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Stealing

Carol Ann Duffy

The most unusual thing I ever stole? A snowman.
Midnight. He looked magnificent; a tall, white mute
beneath the winter moon. I wanted him, a mate
with a mind as cold as the slice of ice
within my own brain. I started with the head.
Better off dead than giving in, not taking
what you want. He weighed a ton; his torso,
frozen stiff, hugged to my chest, a fierce chill
piercing my gut. Part of the thrill was knowing
that children would cry in the morning. Life's tough.
Sometimes I steal things I don't need. I joy-ride cars
to nowhere, break into houses just to have a look.
I'm a mucky ghost, leave a mess, maybe pinch a camera.
I watch my gloved hand twisting the doorknob.
A stranger's bedroom. Mirrors. I sigh like this - Aah.
It took some time. Reassembled in the yard,
he didn't look the same. I took a run
and booted him. Again. Again. My breath ripped out
in rags. It seems daft now. Then I was standing
alone among lumps of snow, sick of the world.
Boredom. Mostly I'm so bored I could eat myself.
One time, I stole a guitar and thought I might
learn to play. I nicked a bust of Shakespeare once,
flogged it, but the snowman was the strangest.
You don't understand a word I'm saying, do you?

About the Author:

Carol Ann Duffy, born in December 1955 in Glasgow, Scotland, is one of the most significant contemporary British poets. She grew up in the deprived area of Gorbals, an experience that shaped her understanding of social realities and informs many of her poems, including *Stealing*, which portrays a character who navigates boredom, desire, and a sense of moral ambiguity.

Duffy is known for her use of simple, accessible language that conveys complex emotions and social commentary. She writes with a straightforward, unflinching approach, particularly when exploring themes of gender, identity, and human behaviour. Unlike the apathetic protagonist in *Stealing*, Duffy herself has achieved remarkable professional success, becoming the United Kingdom's first female Poet Laureate in 2009, a role she held until 2019. She accepted the position in part to break this historic gender barrier.

Her career includes early publications in the 1970s, a degree in philosophy from the University of Liverpool (1977), and work as a poetry critic for *The Guardian*. She has also written children's

picture books and has won notable awards such as the National Poetry Competition for her poem *Whoever She Was*. Duffy's poetry is celebrated for its accessibility, emotional depth, and cultural relevance.

Summary

Stealing by Carol Ann Duffy is a dramatic monologue that gives voice to a young delinquent, revealing both their thrill-seeking behaviour and underlying dissatisfaction with life. Using her trademark ability to inhabit another character, Duffy creates a strong narrative voice distinct from her own, allowing readers to step inside the mind of this morally ambiguous character. The poem opens and closes with a question, giving it a sense of symmetry: the opening echoes a query posed to the speaker, and the closing line conveys frustration that the listener cannot understand the speaker's motivations.

The central act in the poem is the theft of a snowman. The snowman is described as impressive, "big, white, and mute", under the winter moon, and serves as a metaphor for the protagonist. Its coldness mirrors the speaker's own icy, calculated personality, highlighting traits of apathy and detachment. Hugging the snowman's frozen body, the speaker feels a literal and emotional chill, and part of the thrill comes from imagining the children's distress at losing their creation. Yet, even in committing these antisocial acts, the speaker reveals signs of insecurity and boredom, suggesting that their delinquent behaviour masks dissatisfaction with life.

Beyond the snowman, the speaker admits to stealing things they don't need: joy-riding in cars, breaking into homes, and sometimes taking items just for curiosity or minor gain. The speaker carefully avoids leaving evidence, but their actions are both playful and reckless. When reconstructing the snowman in their yard, the speaker repeatedly kicks it until exhausted, illustrating a mixture of childish anger, obsession, and futility.

The poem concludes with the speaker reflecting on the strangeness of the snowman theft compared to other stolen items, guitars, and a Shakespeare bust, but insists the listener does not understand the speaker's motives. Through this, Duffy explores themes of alienation, boredom, rebellion, and the thin line between playfulness and malice, inviting readers to both judge and empathise with the speaker.

Themes

- **Isolation, Alienation, and Selfishness**
 - A primary theme in "Stealing" is the speaker's isolation and alienation. The dramatic monologue portrays a young delinquent who feels disconnected from society, misunderstood by others, and profoundly bored with life. The speaker repeatedly emphasises their own experience through "I" statements, suggesting self-absorption. Their stealing is partly a way to assert control and partly a way to express frustration with their lack of connection, yet it only deepens their loneliness.
 - The speaker's selfishness is self-destructive. They take pleasure in others' misfortune. "part of the thrill" of stealing the snowman was knowing children

would cry, showing a detachment from empathy. The snowman itself acts as a mirror for the speaker, cold and unfeeling, highlighting their emotional frostiness. By destroying the snowman, the speaker symbolically destroys a part of themselves, underlining the corrosive effects of their alienation.

- Where this appears in the poem: Lines 1–25 (e.g., taking the snowman, joy-riding cars, breaking into homes, sighing at their reflection).
- **Greed, Materialism, and Meaninglessness in Modern Society**
 - Another key theme is the emptiness of materialism and self-serving behaviour. The speaker steals items they don't need cars, cameras, a guitar, and even a bust of Shakespeare, demonstrating a lack of purpose or meaningful connection to these objects. This compulsive stealing may reflect wider societal conditions of the 1980s UK, when unemployment, social marginalisation, and disillusionment were prevalent.
 - Through these acts, Duffy comments on the human desire for control and agency in a society that often leaves some individuals feeling powerless. Objects like the Shakespeare bust or the stolen guitar, which could symbolise art, culture, or personal growth, are instead treated as commodities to be taken, sold, or destroyed, reflecting a world where materialism and superficial gain overshadow deeper fulfilment. The poem suggests that acts of selfishness and greed cannot satisfy the human need for connection, purpose, or meaning.
 - Where this appears in the poem: Lines 1–25 (e.g., stealing cars to go “nowhere,” taking objects for fun, reselling items).
- Overall, Duffy's poem explores how boredom, isolation, and societal neglect can manifest in antisocial behaviour, while also revealing the inner emptiness of a self-centred life. Through the speaker's actions and reflections, the poem critiques both individual selfishness and a society that fosters disconnection and alienation.

Form

- Stealing comprises 25 lines, arranged into five cinquains, five-line stanzas. Each stanza is firmly end-stopped, meaning that the conclusion of each stanza coincides with the end of a sentence. This gives the poem a measured, even quality, reflecting the speaker's detached, conversational recounting of their experiences. The stanza breaks act as natural pauses in speech, signalling slight shifts in the focus of the speaker's narrative.
- Despite the structured stanza form, Duffy includes enjambment within lines, creating tension between the stability of the end-stopped stanzas and the speaker's fragmented, impulsive thoughts. This formal tension mirrors the speaker's internal instability: they present themselves casually, yet their actions and reflections reveal emotional turbulence and alienation.
- The poem is written as a persona poem and a dramatic monologue. Through the poem, the speaker recounts the theft of the snowman while inadvertently revealing their character, motivations, and isolation. The use of first-person narration gives the poem immediacy, allowing the reader to experience the speaker's mindset directly. The speaker's gender is left ambiguous, further highlighting the universality of the themes of boredom, selfishness, and alienation.

Meter and Rhyme Scheme

- Stealing is written in free verse, with no regular meter, reinforcing the sense that the speaker is addressing the reader in casual, spontaneous conversation. The conversational tone is strengthened by the use of colloquial language and occasional slang, reflecting the speaker's social class and outsider status.
- While there is no set rhyme scheme, Duffy employs internal rhyme and slant rhyme to create emphasis and subtle musicality. For example:
 - "slice of ice" – internal rhyme highlighting the speaker's coldness and lack of empathy.
 - "same" and "[a]gain" – slant rhyme emphasising the destruction of the snowman, symbolising the speaker's inability to recreate innocence or joy.
 - "bust" and "once" – slant rhyme draws attention to the theft of the Shakespeare bust, suggesting the speaker's superficial engagement with culture and meaning.

Overall, the combination of cinquains, free verse, enjambment, and slant rhyme gives the poem a conversational, yet slightly unstable rhythm, reflecting the speaker's alienation and fragmented psyche.

Literary Devices

- **Imagery**
 - Duffy uses vivid and evocative imagery to create a strong sense of place, action, and emotion.
 - For example, the snowman is described as "magnificent; a tall, white mute / beneath the winter moon", conveying both physical presence and symbolic coldness.
 - Later, the speaker describes themselves as a "ghost", highlighting feelings of isolation and alienation.
 - Through imagery, Duffy allows readers to visualise the scenes while also understanding the speaker's internal state.
- **Alliteration**
 - Alliteration reinforces rhythm and emphasises key ideas. Examples include:
 - Line 2: "Midnight," "magnificent," "mute" – the repetition of the 'm' sound emphasises the quiet, eerie setting.
 - Final stanza: "Shakespeare" and "strangest" – the 's' sound draws attention to the cultural theft and highlights the oddity of the snowman theft.
- **Enjambment**
 - Enjambment occurs when a line runs over into the next without punctuation, creating a sense of flow or tension. For instance:
 - Lines 3–4: "I wanted him, a mate / with a mind as cold as the slice of ice" – the enjambment mirrors the speaker's restless thoughts and disjointed actions.

- Lines 11–12: “I watch my gloved hand twisting the doorknob. / A stranger’s bedroom. Mirrors. I sigh like this – Aah.” – The continuation emphasises the suspense and voyeuristic intrusion.
- **Repetition**
 - Repetition is used to underscore the speaker’s selfishness, boredom, and aggression:
 - Words for theft: “steal,” “pinch,” “nicked” – repeated to show habit and casual immorality.
 - Personal pronoun “I”: Lines such as “I wanted,” “I started,” “I watch” centre the poem on the speaker’s self-absorption.
 - Polyptoton: “Boredom. Mostly I’m so bored I could eat myself” – emphasises the speaker’s monotony and frustration.
 - Epizeuxis: “Again. Again. My breath ripped out” – captures the intensity of the snowman’s destruction, symbolising self-loathing.
- **Colloquialism**
 - Duffy uses informal, conversational language, reflecting the speaker’s social class and casual attitude toward crime, e.g., “mucky ghost”, “pinch a camera”. This makes the speaker’s voice realistic and relatable while emphasising their detachment from social norms.
- **Personification**
 - Objects and abstract concepts are given human qualities to deepen meaning. For example, the snowman is described as “mute”, giving it a quiet, almost judgmental presence.
- **Metaphor**
 - The snowman functions as a metaphor for the speaker themselves: cold, unfeeling, and alienated. The theft and destruction of the snowman mirror the speaker’s inner turmoil and self-destructive tendencies.
- **Rhetorical Question**
 - The poem begins and ends with rhetorical questions: “The most unusual thing I ever stole?” and “You don’t understand a word I’m saying, do you?” These frame the narrative as a response to an unseen listener, creating symmetry while highlighting the speaker’s frustration and alienation.

Detailed Analysis

First Stanza

*“The most unusual thing I ever stole? A snowman.
Midnight. He looked magnificent; a tall, white mute
beneath the winter moon. I wanted him, a mate
with a mind as cold as the slice of ice
within my own brain. I started with the head.”*

The poem opens with a direct rhetorical question, pulling the reader into the speaker's confession. The abruptness of "A snowman" as the answer feels both surprising and oddly mundane, establishing the mix of menace and absurdity that runs through the poem. Short, clipped sentences ("Midnight.") create a sense of sharpness and detachment, reflecting the speaker's guarded, confrontational tone. The snowman is personified as a "tall, white mute", both beautiful and voiceless, mirroring the speaker's own emotional coldness. Calling the snowman a "mate" hints at deep loneliness and social isolation; the snowman is an imagined companion who cannot reject or judge. The metaphor of "a mind as cold as the slice of ice / within my own brain" reveals a self-awareness of emotional numbness, suggesting the theft is not about possession but about finding a reflection of the self.

Second Stanza

*"Better off dead than giving in, not taking
what you want. He weighed a ton; his torso, frozen stiff,
hugged to my chest, a fierce chill piercing my gut.
Part of the thrill was knowing
that children would cry in the morning. Life's tough."*

The defiant opening phrase "Better off dead than giving in" immediately frames the speaker as anti-authoritarian, rejecting social rules in favour of self-gratification. The tactile imagery ("frozen stiff," "piercing my gut") gives the snowman a physical presence that almost fights back, while the act of "hugging" it to the chest adds an uncomfortable intimacy. The admission that part of the thrill comes from knowing children will cry reveals a cruel streak; pain inflicted on innocence becomes a source of power. The curt final line, "Life's tough", drips with sardonic bitterness, dismissing the emotional harm caused as a normal, even inevitable, part of life.

Third Stanza

*"Sometimes I steal things I don't need. I joy-ride cars
to nowhere, break into houses just to have a look.
I'm a mucky ghost, leave a mess, maybe pinch a camera.
I watch my gloved hand twisting the doorknob.
A stranger's bedroom. Mirrors. I sigh like this – Aah."*

Here, the speaker shifts from recounting a single theft to cataloguing habitual criminal acts. The enjambment between "joy-ride cars / to nowhere" slows the pace, as if a momentary pause of reflection has intruded. The self-description "mucky ghost" combines the dirtiness of intrusion with the invisibility of the socially excluded, suggesting the speaker moves unseen through others' private lives. The voyeuristic image of "A stranger's bedroom. Mirrors." fragments the scene into stark snapshots, mimicking how the speaker might process the thrill in disjointed flashes. The sigh ("Aah") is unsettling; it's a moment of satisfaction in trespass, signalling that intrusion and violation are not side effects but the goal.

Fourth Stanza

*"It took some time. Reassembled in the yard,
he didn't look the same. I took a run
and booted him. Again. Again. My breath ripped out
in rags. It seems daft now. Then I was standing
alone among lumps of snow, sick of the world."*

The snowman, earlier a symbol of companionship, now becomes the target of destruction. This act mirrors self-sabotage: in destroying the snowman, the speaker symbolically attacks themselves. The repeated "Again. Again." conveys both rage and compulsive energy, a release of pent-up emotion that is as self-directed as it is outward. The enjambment in "standing / alone" isolates the word "alone", visually and sonically mirroring the isolation it describes. The final phrase "sick of the world" is a raw admission of existential disgust, revealing that the violence is not simply mischievousness but a symptom of deeper anger and alienation.

Fifth Stanza

*"Boredom. Mostly I'm so bored I could eat myself.
One time I stole a guitar and thought I might
learn to play. I nicked a bust of Shakespeare once,
flogged it. But the snowman was the strangest.
You don't understand a word I'm saying, do you?"*

The abrupt noun "Boredom" stands alone, functioning almost like a diagnosis of the speaker's life. The hyperbolic "so bored I could eat myself" suggests boredom so intense it turns self-destructive. The stolen guitar and bust of Shakespeare represent fleeting attempts at self-improvement or meaning, but both end in abandonment, reinforcing the futility that pervades the poem. Ending with a return to the opening conversational mode, the speaker directly addresses the listener: "You don't understand a word I'm saying, do you?". This rhetorical question seals the isolation; not only is the speaker alienated from society, but they also believe their inner world is incomprehensible to others.

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