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from The Woman who Gave Birth to Rabbits

"Night Vision"

This book is dedicated with love to my father, Denis,
who taught me that books are for letting us
imagine lives other than our own.

night vision

The other day in the woods I wandered away from the others and kept walking. The ground was soft as porridge. I held one hand out in front of my face and whenever I stubbed my fingers on a tree I felt my way around it. Whenever I stood on an acorn I picked it up for our pigs. I stood still, and there was no sound at all but the wind shuddering in the branches.

I don't think I have ever been alone in my life before, and I am nine years old.

It was Ned and John who found me; I heard them thudding along from a long way off, calling "Franny! Franny!" Did I not know that I might have caught my foot in a weasel trap, John said, or dashed out my brains against a branch? Ned said our father would have strapped them if I'd come to harm.

My brothers and sisters are mostly good to me. A blind child is a burden, no matter how you look at it.

They're all asleep around me now: John and Ned and Samuel and Dickie in the big bed under the window, Eliza and Mary and Nelly in the one behind the door, and

Catherine and Martha and myself in this one, with Billy tucked in at the bottom and Tabby under my arm with her nose digging into my ribs. It's hottest here in the middle of all the arms and legs. The air smells of cheese.

When I can't sleep, I make a blank page in my mind, and shapes start filling it. I know about the stars; Father told me. I imagine them flaring through holes in the sky like candles in a draught; the edges must get singed. I wonder about the colour of furze, a bit like strong tea, Father says. (I think colour is when you can taste something with your eyes.) And the mountains around Stranorlar, big as giants blocking the path of the sun. I try to decide how each bird feels to the touch, according to its song. The clinking blackbird would feel like the back of a spoon, but the wood pigeon must be soft as the underbelly of a rabbit.

Our mother is behind the wall, in the kitchen; I can hear her poke the turf. She was so angry, that time I put my hand in the fire, when I was small. But I had to find out what it felt like. She cried while she was wrapping a bit of butter onto the burn. She held her breath so I wouldn't hear her, but I did.

I wish we were all locked up safe for the night. But our father is still at Meeting, and it's all my fault.

Father is Brown the Postmaster. If there's ever a letter for someone living here, it's he who brings it. Most days he sees to the horses that carry letters through Stranorlar and on to all the other villages in Donegal. He lost a toe in the snow once. It's my job to rub his feet by the fire when he comes home. But not tonight.

He walked me to school this morning, as it was my first day. And my last, I suppose. Tonight he's gone to see if the

Elders will let him address the Meeting and say how ashamed he is for what his daughter did. I pray they won't cast him out.

I can hear the room filling up with sleep; the little snores, the sighs, the shiftings from side to side. My sisters and brothers hardly know how to move or talk in the dark. They depend on the light so much that once the candle is snuffed out, the greasy air seems to extinguish them too. Night makes no difference to me, except that I can hear better. Tonight I can't remember how to go about falling asleep. My mind bubbles like a spring that cannot be stopped up.

Words have always been my undoing, I can see that now. It began when I was a small child. The sermon was on eternal damnation, and the new Scottish Minister used words I couldn't understand; they echoed in the rafters. So I tried to fix them in my memory, and afterwards, while the brawn was boiling I asked our father to look them up in the dictionary. I never thought there was any harm in it.

Since then I've been collecting words, you might say. They help me to get up, say, when I can't find my fingers on cold mornings. *Fingers,* I say in my head, and there they are, wriggling. Tabby is always bringing me words, even if she doesn't know what they mean. This week I have three new ones: *funereal, ambulatory,* and *slub.* Sometimes for a game, Nelly and Catherine make me say all the longest ones I know; if I won't play, they pinch me. My brothers and sisters think words are to be scattered carelessly, like corn in front of hens. They don't know how much words matter.

Martha, on my left, has curled up like a snail; she has the tail of my nightshirt caught tight between her knees.

How can they all sleep so sound when our father is not come home?

What matters even more than words is how they knot onto each other. Sentences are like the ropes the fishermen throw when they're mooring to land. Sometimes they fray, though. Sometimes I put the wrong words in the wrong places, and other times it's not my fault, they'll not fit.

The Schoolmaster says there are rules that govern words, and then there are times when you must break the rules. Mr. McGranahan knows everything, or nearly; he knows seventeen times fifty-three. After they come home from school, my brothers say their dictionary and grammar over and over to get them by heart so Mr. McGranahan will not have to take down his ashplant. I whisper the phrases while I'm washing potatoes or playing pat-a-cake to make Billy stop crying. Also I have learned Watt's "Divine Songs" and Gray's "Elegy," as well as the Scottish psalms. I made a poem of the Lord's Prayer once, and Tabby wrote it down and said it right back to me. Tabby's only seven, but she's quick at her books. If I had the money I'd feed her till she grew fat as a pig, and send her to a good school so she could come home and read me Greek and Latin.

Some days if there's time after bringing the turf in, Eliza or Mary will read aloud: *Susan Gray,* or *The Negro Servant,* or *The Heart of Midlothian.* I take my sisters' turns at spinning the flax, if they promise to read. I hound them to go on as long as the candle lasts. My ears have learned to swallow up every word; I know a novel by heart after three good listenings. My brothers and sisters think me very clever for this, but it's only a trick for getting by. Like

Jemmy Dwyer down at the smithy, who lost his right hand to a horse but can tie knots good as ever with his left.

They are all so peaceful when they are sleeping. I pray to God every night for my brothers and sisters, as I was taught, but sometimes I wish they wouldn't wake up.

Often they all talk at once, like threads tangled in a basket, so I can't hear myself think. The other day while we were spinning, Nelly and Martha quarrelled over whether it is called orange or red when the sun goes down behind the chapel. I know what orange is because we were given one once and I had a piece all to myself; it tasted sharp as needles. Red is the colour of mouths, and of pig's blood, but when it dries it's called black pudding, which is strange. I'm sure I know what turf looks like, from the salty smell of it burning, and milk, from the way it slips down my throat, but they tell me I'm only imagining. Our father tells them, "Leave Franny be." He says wishful thinking is a powerful thing, and nearly as good as eyesight.

The other day I told Tabby to open the atlas on my lap, and move my thumb to all the places there are: Belfast, and London, and Geneva, and as far away as St. Petersburg. I tried to imagine each place in all its colours. Stranorlar is on the far left of the book, next to the edge; it's a wonder it hasn't fallen off.

There, I'm being fanciful again. Mr. McGranahan told me last week, "You will never go far in life, Miss Franny, if you fall a prey to fancy." I love the sound of that: a prey to fancy. But I have every intention of bettering myself, and of going far in life.

Except that today, I threw away my chance, didn't I?

All might have been well if I could have kept my head

down. The Reverend Minister's voice sounded so chilled, this morning, over the scrape he made wiping his feet at the door of the schoolhouse. "Mr. McGranahan," he began with his Highland *r*'s that go on forever, "do not let me interrupt the good work; I merely observe."

But he butted in after half a minute of grammar, and somehow I knew it was me his eye had alighted on; I could feel his gaze scalding my cheeks.

"Who is that child?" he said.

Now he knew well who I was, for he came to our house on a Visitation not three weeks ago. But the Master told him my name, and off they went like dogs in the lane, snapping and scrabbling. The Minister asked the Master did he not think it a cruel mockery of such a child to bring her into school. Mr. McGranahan said it was I who had begged to come with my brothers, and what harm could it do me?

"Harm, Brother? The harm of making her a laughing-stock in the sight of the whole congregation."

For a moment I was glad I couldn't see; all those eyes turned on me would have been too much to bear.

The preacher went on without stopping for breath. "To attempt to teach a child so blighted, and a girl at that, is to fly in the face of the Providence that made her so."

When Mr. McGranahan is angry he speaks quieter than ever. "Nobody gets the chance to teach Frances Brown anything, Brother, so quick is she to teach herself."

Even then, if I could have kept my mouth shut, he might have saved me. The words behind my lips are no trouble to anybody; it's only when I let them out that I give scandal.

"When I grow up I shall be a poet."

My words hung on the air like a foul smell. I felt the draught when the boys on either side of me shrank back, as if afraid to catch a fever.

The Master began to speak, but my fear made me rush in. "Mr. Milton himself was blind, was he not, Mr. McGranahan? Was he not? Did you not tell us so?"

But the Minister was standing over me now, his words falling like hail. "Milton was a great man. You are a stunted little girl."

Suddenly I was shouting. "Does it not say in the Book of Leviticus, *Thou shalt not put a stumbling block before the blind*?"

There was no sound at all for a few moments. I stiffened, ready for the blow that would knock me off the bench. But the Minister only took my wrist between his icy fingers and held my arm up high. When he spoke it wasn't to me, and his voice boomed over my head like the Orange drums on the Glorious Twelfth. "Who will lead this creature home so she will not fall in the ditch?"

Up close he smelt like vinegar. I ripped my hand out of his grasp. "I can find my own way," I said, shoving past the other children, past the long chalky coat of Mr. McGranahan, who tried to hold me. I got out the door before I started crying.

As a rule, I can follow any path through Stranorlar and not lose myself, but today I was so bewildered with rage that I very nearly stepped into the ditch opposite the smithy. Only the long grasses at the edge told me I was gone astray. When I got on the right track home I felt the last rays of sun on my face before the mountain snuffed them out.

Once the Browns were great folk hereabouts. Our grandfather's father owned a big stretch of land, but he squandered it all. I can see it in my head if I try: a wet green kingdom, with rivers sliding through the fields like thread through cloth. Now all we have left that is grand is our grandmother's rocking chair. Sometimes our mother lets me sit in it if my feet are clean. Its back is carved with fruit and flowers and shapes that I can't make out no matter how often I trace them with my fingers.

Our mother sits in that chair to do her darning. If I hold my breath now I can hear through the wall the faint creak of its rockers—unless that's more wishful thinking. Our father has been gone for hours. Mother was yawning at supper, but she'll not go in to bed before he comes home from Meeting.

They didn't beat me, when I came home from school, not even when I told them every word I said to the Minister. Maybe they're saving it till tomorrow. I would rather have the beating over with and then I could sleep.

Tabby's face is pressed against my hand on the pillow; I can feel her breath like an oven on my fingers. From the corner, Dickie lets out a faint snore. Martha turns over, without warning, and we all must shift too, myself and Tabby and Catherine and Billy at our feet, all packed together like mackerel in a pot.

If the others were awake I would tell them a story: maybe the one about the cottage that stood in the middle of a village that stood in the middle of a bleak moor in the north country, where lived a certain man and his wife who had three cows, five sheep, and thirteen children. One more than us. Martha likes the tale of the old woman who

wove her own hair. Ned prefers the one about the prince with fourteen names.

If I had seven-league shoes and a cloak of invisibility I could be at the Meeting House now. Maybe they're too busy with other matters to discuss a froward child like me. Or else the Elders are arguing with my father this very moment, their big hands thumping the table. But even if I was invisible, it occurs to me, I couldn't make them listen; I couldn't change a thing.

Once when I was small, our mother was teaching me to shell peas. They bounced out through my fingers, and when I reached for them I upset the whole basket. Then I cried, and my mother would have let me go and play on the grass, but my father made me crawl round and pick every pea up off the floor, and then wash the dust off them, for he said he knew I could do whatever I set my mind to. And he was right. But tonight when he was putting on his greatcoat to go to Meeting, he didn't seem so sure.

I bury my face under the blanket and I make up pictures of things that cannot be. A town with seven windmills, and wolves with hair as long as sheep have, and a well in the woods that will make anything dipped in it grow. Sometimes in my imaginings I take a wrong turning, and scare myself. Then my thoughts feed on each other like worms in the black ground, but I must bite my thumb and lie still and not disturb the others, because we are so many in one room.

I remember the last three being born. We all heard, through the wall, though we pretended not to. Our mother doesn't make half as much noise as most women, I heard the midwife say. I know I will never make that noise. I am

a girl much like other girls, but I'll not grow up to be a woman like other women. Who would have a blind wife if he could help it? But I am a great help with the little ones, our mother says. I've never dropped one yet.

I was just learning to talk when the smallpox got me, so Eliza says. Before that I could see, though I don't remember it. All I have is a sense of what seeing means, and what a colour might feel like.

Some of the Elders told my father that by rights I should not have lived after I was blinded. My father told my mother what was said, and she cried; they didn't know I was listening. And another time when my father asked the Minister the reason for my blindness, he was told it might be a punishment from the Almighty for some sin my parents had committed. But they couldn't think which sin that might have been.

I have a handful of pocks over my eyebrows still; I finger them sometimes, to remind me. The Minister must be wrong. Didn't I live, when bigger children died of the same fever? This must mean that I have been chosen for something. There must be another future for me, if I'm not to be a woman like other women and have twelve children. If I do not grow up to be a poet, then what does it all mean?

A heavy step on the path at last: Father. I hear the tired squeak of the latch. My mother stands up to greet him, and the chair rocks like a branch in high wind.

The voices behind the wall are low, as if telling of a death, but I cannot make out the words. When I sit up, cold air worms its way into the bed; Martha burrows down deeper.

How can I wait till morning?

Tabby wakes when I clamber over her, and mutters something, but I put my hand over her mouth to shush her.

The floor is cold. My nightshirt shifts in the draught as I pull open the door to the kitchen. It makes a terrible creak.

"Franny?" says my mother.

I can smell the fire, and fresh mud on my father's boots. At times like these I wish I could read faces. How can I know what way he is looking at me?

"Here."

I think he's smiling.

I walk towards his voice with my hand out. Something hard stops my fingertips: a book. I take its weight into my hands and feel its cover; it is not one I know.

"It's called *The Odyssey*. Mr. McGranahan says if you bring it in to school tomorrow he'll teach you the first line."

I turn my face away so as not to wet the paper.

"Go to sleep, now," says my mother.

note

"Night Vision" is about the childhood of Frances Brown or Browne (1816–70), known as the Blind Poetess of Donegal, who went on to become a successful novelist in London, living with her younger sister and amanuensis. The best source of information on her is Brenda O'Hanrahan's Donegal Authors: A Bibliography *(1982). I have also used the autobiographical sketch that prefaces Brown's first collection of poems,* The Star of Attéghei *(1844), as well as her best-known work, the children's fairy-tale collection* Granny's Wonderful Chair *(1857).*

ballad

After the battle at Philiphaugh on the thirteenth of September in the year 1645, the Army of the Solemn League and Covenant presses north. On the broken road to St. Andrews, a cavalryman hangs back till he is out of sight of his comrades, till the dragoons and the musketeers and the regiments of foot have all marched past him. Till the flag, with its stained white cross on a blue field, is gone by. Then he turns off over the empty fields towards Perth. He wears a buff coat with a worn blue ribbon; his hands smell of saltpetre and blood. He is owed four months' wages. He feels nothing, nothing at all.

Bessy Bell an Mary Gray,
They were twa bonny lasses

Scotland is plague-stricken. Folk wear bruises of mauve and orange and yellow for a few days, and then they die. Sometimes, of course, they drop dead before they've had time to bruise. Edinburgh has emptied out like a puking