

Josie Di Sciascio-Andrews

The First Time I heard Leonard Cohen

We were walking into the auditorium
While the much-awaited band from Rochester
Set up & tuned their instruments
To perform *Jesus Christ Superstar*.
In the dissonant din of brass
And electric amps, in John Lennon
Glasses, a Janis Joplin-like lead singer
Whisper-tapped *testing, testing* on the mic.
Below the stage we were a squirming sea
Of curls and denim when *Suzanne*
Started playing on the P.A.
Leonard Cohen's unmistakeable voice
Leading us to the baptismal waters
Of a river where *you could hear the boats go by*.
Something so pure about the words.
Something so lovely about his *lady of the harbour*.
Guiding us like Mary to the grand simplicity
Of, as godly a thing, as friendship and love.
Suzanne or *Jesus* taking me personally
Too, by the hand, to the Jordan
To heal my teenage angst, at being so new
To English and Canada. There was something
Exotic about those *tea and oranges that came*
All the way from China. Something sacramental.
In those austere years when the only things
That came to our school were kids of poor immigrants
Seeking jobs from Portugal, Italy, Greece, or Yugoslavia
And all that was available at Dominion
Was Orange Pekoe Tea from England &
Sunkist oranges from the Sunshine State.
A cup of tea. Oranges. Love holding us by the hand.
A summer day in a house of light by the water.

Leonard's notes called us out of ourselves
To follow him like a pied piper to the village
To travel with him, travel blind, to touch the divinity

of things. We, the doubting Thomases,
With our wounds and griefs, uncharted
Anxieties and depressions, already at fifteen
Until Leonard named them with his song.
The mess of us. Our generation.
A hornet nest of idealisms. Long hair
And faded Levi's, in a morning assembly
Of a Canadian high school gym in 1970.
And then, the American rock band
That had hit town early that morning
In blue Greyhound buses from New York State,
Broke out in a thunderstorm of instrumentation.
The multitude of our cohort swaying, as if God-led,
After Leonard Cohen's antiphonal, to see Christ
Among us, in the guise of the new kid,
The weird kid, the fat kid, the one smoking pot
On the tree outside the library window.
The kid bullied by some rich roman-nosed jock
And that jerk's snooty girlfriend Eve, Sue, Karen
Or other, taunting, jeering, and mocking them
With: *Hey there superstar! Do you think
You're really what they say you are?*

Editor's Note: Leonard Cohen was a prolific Canadian singer-songwriter, poet, songwriter, and novelist. His songs include "Hallelujah" and "Suzanne". Jesus Christ Superstar is a musical by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice.

The Red Accordion

By ear, at five
My father
Learned to play
An instrument too big
For tiny shoulders to endure.

On slow, hot afternoons
After a day of harvest,
Zio Domenico offered him wine,
Secrets of manhood, cigarettes.
Strapped an accordion
To his tender arms,
Then taught his little fingers to seek
Out harmonic nuances
On a pearly keyboard to the right,
While cohering rhythm from the randomness
Of small, black buttons to the left.

Two ventricles
Bellowing in and out the sound
Waves of a universe expanding
From a silken, fanned out lung
Opening wide the landscape of a life,
Inevitably returning
To the corpus callosum of itself,
Collapsing beauty shut.

Like a butterfly with pleated paper wings
My father mastered syncopated rhapsodies
Molding heart to calculated sequences.

Keeping tempo
In the gaps.

Like heart beats.

Time in one hand,
Space in the other.

A tiny God
Juggling spheres.

I always remember him middle-aged
Sitting on the basement couch
Of the Oakville bungalow
He bought for us in 1970.

I still see him with a glass
Of whiskey or home-made wine
Before a winter night
Shift at the refinery, teary-eyed
And nostalgic, playing old tunes
On a second-hand accordion.

I remember how it bothered him
Not to be able to reach a certain note
Because of a missing key.

He had his eye on a new, red one
That he'd seen in a music shop window
In Clarkson—was planning to buy it
After the last mortgage payment
Of what was to become
His last spring.

On the broken accordion
The quality of sound was good regardless.

How like my father to make good
Of the worst or the mediocre.
His fingers harmonizing joy
For us, in allegro, andante.
Improvising the frenzied flights
Of old-world landscapes.
Waltzes and tangos. Mazurkas.

Inevitably entering into the segue of silence.
The long slow notes
Of a loveless winter.

And then briefly, the joyful reprieve
Of a ripresa. Stitching back
The sweetness of a singable refrain
From some top-forty radio hit
Like Tie a Yellow Ribbon
'Round the Old Oak Tree.

A heart zigzagging spasmodic
Sound right to the end.

Like a blood song.
A song beginning.
A song ending.
With so much urgent striving in between.

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Author Biography

Josie Di Sciascio-Andrews is a poet, an author, and a teacher. She has written seven collections of poetry. Her work has been published in many journals and anthologies and has won many prizes. Her latest book of poems, Meta Stasis, was published by Mosaic Press and released June 2021. Josie is a member of The League of Canadian Poets; the Ontario Poetry Society, and she is the host & coordinator of The Oakville Literary Cafe series. She currently lives and writes in Oakville, Ontario, Canada.

