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For my Longford great-grandmothers:

Elizabeth McClellan Reilly
of Clonbroney,
who survived the Hunger,
and
Anna Rogers Mollaghan,
and for her father, Thomas,
of Drumlish,
who lived through the Land War,
with deepest admiration,
and for
their grandson,
William Reilly,
my dad,
with love
Home
Sounds

In the back field,
I’m bent double, hidden,
pulling up chickweed
for our tea.

Since the Ryans were tossed out,
this field belongs to the English earl,
and his sheep,
who huddle near the stone wall.

Nearby, screams begin.
They come from a mud house
that shelters a family of girls:
Bridey, Mair, Kate,
and Mag,
I forgot the new baby’s name,
Cassie?

I stand tiptoed,
trying to see.
The crash comes
over their screams.
The bashing in!
Dust rises up:
the house of five girls
and a mam is gone.
They're forced out on the road,
maybe to starve.

I clutch my fist to my chest.
I'm afraid for the five girls
and the mam.
I'm afraid for us,
Mam and Da,
Willie and John,
Jane and Nuala,
and even more afraid
for me, Anna.

But didn’t Da say
we’re all right?
Mathias Magrath’s house, Moyasta, Co. Clare after destruction by the Battering Ram, Robert French, ca. 1886–1890 (This image is reproduced courtesy of the National Library of Ireland L_CAB_04918.)
AFTER supper that night,
I climb my hill.
It’s steep and rocky,
but my bare feet know the way.

I sing one of Da’s old songs.
I won’t think about those poor things
on the road.

From behind the hedgerow,
my brother Will says,
“She has a mouth on her,
that Anna.”
And John: “With a voice like a frog.”

I make a frog sound,
laughing,
and go on.
I carry an old potato,
green with mold.
If one of the little people
comes up from the earth,
I’ll throw it to him,
and dash away while he eats.

From here, I can see the world,
my world anyway:
the bogs that cover the earth
like blankets,
and the snipes that fly high.
There’s the top of Liam’s roof,
the thatch tan with weeds.
Beyond that, the schoolhouse.
I close my eyes.
I’ve never been inside.
I’m needed at home.

The corn mill rises up below,
its great wheel creaking
as it grinds the grain.

The English earl’s house spreads out
like a castle.
He’s a man to be feared.
He could put us out to starve, if he wished.


One cover is missing. The other is the color of a January field. It has a picture of a horse, its mane flying.

I clutch the book to myself, wondering at those silky pages. Imagine knowing what the writing says!

I fly down the hill, to tell my best friend, Liam. I pass my house and circle around the Donnellys’.
The oldest, Mae, raises her hand to wave.
She looks tired.
She has more to do than any of us, with her da gone, and five children in steps and stairs behind her.

Liam meets me at the crumbling stone wall. I don’t say a word, but hold the book in front of me.

“Oh, Anna,” he says. He reaches out, almost touching it, and then my hand. “If only I could read,” I say. He nods.
A Word

THAT night while everyone sleeps,
I sit on the rush chair
at the hearth.
The room is cozy.
The banked glow of peat
gives enough light
to see my treasure,
the book!

I stare at the cover,
and picture the horse
pawing the ground,
as I climb on his back.
We soar across the field
and jump over the wall.

I lean closer to the fire light.
The circles and lines
under the picture must say
Horse!
A joy like listening
to Da’s stories,
or swinging along the boreen
with Liam,
fills my chest
and spills into my throat.

I go to Mam’s bed.
She never sleeps.
How thin she looks!
Her eyes are sunken,
her cheeks flushed.
*Please, let her just be tired.*

I put my hand on her shoulder.
“I can read a word.”
She touches my cheek.
“Alannah, my Anna,”
she whispers.
WE sit on the stone wall,
our heads close,
and search through the book
to see *Horse*.
It’s printed on almost
every page.
We know dozens of words,
all *Horse*.
But still . . .

“Anna?” Liam begins.
I glance at his blue-gray eyes,
the color of a windy sky.
“We haven’t paid the rent,”
he says.
“Not this quarter,
not the last two.”

“This year may be different,”
I say desperately.
grasping his arm.
“It’s almost time to plant.”

“If the weather holds, we’ll have vegetables to sell, and lumper potatoes to fill us next winter.”

“It’s too late,” Liam says, his hand on mine. “We’ll be out on the road, Mam and me.”

I can’t see the earl’s house from here. Still I look toward it. Rage rise up in my throat. I swallow, try to speak over it. “Our land,” is all I can manage. “Someday,” Liam says, touching the curl of my hair.
Spring

March is here,
time to plant.
With knives in our hands,
we cut the eyes
from seed potatoes.

We’ll tuck them in the earth,
where they’ll send up green shoots
and purple blossoms.
Then underneath,
lumpers!
My sister Jane is old enough
to help.
But her mind is far away,
on a ship to America.
She slices her finger
as well as the potato.

Ah, Jane.
Mam and I rub her arms,
while Willie pats her head,
and John finds a cobweb
to stop the bleeding.
Da croons, “Don’t cry, astore.”

We set the cuts in the field.
Mam bends,
trying to catch her breath,
her fine hair blowing in the breeze.
She pats the soil
the way she pats us.
“Our mother, the earth,”
she says.

Nuala grabs my skirt,
wanting a bit of potato,
not to plant, but to eat.
Her smiling face looks
almost like Mam’s.
I gather her up,
twirl her around.
“Someday,” I say.

If only the days are clear,
and the lumpers can grow.
“Listen, sky,” I yell,
my fist raised.
“Hold back the rain
for us,
and for Liam and his mam.”
Leaving

AFTER the potatoes, the oats, and the summer cabbage begin to grow, Will and John go down the road, arms slung around each other’s shoulders.

They’ve worked hard in town, mucking out the hotel barn, washing windows, and sweeping the street. They have enough coins now, just, to pay for passage. Their ship will sail from Cork, to Brooklyn, America.

Da stands in the field, one hand raised in blessing. Mam’s face is set
so they won’t see her tears.
I look hard after my brothers.
I’ll never see them again.

“Take me,” Jane cries,
until the road turns
and they’re gone forever:
Willie who carried me on his shoulder
when I was Nuala’s age,
and John so tough
he could walk through nettles,
but was soft for Jane.

I pick up a clod of damp earth
and hold it tight in my fist.
America is not for me.
That faraway place is for my brothers,
and maybe for Jane.
But I belong to this country.
If only it belonged to me.
It’s early, still dark.
Mam is at the hearth.
I go to help with the cooking.

She stands, stirring,
one hand
against the stones,
balancing herself.

The wooden spoon falls
to the floor,
spattering hot soup.
She sinks down for it,
her hand sliding,
and kneels there.

I stare at her.
She’s bone thin,
her hair was red
like mine
but streaked white now. Are we going to lose her?

She turns. I can't hide my fear. “I'm all right, child.” She raises her shoulder a bit.

I go toward her, stumbling. “I can't do without you,” I say fiercely. I bury my head in her chest. All right, I tell myself. She’s all right.
Hens

A clap of thunder, 
and sudden downpour. 
I open the half door, 
worried about the crop.

The hens, wings flapping, 
flutter along the boreen. 
What’s happened?

I throw my shawl 
over my shoulders. 
Head bent against the rain, 
I run to turn them back.

But ahead of me, 
arms out, reaching, 
a man chases after them. 
Our hens!

I’m desperate to catch them, 
but I trip,
turning my ankle,
losing moments.

I scramble up.
One hen is under his arm.
He reaches for the neck
of another.
I yell,
Can anyone hear me?

But then,
Mae Donnelly stands
in front of him,
arm raised,
pitchfork over her head.

The man drops the hen,
and runs away
across the Donnellys’ field.

Mae stabs the earth
with the pitchfork,
and reaches for me,
“Are you all right, Anna?”

“How can I thank you?”
She helps me
turn them toward home,
then waves.
“We have to take care
of each other,”
she calls after me.
EVERY day,
Mam weakens.
Then, one morning,
I kneel at the side of her bed.
“Keep Nuala safe,”
she whispers.
“The house and the land.”

For a moment,
Da rests his head against hers.
“Anna’s only a slip of a girl,”
he says.
“Ah no,” Mam whispers.
“She’s more than that.
Much more.”

Da tries to smile.
“True,” he says.
“She has a lot to say.”
Mam takes a breath,
struggles for another.

“Nuala will always need help,”
she says.

I see Nuala’s beautiful face,
her light hair,
her uneven teeth.
My little sister is slow to speak,
slow to understand.
“I count on you, Anna.”
Mam tries to grip my hand.
“Read,” she says.
“I’m sorry there was no time for school.”

Hours later,
she’s gone.
There’s only the sound of crying
in our house.