

—† **RENATE M. MOHR** | Nonsense and Absence

IT WAS THE DAY OF YOUR FUNERAL that Belle Epoque and Beau Geste stopped talking. I can't remember much about that day, but apparently the nonsense, as my family called it, started when we arrived home for the reception.

Lily put down her pencil and stared out the window. The man ice fishing on the river was still there. He had been standing in the same place for an hour or so. Still. Almost frozen. As she watched, she felt pressure on her neck, squeezing her throat. Then the man shifted the weight on his feet. She lifted her pencil and started again.

I REMEMBER THE NIGHT that we chose the names for the children. We sat huddled at this table. It was cold. This house was always cold. You liked it that way. We wrapped ourselves in blankets, lit the candle in the old Chianti bottle, and drank hot red wine out of chipped blue mugs. You liked the smell of the cloves. I liked the warmth. Dawg, in his usual dank and smelly way, was lying on your feet. I started to read from the book of names given to us by my sister. You shook your head all the way through the A's. When I announced that we were headed into the B's, you said Bojangles. I said Bo Radley. You said it's our duty to pay homage to Bob Dylan. That ticked me off. I said, as if Dylan hasn't had his share of recognition. Anyway, it's not Bob Dylan who wrote Mr. Bojangles. It was Jerry Jeff Walker, and if it's going to be Bo anybody, it should be Bo Radley. Boo, you said. It's Boo Radley. I said, fine, Boo it is. The point is that it's Harper Lee who deserves the honour. She created Boo Radley. And what happens? You answered, a Pulitzer and Gregory Peck playing the lead. Now I know you're playing me. No. The point is, everyone still thinks Harper Lee is a man. That's what she gets for creating one of the most . . . and you leaned toward me and kissed me. I tasted the wine and the warmth of your mouth, then you pulled away.

Beau Geste, you said. To end this battle of the genders we need a gesture of magnanimity. The French call it Beau Geste. I will forego Jangles if you let go of Radley and we settle on Beau.

An ache seized her chest. She looked away from the page and out the window. It seemed as if the ice fisher was sitting on an invisible chair. Maybe it

was a stool. Maybe his auger, turned sideways, became a stool. She wanted to stay with the image of the man in the yellow jacket sitting on the silent river. Still. Frozen in time. “Look at the page,” she said out loud. She lowered her eyes. “Keep going.”

BEAU GESTE. I REMEMBER LAUGHING and then arguing that Beau was masculine and if it was a girl I would be damned if the first name she hears is a boy’s name. I said no, if she becomes a writer like you, she is writing as a woman. Not Harper Lee or George Sand. Not Beau but Belle. She will usher in a new age. Belle Epoque, you said. French for a golden age. Our daughter will usher in a golden age. You kissed me again and again. You called me your Muse.

Lily put the pencil down and put another log in the wood stove. “Don’t look out the window,” she said out loud. “Write.” She sat down and picked at the dog hairs on her fleece shirt. Too many hairs. What’s the point, she thought. She picked up the pencil.

WHAT’S THE POINT IN WRITING. That was your job. People have been telling me I have to write because I can’t talk to anyone. Which is not true. I talk to Belle and Beau. But it’s not good enough. My sister Anne, my parents, the school counsellor, they all tell me it’s not good enough. It seems I’m never good enough. I was only ever good at being your Muse. But then Belle was born and you started to disappear, and after Beau I knew you were lost. And I couldn’t bring you back. And you stopped calling me your Muse. And you stopped calling me. And you stopped.

Lily wiped her nose on her sleeve. She put down her pencil and pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes. She looked at the page, picked up the pencil, and started to write again.

SO THEY ALL GOT TOGETHER to tell me that Belle and Beau weren’t grieving in a normal way. I lost it. I screamed. I told them to get out. I said, how dare you presume to know what is normal. I was shaking as I slammed the door. Beau and Belle were still at school so I had the house to myself and that’s when I yelled. The sound that I made scared me. It wasn’t my voice. I couldn’t stop it. It was like an animal being tortured. I could not stop it. You could have found a word to describe it. I can’t.

Then I just sat in the corner, in your study, and hugged my knees. I wanted it to be quiet so I could hear you in the room. Smell the wood smoke on your sweater, the coffee, hear the sounds of tapping. I wanted you to come to me. People told me stories about being visited and comforted by spirits. But you didn't come to me. You left me and you're not coming back.

She looked out and saw the absence of the ice fisher. His chair was still there. But he was not.

IT'S BEEN EIGHT MONTHS. Today is the first day I'm sitting at your desk, writing. I promised Belle and Beau that I would. I'm wearing your sweater. I'm supposed to be writing for myself but it seems I'm writing to you. For you. Through you. God I miss you.

Lily stopped. "Keep writing," she said. "Keep writing."

IT WAS THE DAY OF YOUR FUNERAL that Belle Epoque and Beau Geste stopped talking. They didn't stop altogether but they stopped talking like they used to. My sister told me that she first noticed it in the afternoon when people were arriving here to pay their respects. Belle was in her room. Anne brought her lemonade and asked her how she was feeling. *Mimsy*, she answered. So when she repeated the question, Belle repeated the answer. *Mimsy*. Well, you can just hear Anne's response. Nonsense, she said. *Mimsy* is not a word. Belle, you must try to tell me how you're really feeling. You would have called it Anne's enabler talk. Trying to enable everyone to talk and be just like her. But Belle just repeated *Mimsy*. And that's how Belle answered everyone for the rest of the day.

Apparently, when Anne brought this to my attention later that night, I laughed. I have no memory of anything that happened that week. But it makes sense that I would have laughed. I would not even have attempted to explain to Anne that *Mimsy* is not nonsense. That it's from a poem called "Jabberwocky," a poem that Humpty Dumpty helps Alice to understand. Because then I would have had to talk about you in the past tense. About how you used to read Lewis Carroll to Belle at bedtime. And that *Mimsy* means flimsy and miserable. And what better word could Belle have used to describe how she was feeling.

So, after that day, Belle only spoke when spoken to. Which was fine with me because I didn't feel much like speaking. Mostly she created new words, but sometimes I would recognize a word from "Jabberwocky." How do you like your

new teacher? Slithy, she would answer. How perfectly descriptive. Lithe and slimy. You would have been proud. After a particularly good word I would ask her if she paid it extra. That's the only thing that would make her smile. I remembered. I remembered that I was in the kitchen and I heard the two of you laughing, and Belle called me and told you to read me that part again. The part about Humpty Dumpty telling Alice that when he makes a word do a lot of work that he always paid it extra.

So that's Belle.

Beau didn't talk at all. He wrote stuff. No words, just symbols. You know those short forms you taught him. The ones you told me I had to tilt my head sideways to read. Like :) means happy. He'd shake his head yes or no, but other than that, symbols were all he used. He still has a good sense of humour. Whenever I talk to Anne he hands me a note :! That's his name for her. Foot in mouth. And if I catch him reading after the lights are supposed to be out he writes bfn eg. Bye for now, evil grin. Then he turns off his light.

They've been seeing a counsellor at school. Anne insisted on a psychiatrist, but I said over your dead body. She said that's not even remotely funny Lily. I said it wasn't meant to be. I didn't tell her that you were raised through a Valium veil thanks to psychiatry. I had to let them see the school counsellor. The pressure was huge. And maybe you're wrong about all the therapy stuff. Maybe the kids do need more than I can give them. You needed more than I was able to give you.

Lily raised her left hand to support her head. She felt an overwhelming tiredness. The man with the yellow jacket was back on his stool. Motionless on the ice.

THEY'RE DOING OKAY. They're making themselves understood. You don't have to talk much to do spelling and drawing. But every time I pick up the phone or answer the door I hear the same mantra. You can't go on like this Lily. So I say, you fix it. You turn back the clock and fix this mess. And they go away shaking their heads. I yell at you to fix this but every time I yell at you I feel your absence. And it knocks me down. Again.

So Belle Epoque and Beau Geste seem to communicate as well as any sister and brother, and I seem to understand most of what they have to say. I'm sure Belle calls her brother wildly offensive names when she gets annoyed with him. He lets me know when he's angry :@ and he calls her cross-eyed x-). Sometimes when I don't understand Belle's words, she draws for me. Like when she called him a snig. Somehow he knew it was a snot-nosed pig. He was really

mad >:-< . Funny how those are the moments that make me want to live.

We were managing. But it wasn't good enough for anyone else. They called a family meeting. At my parent's house. Anne and James were there—Mr. Anne and Mrs. Anne you called them. Beau and Belle were at their cousin's house with a babysitter.

This is how it goes. Father mixes the drinks and we sit by the fire. Anne looks nervous. It seems that I am in terrible shape and need a rest, and Belle and Beau need the structure and stability of a private school. Apparently the children are up to this nonsense because I let them. I even encourage it. I'm looking at Mother, who at the moment resembles a *borogove*, and the rest are staring at me like *mome raths*. I am trying to hold back something from spilling on their white broadloom. I don't know if it's screams or tears or laughter or what. I just know it would make a deep and ugly stain. I think maybe I should just write LOL, instead of laughing out loud or LMAO to let them know I am laughing my ass off. But I'm not. I'm five years old and I'm terrified, and you're the only one who ever gave me the strength to be me in the face of them. It's so quiet. All but the sound of Father's hand in his pocket jiggling the loose change. Then Mother comes out with the ultimatum. If there's no change by Christmas, we'll have to take charge, Lily. Now Anne is all over me with it's for the best, and Mr. Anne stands with his back against the wall looking at his feet.

I don't say a word. I try to think of all the clever things you would say, but they are gone. And so are you. They drive me home, picking up Belle and Beau on the way, and Anne makes some inane chit chat. I think, how dare you say my kids talk nonsense.

I take Belle and Beau into the house. We take off our boots and coats in silence and I light a fire. Then I sit on the couch, and the tears start to flow. Belle sits beside me and says *Mimsy?* Beau gets his pad of paper and hands me a note that says hlvb. That's what you used to say when I got angry with my family. *Hasta la vista*, baby. So I put my arms around them and asked them to do me a big favour. That they didn't need to do it right away, but I needed them to talk again, the way they did before you died. Just think about it, I said. Please. Then I helped them get into their pyjamas and read them a story. One of yours. The next morning, nothing had changed. I don't know what I was hoping for. Belle greeted me with *O frabjus day! Callooh! Callay!* And it was a lovely day. The sun glinting off the ice on the river. After breakfast Beau wrote cul8r, and they both gave me a hug and left for school.

Lily looked out the window. A soft snow fell, but she could still see the ice fisher's yellow jacket.

THAT DAY I STARTED TO CLEAN THE HOUSE from top to bottom. I washed floors, vacuumed, and dusted. I lifted Dawg into the tub and scrubbed him. As I was drying him, the phone rang. It was Mother. She said that she had arranged for Belle and Beau to have an interview at the private school at the end of this week. An interview. They're just kids. It's not just a private school; it's a boarding school. She said that after she and Father saw the condition I was in that they had no choice but to force the issue. I asked, what condition are you talking about? She said, just look at yourself Lily. You're not even conscious of what you look like. Half the time I see you you're wearing his old sweater. Anne tells me the kids eat porridge for dinner. They like porridge, I said. And it's not every night. Anne doesn't come over every night. Then the buzzing started, and I could barely hear her. I started to feel my throat close. You would have walked over and taken the phone out of my hand and hung it up. I couldn't move. I couldn't swallow. I was Humpty Dumpty and I was terrified that I was about to fall. And you weren't there to catch me. I heard her saying my name. Lilianna. That's what she called me when I was Belle's age. I said, I have to go.

I was Humpty Dumpty and I fell off the wall. There was nothing to grab onto. And then I saw *Alice Through the Looking Glass*. I read "The Walrus and the Carpenter" hoping that it would conjure you up. That you would come to my rescue. That you would do what you always did. Hold my face in your hands and tell me that Mother is the walrus and Father is the carpenter, and if I don't learn how to say no, I'll take my place with the other oysters that they devour. Then you would scrunch up your face and recite the ending:

Shall we be trotting home again?
But the answer there came none—
And this was scarcely odd, because
They'd eaten every one.

So I just curled up on the floor beside Dawg and waited to be devoured.

I woke up shivering. I walked into your study and sat at your desk. I stared out the window. That's when I saw him for the first time. The ice fisher. Belle and Beau were standing beside him. I looked at the clock. I must have slept for a long time. I panicked. Then I saw them turn toward the house and run together. But the man in the yellow jacket was not following them. He stayed in the same spot. Motionless. As they ran toward the house, I saw that Belle was hanging onto the back of Beau's jacket to keep him from getting home first. By this time, Dawg

was barking. He could hear their voices. Both of their voices.

I opened the door and they spilled in, Belle saying I get to tell her first and Beau saying that's not fair 'cuz I run faster but you wouldn't let go. It was a little confusing, what with Dawg barking and Beau and Belle talking at the same time, but the story somehow got told, and I didn't dare say a word for fear that they would stop talking.

When they saw the ice fisher on the river, they were curious and went over to see whether he was catching any fish. He asked them their names, but they didn't answer. Then he asked them if they knew what time it was. Belle said *brillig*. Belle said the man in the yellow jacket looked at her and laughed. In a nice way, she said. Not in a mean way. Ah, said the fisher, four o'clock in the afternoon, the time when you start broiling things for dinner. Four o'clock is a good time to catch fish, he said. Then he said: I sent a message to the fish: I told them this is what I wish. And Belle answered: The little fishes of the sea, they sent an answer back to me. And the fisher laughed and told her she was a very smart girl to know her *Alice Through the Looking Glass* so well. And then Belle said my father read it to me almost every night. And the fisher said, I would like to meet your father, he sounds like a wonderful man. And Belle said, he's dead. And the fisher said he was sorry, and Belle said he died in this river, and the night before he died he read me Humpty Dumpty's poem. And the fisher said, my dad died when I was your age and the last time I saw him, we went fishing together. That's why I love fishing. It reminds me of my dad. And then Beau spoke. He said, the last time I was with my dad he was showing me how to write shortcuts on the computer. The fisher said your dad must have been a very smart man.

Then Belle and Beau asked if they could go ice fishing on Saturday. The man said he'd bring another pole and make two new fishing holes with them. He told Belle they'd gyre and gimble. That made me nervous. I had forgotten what it meant. I didn't want to disappoint Belle, so I said I'd think about it so I could look it up later. You would have known right away that it is exactly what a fisher does with his auger. He has to make the auger go round and round like a gyroscope in order to make holes like a gimlet. How could I say no? I'll watch through this window.

Then, as I was telling Belle and Beau about washing Dawg, who should show up at our door but my dear interfering sister. Belle answered the door and said hi Auntie Anne. We had the best time today, she said. We met a fisherman, said Beau. Belle looked at me and said we're . . . uh . . . reading about a fisherman. Come on upstairs Beau, she said, and I'll finish the story. Beau kept asking what story as she dragged him behind her. Anne's mouth hung open and she looked

rather like a fish. When did they start to speak, she asked. I heard myself say thanks for coming over but I can't visit with you today, and I hugged her, turned her around, and guided her out the door.

I heard Belle reading to Beau. My throat was tight and my eyes started to burn. I went into the kitchen and wept as I made dinner. It was all so much like it used to be that it made me miss your presence even more. I put on your slippers and hugged myself in your sweater. Later, as we ate, I told them how proud I was of them. How I wished you were here to hear their story today. And Belle said, we're writing it to Dad. She said, Beau and me are writing him a letter to tell him we're okay and that we're going ice fishing. Then we're going to send it to him. Then Beau said, we're gonna burn the letter over a candle. Belle said, we were going to ask you to help us. And Beau said, the ashes will go in the river the same way Dad's ashes went in the river. Then Belle asked if I wanted to write a letter too. I said I didn't know if I could. Belle said, just try Mom. Dad would want to know you think it's okay for us to go ice fishing. Promise me you'll try. Beau took a pencil and wrote: ^D . I must have looked somewhat concerned because he gave me a hug and said it means great, I like it. So I promised I'd try.

And that night, last night, we had a sleepover. Belle and Beau both slept in our bed with me. They wanted me to read the "Humpty Dumpty" chapter. So I did. Do you remember when Humpty asks Alice what her name is, and after she answers he tells her it's a stupid name and demands to know what it means? She asks him if it has to mean something, and he says of course it does. He says, my name means the shape I am and a good handsome shape it is, too. With a name like yours you might be any shape, almost.

And Belle said, tell us the story of how you and Dad picked our names.