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# The Blue Guitar



JOHN BANVILLE

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*“Things as they are  
Are changed upon the blue guitar”*

—WALLACE STEVENS







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**C**ALL ME AUTOLYCUS. Well, no, don't. Although I am, like that unfunny clown, a picker-up of unconsidered trifles. Which is a fancy way of saying I steal things. Always did, as far back as I can remember. I may fairly claim to have been a child prodigy in the fine art of thieving. This is my shameful secret, one of my shameful secrets, of which, however, I am not as ashamed as I should be. I do not steal for profit. The objects, the artefacts, that I purloin—there is a nice word, prim and pursed—are of scant value for the most part. Oftentimes their owners don't even miss them. This upsets me, puts me in a dither. I won't say I want to be caught, but I do want the loss to be registered; it's important that it should be. Important to me, I mean, and to the weight and legitimacy of the—how shall I say? The exploit. The endeavour. The deed. I ask you, what's the point of stealing something if no one knows it's stolen save the stealer?

I used to paint. That was my other passion, my other proclivity. I used to be a painter.

Ha! The word I wrote down at first, instead of painter, was painster. Slip of the pen, slip of the mind. Apt, though. Once I was a painter, now I'm a painster. Ha.

I should stop, before it's too late. But it is too late.

Orme. That's my name. A few of you, art lovers, art haters, may remember it, from bygone times. Oliver Orme. Oliver Otway Orme, in fact. O O O. An absurdity. You could hang me over the door of a pawnshop. Otway, by the by, after an undistinguished street where my parents lived when they were young and first together and where, presumably, they initiated me. Orme is a plausible name for a painter, isn't it? A painterly name. It looked well, down at the right-hand corner of a canvas, modest, minuscule but unmissable, the *O* an owlish eye, the *r* rather art-nouveauish and more like a Greek τ, the *m* a pair of shoulders shaking in rich mirth, the *e* like—oh, I don't know what. Or yes, I do: like the handle of a chamber pot. So there you have me. Orme the master painster, who paints no more.

What I want to say is

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Storm today, the elements in a great rage. Furious gusts of wind booming against the house, shivering in ancient timbers. Why does this kind of weather always make me think of childhood, why does it make me feel I'm back there in those olden days, crop-haired, in short trousers, with one sock sagging? Childhood is supposed to be a radiant springtime but mine seems to have been always autumn, the gales seething in the big beeches behind this old gate-lodge, as they're doing right now, and the rooks above them wheeling haphazard, like scraps of char from a bonfire, and a custard-coloured gleam having its last go low down in the western sky. Besides, I'm tired of the past, of the wish to be there and not here. When I was there I writhed fretfully enough in my fetters. I'm pushing fifty and feel a hundred, big with years.

What I want to say is this, that I have decided, I have determined, to weather the storm. The interior one. I'm not in good shape, that's a fact. I feel like an alarm clock that an angry sleeper, an angry wake-up call has given such a shake to that all the springs and sprockets inside it have come loose. I'm all ajangle. I should take myself to Marcus Pettit for repair. Ha ha.

They will be missing me by now, over there on the far side of the estuary. They will wonder where I've got to—I wonder the same thing myself—and won't imagine I'm so near. Polly will be in an awful

state, with no one to talk to and confide in, and no one at all to look to for comfort except Marcus whose comfort she is hardly likely to call on, much, given the state of things. I miss her already. Why did I go? Because I couldn't stay. I picture her in her cramped parlour above Marcus's workshop huddled in front of the fire in the murky light of this late-September afternoon, her knees shiny from the flames and her shins mottled in diamond shapes. She will be nibbling worriedly at a corner of her mouth with those little sharp teeth of hers that always remind me of the flecks of glistening fat in Christmas pudding. She is, was, my own dear pudding. I ask again: Why did I leave? Such questions. I know why I left, I know very well why, and should stop pretending that I don't.

Marcus will be in his workshop, at his bench. I see him, too, in his sleeveless leather jerkin, intense and hardly breathing, the jeweller's glass screwed into his eye socket, plying his tiny instruments that are in my mind's eye a steel scalpel and forceps, dissecting a Patek Philippe. Although he is younger than I am—it seems to me everyone is younger than I am—his hair is thinning and turning grey already and he has, I see, hangs now in feathery wisps on either side of his leaning narrow saintly face, stirred by each breath he breathes, stirred a little, a little. He used to have something of the look of the Dürer of the androgynous self-portrait, the three-quarters profile one with tawny ringlets and rosebud mouth and a disconcertingly come-hither eye; latterly, though, he might be one of Grünewald's suffering Christ. "Work, Olly," he said to me dolefully, "work is all I have to distract me from my anguish." That was the word he used: anguish. I thought it queer, even in such dire circumstances, more a flourish than a word. But pain compels eloquence—look at me; listen to me.

The child is there too, somewhere, Little Pip, as they call her—never just Pip, always Little Pip. It's true she's quite small, but what if she grows up an amazon? Little Pip the Gentle Giantess. I shouldn't laugh, I know; it's jealousy jogging my funny bone, jealousy and sad regret. Gloria and I had a little one of our own, briefly.

Gloria! She had slipped my mind until this moment. She too will be wondering where on earth I am. Where, on earth.

Damn it, why does everything have to be so difficult.

—

I am going to think about the night I finally fell in love with Polly, finally for the first time, that is. Anything for diversion, even though thoughts of love are what I should be diverting myself from, seeing how hot the soup is that love has got me into. It happened at the annual dinner of the Guild of Clockmakers, Locksmiths and Goldsmiths. We were there as Marcus's guests, Gloria and I—Gloria under protest, I may add, she being as susceptible as I am to boredom and general fed-upness—we were sat with him and Polly at their table, along with some others whom we needn't take any notice of. Beefsteak and roast pork on the menu, and spuds, of course, boiled, mashed, baked or chipped, not forgetting your perennial bacon-and-cabbage. Perhaps it was the flabby stink of seared flesh that was making me feel peculiar; that, and the smoke from the candles on the tables and the borborygmous blarings of the three-piece band. There was a ceaseless clamour of voices behind me in the big hall, rolling heavy swell out of which there would spurt now and then, like a fish leaping, a shriek of some woman's tipsy laughter. I had been drinking but I don't believe I was drunk. All the same, as I talked to Polly, and looked at her—indeed, gloated on her—I had the sense of dawning illumination, of sudden epiphany, that so often comes at a certain stage on the way to drunkenness. She seemed not newly beautiful, exactly, but to radiate something I hadn't noticed before, something that was hers, uniquely the abundance of her, the very being of her being. This is fanciful, I know, and probably what I thought

I was seeing was merely an effect brought on by the fumes of bad wine, but I'm trying to fix the essence of the moment, to isolate the spark that would ignite such a conflagration of ecstasy and pain, of mischief, damage and, yes, Marcusian anguish.

And anyway, who's to say that what we see when we're drunk is not reality, and the sober world bleared phantasmagoria?

Polly is no great beauty. In saying this I am not being unchivalrous, I hope; it's best to start out candid, since I aim to continue that way, in so far as I am capable of candour. Of course, I found her to find her, altogether lovely. She is full-figured, biggish in the beam—picture the nicely rounded nether half of a child-sized cello—with a neat, heart-shaped face and brownish, somewhat unruly hair. Her eyes are truly remarkable. They are pale grey, they seem almost translucent, and in certain lights take on a mother-of-pearl sheen. They have a slight cast, which finds an endearing echo in the slight overlap of her two pearly front teeth. She has a placid mien for the most part, but her glance can be surprisingly sharp, and her tone at times can deliver quite a sting, quite a sting. Mostly, though, she keeps a wary eye on a world she doesn't feel entirely at ease in. She is always conscious of her lack of social polish—she is a country lass, after all, even if her folk are shabby-grand—in comparison to my poised Gloria, for example, and is unsure in matters of etiquette and nice behaviour. It was very affecting to see, the night at the Clockers, as the evening is colloquially known, how at the start of each course she would glance quickly about the table and check which item of cutlery the rest of us were favouring before daring to pick up knife or fork or spoon for herself. Maybe that's where love begins, not in sudden seizures of passion but in the recognition and simple acceptance of, of—of something or other, I don't know what.

The Clockers is a tedious affair, and I felt a fool for coming. I had turned my back on the festive crowd and, propped on my elbows, was leaning forwards earnestly across the table so that my face, hot and throbbing, was almost in Polly's bosom, or would almost have been had she not turned halfway away from me on her chair, so that she was looking sideways at me along the curve of her nicely plumed right shoulder. What did I talk to her about, with such force and fervour? I can't remember—not that it matters: the matter was in the tone, not the content. I could feel Gloria monitoring us, with an amused and sceptical eye. I often think Gloria married me so as always to have something to make her laugh. It doesn't mean to sound resentful, not at all. Her laughter is not cruel or even hurtful. She just finds me funny, not for what I say or do but for what I am, her rufous-headed, roly-poly and, did she but know it, a light-fingered manling.

Polly at this time, the time of the night at the Clockers when I fell in love with her, had been married for three or four years, and was certainly no dewy-eyed lass of the kind that might be thought susceptible to my insinuating blandishments. All the same, it was plain I was having an effect on her. Listening to me, she had taken on that vaguely staring, wide-eyed expression, accentuated by her lopsided gaze, of a married woman in whom a tentative delight is dawning as she realises, incredulously, that a man she has known for years and who is not her husband is suddenly telling her, in however roundabout and high-flown a fashion, that he has all of a sudden fallen in love with her.

Marcus was away among the dancers, whooping and stomping. Despite his diffident and incurably melancholic disposition he does love a party, and joins in with violent enthusiasm at the first pop of cork or blast on a bugle—that night he had invited Gloria no fewer than three times to jump up and join him in his capers, and on each occasion, to my considerable surprise, she had accepted. In my early days with Polly I used to try, treacherous hound that I am, to get her to talk about Marcus, to tell me things he said and did in the privacy of their lives together, but she's a loyal soul and let me know straight away

and with impressive firmness that her husband's peculiarities, if indeed he had any, which she wasn't saying he had, were a forbidden topic.

How did we meet in the first place, the four of us? I think it must have been Gloria and Polly who struck up a friendship, or better say an acquaintanceship, though I seem to have known Marcus all my life, or all of his life, since I'm the older of the two of us. I recall an initial picnic in an ornamental park somewhere—bread and cheese and wine and rain—and Polly in a white summer dress, bare-legged and lissom. Inevitably, I see the occasion in the light of old man Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*—the earlier, smaller one—with blonde Gloria in the buff and Polly off in the background bathing her feet. Polly that day seemed hardly more than a girl, pink-cheeked and creamy, instead of the married woman that she was. Marcus was wearing a straw hat with holes in it, and Gloria was her usual glorious self, a big bright beauty shedding radiance all round her. And, my God, but my wife was magnificent that day, as indeed she always is. At thirty-five she has attained the full splendour of maturity. I think of her in terms of various metals, gold, of course, because of her hair, and silver for her skin, but there is something in her too of the opulence of brass and bronze: she has a wonderful shine to her, a stately glow. In fact, she is a Tiepolo rather than a Manet type, one of the Venetian master's Cleopatras, say, or his Beatrice of Burgundy. To my luminous Gloria, Polly could hardly hold one of those little votive candles people use to pay a penny for in church and set burning in front of their favourite saint's statue. Why then did I—Ah, now, that's the nub of the matter, one of the nubs, that I have worn everything down to.

The Clockers ended in the mysteriously abrupt way that such things do, and most of the people at our table had already risen and were making befuddled attempts to organise themselves for departure when Polly fairly sprang to her feet, thinking of Little Pip, I imagine—Polly's father and her addled mother were supposedly minding the child—but then paused a second and did a curious, shivery little flounce, surprisedly smiling with eyebrows raised and her hands held out from her sides with the palms flat on the air, like a toddler attempting a curtsy. It may have been nothing more than the effect of her buttocks detaching itself from the seat of her chair—it was very hot and humid in the room—but to me it seemed that she had been lifted, suddenly, lightly, by the action of some invisible and buoyant medium in that she was, literally, and for a second, walking on air. This was hardly the result of the fervid harangue I had been subjecting her to in the absence of her husband, yet I was moved, to hot tears, almost, feeling I had somehow been allowed to share with her in this brief and secret exaltation. She took up her velvet purse, still with a trace of that faintly surprised smile—was she even blushing a little?—and made no show of looking about for Marcus, who was fetching their coats. Then I too rose, my heart fluttering and my poor knees gone to rubber.

In love! Again!

When we came outside the night seemed unwontedly huge under a skyful of glistening stars. After the noise within, the silence out here rang thrillingly in the frosty air. At first Marcus's car wouldn't start because, being a cheapskate, he had filled the fuel tank with an inferior sort of fluid and the pipes were clogged with salt. While he was under the bonnet, sighing and softly cursing, Polly and I stood waiting on the pavement, side by side but not touching. Gloria had moved a little way off to smoke a furtive cigarette. Polly had her coat wrapped tightly round her and her chin was sunk in its fur collar, and when she looked at me she did not turn her head but swivelled her eyes sideways comically, with a clownish, hapless, downturned grin. We said nothing. I thought of taking hold of her and drawing her to me while Gloria wasn't looking and kissing her quickly, if only on the cheek, or even the forehead, as an old friend might at such a moment; but I didn't dare. What I really wanted to do was to kiss her lips, to lick her eyelids, to dart the tip of my tongue into the pink and secret volutes of her ear. I was in a state of

heady amazement, at myself, at Polly, at what we were, at what we had all at once become. It was as if ~~god had reached down from that sky of stars and scooped us up in his hand and made a little constellation of us on the spot.~~

It has always seemed to me that one of the more deplorable aspects of dying, aside from the terror, pain and filth, is the fact that when I'm gone there will be no one here to register the world in just the way that I do. Don't misunderstand me, I have no illusions about my significance in the torrid scheme of things. Others will register other versions of the world, countless billions of them, a welter of worlds particular each to each, but the one that I shall have made merely by my brief presence in it will be lost for ever. That's a harrowing thought, I find, more so in a way even than the prospect of the loss of self itself. Consider me there that night, under that strew of gems on their cloth of purple plush, having been set upon out of nowhere by love and gazing all about me with my mouth open, noting how the starlight laid sharp shadows diagonally down the sides of the houses, how the roof of Marcus's car gleamed as if under a fine skim of oil, how the fox fur of Polly's collar bristled in burning tips, how the roadway darkly shone with frosted grit and the outlines of everything glimmered—all that, the known and common world made singular by my just looking at it. Polly smiling, Marcus vexed, Gloria with her face the parcel of people behind me coming out of the Clockers in a burst of drunken hilarity, their breath forming globes of ectoplasm on the air—they would all see what I saw, but not as I did, with my eyes from my particular angle, in my own way that is as feeble and imperceptive as everyone else's but that mine, all the same: mine, and hence unique.

Marcus finished whatever it was he had been doing to the car's plumbing and straightened up and shut the bonnet with a bang that seemed to make the night draw back in alarm. Muttering about carburettors and wiping his hands down his long narrow flanks he got behind the wheel and pressed the starter crossly, and with a cough and a wheeze the machine shuddered into life. He sat there with the door open and one foot on the pavement, revving the motor and listening to the poor brute's ardent wails. I like Marcus, really, I do. He's a decent fellow. I think he regards himself in somewhat the way that Gloria regards me, as all right in general but fundamentally hapless, susceptible of being put upon and more or less risible. As he sat there, his ear cocked to the sounds the engine was making, he kept shaking his head in rueful fashion, smiling tightly to himself, as if the breakdown were just the latest in a series of small, sad misfortunes that had been dogging him all his life and that he seemed incapable of avoiding. Ah, Marcus old chap, I'm sorry for everything, truly I am. Odd, how hard it is to say sorry and sound convincing. There should be a special, exclusive mode in which to frame one's regrets. I might bring out something on the subject, a manual of handy hints, or even a style-book: *An Alphabet of Apologies, A Sampler of Sorrys*.

Gloria and I got into the back seat, me behind Polly, where she sat in front beside Marcus. I could smell the cigarette smoke on Gloria's breath. Polly was laughing and complaining of the cold, and indeed, observed from where I sat, with her round dark glossy head sunk in that fur collar, she might have been a plump little Eskimo squaw all bundled up in sealskins. As we glided through the silent streets I watched the brooding houses and shut shops as we passed them smoothly by, trying to keep my mind off Marcus's maddeningly slow and cautious driving. Pierce's Seed & Hardware, Cotter's the Chemist, Prendergast's the Pie Emporium, the hovel once inhabited by the legendary midwife Grann Colfer, with its squinting bull's-eye panes—an eyesore!—wedged between the Methodist Hall and the many-windowed meeting rooms of the Ancient Order of Foresters. Miller the Milliner, Hanley the Haberdasher. My father's print shop, as was, with my studio above, also as was. The Butcher. The Baker. The Candlestick-maker. Why ever did I come back and settle here? When a youth, as I've



remarked, I couldn't wait to get out of the place. Gloria says it's because I was afraid of the big world and so retreated to this little one. She may be right, but not wholly so, surely. I feel like an archaeologist of my own past, digging down through layer after layer of schist and glistening shale and never reaching bedrock. There's the fact, too, the secret fact, that I foresaw myself cutting a new figure in the old place, lording it in my big cream-coloured house up there on Fairmount—Hangman's Hill, it was previously called, until the Town Council voted, wisely, to change the name—with the world I was supposed to be afraid of making its way in fealty to my door. I would be like Picasso in Venice, or Matisse at the Château de Vauvenargues, though I ended up more like poor Pierre Bonnard, held in hen-pecked captivity in Le Cannet. Instead of honouring me, however, the town thought me a bit of a joke, with my hat and cane and gaudy foulards, my overweening demeanour, my golden, young and utterly undeserved wife. I didn't mind, so charmed was I to be back among the scenes of childhood, all magically preserved, as if sunk in a vat of waterglass and kept specially for me, in confident and patient expectation of my inevitable homecoming.

Main Street was deserted. The Humber lumbered along in the wake of the twin beams of its headlights, grumbling to itself. A married couple never seem so married as when viewed from the back seat of a motor car, talking quietly together in the front. Polly and Marcus might have been in the bedroom already, so soft and intimate their converse sounded to me, as I sat there alertly mute behind the backs of their heads. First twinge of jealousy. More than a twinge. What were they talking about? Nothing. Isn't that what people always talk about when there are others around to overhear them?

Next thing I knew there was something scrabbling at my knee, and I would have given a squeak of fright—it was entirely possible Marcus's ancient motor would have rats—but when I looked down I saw the glimmer of a hand and realised it was Polly who had got hold of me there. Without giving the slightest sign of movement she had managed to reach her arm through the gap between the door and her seat, on the side where Marcus wouldn't see, and was fondling my kneecap in a manner that was unmistakable. Now, this was a surprise, not to say a shock, despite all that had gone on between us at the table earlier. The fact is, whenever I made an overture to a woman, which I seldom did, even in my young days, I never really expected it to be entertained, or even noticed, despite certain instances of success, which I tended to regard as flukes, the result of misunderstanding, or dimness on the part of the woman and simple good fortune on mine. I'm not an immediately alluring specimen, having been, from the start, the runt of the litter. I'm short and stout, or better go the whole hog and say fat, with a big head and tiny feet. My hair is of a shade somewhere between wet rust and badly tarnished brass, and in damp weather, or when I'm by the seaside, clenches itself into curls that are as tight and dense as cauliflower florets and stubbornly resistant to the fiercest combings. My skin—oh, my skin!—is a flaccid, moist, off-white integument, so that I look as if I had been blanched in the dark for a long time. Of my freckles I shall not speak. I have stubby arms and legs, thick at the tops and tapering to ankle and wrist like Indian clubs only shorter and chubbier. I entertain a fancy that as I get older and my girth increases these stubs will steadily retract until they have been absorbed altogether, and my head and thick neck will flatten out too, so that I'll be perfectly spherical, a big pale puffball to be bowled along at first by kindly Gloria and then, after she has lost heart, by a stern, white-clad person in rubber soles and starched cap. That anyone, especially a sensible young woman of the likes of Polly Pettit, should take me seriously or give the slightest credence to what I had to say is still to me a matter for amazement. But there I was, with my knee being felt by this very Polly, while her husband, hunched forwards and unknowing at the wheel, with his nose nearly touching the windscreen, drove us slowly homewards, in his old pumpkin of a car, through this lustrous and suddenly transfigured night.

Gloria, my usually sharp-eyed wife, noticed nothing either. Or did she? One never quite knows, with Gloria. That's the point of her, I suppose.

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Anyway, that was that, for then. But I want it understood and written into the record that technically it was Polly who made the first move, by virtue of that fateful feeling of my knee, since my overheated blandishing of her at the table earlier had been a matter solely of words, not actions—I never laid my finger on her, m'lud, not that night, I swear it. When I reached down now and tried fumblingly to take her hand she instantly withdrew it, and without turning gave an infinitesimal shake of the head that I took as a caution and even a rebuke. I was greatly agitated, no less by Polly's caress than by her rebuff, and I asked Marcus to stop and let me off, saying I wanted to walk the rest of the way home and clear my head in the night air. Gloria looked at me briefly in surprise—I've never been much of a one for outdoors, except in my painterly imagination—but made no comment. Marcus stopped the car on the bridge over the mill-race. I got out, and paused a moment and put a hand on the roof of the car and leaned back in to bid husband and wife goodnight, and Marcus grunted—he was still annoyed with himself over the car not starting—and Polly only said a quick word that I didn't catch and still wouldn't turn her head or look at me. Off they drove, the exhaust smoke leaving an acrid, saline stink on the air, and I walked slowly in their wake, over the little humpbacked bridge, with the mill-stream gushing and gulping under me, my thoughts in a riot as I watched those rubious tail-lights dwindling into the darkness, like the eyes of a stealthily retreating tiger. Oh, to be devoured!

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Now, as to the subject of thieving, where to start? I confess I am embarrassed by this childish vice—let's call it a vice—and frankly I don't know why I'm owning up to it, to you, my inexistent confessor. The moral question here is ticklish. Just as art uses up its materials by absorbing them wholly into the work, as Collingwood avers—a painting consumes the paint and canvas, while a table is for ever in the wood—so too the act, the art, of stealing transmutes the object stolen. In time, most possessions lose their patina, become dulled and anonymous; stolen, they spring back to life, take on the sheen of uniqueness again. In this way, is not the thief doing a favour to things by dint of renewing them? Does he not enhance the world by buffing up its tarnished silver? I hope I have set out the preliminaries of my case with sufficient force and persuasiveness?

The first thing I ever stole, the first thing I remember stealing, was a tube of oil paint. Yes, I know, it seems altogether too pat, doesn't it, since I was to be an artist and all, but there you are. The scene of the crime was Geppetto's toyshop up a narrow lane off Saint Swithin Street—yes, these names, I know, I'm making them up as I go along. It must have been at Christmastime, the dark falling at four o'clock and a gossamer drizzle giving a shine to the mussel-blue cobbles of the laneway. I was with my mother. Should I say something about her? Yes, I should: she's due her due. In those early days—I was nine or ten at the time I'm speaking of—she was less like a mother than a well-disposed older sister, more well-disposed, certainly, than the sister I did have. Mother always affected a distraught and even slightly dazed manner, and was generally inadequate to the ordinary business of life, a thing people found either exasperating or endearing, or both. She was beautiful, I think, in an ethereal sort of way, but gave little attention to her appearance, unless her seeming negligence was a carefully maintained pose, though I don't believe it was. Her hair in particular she let go wild. It was russet in colour and abundant but very fine, like a rare species of ornamental dried grass, and in almost every memory I have of her she is running her fingers through it in a gesture of vague and ruefully humorous desperation. There was a touch of the gypsy about her, to the shame and annoyance of her children, excepting me, for in my eye

everything she was and did was as near to perfection as it was humanly possible to be. She wore peasant blouses and billowing, flower-print skirts, and in the warmer months elected to go barefoot about the house and sometimes even in the street—she must have been a scandal to our hidebound little town. She had strikingly lovely, pale-violet eyes, which I have inherited, though certainly they are wasted on me. When I was little we were never less than happy in each other's company, and I wouldn't have minded and I suspect she wouldn't, either, if there had been only the two of us, without my father or my older siblings to crowd the scene. I don't know why I should have been her favourite but I was. I suppose being young, I wasn't ugly yet, and anyway, mothers always favour their last-born, don't they? I would catch her watching me intently, with bright-eyed expectation, as if at any moment I might do something amazing, perform some marvellous trick, upend myself in an effortless handstand, say, or launch into a operatic aria, or sprout little gold wings at my wrists and ankles and fly up flutteringly into the air.

I had announced early on, in my most precocious and grandest manner, that I intended to be a painter—what an unbearable little twerp I must have been—and of course she thought it a splendid notion despite my father's anxious murmurings. Naturally the usual crayons and coloured pencils wouldn't do at all, no, her boy must have the best, and at once we set off together for Geppetto's, the only place in town we knew of that stocked oil paint and canvases and real brushes. The shop was high-ceilinged yet cramped, like so many of the houses and premises in the town; so narrow was it indeed that customers tended automatically to enter it at a sideways shuffle, insinuating themselves through the tall doorway with averted faces and retracted tummies. There was a wrought-iron spiral staircase on the right, which I always thought should lead up to a pulpit, and the walls were fitted with shelves of toys to the ceiling. The art supplies were at the back, on a raised section up three steep steps. There Geppetto had his desk also high and narrow, more like a pulpit, really, a vantage from which he could survey the entire shop peering over the tops of his spectacles with that benign and twinkling smile in which there glinted, like a bared incisor, the sharp, unrelenting watchfulness of the born huckster. His real name was Johnson or Jameson or Jimson, I can't remember exactly, but I called him Geppetto because, with his fuzzy white sidelocks and those rimless specs perched on the end of his long thin nose, he was a dead ringer for the old toy-maker as illustrated in a big Pinocchio picture-book that I had been given as a gift on Christmas.

By the way, I might say many things about that wooden boy and his yearning to be human, oh, yes, many things. But I won't.

The various colours, I see them still, were set out in a ranked and captivating display on a carved wooden stand like an oversized pipe-rack. Straight away I fixed on a sumptuously fat tube of zinc white. The tube, by happy coincidence, seemed itself made of zinc, while the white label had the matt, dusty texture of gesso, a shade I've favoured ever since, as you'll know if you know anything of my work, which I hope you don't. By instinct I made sure not to let my interest show, and certainly wouldn't have been so foolhardy as to pick the thing up and examine it, or even to touch it. There is a particular kind of sidewise regard for the object of his desire that in the first stage of stealing it is all the thief will permit himself, not only for reasons of strategy and security but because gratification postponed means pleasure enhanced, as every voluptuary knows. My mother was talking to Geppetto in her distracted way, gazing past his left ear and absent-mindedly fiddling with a pencil she had picked up from his desk, turning and turning it in her attractively slender though somewhat mannish fingers. What can they have been talking about, such an ill-matched pair? I could see, despite my tender age and his years, that the old boy was greatly taken with this wild-haired, limpid-eyed creature. My mother, I should say, was always seductive in her dealings with men, whether intentionally or otherwise I can't say. It was her ve-

vagueness, I believe, the slightly fey, slightly frowning dreaminess, that dazzled and undid them. And therein I saw my chance. When I judged that she had lulled the old shopman into a state of glazed befuddlement, I shot out a claw and—snap! the tube of paint was in my pocket.

You can imagine how I felt, with fright making a burning lump in my throat and my heart banging away. Gleefully triumphant too, of course, secretly so, and horribly. I was in such a state of stifled excitement that it seemed my eyes might pop out of their sockets and my cheeks swell to bursting. Believe me, when it comes to first times, stealing and love have a lot in common. How thrillingly chill that tube of paint felt, and what a weight it was, as if it were formed of an otherworldly element that had landed here from a distant planet where the force of gravity was a thousand times stronger than on earth. I wouldn't have been surprised if it had torn its way through my trousers pocket and smashed a hole in the floor and gone on plummeting downwards till it came out in Australia, to the amazement of the blackfellows and the fright of kangaroos.

I think what most impressed me about what I had done was the quickness of it. I don't mean just the quickness of the deed itself, although there was something eerie, something wizardly, in the seeming instantaneous way the tube of paint got from its place on the wooden stand and into my pocket. I'm thinking of those Godley particles we hear so much about, these days, that at one moment are in one place and the next in another, even on the far side of the universe, with no trace whatever of how they got from here to there. That's the way it always is with a theft. It's as if a single thing by being stolen were on the instant made into two: the thing that before was someone else's and this not quite identical thing that now is mine. It's a kind of, what do you call it, a kind of transubstantiation, if that's not going too far. For it did give me a feeling almost of holy awe, on that first occasion, and does so still, every time. That's the sacral side of the thing; the profane side is if anything even more numinous.

Did Geppetto spy me in the act? I had the fearful suspicion that for all that he was in thrall to my mother's azure gaze, even though it wasn't fully focused on him, he had spotted my hand darting out and my fingers fixing on that lovely fat shiny half-pound of paint and magicking it into my pocket. Whenever I returned to his shop, and I would return there many times over the coming years, he would give me what I thought was a special, sly smile, quick with knowing. "Here he comes, our little painter!" he would exclaim, snuffing a soft laugh down his greily hirsute nostrils. "Our very own Leonardo!" That first time I felt so euphoric I didn't care if he knew what I had done, but all the same he was one person I made sure never to steal from again.

How did I account for the extra and costly tube of paint that my mother would have known she hadn't purchased from Geppetto? Vague she may have been, but she was always careful with the pennies. Explaining the inexplicable and sudden appearance of an unfamiliar object is always a tricky business, as any recreational thief will tell you—I say recreational when really it's a matter of aesthetics, even of erotics, but we'll get on to all that in a while, if I have the heart for it. Prestidigitation comes into it—now you don't see it, now you do—and I quickly became a dab hand at palming and unpalming my pilfered trifles. People in general are inattentive, but the thief never is. He watches and waits, then he pounces. Unlike the professional burglar, in his stripes and ridiculously skimpy mask, who comes home from work at dawn and proudly tumbles the contents of his swag-bag on to the counterpane for his sleepy wife to admire, we artist-thieves must conceal our art and its rewards. "Where did you get that fountain pen?" we'll be asked—or tie-pin, snuffbox, watch-chain, whatever—"I don't remember you buying that." The rules of response are, first, never to speak straight off, but let a beat or two go by before answering; second, seem a little unsure oneself as to the provenance of the bibelot in question; third, and above all, never attempt to be comprehensive, for nothing fans the flame of suspicion like a

abundance of detail too freely offered. And then—

But I'm getting ahead of myself; a thief's heart is an impetuous organ, and while inwardly he thro for absolution, at the same time he can't keep from bragging.

My father, as I've mentioned, disapproved of my new hobby, which is how he regarded it—painting that is—and continued to disapprove even when I was older and began to earn, even in the early days not unappreciable sums for my daubs. At the start he was thinking of the expense, for after all he too made his living in or on the periphery of the art business and would have been aware of the cost of paint and canvas and good bristle brushes. However, I suspect his misgiving was in fact only a terror of the unknown. His son an artist! It was the last thing he would have expected, and what he didn't expect frightened him. My father. Must I make a sketch of him, too? Yes, I must: fair is fair. He was an unassuming man, lanky, thin to the point of emaciation—obviously I must be a throwback—with stooped shoulders and a long narrow head, like the carved blade of a primitive axe. Rather a Marcu type, now that I think of it, though in aspect less refined, less the suffering saint. My father moved in a peculiar, mantis-like fashion, as if all his joints were not quite attached to each other and he had to hold his skeleton together inside his skin with great care and difficulty. My reddish-brassy-brown hair seems to be the only physical trait I inherited from him. I have his timidity, too, his small-scale fearfulness. Early on I developed a weary contempt for him, a thing that troubles me now, when sadly it's too late to make up for it. He was good to my mother and me and the other children, according to his lights. What I couldn't forgive him was his execrable taste. Every time I had to go into his shop my lip would curl in contempt, instantly and all by itself, like one of those old-time celluloid shirt-fronts. How I despised even as a child, the so many prints of teary urchins and kittens at play with balls of wool, of dappled glades and antlered monarchs of the glen, and, prime object of my loathing, that life-sized head-and-shoulders portrait of a pensive Oriental beauty with green skin, framed in gilt and mounted in unavoidable splendour above the cash register. There was never any question of his stocking my stuff, certainly not—he didn't ask, and I didn't offer. Imagine my surprise and some dismay, then, on the day after he died when I was going through his things and came across a burlap folder, which I think he must have made himself, in which he had kept the portrait I did of my poor mother on her deathbed. French chalk on a nice creamy sheet of Fabriano paper. It wasn't bad, for prentice work. But that he had kept it all those years, and in its own special folder, too, well, that was a facer. Sometimes I have the suspicion that there's a lot I miss in the day-to-day run of events.

Wait a minute, though. Can I really count that tube of paint as the first thing I stole? There are many kinds of theft, from the whimsical through to the malicious, but there's only one kind that counts, for me, and that's the theft that is utterly inutile. The objects I take must be ones that can't be put to practical use, not by me, anyway. As I said at the outset, I don't steal for profit—unless the secret shiver of bliss that thieving affords me can be considered a material gain—whereas I not only wanted but needed that tube of paint, as I wanted and needed Polly, and there's no doubt I put it to good use. Oops! That bit about Polly slipped out, or slipped itself in, when I wasn't expecting it. But it's true, I suppose. I did steal her, picked her up when her husband wasn't looking and popped her in my pocket. Yes, I pinched Polly; Polly I purloined. Used her, too, and badly, squeezed out of her everything she had to give and then ran off and left her. Imagine a squirm, a shiver of shame, imagine two white-knuckled fat fists beating a breast in vain. That's the trouble with guilt, one of the troubles: there's no escaping it in regard; it follows me around the room, around the world, like, all too famously, the Gioconda's puffy-eyed, sceptical and smugly knowing stare.

Just down from the roof. Whew! The storm earlier this morning lifted off half a dozen slates and dashed them to the ground, smashing them to bits, and now the rain is coming through the ceiling in one of the back bedrooms, having already caused who knows what havoc in the attic. The house is only a ground floor over a basement so the roof isn't all that high, but it's steeply pitched and I can't think what possessed me to shin up there, especially in this weather. I was negotiating my shaky way across the slates when I slipped and fell on my belly, and would have slithered all the way off and plunged to the ground had I not managed to grab on to the roof-ridge with my fingertips. What a sight that would have made, if there had been anyone to see me, wriggling and gasping like an impaled beetle, my pudgy legs thrashing and my toecaps searching desperately for purchase on the greasy slates. If I had fallen on the concrete in the back yard would I have bounced? In the end I managed to get myself to calm down and lay motionless for a while, still clutching on by my cold and stiffening fingers, being rained on, with a flock of jeering rooks wheeling about me. Then, closing my eyes and thinking of saying a prayer, I released my hold on the ridge and let myself slide slowly, clatteringly, down the slope until my toes clenched inside my by now badly scuffed shoes, encountered the guttering and I came to a blessed stop. After another brief rest I was able to get up and scramble sideways at a crouch along the edge of the roof—amazing the gutters didn't give way under me—with the hopping, rolling gait of an orangutan, hooting softly in terror, and gained the relative safety of the tall brick chimney that juts up at the north-west corner of the roof, or is it the south-east? Stupid to have gone up there in the first place. I might have broken my neck and not been found for weeks. Would those rooks have plucked out my corpse with staring, shocked and disbelieving eyes?

I don't know why I came here—I mean why here, to this house. This is where I grew up, this is where the past took place. Is it a case of the wounded rabbit dragging itself back to the burrow? No, that won't do. It's I who wounded others, after all, though certainly I didn't get away unscathed. Anyway, this is where I am, and there's no point in brooding on why I chose to come here and not somewhere else. I'm tired of brooding, it availeth naught.

I was wary of the woods, when I was young. Oh, I used to love wandering there, especially at twilight under the high, darkling canopy of leaves, among the saplings and the sprays of fern and the big, purplish clumps of bramble, but I was always afraid, too, afraid of wild animals and other things. I knew the old gods dwelt there still, the old ogres. There is felling going on today—I hear it down in the distance, in the deep wood. Hard weather for that kind of work. There can't be much timber left that's worth cutting. All the property round here is still in the hands of the Hyland clan, though it's mostly stripped by now of its erstwhile abundance. I feel its barrenness, as I feel my own. I expect the woodsmen will make their way up here in time and then the last of the old trees will be gone. Maybe they'll fell me along with them. That would be a fitting end, to go down with a flailing crash. Better, at any rate, than sliding off a roof and cracking my pate.

My father bore a smouldering contempt for the Hylands, whom out of their hearing he referred to witheringly, as the Huns, a reference to their Alpine origins. A hundred or so years ago the first of the Hohengrunds, which was their name originally, one Otto of that ilk, fled the towering, war-torn heights of Alpinia and settled here. In those days of plenty the by now pragmatically renamed Hylands-Hohengrund, Hyland: Get it?—soon became extensive landowners, and not only that but masters of industry, too, with a fleet of coal ships and an oil-storage facility in the town's harbour that supplied the entire province. Their long heyday ended when the world, our new-old world that Godley's Theorem wrought, learned to harvest energy from the oceans and out of the very air itself. Yet even as times grew hard for them the family managed to cling on to their acres, and a pot or two of gold besides, and to the

day in these parts the name of Hyland will cause some among the older denizens instinctively to doff cap or tug a hoary forelock. Not my dad, though. A timid spirit he may have been, but my goodness when he got going on our self-styled overlords—whose precipitous decline had only begun when his was finishing—he was what folks round here would call a Tartar. How he would execrate them of an evening, bringing his fist down on the table with a bang and making the tea-things jump and rattle while my mother turned ever more dreamy and plunged her fingers into her bird's-nest of hair in vague-eyed distraction. Yet for all their ferocity I never quite believed in those rants. I suspect my father didn't care tuppence about the Hylands, and only lit on them as an excuse to shout and thump the table and that way alleviate a little the sense of disappointment and failure that ate at him like a canker all his life. Poor old Dad. I must have loved him, in my way, whatever way that might have been.

It didn't help his temper that the gate-lodge in which we lived—lodged, in fact—should be the property of those same Hylands and rented to us by the year. What a grim hush would fall upon the household when the time came, in the first week of January, for my father to don his best suit of shiny blue serge and make his muttering, chagrined way into town to the offices of F. X. Reck & Sons, solicitors, land agents and commissioners for oaths, to submit himself, like some churl or vassal of yore, to the ceremonial renewal of the lease. The mansion that this house used to be the gate-lodge to was acquired in the last century by the first Otto von Hohengrund himself. By our time the big house was in the possession of one of Otto's numerous descendants, a certain Urs, who was indeed of bearish aspect and wore lederhosen, I swear it, in the summer months. I would glimpse his children in the woods, sometimes, delicate, pale-haired creatures but imperious withal. On a never-to-be-forgotten occasion one of them, a little girl with earphone braids and a perfect Habsburg lip, accused me of *trezpazzing* and slashed me across the face with a hazel switch. You can imagine my father's rage when he saw the welt on my cheek and heard how I had come by it. However, retribution sometimes falls even upon the mighty, and the following autumn the same little girl was savaged by a wolf, one of a supposedly tame pair that her father had imported here, out of nostalgia no doubt for the terrible forests and mountain fastnesses of his ancestral lands. The thing had got out of its pen and come upon the child picking berries in a dell not far from the spot where she had slashed my face that day. My father pretended to be shocked like everyone else by this gruesome incident, but it was plain, to me at least, that in his secret heart he felt that justice, admittedly disproportionate, had been done, and was duly gratified.

I wonder what my first painting was of. Can't remember. Some sylvan scene, I imagine, with leaves and stiles and moo-cows, all laid out perspectiveless under a goggling egg-yolk sun. I'm not sneering. It's true I was merely happy at first, dabbling and daubing, and happiness, of course, in this context, doesn't do at all. I spent more time, I think, in Geppetto's treasure-house than I did in front of my easel—yes, she bought me an easel, my mother did, and a palette, too, the elliptical curves of which caused in me and cause in me still, for I still have it, a secret amorous throb. The smell of paint and the soft feel of sable were to me what marbles and toy bows-and-arrows were to my coevals. Was I only at play, then, all innocently? Maybe I was, yet I did better work then, as a child, I'll wager, than later on when I grew self-conscious and began to think myself an artist. My God, the horror of trying to learn even the basics, the essentials! To re-learn them, that is, after the lucky flush of my carefree years came to an end. Everybody thinks it must be easy to be a painter, if you have some skill and master a few basic rules and aren't colour-blind. And it's true the technical side of it isn't so difficult, a matter of practice, hardly more than a knack, really. Technique can be acquired, technique you can learn, with time and effort, but what about the rest of it, the bit that really counts, where does that come from? Borne down from the empyrean by plump putti and scattered upon the favoured few like Danaëan gold? I hardly think so. An early facility is cruelly deceptive. It was as if I had set off heedlessly up a gentle grassy slope



somewhere in old Alpinia itself, plucking edelweiss blossoms and delighting in the song of the lark, and presently had come to the crest and stopped open-mouthed before a terrifying vista of range upon range of flinty, snow-clad peaks, each one loftier than the last, stretching off into the misty distances of Caspar David Friedrich sky, and all requiring to be climbed. I suppose I could flatter myself and say I must have been wise beyond my years to recognise the difficulties so early on. One day I saw the problem, just like that, and nothing was to be the same again. And what was the problem? It was this: that out there is the world and in here is the picture of it, and between the two yawns the man-killin' crevasse.

But wait, wait, I'm getting confused in my chronology, hopelessly confused. That insight didn't come until much later, and when it did, it left me blinded. So maybe, all those years ago, I wasn't such a perceptive little genius after all. That's a fortifying thought, though I can't think why it should be.

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Somewhat later. I made myself go for a walk. It's not a thing I often do, the reason being that it's not a thing I do well. That sounds absurd, I know—in what way would a walk be done well or ill? Walking is walking, surely. The point, however, is not the walking, but the going for a walk, which in my estimation is the most futile and certainly the most formless of human pastimes. I'm as ready as the next man to savour the delights that Mother Nature spreads before us with such indulgence and largess, probably readier, but only as an incidental pleasure in the intervals of the everyday. To set out with the specific purpose of being abroad in the clement air under God's good sky and all the rest of it smacks to me of kitsch. I think the trouble is that I can't engage in it naturally, without self-consciousness—that's what I mean by speaking of it being done badly. I look with envy upon others I meet along the road. How heartily they tramp, in their knee-breeches and rain-proof jackets, fearlessly wielding those pairs of long, wonderfully slender walking-sticks, more like ski poles, with leather loops on the handles, and not a thought in their heads, it seems, their faces lifted with blameless smiles to the bright day's blessing of light. I for my part skulk and sweat, mopping my streaming brow and clawing at a shirt collar that indoors was an easy fit but that now seems intent on throttling me. It's true, I could pluck it open and snatch off my tie and cast it from me, but that's just it. I've never been the unbuttoned type. I may look like Dylan Thomas in his premature decrepitude but I haven't got his windy way.

What it is, you see, about being on a walk—I'm sorry to keep tramping on about it—with no other purpose than being on a walk, is that I feel watched. Not by human eyes, or even by animal ones. For me, nature is anything but inanimate. Today as I strolled—I do not stroll—along the back road that skirts the wood I felt the life of things thronging me about on every side, crowding me, jostling me: in other words, watching me. Why, I wondered uneasily, is there so much of it? Why is there grass everywhere covering everything?—why are there so many leaves? And that's not even to consider the goings-on underground, the rootling beetles, the countless squirm of worms, the riot of thready roots striking deep and deeper into the earth in search of water and of warmth. I was appalled by the profusion; I felt pressed down upon by the weight of it all, and soon turned about and scurried back to the house and fled indoors, with a tremulous hand pressed to my racing heart.

Yet when I painted I painted nature best, and most happily. There's a paradox. Mind you, when it comes down to it, what else is there to paint? By nature, need I say, I mean the visible world, the entirety of it, indoors as well as out. But that's not nature, strictly speaking, is it? What, then? It's the *omnium*, that I'm thinking of; the whole kit and boodle, mice and mountain ranges, and us, wedged in between, the measure of all things, God bless the mark, as they say in these parts.

There's nothing to eat in the house. What am I to do? I could go out into the wood, I suppose, and forage for sweet herbs, or delve for pig nuts, whatever they are. Autumn is supposed to be the season of mellow fruitfulness, isn't it? I've never been any good at looking after myself. That was what womenfolk did, they took care of me. Now see what I've become, a mute and lyreless Orpheus who would lose his head for sure, were he so foolish as to venture back among the maenads. O god departed! O deus mortuorum! To thee I pray.

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My thoughts have turned yet again to that tube of zinc white I filched from Geppetto's toyshop. I can't seem to leave it alone. I've come definitely to the conclusion that it didn't in fact constitute my first legitimate theft. Granted, the tube of paint was the first thing I stole, so far as I remember, but I stole it out of childish covetousness, and the deed had nothing in it of artistry and lacked the true erotic element. These vital qualities only entered in with Miss Vandeleur's green-gowned figurine. Ah, yes. I have her still, that little porcelain lady, after all these years. What a sentimentalist I am. Or, no, that's not right, what am I talking about?—sentimentality doesn't come into it. The things I've kept I haven't kept out of nostalgic attachment; as well suggest to the high priest of the temple that the holy relics he looks after and jealously watches over are mere mementoes of the mortal men and women, the original owners, who were destined one day to be elevated to sanctity. Wait!—there it is again, the hieratic note, the summoning of the sacred, while in fact the true end of stealing is mundane-transcendent, yet at the same time earthbound. Let me state it clearly. My aim in the art of thieving, it was in the art of painting, is the absorption of world into self. The pilfered object becomes not only mine, it becomes me, and thereby takes on new life, the life that I give it. Too grand, you say, too highfalutin? Scoff all you like, I don't care: I know what I know.

Miss Vandeleur, the Miss Vandeleur I'm speaking of, not that there could have been so many others by that name, kept a boarding house in a village by the sea. She was related to my family in some way that I never did get to the bottom of. I suspect her relatedness was notional. There was an aunt on my father's side, an elderly, genteel lady who dressed in muted shades of mauve and grey, and wore—can it be?—button boots, that were delicately craquelured all over with a web of waxy wrinkles. She used to give me sixpences warm from her purse, but could never remember my name, and I've returned the compliment now by having forgotten hers. It seems to me Miss Vandeleur had been companion of long standing to this venerable spinster—as to precisely what variety of companion she was I'm not going to speculate—and on the old girl's death had become attached to us, a replacement, as it were, for the woman who had died, a sort of honorary aunt. At any rate, in the flat weeks towards the end of the season, when she had rooms standing idle, Miss V. would graciously invite us down to stay, at greatly reduced rates, which was the only way we could have afforded such a luxury.

Miss Vandeleur was a large, fair person with a mass of artificial blonde hair, which she wore loose and flowing. She must have been a beauty when she was young, and even yet, in the days when we knew her, she had the look of a ravaged version of the flower-strewing Flora to the left of the central figure in Sandro Botticelli's much admired if slightly saccharine *Primavera*. I suspect she was aware of the resemblance—someone once, a suitor, perhaps, must have drawn her attention to it—given that unlike the mass of carefully kept corn-coloured hair and the high-waisted, diaphanous dresses that she favoured. In temper she was volatile. Her predominant mode was one of stately benevolence, out of which she might erupt at the slightest provocation into slit-eyed, venom-spitting rage. There had been a tragedy long ago—a pair of twins had deliberately drowned a playmate, as I recall—in which Miss Vandeleur had been

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