

Things I See

Mary Costello

Outside my room the wind whistles. It blows down behind our row of houses, past all the bedroom windows and when I try to imagine the other bedrooms and the other husbands and wives inside, I hear my own husband moving about downstairs. He will have finished reading the paper by now and broken up the chunks of coal in the grate. Then he will carry the tray into the kitchen, carefully, with the newspaper folded under his arm. He will wash the mugs and leave them to drain; he will flip up the blind so that the kitchen will be bright in the morning. Finally, he will flick off the socket switches and pick up his bundle of keys. Occasionally, just, he pauses and makes himself a pot of tea to have at the kitchen table, the house silent around him. I know the way he sits, his long legs off to the side, the paper propped against the teapot, as he stares, pensive, into the corner near the back door. He drinks his tea in large mouthfuls and gives the mug a discreet little lick, a flick of the tongue, to prevent a drip. When I hear his chair scrape the tiles I switch off my lamp and turn over. Don is predictable and safe. Tonight he is making himself that last pot of tea.

There are nights when I want to go down and shadow him and stand behind his chair and touch his shoulder. My pale arms would encircle his neck and I would lean down so that our faces touch. Some nights between waking and sleeping I imagine that I do this but I stand and watch him from the kitchen door and I am aware only of the cold tiles under my bare feet. There is something severe and imperious in Don's bearing that makes me resist. He has a straight back and square shoulders and black black hair. His skin is smooth and clear, without blemish, as if he has many layers of perfect epidermii. Beside him, with my pale skin and fair hair I am like an insignificant underground animal, peering out at him through weak eyes.

Lucy, my sister, is staying with us for a week. She is sleeping in the next room and when she tosses I hear the headboard knock against the wall. I get up and stand at the window. The light from the kitchen illuminates the back garden and the gravel path down to the shed. When I am away from this house I have to let my mind spill over into this room before I can sleep. I have to reconstruct it in the strange darkness

of another room before I can surrender. Its window bears down on the old fir trees looming tall and dark beyond the back wall. There is the house and these trees and a patch of sky above and these are my borders. They pen me in and I like this. I cannot bear large vistas, long perspectives, lengthy hopes. When we first came here Don wanted us to take the front room; it is west-facing and sunny and looks onto the street. He likes the sound of the neighbourhood; he likes to know there are lives going on around us. Some nights he sleeps out there. This evening he told me I was intolerant.

Tonight I long to be alone. I would walk around the carpeted rooms upstairs, straightening curtains, folding clothes, arranging things. I would lie on the bed and inhale Don's scent on the pillow and this contact, this proximity to him, would be enough to make me nervous and excitable, too hopeful. Sometimes when Don and Robin are out and I am alone in the house I am prone to elation, swept up in some vague contentment at the near memory of them. I let myself linger in their afterglow, and then something—a knock on the door, a news item on the TV, the gas boiler firing up outside—will shatter it all. Lately I have become concerned for our future. It is not the fact of growing old, but of growing different. Don gets impatient if I say these things and I see his face change and I know he is thinking, For God's sake, woman, pull yourself together.

I go into the bathroom and the light stings my eyes. I splash water on my face. He will hear my movements now. I rub on cream and massage the skin around my eyes and cheek bones. My eyes are blue, like Lucy's. There are four girls in my family and we all have blue eyes. I go out on the landing and lean over the banisters and check the line of light under the kitchen door. I pause outside Lucy's door. I imagine her under the bedclothes, the sheet draped over her shoulders, her hair spilling onto the pillow. Lucy is a musician; she plays the cello in an orchestra and this evening she played a Romanian folk dance in our living room. Robin was in her jammies, ready for bed and afterwards she picked up Lucy's bow. Lucy let her turn it over carefully and explained about horsehair and rosin and how string instruments make music and she showed her how to pluck a string. Then she whisked her up into her arms and nuzzled her and breathed in my daughter's apple-scented hair.

'Have you thought about music lessons for her?' she asked me a moment later. 'She could learn piano, or violin. She's old enough, you know.' Before I could reply she brought her face close to Robin's. 'Would you like that, Sweetheart, would you like to play some real *mu-sic*?' Robin giggled and clung to Lucy like a little

monkey. They sat on the sofa across from me. A bluebottle came from nowhere and buzzed above my head.

'I don't know,' I said. 'She's already got so much going on. And she's only six.' I watched the bluebottle zigzag drunkenly towards the up-lighter and for a second I was charged with worry. Every day insects fly into that lighted corner and land on the halogen bulb and extinguish themselves in a breath.

'Don't leave it too late, Annie. She's got an ear, she's definitely got an ear. I said so to Don today.'

She carried Robin upstairs then and they seemed to leave a little scent in their wake. It reminded me of the cream roses that clung to the arched trellis in our garden at home. No, it reminded me of Lucy. I think she has always given off this scent, like she's discarding a surfeit of love. I wonder if all that wood and rosin and sheep gut suffocates her scent. I think of her sitting among the other cellists, her bulky instrument between her knees, her hair falling on one side of her face, the bow in her right hand drawing out each long mournful note, the fingers of her left hand pressed on the neck of the instrument or sliding down the fingerboard until I think she will bleed out onto the strings. I watched those hands today as they passed Robin a vase of flowers. She has taught Robin to carry the flowers from room to room as we move.

I turn and tiptoe into Robin's room now. The lamp light casts a glow on her skin and her breathing is so silent but for a second I am worried and think to hold a tiny mirror to her mouth, the way nurses check the breath of the dying. She is a beautiful child, still and contained and perfect, and so apart from me that sometimes I think she is not mine, no part of me claims her. Don has stayed home and is raising her and she is growing confident. Often at work I pause midway through typing a sentence, suddenly reminded of them, and I imagine them at some part of their day: Don making her lunch, talking to her teacher, clutching her schoolbag and waiting up for her along the footpath. I have an endless set of images I can call on. This evening as I pulled into the driveway Don was putting his key in the door. The three of them, Don, Lucy and Robin, had been for a walk. It was windy, they had scarves and gloves on and their cheeks were flushed. Lucy and Robin laughed and waved at me as I pulled in. I sat looking at them all for a moment. Now I have a new image to call on.

If I ever have another child I will claim it—I will look up at Don after the birth and say, 'This one's mine.' I have it all planned.

After dinner this evening Don took the cold-water tap off the kitchen sink. He spread newspapers and tools all over the floor and cleared the cupboard shelves and stretched in to work on the pipes. He opened the back door and went out and back to the shed several times and cold air blew through the house. After a while there was a gurgle, a gasp and a rush of water spilled out along the shelf onto the floor. He jumped back and swore. Robin was in the living room watching Nickelodeon and Lucy was practising in the dining room. I had been roaming about the house tidying up, closing curtains, browsing. I had stepped over Don a few times and over the toolbox and spanners and boxes of detergent strewn around him.

'What's up?' I asked finally. His head was in the cupboard. 'What are you at?' I pressed.

'Freeing it up,' he said, and I thought of the journey these three words had to make, bouncing off the base of the sink before ricocheting back out to me. 'Did you not notice how slow the flow has been lately?'

I leaned against the counter. The cello drifted in from the next room, three or four low-pitched notes, a pause, then the same notes repeated again.

'Wouldn't the plunger have cleared it?' I asked. I watched his long strong torso and his shoulders pressed against the bottom shelf. He drew up one leg as he strained to turn a bolt. His brown corduroys were threadbare at the right knee and the sight of this and the thought of his skin underneath made me almost forgive him. The cello paused and then started again and I focused on the notes, and tried to recognise the melody. Lucy favours Schubert; she tells me he is all purity. I have no ear and can scarcely recognise Bach.

'Is that urgent?' I asked.

'Nope.'

'Can't it wait then?'

I imagined his slow blink. Next door Lucy turned a page, I sensed her pause and steady herself before raising her bow again. A single sombre note began to unfurl into the surrounding silence and when I thought it could go on no longer and she really would bleed out of her beautiful hands, it touched the next note and ascended and then descended the octave and I thought this *is* Bach, this is that sublime suite that we listened to over and over in the early months of the pregnancy, and then never again, because Don worried that such melancholy would affect his unborn child.

'Can't you do these jobs during the day, when there's no one here?' I blurted. A new bar had begun and the music began to climb, began to envelop again.

He reversed out of the cupboard and threw the spanner in the box. 'What the hell is needling you this evening?'

'Shh. Keep your voice down. Please.'

It was Bach, and I strove to catch each note and draw out the title while I still could, before it closed in.

He started to gather up the scattered tools and throw them in the toolbox. 'Jesus, we have to live.' I stood there half-listening. The music began to fade until only the last merciful note lingered. I can recognise the signs, the narrowing of his eyes as he speaks, the sourness of his mouth when he's hurt and abhorred and can no longer stand me, and when the music stopped I longed to stop too, and gaze at him until something flickered within and his eyes met mine and we found each other again.

He leaned towards me then and spoke in a low tight voice. 'What's wrong with you, Ann? Why're you so fucking intolerant?'

He slumped against the sink and stared hard at me and I looked out at the darkness beyond the window. I heard Lucy's attempt to muffle our anger with the shuffle of her sheet music and cello and stand. I longed for her to start up again, send out a body of sound that would enrapture, and then I wondered if he had heard it, if it had reached him under the sink all this time, and if he'd remembered or recognized or recalled it. *What was that piece, I longed to ask him, that sonata that Lucy played just now, the one we once loved, you and I?*

I thought of them, Lucy, Robin and Don at the front door earlier. They had all been laughing. Who had said something funny? Robin is sallow like her father, with long dark hair, and some strands had blown loose from her scarf. Don was laughing too but when he saw my car he averted his eyes and singled out the key in his bundle. There was a look on his face. I have seen that look before. It is a dark downcast look and when he looked away this evening perhaps he was remembering another day, the day that I was remembering too.

Robin was newly born and Lucy, having just finished college, came to stay for a few weeks, to relieve us at times with Robin. I had wanted a child for a long time and now, when I recall them, I think those early days were lived in a strange surreal haze. At night, sleepless, I would turn and look at Don in the warmth of the lamplight, his dark features made patient and silent by sleep, and I would want to preserve us—Don, Robin and me—forever in the present then, in this beautiful amber glow.

I had gone into the city that day and had wandered about the parks and the streets, watching my happy face slide from window to window. Light-headed, euphoric, I bought cigarettes and sat outside a café and watched people's faces and felt a surge of hope. An old couple came out with a tray and sat down, hardly

speaking but content. Young girls crowded around tables, flicking their long hair and chatting to boys. I lit a cigarette and bit off half of the chocolate that came with my coffee, saving the rest for later, to disguise the cigarette smoke on my breath. I had not smoked for years and the deep draw spiked my lungs and the surge of nicotine quickened my heartbeat and made my fingers tremble and I closed my eyes and relished the pure intoxication of it all.

Suddenly I was startled by a pigeon brushing my arm and landing at my feet. It fluttered and hopped on one leg and then I saw the damaged foot. There remained only one misshapen toe and its nail, ingrown, coiled tightly around the leg, swollen, sore, unusable. I met the pigeon's round, black empty eye and thought of the word *derelict* and it seemed like the saddest word I had ever encountered. Two more pigeons landed close by and pecked at crumbs. And then a gust of wind—tight against the street—blew in and tossed napkins and paper cups and wrappers from the tables. My chocolate, half eaten in its gold-foil wrapper, blew to the ground. My pigeon hopped over and pecked at it and I smiled at his good fortune and then, in panic, thought that Don would now smell the cigarette when I got home. I checked my watch and remembered Robin and her tiny clenched baby fists and her moist eyelids, and wondered why I had ever left her. I went to rise and a terrible racket of flapping wings and screeching started up at my feet. The others had come after the chocolate. They had cornered my lame pigeon. 'Shoo, Shoo,' I called at them. I waved my arms and tried to rise again but with my loud heart and my shaking hands and the terrible screeching of pigeons, I fell back into the chair.

Later I fled the city, trembling, and drove fast towards the suburbs, with Robin on my mind and a sinking feeling that I might not see her again.

At the front door I reached into my pocket but found no key. I looked in the living-room window. Robin was asleep in her Moses basket. She was there, safe, and she was mine.

I walked around to the back of the house. The old fir trees were pressed flat against the sky and everything was still. The neighbourhood was silent and the birds and the dogs and the children's street play were all absent, or that is how I remember it, as if all living creatures had sensed danger and fled, as they do on high Himalayan or Alpine ground before an avalanche. The back door is half glass and Don had his back to me. I raised my hand to knock on the glass and then I saw Lucy, in front of him, wedged up against the counter. He stood over her, leaning into her, with an arm each side of her and his palms flat on the counter. He was spread-eagled; he had her cornered. Her body and face were hidden from me; her hands moved on his shoulders, and then her fingers touched his neck, and her legs in jeans

emerged from between his. I looked at the back of his head, at his thick black hair, his square shoulders. He was wearing a check shirt I had given him at Christmas, and his dark brown corduroy trousers. He moved his hips and his thighs, grinding her, and I thought: she is too small for him, he will crush her. But I underestimate Lucy.

And then he stopped moving and tilted his head, as if hearing something. He turned his face to the right and I slid back. All he would have caught was a shadow, like a bird's, crossing the back door. I walked lightly around to the front and sat in the car. Later I rang the doorbell and pretended to search for something in the boot. And things started to come out and move again. A jeep drove into the cul-de-sac and a child yelled and cycled his tricycle along the footpath. An alarm went off at the other end of the street.

Finally Don opened the door.

'I forgot my keys,' I explained quickly. He looked at me, that too calm look.

'You should have come around the back. Robin might have woken with the bell.'

'Did she sleep the whole time?' I asked, and we looked at each other for a terrible moment and neither one of us heard his reply.

*

Now I hear his movements below and I become anxious. He is locking the back door. I have a sense of being in both places now—there, below with him, and here in the bed. My heart is thumping and I am far from sleep.

And then suddenly I am exhausted from the effort of tracking him. My bed is too warm, too familiar, like a sickbed. I am agitated, and I twist and turn and lie horizontally and try to use up all the space and I remember a childhood illness, a fever, and my mother's voice in the darkened room, saving me. And now I want Don here, I want the memory of him here. I want him beside me so that I can find the slope of his body and lie against it. I want him to reach across the wide bed and draw me into his arms. I want him to lay his large hand flat on my belly and press gently and feel desire flood through me. I want to be silent and dreamy and view this room, this sky, everything, from a different angle. I want to be shielded by trees and lie against him and sleep.

'You asleep?'

I did not hear him come upstairs. He has stolen upon me before I am prepared. He approaches my side of the bed but stands back a little. His voice is soft

and defeated. I open my eyes and look at him. I am waiting for some sound to rise out from inside me, a few words to send across this short distance that will not disappoint. He waits too and a long look passes between us and I know something has spoilt, and then he moves away and starts to undress. And for the first time his undressing, piece by piece, is too intimate and crushing and revealing and I close my eyes and weep.

He goes into the bathroom and closes the door. In a moment I hear the flush and the brushing of teeth. When he returns he walks around the room and hangs up his clothes, unplugs the hairdryer, tidies away his shoes. Now and then he clears his throat in a precise, emphatic way. He does this when we argue—he appears occupied in his task, untouched, untroubled, aloof. He does it to distance me, to reduce me, to make me think, *This is nothing*. And I am left wondering—do I magnify everything, do I magnify the words and the pain and the silences? Do I?

He reaches for a pillow and for a moment I think he is going to take it to the front room. But he gets in beside me. He sits with his arms folded, looking from him, and I can feel the rise and fall of his chest. I wonder at his thoughts, at those clear thoughts I imbue him with, at his certainty, at how he seeks always to unscramble things when all I can summon is silence, and how I will never know him but always imagine him. Outside there is the occasional flapping of our clothes on the clothesline, and then the faint distant whistle of the wind, as if it has moved off and left our house alone tonight. And I think this is how things are, and this is how they will remain, and with every new night and every new wind I know that I am cornered too, and I will remain, because I cannot unlove him.

Things I See © Mary Costello

This story was first published in The Stinging Fly magazine in 2010 and subsequently in the short story collection The China Factory (Stinging Fly Press 2010 and Canongate 2015).