

Creation And Destruction

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Is it possible to find valid arguments for creation in times seemingly characterized only by destruction? Can beauty ever be a match for "might is right?" Do the world's creative and destructive forces ask themselves the same questions? Is Nordahl Grieg's classic line from 1936, "Peace is to create," still valid?

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Hallelujah

At the end of August 2001, I was a fly on the wall at the tri-annual Nordic Authors Rights Symposium in Akureyri, an enclave nicknamed the Capital of North Iceland. The brief arctic summer was already giving way while Nordic Authors Rights lawyers and CEOs debated about and lectured on our options to survive through creating - or at least not become extinct in the attempt. One interesting 35-page paper discussed "What is a work of art?" It's strange how something seemingly so obvious to creators can end up the subject of an exhaustive, well-reasoned, juridical yet inconclusive analysis. Nonetheless, this will undoubtedly become a vital issue for creators in a digital, global future where the original will be at risk and the copy will prevail.

At the sole bookstore in Akureyri, I found one of the *originals* that is much desired but rarely found on the shelves of a Danish provincial bookstore: Leonard Cohen's "Stranger Music." Iceland, a nation of only 270.000 inhabitants, releases more books annually in their native language than any other nation in the world. And here in this remote location just below the arctic circle, one finds flowers of diversity from a wide world of original creation. What is it with these people? In Denmark, the pride to create and act in your own language with your own cultural peculiarity often leads to accusations of provincialism or even nationalism. Why? It is they - and not we - who possess a remarkable cultural curiosity and openness, offering access to sublime, international expressions – while still taking pride in their own language and deep roots?

Cohen's poems became my companions as I travelled around the island for the week following the symposium. They lifted the immense landscapes high above themselves.

On a silent Saturday afternoon, I drove into a diminutive village, comprising three houses and a gas station, on the east coast for fuel and a cup of coffee. Like every small Icelandic gas station, this one had an even smaller cafeteria. While I was waiting for the coffee I searched through the two boxes of CDs on the counter. Amongst these 20-30 albums were Billy Joel's "Piano Man" and Jeff Buckley's

"Grace." Afterwards, "Hallelujah" played on repeat throughout my journeys around Iceland. Only after three days of driving and listening did I enter deeply enough into the flow of the song to look for the lyrics on the cover. They were not there. Instead, to my surprise, I realised that "Hallelujah" was an old Cohen song. How in heaven's name had I overlooked this song for so many years? When I searched "Stranger Music," of course, I found the poem. In my mind, Iceland will forever be connected with that simple prayer: "Hallelujah:"

*I've heard there was a secret chord
that David played to please the Lord
But you don't really care for music, do you?
It goes like this: the fourth, the fifth
the minor fall, the major lift;
The baffled king composing Hallelujah!*

*I did my best; it wasn't much.
I couldn't feel, so I learned to touch
I've told the truth, I didn't come to fool you.
And even though it all went wrong,
I'll stand before the Lord of Song
with nothing on my lips but Hallelujah!*

The Sisters Of Mercy

On Saturday, September 8, 2001 I flew into Montreal, Canada, the most likely place on the globe, I reckoned, to find *them*: the sisters and brothers of The Poet.

I had been asked to participate on behalf of Danish composers along with Film directors and actors in diversity at the first international meeting on Cultural Diversity in the wake of the ongoing WTO negotiations. Canada had invited representatives from film, media, literature and music - creators, performers, independent producers and publishers alike - from ten countries to this first attempt to construct a global process to assure and safeguard the right to cultural diversity.

The meeting was to open Tuesday, September 11, following an official reception on Monday night, at which the Minister of Culture of Quebec would greet the participants on behalf of the government. But, because flights are cheaper if the trip includes Saturday night, I arrived a few days early, providing me the opportunity to search for traces of one of the two Canadians I knew to have been born and raised in Montreal.

The cultural diversity of any foreign nation always becomes very clear when presented to you by your taxi driver. So, when I entered the cab at Dorval Airport in stifling heat, my first question was, "Aren't you terribly proud that Leonard Cohen was born here?" "Leonard who?" was the extremely polite response, set forth in measured English inflected with an unmistakable French accent. Upon traveling only a few hundred meters on my first Canadian highway, a split society disclosed itself to me. This black man was a French Canadian, and the division was no less obvious than when walking near the

now symbolic division at Berlin Brandenburger Tor - beneath the German inner and outer lime trees – “Unter den Linden.”

The next day this insurmountable distinction was made even more obvious by my conversation with a twenty-five-year-old, somewhat spiteful girl. From the box of her tourist horse cart she guided her Queenie through the traffic of Old Montreal with a disdain for death equalled by her contempt for *the English*.

On being presented with the Cohen question, she too offered only a vague, reluctant recognition: to her, he was clearly one of *the others*. He belonged to the rich suburbanites up the mountain west of the St. Lawrence River. "We French," she said, "have to live and work in the flat and ugly East Side where the rich English build their factories. We have to live with their pollution and their shit, growing sick while they live in their beautiful, cool giant houses beneath shadowy trees, houses built from the money we have earned for them!" I guess she was not one of *them*.

My heart immediately started creating excuses for my hero. Strictly speaking, he could not be held responsible for his birthplace. And had he not spent his creative life as a painstaking builder of bridges, examining the cruelty of the world and offering love?

All this came up as we jog-trotted past the artificial islands by the harbourfront where the Quebec Indians were holding their annual powwow with the old chiefs leading traditional dances. The young men participated with that mixture of deference and impatience felt by all upcoming leaders to crowd out the old ones. The grandmothers took the little girls by their hands like queens and had them experience tradition through the movements of their bodies. There was a clear difference between male and female dances. My young, pert female driver, who had to earn money for her studies transporting tourists and other suppressers, exhibited even more contempt and spite towards these indigenous Canadians. The pecking-order was clearly delineated; pressure generates counter-pressure – as well as an ability to identify a powerlessness visibly deeper than one's own.

Montreal, it turns out, wasn't the place to find a guide to sublime creation. My desperate need to know if The Poet was the result only of inner landscapes or if he carried traces of environmental influences as well remained unrequited.

A biography indicated that the Cohen family home had been located in Westmount with a garden overlooking Murray Hill Park. My map showed a pearl string of parks in Montreal, but not a Murray Hill Park. My last resort: The Tourist Office. The merciful and helpful women working there immediately invested themselves in my problem. Yes - they knew who Leonard Cohen was (thank God!), but no, they had no material about him. But one of them would, they volunteered, search the net. They were profoundly apologetic that their computers were so very old and slow. It took so long to just get online, but they would try.

Every ten minutes, a young woman surfaced to inform me there was still no result. After an hour of waiting, I surrendered. I went away wondering. “Was he only world famous in Denmark? Or could it be so Andersen'ically grotesque that even in major countries - not just in small barnyards inhabited by ducklings – a prophet is not without honor, except in his own country?”

*Suddenly the night has grown colder.
The God above preparing to depart.*

Later that night, after I had fled the air-conditioning of the hotel room for the dense, unusually hot September night, I saw students from the nearby university campus carrying chairs, tables, food and candlesticks and setting them up beneath the trees for a meal by the big fountain. I sat on a granite bench watching the young boys - who were only a few months too young and still too shy to expend their life forces on the as yet unattainable girls. Instead, they challenged each other to perform skateboarding stunts. Who could jump the edges of the granite benches, skate safely along the edge, land and roll on? Again and again this exercise in elegance and stamina was replayed. Even when the skateboarders inevitably fell, they appeared graceful and invulnerable. And, rather than exhibit irritation or vexation when tourists (like me) used the benches for their original purpose, the skateboarders simply and adeptly slowed to a stop, waited until the passage was clear again, and then resumed. They had time enough to burn before nature made them ready for the girls and the girls ready for them.

A young woman passed me in the twilight, then turned around and approached me. "Oh - my God! - It's YOU. I found him!" she said. Out of 3.3 million Montreal inhabitants plus the tourists, visiting businessmen, and other transients in town that day, the same young woman from the Tourist Office who had tried to answer my questions had bumped into me on her way back from work. While I had given up, she had persisted in her search. "He was born on Belmont Avenue." Maybe *they* are to be found in tourist offices? She was clearly one of *them*! She had not been able to find the house number, but on the map I found a short part of Belmont Avenue with yards bordering a King George Park. At the foot of the park was a very short section piece of roadway called Murray Hill Street.

Back in the hotel room I searched the telephone books. Maybe some Cohens still lived on that street, and I could find the house number. The directory listed hundreds of Cohens in Montreal, but none resided on Belmont Avenue. The next morning, I went up the mountain. I was dropped at the foot of the park and walked slowly and attentively uphill towards Roslyn Elementary School, where Leonard Cohen had been a student.

The high school he attended is a little further down the mountain, but Roslyn is beautifully sited uphill in an open space between the avenues lined with and overshadowed by plane and sycamore trees. Carved in stone on one end of the school was "Boys' Entrance;" engraved on the opposite side, separated by the entirety of the massive building, was "Girls' Entrance." It was not difficult to imagine the scene sixty years earlier. Children of that age exist independently of time and space. A bell chimed, and loud, happy voices filled the entrances. When silence returned, I walked past the main entrance back towards Belmont Avenue, but immediately regretted that I would never be here again. This was a time that called for boldness. I strode to the main doorway and entered the front corridor, stale and stifling hot as an oven. The next door was locked. When I pushed the button I heard a bell ringing in the office a few steps up ahead. Nothing happened. Children and grownups came and went in the corridor behind the glass door; but no one reacted to my ringing. I felt I would faint from the heat and lack of air. I rang the bell again. Just when I was ready to give up, a buzzer sounded, allowing me to open the door.

Once inside the office, I was confronted with a mountain of a woman seated with her back turned to me. I waited politely for a long time, having immediately realised she was definitely not one of *them*! One could expect no mercy whatsoever from her. She lacked only the Sam Browne belt to look the part of an archetypal authority figure ready to impose her power to exact revenge on anyone anywhere for somehow forcing someone her size into such a narrow chair. I knew dealing with her would require some serious hustling and sweet talking. When she finally turned toward me, I switched on the charm, always and anywhere the course of action with the greatest likelihood of success. And, indeed, she melted before my onslaught of flattery. Her change in attitude toward me did not, of course, prevent her ignoring, without any visible remorse, another guest who was, in that sweltering heat, ringing the bell in vain for fully five minutes. When a teacher came into the office and asked her why she did not open the door, she lied with the effortless ease earned only through a lifetime of practice, "I was out back in the archive." To me, she said, no, they had no official records for Leonard Cohen. Some years ago, she recalled, a man who was writing a biography had asked the same questions, but they had no material. The archives had been placed in storage. She did not quite remember; but yes - there had been something, now that he had died! I explained that he had not died at all. He had come down from his Buddhist retreat on Mt Baldy and was, in fact, just then releasing his first album after ten years of silence. I told her that perhaps they should prepare for the day he did die, because I was sure that then they would be besieged by people who - like me - wanted to feel the traces and presence of a great artist. For the price of ten dollars I purchased a book celebrating a jubilee of Roslyn Junior School in the vain hope that I might catch a glimpse of a little Leonard in the photographs I didn't find any likeness, but I did read that King George had, at some point, visited the loyal English-minded royalists of Westmount and that they had, on that occasion, renamed their park. The removal of the school archives had erected an obstacle to my quest for traces of the songwriter's past. They seemed to taunt me: Was I a dedicated searcher or was I just playing a game?

I followed the path I was certain he had taken on his daily walk home from school. Boys possess an uncanny instinct for locating the most direct path between two places. I felt the years disappearing once again as I walked past the dozen or so houses on Belmont Avenue, unsuccessfully trying to identify his home. I stopped a younger woman, who at first just looked at me and then turned away with suspicion. Slowly, however, she thawed. She nearly became one of the sisters. No, had he really been born here? She had thought he was born in the Latin Quarter. No, she did not know where. I continued on and found the only living soul in the street other than hundreds of squirrels, a handsome elderly gentleman watering his roses. He seemed to be of the proper age to maybe remember. Could I disturb him for a minute? In broken English with a strong French accent he regretted. He was just the gardener and knew nothing.

The rich dare not remember nor be reminded of the conscience they fear they ought to have. The poor, serving souls do not remember because they had other more immediate things to worry about than singers and poets, who - in the midst of their own lonely search for cohesion - became strangers to all the world.

*All the sisters of Mercy
they are not departed or gone
They were waiting for me
when I thought that I just can't go on*

*And they brought me their comfort
and later they brought me this song
Oh I hope you run into them
you who have been travelling so long*

First We Take Manhattan

At nine o'clock, Tuesday, September 11, the first meeting of the Coalition For Cultural Diversity, an international conference of professional associations from the cultural milieu, convened in Quebec's former Parliament building. Two hours later, alarm began to spread among our Canadian hosts. A film representative, who had just received a call on her cell phone, whispered to me with near-paralysing incomprehensibility in her voice and her eyes, "They say that someone crashed two planes into each tower of the World Trade Centre in New York. They say another plane hit the Pentagon!"

Shortly after this, the conference mediators announced that the convocation would go on despite the circumstances. No one had to point out that the context of the meeting had dramatically shifted. We had gathered, after all, to explore strategies to combat the monopolization of artistic expression and concurrent displacement of local cultural aesthetics by the multinational/American entertainment industries and blind market forces.

My first thought was "This is World War Three. Oh God, let it not be foreign flights!" My next thought was egocentric as well: "When the First and Second World Wars started, who was, by chance, stranded in foreign lands? Who was stranded and could not return home for years or maybe never? How would one cope? Who would clean out my mess of a house if I were not there to do it myself?"

And then came the overpowering thought, "What had I neglected in my personal life - things I assumed I had all the time in the world to do? What had I not said to whom? Which love had stayed unspoken for too long?" And then came the pledge, "If I get back home safely I have to do and say all the things I postponed out of cowardice or egotism. Or was it just out of laziness? All the things I thought could wait for more appropriate times. Times that might never come! All the songs yet to be written."

I was stranded not for five years but only ten days. Since no one, however, could tell us when Air France could fly us out, that week was unbearably long. The bulletins came in day by day, hour by hour. It was, of course, impossible to play the role of tourist under such circumstances. Colourful Hawaiian shirts, shorts, sandals, cameras ... nearly made me throw up. Instead, the days were spent glued to the Canadian and American news media in the cold draughts of the hotel's overly robust air conditioning, interrupted only by the daily prayers at Notre Dame Cathedral around the corner and simple meals supplemented by a glass of red wine in the bar at night. Similarly stranded colleagues sat in corners of the hotel waiting for notification that they could go home. We became mute. We had done our work well despite the circumstances. Any additional talk would have approached contempt for the lives lost and for the concern about the American government's ability to react with the necessary wisdom.

My respect for the American media had been minimal, but in those first days following the event, I had to revise my view. There was no advertising, no drawing board-designed, winking, sexually fixated,

morally indifferent pop-rock-tits-hits. I was embarrassed that I had been so prejudiced, that I had been unwilling to offer the benefit of the doubt and consider the possibility that anything good at all from could arise from those sources. CNN and especially ABC were studies in dignity, balancing on a razor's edge to avoid both sensationalism and cynicism. This was in large part due to the outstanding anchor, Peter Jennings, a real human being speaking like a human being. Someone who *was* human despite the inhumanity of the event. He was on the air ten hours a day for five days. Sunday morning, he had invited children into the studio for a direct conversation. Questions. Fear. Caring. The incorruptible wisdom of children. At the end of the show he queried an eight-year-old girl about what she would ask one of the individuals who had done this. After thinking a moment, she said, "I would ask them why they have no heart, 'Why do you want to kill us?'" What Peter Jennings did not say was that this was the *only* valid question to be asked - the one question all the children in the world - big as well as small - have cried out into the emptiness. It is a question still being as lives and daily livelihood are being laid in ruins by any ideology with enough power to make itself a master of human lives. For more than fifty years after Pearl Harbour, this question has sounded more often from the victims of the western world and the American system than from the powerful Americans themselves. Maybe it's not only hatred that is provoked when the globe is punctured; perhaps empathy, compassion and mercy is awakened as well? At least that is the hope.

By Sunday, the advertisers and the rock-videos had sneaked back into the intervals between the news. And by the beginning of the new week the industry was back on track. But even an untrained Danish eye saw clearly that the advertising bureaus had been doing overtime ever since D-day, cutting and adjusting the supply of goods on the stairs of the temple to fit the new order of the world. The show must go on. Business as usual.

*I'm guided by a signal in the
heavens. I'm guided by the
birthmark on my skin. I'm
guided by the beauty of your
weapons. First we take
Manhattan, then we take Berlin*

*I don't like your fashion
business, mister. I don't like
these drugs that keep you thin.
I don't like what happened to
my sister. First we take
Manhattan, then we take Berlin.*

Famous Blue Raincoat

When I finally made it back home, I immediately had to face a challenge to my convictions. Two weeks after my overwhelmingly fearful experience in Canada, I had to choose to either, as the American colloquialism has it, "chicken out" and betray my artistic and professional community or summon the courage to keep my commitment to cross the Atlantic again to attend the Authors and Composers World Congress on behalf of the Danish Authors' Rights' Society, Koda - in New York!

My desire to make this trip was hardly filled with passion. The American military coalition was not yet ready. Rumsfeld would return to the states the very Saturday of our departure, and it was expected, that the Afghanistan offensive would begin immediately after his return. Would I once again risk being caught in a fight between fundamentalists motivated and blinded by malignant narcissism?

I clearly remember the feeling of loneliness and abandonment during what the Americans called the "Gulf War" ten years earlier. If you raised your voice expressing doubt about the American "intelligent bombs," which were held to first knock on the doors of civilian houses to ask if anybody was home before detonating, you were taken to task. Everyone seemed all too willing to believe the newly fabricated myth of a war without civilian casualties. We wanted, needed to believe in the justifications for retaliation, such as the report that Iraqi soldiers had removed babies from incubators and left them to die, a story that, it was later revealed, was the unverified testimony of the daughter of the Kuwaiti Ambassador to the U.S. We wanted so hard to trust these notions because they soothed the gagged conscience. Even good, wise friends saw red or blacked out totally if you dared express a doubt out loud. Silence is very tempting in such circumstances. Who can manifest the courage to stand outside the flock, cold and alone?

Since then, an alert press has uncovered the atrocities we and the West sanctioned with our silence, but, luckily for us, everything had by then become history. These atrocities rose almost to the level of the crimes of Saddam Hussein. The ambassador's daughter had been cast and trained successfully by an international advertising company, and the strategy had matched the intent. The purchased roleplay was created to entice us to buy into the government's premise by making us feel like heroes of justice when we were really sheepish, passive followers.

I flew to New York with a trembling heart and an anxious mind, not so much because of fear about the flight itself or even staying in the violated city but for fear of once again being forced to watch the wall of manipulation mirrored uncritically in the eyes of other people. My mood improved when, during the flight, I read a disarmingly witty parody of a television listing, published in a Danish national paper, featuring a supposed day's programming on Taliban TV. I remember only the children's' hour called "Talibans In Pyjamas," the multitude of programs prohibited to women, and the midnight blue movie prohibited to everyone. Finally, my tormented soul was relieved by laughter after this long month of apprehension.

It turned out to be a very small World Congress. Many would-be participants cancelled their flights for fear. Others conveniently fell ill the very day before departure and could not come. On the other hand, in all other respects, the Congress displayed the force and courage of creation, demonstrating that the world of creators has access to something (maybe the only thing) forceful enough to contradict destruction. While presenting my report, "Creation, Copy and Public Service" I improvised a translation of a few lines from Norwegian, Nordahl Grieg's 1936 poem, essentially "War is contempt for life - Peace is to create."

Every morning when we walked from the Mayflower Hotel on Central Park West to gather in the Parker Meridian conference room, we passed a flock of resolute teenage girls. For days, they had camped in their bedrolls on the sidewalk outside our neighbouring hotel on Columbus Circle. The uniformed doormen did their jobs, held doors, called taxis, all with smiles on their lips. They were

gentle towards the young girls restlessly awaiting revelation. Maybe they remembered their own all too brief youths and their idols. The universal teenager! The boy band, *N'Sync, was in residence at that hotel during those days! Some things in the world never change, come rain or shine. One morning when we passed, I was struck by something unsettlingly familiar in a grey-haired man passing, wearing a worn-out blue rain coat. Respectfully and unseen he yielded to the young girls on his way into the cold city. He reminded me of someone. No one else saw him. It wasn't even raining.

The New York Authors and Composers World Congress, CIAM demonstrated how the principle of creation can call up common denominators between cultural diversities and very different conditions for life and creativity. There was no faltering in the ranks although everyone was apprehensive and shaken to their cores by the possibility of blind revenge. We were the guests of our American colleagues and the American copyright society, ASCAP. But, everyone I met had the courage to separate or connect things as necessary.

On the one hand, there was grief and compassion for the losses of so many lives, but on the other hand, there was a penetrating consciousness that "an eye for an eye - and a tooth for a tooth" is an Old Testament and profoundly fundamentalist concept that was the morally equivalent of the exercise of power based upon the *right of the strongest*.

Whether manifested as the European acceptance of the Jürg Haider or Berlusconi versions or the Taliban version of Afghanistan (a version initially sanctioned and created with the help of the West and the CIA), the principle of *might makes right* cannot be put up for comparison – it is not possible to be “a little” pregnant with power – even if it might be a comforting belief.

Everyday creators confront and contradict the right of the strongest. They notify all rulers that might is **not** the same as right in a way that the mighty men and women cannot ignore. That is why art is a far greater threat to fundamentalist and dictatorial forms of government than any military apparatus. And that is why rulers intoxicated with power overturn sculptures, burn books, *ent-arte* the artistic freedom of speech, kill or incarcerate the carriers of language, music and image - or just ridicule the ones who will not march in time and rank. This holds whether the dictator's source of power be political, religious, or military, or if the power is multinational or economic - the stateless *states* beyond states, which in many cases have grown stronger than any politically formed state. In many cases these non-political states are so powerful that they are able to control world events beyond any democratic scrutiny (albeit often with the initial blessing and encouragement from democracy itself) in the name of the holy and inviolable *market*, even with human lives at stake.

It is indecent and unethical to force an entire world to choose between two forms of fundamentalism: "If you are not with us - you are against us." This is where the role of the arts reveals itself with brilliant clarity, and where I - so near the very centre of the enormous grief still smouldering just a few kilometres down Manhattan - was filled with pride to belong to this group of creators of music gathered in a conference hotel at 53rd Street. We were all in contact with creative courage. No one excused him- or herself as many did with the Gulf war - not even the Serbian composer from Belgrade who was severely injured, having barely survived the last NATO bombings or the Israeli composer who lives with in fear for himself and his loved ones every day. This is the kind of fear that eats away at any chance of empathy and forgiveness and can inflame a blind, inextinguishable hatred. The Lithuanian

composer courageously works with his colleagues – all trapped within the fear of the still eminent shadow of a fallen *might is right* bear - to establish some form of protection for the rights of creators, all with an angelic, historical patience. The Dutch composer, unable to support himself by composing alone, earns his living as a cameraman for Dutch TV2, working from a helicopter for weeks after September 11, to film the chaos on Dutch motorways, where the traffic bottled up again and again because of bomb threats. The traditional division and self-preserving mistrust between very different kinds of musical expressions was suddenly dissolved by an overriding perspective. These and many, many more artists were tied together by one common denominator: faith in the percept that "Peace is to create."

Too often too many of us fall victims of the fallacy that security lies in wielding the greatest power. Instead, the consequent competition – armaments being sold to both sides of conflicts, sanctioned by the scrupulousness of multinational companies and the contempt for life generated by global profit hunting - inevitably leads to an uninhibited, demented version of the *mutually assured destruction* strategy, in which the participants, rather than frightening each other into a coerced peace, contribute, over the long term, to a kind of mass suicide enabled by an ever more plentiful, ever more powerful arsenal of weapons. Such a scenario gives powerful fundamentalists the alibi to enter into an arena of total, catastrophic annihilation. The only effective countermeasure to such forces is Love. Love - the carrier of empathy, openness and compassion. Love - the ability to create and to forgive. Love is, indeed, "the only engine of survival."

*It's four in the morning, the end
of December. I'm writing you now
just to see if you're better. New
York is cold but I like where I'm
living. There's music on Clinton
Street all through the evening...*

And Leonard Cohen ends the song with his solution for ending enmity, a realistic human example that one devoutly wishes all fundamentalists would recognize and emulate.

*...And what can I tell you my
brother my killer? What can I pos-
sibly say? I guess that I miss you.
I guess I forgive you. I'm glad that
you stood in my way. If you ever
come by here for Jane or for me,
I want you to know that your enemy
is sleeping. I want you to know that
his woman is free. Yes, and thanks
for the trouble, you took from her
eyes. I thought it was there for
good, so I never really tried.*

Sincerely, L. Cohen