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THE BLUE GUITAR

I do my best to tell it true
a thing exceeding hard to do
or tell it slant as Emily
advises in her poetry,
and, colour blind, how can I know
if green is blue or cinnabar.
Find me a colour chart that I
can check against a summer sky.
My eye is on a distant star.
They said, ‘You have a blue guitar.’
‘I have,’ the man replied, ‘it’s true.
The instrument I strum is blue
I strum my joy, I strum my pain
I strum the sun, I strum the rain.
But tell me, what is that to you?
You see things as you think they are.
Remove the mote within your ear
then talk to me of what you hear.’
They said, ‘Go smoke a blue cigar!
You do not play things as they are.’
‘Things as they are? Above? Below?
In hell or heaven? Fast or slow…?’
They silenced him. ‘It’s not about
philosophy, so cut it out.
We want the truth and not what you
are playing on the blue guitar.
So start again and play it straight
don’t improvise, prevaricate.
Just play things as they really are.’
The man replied, ‘Things as they are
are not the same as things that were
or will be in another year.
The literal is rarely true
for truth is old and truth is new
and faceted — a metaphor
for something higher than we are.
I play the truth of Everyman
I play the truth as best I can.

The things I play are better far
when changed upon the blue guitar.’