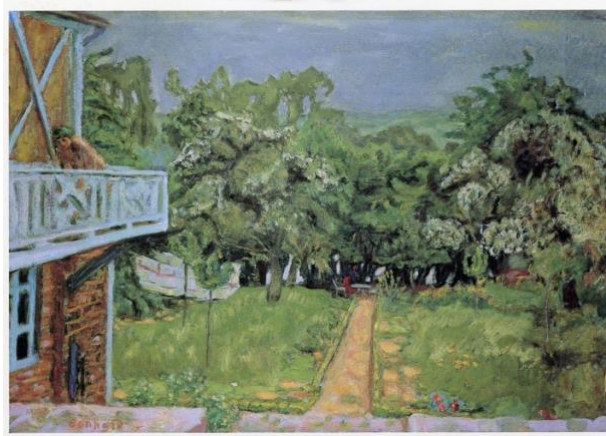


Pierre Bonnard (1910) *Blue Balcony*



Fluorescent orange. A reflective strip of silver on a cuff. Black thread. Black stitches dividing the silver into scales. Below, dark grey, thick mercury, presumably, down there, in circles, occasional ripples, shifting patterns, hinting at presence. This is not the image. This comes later, after the destruction of the world that came before. This image bares no relation, it is not congruent with the image above and yet, if it were not for those very large gaps, empty now of the things that filled them (the things that stood in for the passing of time), their edges would not meet, the silver, the salt, the biting cold, no not at all, with this path and garden furniture and laundry hanging out to dry in writhing greens, content – discontent?, a terrace, a pale blue X, a window that feels decidedly French.

Length (of time – distance?). Now – then. I am – will be: always abroad.

Abroad. A broad. *Brawd* – *b-road*. A broad brush. *Wide of the mark*. *In error* (in?). Archaic: *out of doors*.

‘What does origin mean to you’, asked the Russian painter with the short blonde hair. She points out that this is still a question, one which seems legitimate but is it? She said she was born in Russia (born: to be carried – to endure). Russia is where she *grew up* (to: full height? maturity? Measurements of rites of passage, legally able to: have sex, get married, drink alcohol, vote in (local?) elections – leave?). Is she Russian? What makes her Russian? Is it in the blood, the accent, the state education, the old traditions, her documentation? She says she does not feel Russian. She says she does not know what it would be like to feel Russian. What does she feel? Fragmented? *The fragment has gone too far*. This is not what Modernism meant. This is *flotsam*. A Scott Walker album: *Drift*. Drifter – a spacial thing to be. I am not a place. I am place. I am this: wherever and for however long that may be.

As we grow older time speeds up. We know this. We have agreed to this. We repeat it without fear of contradiction. *Our first impressions are the strongest*, not of people, but the world. We know this too. We say it – we preserve it. As we grow older and if we *drift*, those very early images are all we have left of something fragmented and half-remembered, something that, when we return, subconsciously, nocturnally, to its image, becomes transfigured. Coincidence is the product of a bad memory. If we remembered things clearly they would hold no mystery. Childhood doesn’t remember either, which is why its images are so vivid.

The woman with the short blonde hair turns to the aptly named Flora. Flora is French. I say this with some uncertainty but not as much as I should considering the turn the conversation is taking. Flora is beautiful in an effortless, makeup-less, messy haired, languid, cliché of a French woman kind of way. Flora has many lovers of many different genders (of?). If I had to describe a French woman, Flora would suffice. Or Charlotte Gainsbourg, that icon of French femininity, although she/this is also a con – she is (?) half (?) English (?). The woman who does not feel Russian, asks Flora what it means to be French. What makes one, or not even one, what is *French*? Flora, with a flick of her very long thick dark hair and a hint of self-consciousness (or was it?) as she shrugged (so Frenchly), says, with certainty (and slightly indignantly) ‘it’s in the language.’

In?

There is something about the way the blue balcony juts out into space. The path and the hint, the thin strip of terrace framing all that green. Diagonals, a rule of two thirds – the call of the open road.

I can't imagine what it feels like to be so certain of language. My language is not mine. Like many of its 'native' speakers it comes from a place that, until recently, was unknown to me. My language is both familiar and foreign to me. My mother and her tongue arrived on a boat, my mother came after, many years later – the youngest migrant, six months old, I still have the newspaper clipping.

Language is the house man lives in. I heard this in a French film made by a man from Switzerland. It is a common misconception that Jean Luc-Godard is French. He is so wrapped up in *Frenchness* and its ideas about itself, that it is hard to think of him as anything else. The film is called *Deux ou Trois choses que je sais d'elle* or *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*. The 'd'elle' or 'Her' in the film is Paris: the film is about capitalism and modern life.

Blue Balcony.

A child asks his mother what language is and this is what she says: *Language is the house man lives in.* I repeat this a lot, as a joke, because I can speak only one language, that of my mother, and I say, again and again in different company 'if language is the house man lives in, then I live in a bedsit'. It is not very funny, it is something I say to cover my regret and insecurities and recently someone told me, Jean-Luc Godard was paraphrasing Heidegger. Since then I have felt that I don't have a claim on even that anymore and so I have stopped saying it, although, I often still think it.

I once had a flatmate who spoke several languages including French and English. She was born in Switzerland to a French-speaking Swiss father and a Finnish mother. Her parents separated when she was three and she and her mother went *back* (?) to Finland and there she (my flatmate) *grew up*. She told me that, before he immigrated, Jean-Luc Godard had been her father's French teacher.

Fergus shows me the Bonnard. 'It is such an amazing painting'. I agree. I cannot imagine the first time he saw it. I imagine him returning to it. Later, I spend hours looking at it in books and on a screen. Then, quite by accident, I see it *in* (?) the flesh. It is completely unexpected. It is not in a Bonnard show. It is not in an exhibition. It is held in the permanent collection and on this day it is on display. I walk into a room with two entrances but no doors. The entrances face each other. It is hung to the right of the doorway facing the one I have just passed through in order to enter the room. I look right, I look left, then: *hello!*

Tenants and landlords. My flatmate was beautiful but not very bright and she loved to exploit my inability to speak other languages. This and her beauty were the cards that she held up her sleeve and she used them to assert her authority. One day I made the mistake of saying something about Sartre, giving his name the standard, accepted English pronunciation and she seized the opportunity to play dumb and humiliate me: *I honestly have no idea what you are trying to say.*

The thing about Bonnard's balcony is: it is not blue. It is turquoise. Turquoise is a controversial colour. It is not blue, it is not green – it is itself. I know people who do not like turquoise because of this slippage – it disappoints them because it is not green and it disappoints them because it is not blue. Turquoise is for me and David Hockney. I keep it for us. And Nadia. Nadia who had green eyes and turquoise pendants. Nadia who, when she stood up to talk about

her early influences, spoke about her love of a colour that would not settle. I thought she was South American – I presumed she was South American. I got carried away by the images she showed, of gold and blue-green stones. I allowed myself to indulge in exoticising fantasies, but she was not of Mayan descent, and *came* (?), in fact, *from* (?) Syria.

They are sitting on a step. They are framed by shutters that are open to their right and left, respectively. One half of an open French door is visible. As are eleven panes of glass. The sun is shining. She is wearing a white lace collar around her shoulders. Typed on a typewriter (her mistakes, barely concealed beneath white fluid) and attached to the image, by their daughter, my grandmother, is the following caption:

EMILE DEMOZAY, with
his new wife, PAULE
she was self conscious
being pregnant with he
first child. 1912



EMILE DEMOZAT with
new wife, PAULE
she was self conscious
being pregnant with her
first child. 1912

There are four postcards stuck to my wall. The wall became mine less than a month ago and will remain so for an uncertain amount of time. What is certain is that the wall will not be mine forever. It is unlikely that it will be mine for long. The wall is angled because it is part of a/the (?) recess where my (?) desk sits in front of a/the (?) window. All of these/the postcards were purchased, by me, in museum gift shops.

I have a Swiss friend, a Swiss German speaker, who tells me funny stories about the prejudices of his family. One of my favourites is: when any one of them encounters a Swiss French speaker, despite the fact that they are all fluent in French, they say (as a joke): *I'm sorry, I do not speak Russian.*

A vase of yellow tulips with turquoise stems. The vase is made of glass. It could be cut crystal. The painting (postcard) is not 'blurry' because, the painter says, it is not possible for a painting to blur.

Duchamp, under the guise of his female alter ego Rose Sélavy, made a miniature replica of a French window. It is turquoise and has cut crystal handles and is called *Fresh Widow*; the title is a pun (in English) on *French window* and also, could be a reference to the blacked out windows which have gone into mourning by blocking it out with black leather. It has been described as a 'semi-readymade': the ready-made element being the pre-existing (primal?) idea of a French window.



Marcel Duchamp (1920) *Fresh Widow*

When do our dreams return home? It seems, of late, every night:

The corridor looks long, although I know that it is not. The floor is made from polished wooden floorboards and reflects the afternoon light. The corridor channels the breeze that picks up off the river at two o'clock, so regular 'you could set your watch by it'. At one end of the corridor is a pink lattice door, the green of the trees in the courtyard, fills its tiny squares. At the other end of the corridor, the French doors, which are difficult to close because the dog repeatedly pushes them open with her fat black body, are open.

Bonnard. Bonnard. Bonnard. You look like my Swiss German speaking friend. Or is it just your glasses that are similar? Your love of colour? The fact that you are both painters?



Bonnard at home, Le Cannet (1944). Photo by Henri- Cartier Bresson.

There is nothing quite like the potential of a house to yourself. Some days, after my walk up the hill, I would go straight back to bed and wake up feeling confused. Some days I would make pasta and hang it up on coat hangers all over the house. It was worse when it rained. It didn't rain much but when it did it was heavy. I would sit on the sofa and look out the window, watching the rain as it bounced on the road. It ran off the roof and rushed down the street. The sound of the rain on the roof pulled the ceiling down close and, when it stopped, everything steamed and the plants would turn dark shiny green and the air would be thick with the smell of wet earth and the sound of dripping on leaves.

Why can't I write about this painting? Am I unable? Do I refuse?

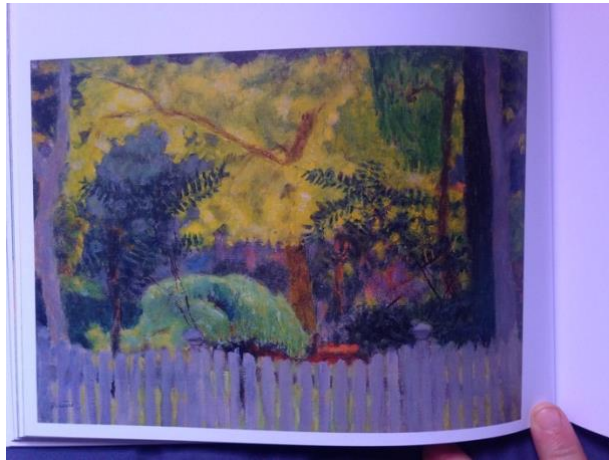
She twitches in her sleep. Claw on carpet. Wakes herself up. Twenty years later and still a black dog.



The last night in the house was unimaginable. It was not possible, after thirty years. It was empty. Of five people's stuff – all thirty years of it: Boys Brigade badges, exercise books, maps, skis, swords – coat hangers. The kitchen was denuded: the horse brasses had been taken down.

But these were not my memories. I remember a wicker rocking horse, bleached silver by the sun on the veranda. I remember palm trees. I remember latticework. I remember how the Jacarandas would dot the hills with purple-blue clouds and turn the streets into archways of colour. I remember how their bell-shaped flowers fell like snow and covered the ground in a blue-purple carpet. I remember the equally slippery blue of plumbago. The way it stood out at dusk and turned pink before storms. I remember towels over railings. I remember the colours of Connie's house. I remember dark green shade and picket fences. I remember the feeling of winter morning sun. I remember the polished wooden floor-boards, bathed in squares of light. I remember when the average daily winter high was twenty two degrees.

She had a painting in her bedroom by Cernak. Cernak was/is (?) a painter and, she claimed, a white witch. The painting was of a woman on a veranda. After I hit her, because she painted over my work, she threw me out of art class. A rectangle of garden was framed by the veranda and looked like a purple-green hell. I wandered up and down the very hilly streets until my mother found me. Its tongues were mauve and blackish green. She told my mother I was a black witch. The woman in the painting looked serene, oblivious to the chaos in the garden. She found me under an umbrella tree, using a stick to dig up broken pieces of plate. Purple, green, yellow. Shards of willow pattern. Pink shadows. White and blue.



Pierre Bonnard (1923) *The Violet Fence*

Bonnard. You seem to have a thing for balconies too. And insides and outsides and windows and doors. And verandas. Has everyone always just been swimming? Lunch: *little breakfast*, the only meal of the day.

Recognition. I see you, I know you. I am this. I am of this. It is in me – it was in you – it is *of* you: expressing the relationship between the part and the whole. Of, of, of...

Aside from, beside, the many openings into; facets, aspects, views (I refuse to use the word ‘memory’) are the photographs: naked bodies – you, your wife, your lover. Dappled sunlight on white skin. Shady places, towels. Many of your family. High collars. Shutters. Rattan chairs. Harri said there is a word for the mark left on skin by wicker. I do not remember what it is. Next time I see her, I’ll ask.



Bonnard with his nieces and nephews c. 1899-1901. Unknown Photographer.



Bonnard's mother and sister Andrée c. 1899-1901. Photo by Pierre Bonnard.

Kettering (n.)

The marks left on your bottom or thighs after sunbathing on a wickerwork chair.¹

¹ Douglas Adams, *The Meaning of Liff* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2013), p.90.



