

Medbh McGuckian

**THE THANKLESS
PATHS TO FREEDOM**



Gallery Books

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Contents

Colour Mistakes	page 11
Without a Wedding	13
The Hotel Picardie	14
Mrs Much-wed	15
Poem on the Landscape Behind the Mona Lisa	17
Every Patient Contact	18
The Feather Shop	19
Impartial Reflections	20
Ten Day Window	21
The Plume Trade	22
Our Lady of Good Death	24
Nine Types of Solitude	25
A Wineskin in the Frost	27
Star Patient	29
Bethlehem Candle, £70	31
Removing the Martian Sky	33
The Elsewhere Empire	34
The Bidding Prayers	
1 AFTER THERMIDOR	35
2 JEWEL SONG	35
Landslides in Sensitive Clays	37
Kepler 452b	38
The Unanxious One	41
Bishop Street, Without and Within	42
Chalice Orchard	44
Mirror for Eight Voices	46
Self-portrait with Large Collar	48
Self-portrait with Jewish Passport	50
The Thankless Paths to Freedom	52
Woman Reading by a Paper Bell	54
Black Angel	57
Black Garden	58
The Moondial	59
The Snowfall Room	61
The Chrysanthemum Hour	62

A Particular Friendship 65
Awakening Day 68

*for Anne Devlin
and Carol Tweedle Bardon*

Bishop Street, Without and Within

Spring has come with great difficulty.
We stood whole days in a cloud of water
since the first days of winter moved in.
He is half-dust already.

It was deep into April, the city
was soft as a palace of flowers
or linden honey. We would have stopped
the beating of our hearts if we could.

In a room with a real floor the powers
that were spoke for what one might call
the Provisional wing. They inhabit
an island, and long ago have shed and unlearned

all native marks and notes. Anything
alphabetic has a pastness about it
ab ovo, though we delight in a visitable
past, as if the flags meant nothing.

When the train began to move
I closed my eyes. It did not stop
at any station, but ran on as if
it had lost its mind, ran to the side,

then turned and rolled into
an open field. So it played
its lamp, the disorder
of drinking it in deeply,

such a smoky gem, whether
it should be prised free.
Mary Antrim, the name means
receptacle in Italian, tub or vat,

but also edge or border,
flower border, edge of page.
I was as kind to her that evening
as I knew how to be,

her head bloodied by a stone.
I filled a bowl with berry juice
for darkening her shawl,
that mystic, chemical change,

as one who has gone over to Rome
in attempt to make existence
shockproof. Other leaves in the story
are Lamb House, where single lady

penfriends hang yearningly
about a locked door —
so thickly besieged a shrine —
the devoted elderly widow

with her inexhaustible
collection of relics. He became
supersubtle, deciding to work
the garden: but why should he not

slink past in immortality,
in the figured tapestry,
the long arras that hides him,
while the good season lasts?