

September

by Mary Wickham RSM

September in Ireland can be mild, as the days mellow into Autumn.
Inevitably there will be rain, but the sun still tinges the scene,
the pungency of peat smoke intensifies
and the land hunkers down for the darkneses.

Born in a September and given a name,
Catherine Elizabeth gazes from one of the windows of Coolock,
its panes and muntin wood recalling the Cross,
the mystery that owns and guides her.
She surveys with affection the expansive fields,
a fertile region of crops and limestone quarries -
her home, her workplace, her circle for twenty years.
The air here is clear and healthy, brisk from the Irish Sea.

Perhaps she idly imagines mellowing into her own Autur
as a spinster nudging fifty, she has lived well beyond
the average lifespan of an Irish woman of her time,
and already done her share of care and sheltering,
faithful tending and wound watching.

Despite mild appearances, she is not average,
what beckons her is neither Autumn nor Winter,
and what calls her is not mild but bold,
bolder than she can ever envisage - a Spring for the ages,
seeds long latent splitting open to push the friable darkness
and greet the sun and the inevitable rain,
to become an unlikely flourish of blossom and fruit
in the midst of the fretfully fetid air of the city.



As she gazes from the window,
in these busy interim years between Coolock and Baggot St,
years of change and finish, loss and unexpected gains,
where grace introduces hope to opportunity,
she does not yet know that Septembers will soon change forever.

She will have the key to the door in Baggot St by September 1827,
to deal with and heal the aftermath of an enslaved people,
a deprived society: denied education, worship, property, language -
deprived but rising in a liberation ripe for guidance.
She does not yet know that she and the house will begin life together
of all days on day twenty-four of a September -
Feast of the liberation of the enslaved,
feast of the strongest and most tender of women.

Catherine Elizabeth will then let play on her tongue the word mercy,
that has long been a tenant in her heart,
and she will release her heart to inhabit the house
so gracefully and gratefully named.

For now, these Septembers before, she is between.
In right time she will cross the threshold of her new home,
a home for others, a home with others,
a home for nourishment of mind, spirit and body -
school, shelter, soup kitchen, singing-sanctuary,
sacred-solace, society of good works, circle of friends.
Born, like her, in September, a September yet to come,
and given a name - The House - of Mercy.

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