

*Gerald Lynch*

## **Amusing Myself**

(a)

I breathe deeply and regularly as the steaming water, failing to numb the nerve bundle at the base of my neck, sprays a scalding reminder upon my scapulae. I was mindlessly hanging out, flat-palmed on the turquoise tiles of my phone booth-sized shower, a someone whipped by pale fire while he waited for a call.

And then you called, Betty.

I had little to answer, though. With chin on chest I groaned, "Yes, Betty," and felt a chill and watched a drop splat in cinematic slow motion between my spidery big toes, which I wiggled, as if to signal I was still there.

My end of our talk proceeded characteristically:

"Yes.

"Okay.

"We'll see.

"Maybe.

"I prefer not to."

I did not question your presence here. And when you uncharacteristically asked to rendezvous at an unfrequented place, I, like Bartleby, could only say, "I prefer not to."

You signed off with lugubrious regret, giving my name two syllables: "A *public* man now? *Ja-ake*."

I did not let on that I had felt your presence over the past week here in Ottawa. No, I merely hung up.

(b)

Last Wednesday I had stood musing at my greying beard in the frosted display window of Levigne's Stationery on Lantern Avenue, wondering why I'd bothered paying extra for a multi-strike ribbon when I was typing only the odd New Year's letter. Then the vain musing drained from me like tepid mercury, and I was topped off with hot raw wanting. And I knew with the taste of mercurial adrenalin that my Betty was near again.

There is something about your proximity, Betty, that makes me appropriate the real world, possess it fresh and fearlessly, almost carelessly, again. When you are near, Betty, I want to point to things—the January sun like a calcifying or cataracting eyeball, like failing vision, like macular degeneration in the old real world; the low grey sky that plants us, keeps us from colder space; the serrated corners of brick buildings that want us to risk our wrists, that want to be touched; work boots that keep out the snub-nosed world. Things like that.

We have not seen each other for years, you and I. When we were together last you displayed a face more exacting than provocative, your eyes like commas pinching a full mouth forever held in. You were dark-haired then, with a brush-stroke of silver like feathers. In the intervening time we have spoken distantly, infrequently, politely about impersonal things. You never said again that I was incapable of the kind of love you wanted. I never referred to that last time together, the afternoon and evening of the day before I married for the first of five times. You had pleaded with me to throw "it" all over and abscond with you for foreign parts. Betty, that "abscond" and "foreign parts" was unbearably pathetic to my quintuple senses. I thought then: "Look what I've done to her style."

But now I have a better thing to say: "Why didn't I go with you?"

A public man now? No. Over the past decade I have grown as silent and pale as liquid paper. And I fully expect that if you won't take me back the way I am now, Betty, I'll just die.

(c)

Because I am certain now that we will be together imminently, I float along the sidewalk on the sort of soaring nonsense that guarantees a commensurate fall. Therefore let us appropriate something useful. Where I live now, for instance: mode, mimetically low; topos, satire.

You might not survive in the faculties-benumbing air of this place, Betty. A cold city, Ottawa, to be sure, the streets a-slush with paranoid civil servants being uncivilly weaned from the federal tit, the core of the city occupied by frisky yuppies and fat cats, two-income latchkey families, and idling military personnel everywhere. There's a capital for you, Betty! Oh Betty, make your choice (as you once asked of me). The military personnel? Those stout middle-aged men in the dullest green uniforms the imagination could conceive? Those aging boys with bellies on them like sovereign icebreakers? Those dinosaurs in sinecures! There they stand, on a sort of guard, permanently queued in banks like the future held in flat-green aspic, pricks in aspic, handsomely situated with their pistachio-colored cheques pinched passively in nicotine-stained, white-tipped chubby fingers, so many of them in this sub-Arctic city of legislated importance. In their anti-green costumes, with their pup-tent caps still pitched rakishly on their bullock heads, as if arriving at Tipperary were not a long, long way away indeed. And when the fore-boy of two in a queue comes sluggishly about for parley with his rearward mate their bellies brush like clandestine lovers at a rendezvous. And yes, Betty, my only one, they do like to fondle their own yearning stomachs, to stroke their bellies as if rendezvousing with itchy-eared pups stowed under the great coats of affection-starved Gulag prisoners, our own boys too much the officers and the gentlemen to cup their crotches off base.

And the hill of civil-servants? The empty schools of whole-language teachers? Betty, every block of Ottawa now has its own professor! . . . Betty.

I am now breathing irregularly and shallowly, Betty. I have not indulged in such an orgy of self-loathing since I stood for 72 hours outside of the Convention Centre during the Meech Lake Crisis. Would you like to choose another topic? The possibility of Canadian life on Mars? Snow removal? Armageddon? The weather generally? With you returning now, no subject is without its rewards, the obscene its bouquet, the profound its slick surface, the trivial its black depths. Oh Betty, why did you stay away so long this time? Without you, everything I think becomes rant on my tongue, everything I touch turns to harangue in my hands.

(d)

Already I can hear what you will say first when you materialize and I wrap loving voice around you: *Where are we now, Jake? It's cold here.*

Cold? Cold here in Ottawa? Colder than a witch's stiffest nipple! A cold that cuts through mere layered clothing like something intentional. A cold like a *wanting* hungry for marrow. And that wanting cold fixes an ice-bite on brittle bones and twists and snaps and thrashes like some Arctic shark after a year's diet of algae. . . . Until of course we find some artificial warmth, again, dear Betty, lost Betty.

But *see?* See what I mean about me without you? A weather man, that's what I've become. A fucking fair-weather friend to myself! Betty, if you do not take me back, all the way back, what will become of me! What will become my subject? You? Only you? Always you?

Betty, now listen up and listen good: You must save me from that . . . that *decadence*.

(e)

I was a mere self of an incapable boy when Betty and I first made acquaintance. For me each wet green morning distinguished a mossy world like a floodlit aquarium, a green wet world. Before Betty I had viewed life with adolescent clarity, that post-pubic view that distorts everything human to a simple calculus. We will live in Truth, Betty! . . . But why this sudden pallor, this drop of the gaze to the pathetic lap of self-consciously empty hands? Betty wants love too? . . . Ah Betty, you made life so confusing. At first I found myself unsure, then viewing even enemies from the back and awakening to a body of raw sympathy like compassion's newborn daughter. After years of failure as a poet, then rejection as a novelist, then poverty as a free lance journalist, then nervous breakdown as a technical writer, I sought refuge in the federal civil service and the great indifference of my middle age. Here I am now: a well-paid employee in the Ministry of Failure. That's how I look to me in flashback, from the back.

(f)

Recrossing the Laurier Street Bridge over the Rideau Canal, sure now of your return on this variable winter's day, anticipating a new subject, I . . .

Something vibrates the bridge from below; faintly a sound like a death rattle, then silence; then a hum that becomes a nightmare's whisper issuing from under, and dark skaters, coatless shouting skaters, stream blindly for a darker spot on the ice. They encircle a hole, leaving a dazzling border of skate-chipped ice between themselves and the opening with its inner border of shards like a shark's teeth.

Has someone fallen in? Someone or something has. Openings just don't open.

"It was an old man!" a man shouts.

"I saw a mother and a baby!" a girl wails.

"I saw a polar bear!" a young boy gasps.

"A baby!" cries a young girl. "I saw it too! It was a baby girl!"

From my vantage point they appear only as human forms of relatively the same shape and size, and human forms only because I know them from their alarmed voices. Otherwise they could just as accurately be described as a black mass of hysterical noise pulsating teasingly about a black opening. An ink blot, or what happens when paper tears and smudges in a printer. Alarming things like that.

I take a shallow breath of pure sub-zero air.

Just ahead of me, at the midpoint of the bridge, a prepubescent girl with fiery hair points at the scene and shouts laughingly.

Showing no embarrassment at my approach, she alternates her glances between me and the canal. And I catch coyness teasing from her slightly slanted eyes, a Lolitish allure in those almond eyes fanned by coarse blond lashes below coarser blond eyebrows, those eyes above apple cheeks like two great red periods. In truth, I sense a something very full of you, Betty, a something that makes my breath come shorter still.

Northern wind blasts the bridge.

"This is as cold as she gets!" I think she has shouted out at the accident, but she's shaking her head so rapidly now and already moving off in the icy air.

I lean toward her and shout, "What—what happened?"

She turns back and smirks indulgently, but I cannot hear what her open mouth says.

"My *what?* Lose my *what?*"

She laughs and flits off.

"Huh?" But I am speaking more to myself now than to her. In fact, there is no way I can be half certain that she said even the little I've written.

The hole in the ice is soon abandoned by all save a couple of uniformed investigators of such mysteries. A frogman crawls out of the hole, crawls onto the ice, and stands waving his arms. The canal is so shallow in winter, he must have been *lying* under there. He wears a huge plastic bib, an advertisement for a restaurant called "Mother's," which reads, "COME TO GRAND OPENING (HA! HA!)." So, the hole had been made and patiently waited upon from below. Who would have thought that possible?

One of the officials leads the frogman away to a steaming car. Another official cordons off the hole.

A flurry of crystals fills my lashes, my nostrils unite, and for a moment I see nothing and don't breathe. This is as cold as she gets. I throw back my head and look blindly into the swarming air and open wide my mouth to shout some curse, and my silence is warm and wet and vain. Then a word of praise comes keen and clear.