

The Things I See

By Theresa Derwin

I don't see a carousel. I see the souls of dead children. The lights on the carousel jump and flicker, fireflies trapped in a jam jar. A wooden horse painted shades of pinks and reds with flecks of gold, turns round and round in time to the music of the organ. Always last to finish the race, it's going nowhere, carrying the souls on its broken, tarnished back. The horse was new a hundred years ago.

He says I'm imagining things. I can't see them. They're not really there. But I know better.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the young boy watching me. He's watching me concoct a recipe for tonight's party. I hope he likes it. *Mike, that is*, not the dead child. The dead child can't eat, or taste for that matter. Although I have no doubt that in life the child might have liked Italian food. Maybe it's the dark eyes, or the sunken cheeks more olive than pale, or the way his doleful eyes reach out with hunger. Part of me wants to ask the boy, and part of me wants to ignore the impulse, pretend I can't see him. I'm afraid he'll answer if I speak. *No, I can't see him* as I chuck a chunk of garlic into the sizzling wok, breathing in the pungent, heady aroma of the ingredients, bathing in a myriad of spices, rich and sweet. I imagine a stream of scented smoke wafting above me, the dead kid following the scent with his nose like the Bisto kid, and I have to stop myself from laughing. Laughing right now would be a very bad thing. I wouldn't be able to finish the dinner party.

Yes, I think to myself, as I throw in the onions and chopped coloured peppers. He looks Italian. I wonder what his name is.

I've been seeing things as long as I can remember. When I was a kid I used to go to the park with my sister and some of the other kids from the street. We would run across the old stone bridge to the small clearing in the centre of an expanse of dry, yellow grass, and climb onto the round-a-bout. James, who was a good deal older and wiser than myself (and at least 5ft tall), used to spin us round and round, faster and faster, while we all clung desperately to the red and green wagon wheel, hair whipping madly past us. James used his full strength to push us, and I almost wet myself with the excitement, my scrawny fingers tightly gripping the iron tentacles of the round-a-bout. I was five at the time.

That was the first time I ever saw anything. As the wheel spun round, I saw the blurred face of a young girl in the distance. Tracey couldn't see the little girl sitting on the swing. Only I could.

The girl was a small, insignificant thing, carrot curls, vacant, grey eyes peeking out from a pale, sallow, face. Orphan Annie in a perverse world. She was swinging slowly, not too high, not too fast, chubby, legs kicking forward and pushing back to give momentum, but not enough force to get her truly high.

James pulled the round-a-bout to a halt, heels digging into the gravel, using all of his strength to slow us down. Dizzy and exhilarated, we staggered off, collapsing in various heaps of disarray and tangled limbs, on the damp, grass. Tracey's ragged breath echoed mine. I looked over at the swing to see the strange girl in the pink dress, but she was gone.

Tracey said I was lying. They always said I was lying.

I'm not sure of much, but there are a few things that I do know. God is a man (I'm convinced he has to be a man, because only a man could make such an almighty balls up of the twirling ball of green and blue, spinning in the sky). Junk food will make you fat, and Elvis is alive and living in Vegas. Though I don't know if he actually gets any work as an impersonator.

Oh, and *kids lie*. It's important that you understand this.

That's one truth that I found out about the hard way.

When I told Mom about the girl on the swing, and how she looked so lonely and I wanted to play with her, Mom slapped me so hard across the cheek that my head rocked backwards, thunder reverberating in my ears.

Don't be silly, don't lie, she said.

But . . .

But nothing. You have a stupid imagination.

How can imagination be stupid? I thought. *What is imagination?* I don't know that word.

Then she showed me the picture of the girl in the newspaper. Not sitting on the swing, but in a back garden. Mom yelled at the top of her voice, arms waving frantically about as she thrust the paper under my nose and I started to cry, only I was so frightened, and I didn't know why Mom was so upset.

She didn't look lonely in the photo. She looked happy. Her curls, red as sunset, fresh cheeks, wearing a new pink dress with flowers on it, similar to the one she wore on the swing. Her skin was pretty and pink, like the dress. I knew those colours were there because I'd seen them in the photo, but all I could see *in my head* were her curls, writhing on her shoulders, angry snakes, surrounding an ashen face.

She looked better in the photo.

In the photo she was smiling. Her smile was healthy and bright, reaching out to me. She could've been my friend. At least, if she wasn't dead, and *slightly yellow*, I thought.

So, why should you believe me? Good point, valid question. You know what it's like. You get so tired of trying to tell the truth that it's impossible to tell the difference anymore. No one will believe you anyway. Not you, not a *mere* child. So you bottle it up, store it inside and it bubbles and bubbles, fizzy cola pushing against the cork of its prison, 'til finally, it bursts through in a jumbled mess and you're left drowning in it, and no one will believe you now because it's all a mess.

So when I told people, they didn't believe me, just as you don't. I'm so sick and tired of people not believing me.

I used to have nightmares about the round-a-bout. I dreamt that the red and green top would spin wildly, a bottle top unscrewing, flinging its passengers to the ground, breaking their small bodies. Decapitating them with its spinning top.

Now I dream about the carousel and Alvaro, the Bisto kid. He told me he was half Italian, half Spanish, an eclectic mix of passion and fire, flamenco and food.

I love paella. Paella screams of the sea; salt water and the bitter tang of muscles, crunchy when you taste the shell. Paella reminds me of being abroad. Sitting in the sun, soaking up the rays and the warmth of the sun bouncing on your flesh, the warm breeze tingling on your skin as you look across the wide expanse of the waiting sea, crystal waters painted cerulean blue.

I love the colour blue. It calms me. Did you know there are at least an infinite number of words to describe the word 'blue'?

Blue - azure, cobalt, sapphire, navy, cerulean, indigo.

I love the colour blue. I think it's because Alvaro looks blue too. And he loves Paella, because it's Spanish, and he always preferred his Dad's cooking to his mother's.

I love Paella too. But all it really is, is dead fish.

Alvaro smells of Paella. Putrid and stale.

The park holds many fond memories for me, others not so fond. I remember how we used to sing. Now Tracey could *sing*, and would make music teachers cry out with relief, as opposed to the pain or wincing that normally followed when I sang. I thought at the time that I was Tina Turner but without the bad hair. I used to strut my stuff across the living room dance floor or on the stage in the park we had constructed from old crates and cardboard boxes. I'd be squealing at the top of my lungs, copying the moves and the wild gyrations of Miss T and didn't really think about it, or about the man who used to stare at me. So, there I was in the park, bopping for all I was worth as *Miss T* delivering a stunning rendition of *What's love got to do with it*, before switching to Madonna's *Like a Virgin*. I was belting it out, a real Diva, complete with backing singers, when my performance was interrupted by the need for a pee. I carefully inched down the broken crates, trying not to catch my skirt on a splinter, leaving my entourage behind to go in search of a private spot to go the toilet.

In the park, there was a cluster of overgrown bushes, trees and weeds just on the edge of the swamp-like forest. It was the perfect place for privacy; secluded and dark. There was just enough crawl space for me to get through until I hit the small clearing in the centre. Crawling through was an exercise in pain, twigs crunching under my knees, grabbing at my hair, pulling at my skirt, and scratching my bare legs. But we never seemed to mind.

Once I was inside, it was a whole different world – a tantalising jungle to make Indiana Jones proud, full of hidden tunnels and secret corridors. We used to use the clearing to build campfires, hide out from our enemies and make mud pies – survival rations at best. This was our special place, special and perfect. It was also a very convenient place to go to the loo in times of desperation. And I was desperate for a pee.

I'd left it too long as usual, not noticing that the dancing had reacted with my bladder. Finally crouched down, hoisting up my skirt and pulling my knickers down, then aside. It was hard to get started, but at last I did what nature intended. I concentrated heavily on the yellow river trickling beneath my feet, steam rising from the stream into the chilly air, ready to pull in the reins and spring up, and out of the way if it went near my shoes.

When I was done, I quickly stood up, pulled up my knickers, straightening my skirt and stretching to get rid of the creaks I'd got while crouching.

That was when I turned towards the jungle doorway and saw the girl from the swing, staring straight at me, dried blood matting her red curls, the two colours blending together in perfect symmetry.

The image still lives with me. I see it clearly now.

I see the man that stands behind her, waiting patiently, waiting because he knows that she can't escape, and he will have his trophy of fresh skin, his eyes awash with a feral hunger. I can hear her screams and they echo mine, as his twisted fingers reach out for us, and she stares at me, willing me to see. To understand.

I see my death in her eyes. The knowledge of it seeps out. Conjunctivitis, it blinds and veils until it's all I can see. My death. Her death.

She knows the exact time and place of my death, the exact circumstances in fact. And it *will* happen. I will die, with prying fingers touching me, cold steel slashing across my bare chest and belly, covered in dirt and grass, smelling of piss. *Unless* I remember to run . . .

A volcano explodes in my chest; fear released in a flood of lava, my body reacting before the thought has registered and my mind has had a chance to catch up. *Run!* . . . it screams. *Run.*

Annie tells me to run too.

I stumble forward, scuttling on all fours, the fresh dirt, remnants of her grave creeping under my fingernails, burrowing deep inside, staining my skin with poison. All I can do is squeal like a piglet, grunt, squirm and heave as I scurry through the tight gap, into the light beyond; to the wagon wheel and the crates and Tracey, who's wondering where I've been and what I've been doing.

And I wanted to tell Tracey where I'd gone, but I was so afraid. I wanted to tell her about seeing the dead girl, the man with stale breath and how I peed on the girl's grave, but I'm afraid. For the first time in my life I'm really afraid; not the fear of skulking shadows in my bedroom at night, or fear of the coat that hangs on my door and becomes some unknown man in the dark.

This time the terror is real. The man is real.

I can't deny him anymore. He visits me, I think, because he knows this, and he knows I can help him. I couldn't help Annie, but with Alvaro I have a fighting chance. I still hope that there will be at least *one* child that I can save.

The onions make me cry. I can feel the wet trickle of tears roll down my cheek and I start to snuffle, so I grab a kitchen towel and blow my nose to clear it. Onions always do this to me. I keep stirring and stirring the wok for tonight's dinner party, breathing in the scent of the rich sauce. Red and bubbling, it barely covers the tang of Alvaro's blood, metallic vinegar.

He's starting to stink a bit now. I think he's been dead about two weeks but I can't be sure. It feels like he's been watching me for years, but I really think it's only been two weeks. At least I think so, because that's how long I've been cooking spicy food. It makes Alvaro feel at home. And the garlic hides the smell of him.

Lately, the smell's getting worse. It's a wonder that Mike can't smell it too. But then again, it's a wonder Mike sees, smells or hears anything. He's so blind at times. I try so hard to cook things that Mike will enjoy, but he doesn't seem to enjoy anything anymore, not even these stupid dinner parties.

I acknowledge Alvaro watching me, because I have work to do and I want him out of the way. For just a moment it's so cold and I have to shut the window.

"Please Alvaro, stop watching," I say, "I'll help you but I have to serve dinner first. Mike has friends outside and they want dinner. *Please.*"

Obligingly, Alvaro disappears and I think *at last, a kid who listens*. Then again, I suppose *it would* take a knife through the throat to make him listen. He's much more attentive now, I bet. That's why Mike decided we weren't going to have kids. They don't listen.

With Alvaro gone, I can concentrate on the mechanics of the meal; draining the pasta, one last stir of the simmering sauce, tossing the salad in olive oil and balsamic vinegar. If nothing else, I've become more adventurous in the kitchen since

he showed up. I suppose you have to take the rough with the smooth, visions of dead people versus panache in the kitchen.

Eventually dinner is ready, and I can breathe a sigh of relief. The food is perched in its perfect plate or bowl, waiting to be served.

So I take off my apron, adjust my skirt and look at my startled, tired face reflected on the gleaming counter top. I share Alvaro's sad smile, and deep brown eyes. Only he's in slightly worse shape than myself, being dead and all. I smile at the thought and have to stifle another laugh, and then freeze the smile. It's my best one you know. My "hi, how are you, glad you could come, isn't life perfect?" *smile*. It goes wonderfully with my perfect fucking dinner.

There will not be death or pain in my dining room.

My perfect smile escorts me from the kitchen to the dining room.

I carry the first of the dishes through to the table, where Mike, Angela and Alan are chatting over a bottle of wine, seated round the table, with Mike at the head of course. Carefully, so as not to spill, I place the pasta dish in the centre of the table and nod towards the bottle of Soave that Mike is pouring, indicating (I hope) that the least he can do is pour me a large one. God knows I need it.

Leaving him to that difficult task I go back into the kitchen and return a couple of minutes later with the rest of the food. We start to eat and both Angela and Alan make a few polite noises about how good it is, but all I can do is stare at Mike's gaping jaw as he shovels food into his mouth, the pasta falling out the more he shoves it in. I'm so fixated on his mouth I can't hear what Alan is saying. I shake myself awake and make a point of listening to Alan's inane chatter. Verbal diarrhoea, I call it. Angela and Alan, the perfectly matched couple with perfectly matched names. Not like Susan and Mike.

Suddenly I want to scream but close my lips tightly to suppress the urge. I watch Mike scoop even more food into his cavernous maw and it sickens me. *He* sickens me. What makes it worse is the syrupy blood, dripping slowly down on to his plate, blending skilfully with the ripe tomatoes and pasta. Alvaro is leaning on Mike's shoulder, salivating as Mike continues to eat, oblivious, as he blindly consumes parts of the dead boy.

Well, at least I know someone likes my food.

After Mom hit me, I swore I would never tell anybody about the things I see. Annie disappeared after a while. I think, to be honest, she got bored of hanging around, of trying to reach me, but I could never really hear her voice or understand her. The more the children visited me, the better I became at understanding what they were saying, but I never knew why they chose me. I still don't. And I still wake up in a cold sweat at night, to find that there is a child hovering over me, beckoning. I still see Annie's face in my mind though, and she haunts me now, more than she did when I was a child. They never found her body. I never told.

Alvaro is looking rather fetid now, and he is *really* starting to stink. I've started to buy those clever air fresheners, the ones you plug in or stick to the wall that release intermittent bursts of fragrance, everything from citrus, or freesia to pine or lavender. They're everywhere. In the kitchen, the living room, the guest room, the bedroom, the stairs and the bathroom. Everywhere. But all I can smell is Alvaro. The lavender can't bury him. He's creeping up through my nostrils into my head and I want to gag on the odour.

Mike is beginning to worry about me. I can see him looking at me when he thinks I'm somewhere else, but I'm not, I'm here, waiting for him to call the doctor again. When he thinks I'm elsewhere he reaches for the phonebook and I start to talk to him in the hope he'll hold back. If he calls the doctor before I help Alvaro I'll never rest, never be free to sleep. I can't think. I don't know how to help him. I'm so tired, so bloody tired.

Last night I dreamt of Annie. She was riding the round-a-bout, and this time it was *her* plump fingers that held onto the cold frame for dear life. This time in the dream I can almost hear her. I've grown better at understanding the children. I think I've already mentioned that before, haven't I? That it's becoming easier, louder even.

They reckon that kids can see things that adults can't see, in the same way that a cat or a dog hears noises we can't hear, and they meow or growl at an empty space, or a corner because they know that there is someone or *something*. I don't think it's true though. It isn't just pets or kids that see things. I hear things too, when they want me to hear.

The older I get the *more* things I see. It didn't lessen as I left my childhood, behind me, like I hoped it would. It increased, which doesn't make sense if what they say is true.

Sometimes it's too much. I'm a vacuum of sizzling noise, thoughts, feelings; the buzz of a thousand tiny voices running round my brain like insects, scurrying left, right, all over the place. And sometimes those voices have faces, or bodies; bleeding battered bodies.

I'm dreaming again. Of Annie. I see the man that stands behind her. I can hear Annie's screams and they echo mine, as his twisted fingers reach out for us, and she stares at me, willing me to see. To understand.

I see her battered body, covered in the dirt, the calloused hands that ram her limp frame into the soil, scooping dirt over her. I can remember that dirt, soft and wriggling with worms, seeping into my fingernails, sneaking up my skin. And the feel of it will never leave me.

Mike is in the living room, reading the paper and I'm in the kitchen, preparing dinner, when the electricity cuts out. For a minute or two the fear engulfs me, the creature inside my chest beating its puny fists against my rib cage, until Mike calls in that he's going to check the fuse box and it'll be all right. So I start to calm down. It's okay. There is nothing here in the dark that isn't here when the lights are on. Besides, if the power comes on quick enough, the air fresheners will still work. I will still be able to breathe in and smell lavender, not dirt, or blood, or maggots, wriggling deep inside me.

There is a brief flicker, the lights flash on and Alvaro is here again.

This time he's not alone.

Annie? I think.

It's hard to tell, she looks a lot worse than before, like the dirt is eating her up inside, adding to the decay. In a dreadful way, I'm pleased to see her and I realise I've missed her. A hint of the grime from her tomb still clings to the dried blood that mars the perfection of her curls. Alvaro stands next to her.

Alvaro is looking inside the saucepan, almost on tiptoe, straining for a look at what Mike will be having for dinner. Every time I cook he shows up, like he misses food in all its guises. Standing next to Annie, it occurs to me that it's the first time

I've seen more than one child at once, apart from the time I went to the German markets last Christmas. They had food stands and beer stalls, intricate souvenirs for sale and lots of wonderful things to buy; gingerbread, chocolate covered fruit, spicy sausages and bottles of spiced wine. Alvaro would've liked it. I used to love going to the market until the day they brought the carousel. Children riding the gilded horses side by side.

Now I understand what I have to do.

I see Alvaro in the park, riding the round-a-bout, as the man walks up behind him. I see Alvaro in the dirt too, his tattered, bruised body crammed into a burial chamber, overgrown with fresh grass it has been that long. He is hidden deep in the soil, struggling for breath, his broken fingers nearly touching the bones of Annie's fingers. There is no skin left.

I know where he is. Just as I've always known where she is.

Shh, it's all right, it's okay, I'll find you, I whisper, gelatinous tears dribbling into my mouth, making me retch, *I'll find you*.

The vice in my chest lets go just a little and I smell the lavender. I can breathe again.

I pick up the phone and start to dial.

I'm so tired.

Can I sleep now?