before succumbing to the academic dullness of imported theory that too often has resulted in flakey imitations of sad originals, Cohen by contrast has always kept it easy and slow. His practice, such as it is, has been the simple bravery of publishing whatever it is he's completed and polished, warts and all, take it or leave it.

The new work, for the most part, is polished. Technical virtuosity à la Timothy Steele though, has never been Cohen's calling card. Rather, he works with mood, timbre, emotion, and as ever, a kind of cocksure undergrad élan. Many of these pieces have clearly been lugged about in pockets and notebooks for years, and there's a fair amount of rhyming ballad form, tending toward song. Cohen aficionados will observe the inclusion of what Allen Ginsberg called 'diary poetics' too, as the 70 year old master tidies up his literary flotsam and jetsam in what's a substantial compendium of more than 200 pages.

Longing is dedicated to Cohen's old master, Irving Layton. Perhaps unsurprisingly, like his mentor Cohen's work is prefigured by narcissism and an expansive view of what it means to live, breath and love as a man, artist, Jew, showman, and in Cohen's case, Buddhist seeker in uncertain times. Where Layton as egoist came on with swollen chest, Cohen's narcissism is subtle, extending even to his humility. It's a fascinating act of conscious self-exposure that weaves itself throughout the *Longing* poems, but far from being charmless Cohen makes even this work too.

Like Henry Miller, a fellow poet of the body with whom Cohen also shares a lust for spiritual enlightenment, Cohen reveals himself as an artist of considerable talent as well. Most poems are accompanied by his own drawings, woodcut-style images, or



*Poetry is just the
evidence of life. If
your life is burning
well, poetry is just
the ash.*

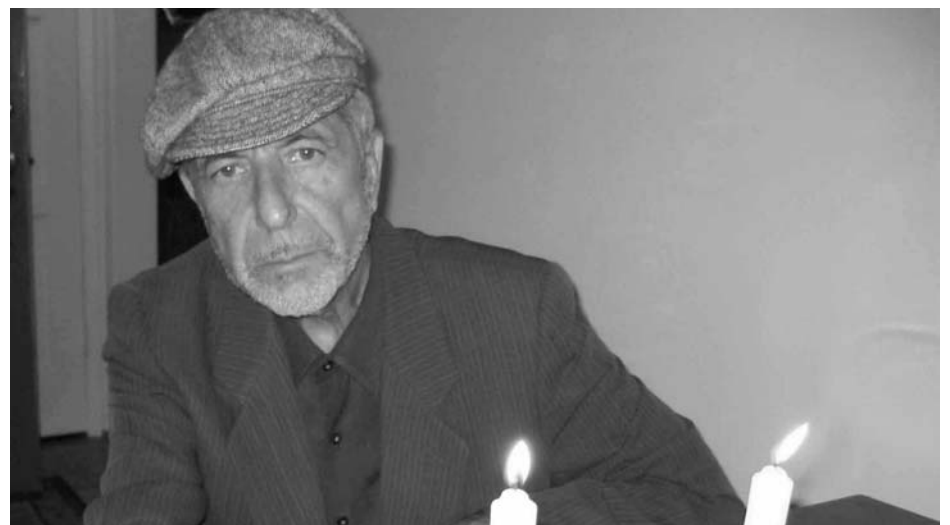
graphic ornamentation. The strongest are his self-portraits. Modigliani, Schiele and Van Gogh come to mind in viewing these images, often reproduced in various forms on different pages—in b & w reverses, blow-ups, close-ups, and the like. This adds a tremendous dimension and makes *Longing* not just a lengthy, absorbing read, but a coffee-table keeper to boot. An ambitious work that brings in everything but the kitchen sink, it's a compelling collection that has one picking it up again and again.

For anyone interested in Cohen the man, the Mt. Baldy poems are of particular interest. In "The Party Was Over Then Too", he explains his original retreat motivation: "I joined a tiny band of steel-jawed zealots / who considered themselves / the Marines of the spiritual world..."

Celebrating what Buddhists understand as 'everyday sacraments'—the plain taste of ordinary life maintenance activities—in poems such as "Leaving Mt. Baldy ('I finally understood / I had no gift / for spiritual matters)", "The Lovesick Monk", "Early Morning at Mt. Baldy", he bridges the sacred and profane in recounting everything from writerly solitude, to self-abnegation, dressing for zazen meditation at 4 am in the cold with a hard-on, to the joys of cunnilingus, and the curiously complementary self-discipline of avoiding female intimacy. Often, self-deprecating humour underscores his declarations, although in offerings like "Other Writers", some of the pretty-boy poetic arrogance we saw in *The Energy of Slaves* from the 1970s, and that was hinted at from his earliest collections, creeps in. No matter, this poet sees through himself and his narratives lead inevitably to the epiphanies of such enduring later Cohen classics as "Love Itself", "A Thousand Kisses Deep", and "Here It Is". But then, as Susan Musgrave has reminded us, this man's lyrics "have never been just lyrics; they are a way of life."

Ever since "The Maple Leaf Forever" faded into post-colonial obscurity as Canada's unofficial anthem, Cohen's "Suzanne Takes You Down" has pretty well taken its place as the people's hymn in the Great White North. Happily, its same style and rag-tag melancholy are still with us in *Book of Longing*. Take "The Mist of Pornography":

*'when you rose out of the mist
of pornography
with your talk of marriage
and orgies
I was a mere boy
of fifty-seven
trying to make a fast buck
in the slow lane...'*



(continued on Page 32)

TWO BY RHENISCH

Linda Rogers

Harold Rhenisch is “hard of hearing,” but as far as I know, no one has accused him of having a tin ear. In the new book, *Winging Home*, another in a growing collection of lyrical non-fiction, the conversation of birds is pitch perfect.

Rhenisch, a poet to his bones, is a new world essayist with an old world sensibility. Growing up “German” in the post-war years in the interior of BC was no easy task. Germans were the old axis of evil, every last one of them. Even the descendents of Mennonite exiles, like the writer Andreas Schroeder, felt the prejudice. Perhaps that is what gives Rhenisch the outsider’s perspective that makes his writing so rich in fresh impressions. He is the perennial newcomer, his senses alert to phenomenal information. Every paragraph is a virtual landscape complete with the sounds he struggles to hear. Every line is poetry.

A few years ago, my husband and I had dinner with Harold and his wife Diane in a German restaurant at a posh ranch in the Cariboo. Replete with six-foot Teutonic blonde buckaroos, the dining room could have been directly translated from the Black Forest. No one but us spoke English. “Ask them why they are so smitten with our wilderness,” I insisted to our host. “No,” Rhenisch refused, “I only speak Canadian.” That was true and not true. Of all the contemporary writers, Harold, his perceptive eye trained on his surroundings, could be the most indigenous of our writers. And yet, he is also the quintessential European, his DNA informed by an ancient culture, his other language the Low German of his ancestors.

The birds have their own language, a *singspiel* of life on the move. Like Rhenisch, they are questors on journeys determined by genetics and circumstance. A German Romantic to his core, Rhenisch is fascinated by the harmony and cacophony of his feathered co-evolutionaries. In the solitude of the sound challenged, he hears more than most people.

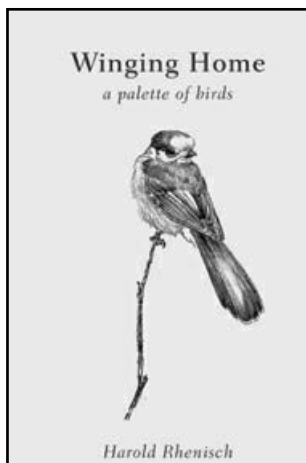
At once a diary recording the seasonal visitation of birds in his neighbourhood, *Winging Home* is also a map of Rhenisch’s overlapping civilizations, old world and new. His observations of bird species are parallel to human references. Birds are social. Human beings are social. In the magic of transformation the reader is invited into the very minds of his feathered visitors. Humorous in their aspirations, touching in their loyalty, and frightening in their fury, birds are us.

“The chorus of blackbirds is definitely not a song. It is a lot more like the sound of a factory, choreographed by a mad genius in a green velvet jacket cut from a curtain in 1914 London... It has been compared to the sound of an orchestra tuning up... The blackbirds make all these sounds at once. They may be in a group, but they do not sing as a group.”

Rhenisch offers chicken feed and rotten apples to his flying guests. To his readers he gives prose as rich as fruitcake. His musings are to be browsed, taken with a glass of port and savoured, bite-by-bite, as chapters introduced by proverbs progress like seasons beside the lake, which holds memory in patterns as beautiful and dangerous as the ice-covered water that sometimes tempts the traveler to exceed his reach.

If *Winging Home* is the diary of a poet circled by wings, *The Wolves at Evelyn* is about a poet running with the wolves, their teeth nipping his winged heels. Both memoir and meditation, *The Wolves at Evelyn* is the recollections of a boy whose imagination ran wild in an orchard of Eden enclosed by fences as rigid as the Berlin Wall. A dreamer trapped in the hardworking reality of immigrant life, the poet goes back and forth in time, explaining in jump cuts the history that illuminates the present.

“For my brother and me, it was still World War 11. We were hidden from terror and kept distant from the corrupting influences of art and culture, history and philosophy. For our parents, those were the killers. It was the artists who had betrayed, the artists whose desire to dismantle culture had led to war. To keep us safe, we were hidden among working people in a mountain valley two hundred miles from the ocean, hidden on a farm in the midst of a settlement of Canadian soldiers, hidden in work and the folds of the land, wrapped up in a Hudson’s Bay Company trade blanket, washed in a wash tub, taught to whistle for birds by a woman who could still

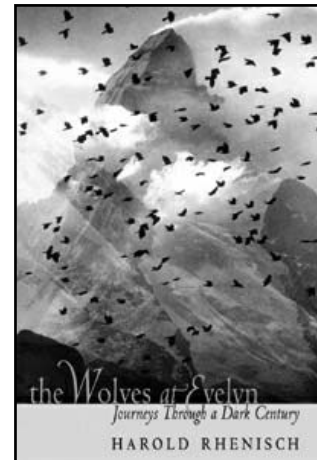


Winging Home:
a palette of birds
Harold Rhenisch,
Brindle & Glass. 242 pp.
\$24.95

remember operas, without the words, if that was possible. It was possible. A new world would come from us.”

How ironic that the young ironist, his malice leavened by humour, would become a poet, the most “frivolous” of artists. The charm of *The Wolves at Evelyn*, is his lucid presentation of the confused songlines of a child lost in the wilderness of the Twentieth Century. Speaking directly to the reader in idiosyncratic language, a compelling mixture of rhetoric and plainsong, Rhenisch has made a folktale out of his own history. The writer is Hansel following breadcrumbs out of the black forest of mythology back to the humble hut where the Canadian journey began, and back to Europe with his eldest child, Anassa, where they trip on the dreadful family legacy. As Father and daughter follow the breadline from the Third Reich to rural British Columbia and begin the healing process of reconciling past and present, guilt and redemption, that new world at last becomes a real possibility.

Linda Rogers writes on Arts and Culture for Focus Magazine. Her novel *The Empress Letters* will appear in 2007.



The Wolves at Evelyn:
Journeys through a
dark century
Harold Rhenisch,
Brindle & Glass. 312 pp.
\$24.95

COHEN (continued from Page 5)

Balance this with the sheer bullshit nuttiness of “Dear Diary” (“Dear diary / I mean no disrespect / But you are more sublime / Than any Sacred text. / Sometimes just a list / Of my events / Is holier than the Bill of Rights / And more intense.”). It’s like we’re hearing the same impish voice that Donald Brittain’s NFB documentary, *Ladies and Gentleman, Leonard Cohen*, brought to us, but only four decades further along the razor-blade of life. For this poet whom we’ve loved with that mixed regard peculiar to Canada, is indeed growing old. Cracks about aging—wrinkles, prozac, hearing aids, halitosis, gaining weight—abound in this volume.

Even so, for this self-confessed creaky sybarite, Woman still exists as muse. If expressions of whatever Buddhist awareness he acquired may seem slim after five years of renunciation atop Mt. Baldy, Cohen’s salty old tangos in homage to the female of the species still bump and grind along with the limp and swagger of a mythic boulevardier. From the title piece:

*I know she is coming
I know she will look
And that is the longing
And this is the book.*

Prepare yourself for a jolt when you read this truly long-awaited book. Mortality can be a bitch, even for the blessed, but we can be grateful for this look inside the medicine cabinet of experience that keeps Leonard Cohen out on point for our graying culture. *Pax vobiscum* homeboy.

Trevor Carolan is the international editor of PRRB.

(m)Öthêr Tõnguê Press

private literary press
Saltspring Island, B.C.

www.mothersonguepress.com
orders@mothersonguepress.com