

Well Jean-Christine perhaps this is where I will go mad – in a place where no one will know it. Then again, I'm fully cognisant of what a ficklebones I am, how zealously I start a thing yet seldom see it through – perhaps it will be the same with losing my head. My head! As if I ever gave any indication of a firm and regular mindset in the first place – no, I never felt much inclination to persuade or preserve, so perhaps, in any case, there isn't a great deal to mislay. There is however an area where I am showing some consistent and considerable prowess, a notable degree of inimical flair even – I frequently lie in order to feel present. To conceal imperturbable indifference, I lie, I lie to myself especially – first & foremost – well I must occasionally convince myself of some abiding trifling thing. There has to be something to look out for while I'm looking out, and lately I traipse about in an enormous raspberry coloured cardigan and every now and then I go right up on my tiptoes and there is something with some effort that rivets me so.

What is a crush, my companion asks, hours later – an immoderate interest, I say, in an unknown man's whereabouts.

And thus it seems I'm doing something with my life, making a little breathtaking instance out of it and gathering up hope in my lungs – who knows, perhaps I might be taken over and dream and dream, wouldn't that be a fine thing – oh my skin then, oh the mornings then, and the way my miscreant hands feel in those cosy raspberry copious pouches as I walk first thing after a whole night of craving and cavorting with this vivid viscid pungent absence, all over me, all over me, all over me. Oh the stench of the whorl of the pattern of the disarray of my beautiful misspent desire.

So that when finally he passes by here, with his slow and great big biblical stride, his presence is hardly a thing at all, nothing compared to the thick pervasive nocturnal lack of him, night after night after night. I sit on the steps and lean here and there and lose all vigilance, feel my way into a variegated shadow, wallow, overcome and underwhelmed by a craned and cloying lassitude so that I often need to have something in both hands and my hands now are quite altered, you would not know them – scratched terribly both sides and I did that on purpose, it gave me pleasure, to work that way, to go down to the garden and pull at the ivy and brambles near the wall without gloves that way.

Someone will say something, I thought, but nobody said anything and I hurt myself easily, straightforwardly, with wide open eyes. You just keep on reaching around, you don't know when it will prick or sting. You feel so silly and pleased and ferocious. Perhaps something, this, will send me to sleep all night through, with no visits, no fingers, no hotchpotch pelvis and ramshackle ribs.

He goes by and he is wearing a hat. He stands and his back is to me. He's wearing a hat and his back is to me and his shoulders are very clear and his waist is remarkable, truly remarkable, so narrow and pivotal above his belt! He holds a garden hose near the trees he planted just recently, turns and rests, turns and rests, and it's too early I think for that so either he has somewhere to go to today or else he thought it was about time he stood like that, just across from the window here.

I cannot tear myself away.

It's been so long since I acted with will and abandon I hardly recognise myself. Oh Jean-Christine what has become of me! I got caught up with making progress of one kind or another, my reputation got to me and I got hooked on it, but it does nothing to fill me, nothing at all. I must break off from all that now my dear I feel before I end up right back at the start, which can so easily occur, I'm sure of it.

God knows how I fended off drudgery for so long. When more and more they make it look like such a deserved and pretty cake.

It's Halloween soon, in less than a week! I'll do my hair like it is now but I don't have any idea about what I'll wear – I don't have very much with me. I shall simply enswathe myself with all manner and texture of black I think. Velvet, silk, ebony, taffeta, lace, jet, crinoline, gauze, kohl, musk, dusk, coal, musk, dusk, crinoline, gauze, horsehair and firebrand, whalebone and widow's weeds. They won't see me coming! With a big low crucifix and something at the throat and all the tiny buttons done up at throat and wrists. It'll take a lifetime! That's right. Tight, tight, tight. And dust and detached wings on the waistcoat with pearl fasteners and mud on the heels and beneath my nails – yes, mud, dirt, beneath my nails and blurring my hairline. So I can hardly breathe. And those fascinating scratches from the thorns will look just the ticket. To die for! Desire always blackens me so, blackens me so. I don't suppose this droopy raspberry coloured geansai fools anyone. I spent hours down by the stream, we'd barely finished clearing it when I took down the tasselled cushion and made myself right at home there, with my skimmer tipped just so, eclipsing the sunlight.

Hours I was there, reading over my waiting and flipping the tassels like the way a horse flicks its tail and he did come, but was so hard to see, barely there at all, because of this washed out mind of mine and the sudden sun right there behind him – what did I see of him? His hair-tips and belt hooks, and then he turned and rested, and that was all, all for that day.

(I will take your heart with me under the stones under the water under the reeds under the sun under my lungs under the sound of the voice of your dear wife calling you in for lunch. If not on this day, then another. For they are all the same, I can't help but notice, and you must know you cannot hide from hunger. It seems we are all condemned to live with some kind of drudgery, well then let this be mine. Let me be cancelled out this way. I take a swipe at my fringe, plop eye drops behind the acrid rims, revolve around the same lipstick. I write letters all day long, saying whatever moves my hand at that hour, depending on what creature might be around – lizard, vulture, boar, finch – and the colour of the sky, and my bones, my meek and grateful bones, pressed up against my petulant and frustrated flesh – I do not know which will get the upper hand and finally take a hold of you. The stars are haunting me. The small creatures are haunting me. Your belt haunts me. The holes in your belt haunt me. If I stand before you and look at the buckle of your belt will you know right away that the holes of your belt haunt me?)

I cannot tear myself away.

My companion is going to prepare tagine & I'm going to concoct my very delectable apple crumble. I'm going to stir in ginger and a cinnamon stick and something else I cannot mention while the apples let off steam and I'm going to sprinkle the crumble with bashed hazelnuts and mollifying oats and something else I dare not mention. And I'm going to stand upstairs in the kitchen while the buried apples bake, with dirt on my heels and below my nails and the buttons done right up to my throat and way down to my silvery shuddering wrists. And I'm going to take the ice-cream, the pure beautiful ice-cream she so kindly brought, out of the freezer box and I'm going to leave it there to soften on the side next to the bowls in a stack while I roll and smoke a cigarette. And then my companion will come up to the kitchen and she'll stand behind me, much smaller than ever she is, and she'll say, she'll say, the music is wonderful, and slip an arm about my waist. The music is wonderful and everyone has eaten everything.

Squeeze! Devoured it all. And I'll smile and scoop that pure beautiful ice-cream into softly scuffed furls and slide it into those oblivious impeccable bowls just like an outlaw who has come upon an enchanting and momentary shelter. There is a pond with deep down carp and a statue watching over, there are fruit trees and vines and haphazard herbs, there is even a dog who waits silently for the croissant to shed its flaking shell and a smooth-skinned boy who skims the pool with a white net. I think you would like him very much. Do not forget me.

Do not forget me – I do not forget you. I believe you are in the leaves. Which are all in great big piles now. And come into the house.

Love & embraces,
Clara xxx

¹. Claire-Louise Bennett is an English writer living in Galway. Her debut work of fiction, *Pond*, was published this year by Stinging Fly in Dublin, and Fitzcarraldo Editions in London. She has also published stories in *The Irish Times*, *The White Review*, and *gorse*.