

Launch

“One Crimson Thread”

by Micheal O’Siadhail

by

The Honourable Mrs Justice Susan Denham, Chief Justice

on

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Tonight we gather to celebrate a wonderful new collection of love poems by Micheal O’Siadhail.

Ten years ago I had the honour of launching “Love Life”, in which Micheal wrote of the thirty six year marriage he and Bríd had shared at that time. “Love Life” is a powerful collection, a homage to enduring love.

In this collection of sonnets Micheal writes of the last two years of Bríd’s life, her death, and his grief. Those of us who knew Bríd, and know Micheal, come to this collection with a special heartache. A couple who have been a part of our lives for nigh on 40 years are no more. A slipping away of part of our generation.

This is not a collection of poems written in the abstract. There is a gripping immediacy which catches you on the first page - you are drawn in, and you turn each page, sometimes tentatively, to see what is happening.

The immediacy which comes across is because it is a journal, written as the events unfold. Written by the poet, traumatised by what is happening, and using words, and the world of words, to cope personally.

As with “Love Life”, this is a collection of love poems. It describes the personal crimson thread of two lovers on their life journey. It is a story that has been told and retold over the centuries, as in the song of Solomon ‘Your lips are like a thread of crimson’.

Here we have a searing story of a lovers’ journey in the 21 51 century.

We are brought along the journey, pause at stages, to the final course.

Starkly, Micheal describes matters which arise along the way. Often they are not issues which arose, or were recognised, in times gone by.

Modern medicine is helping us live longer, sadly this means that dementia is an illness which appears to be becoming more common. Certainly, it is spoken of in public more frequently. It is such a fearful illness, for both the patient and for the family. Micheal evokes this pending disaster in his first sonnet:-

“Dementia. A name for you my love?

In such a word do our two lives unknot?

Without your hand, my life’s an empty glove.

A sabotage has spread across your brain,
Unravelling our long-ravelled crimson thread.
My Bríd have you begun to take your leave?

Micheal describes the travails of caring for Bríd as her health deteriorates. He agonises over day time care. Thus, he writes:-

“Though all who know me warn I look too worn,
I have and hold in sickness or in health.
If I collapse, who’ ll mind you then? I’m tom.
Between a vow and burn-out now by stealth.
We call to see a place for daytime care.
‘Dementia we never mention here’,
The head-nurse winks, ‘in case we are aware! ‘
In every we an us and them is clear.
[Sonnet 8]

The fear of the long goodbye, slipping into a new world, by both Micheal and Bríd is –

Thus of Bríd:

“I feel a distance in your frightened eyes”

and of Micheal:

“I shouldn’t jump ahead but I’m afraid
I’ll be some stranger you won’t recognize;”

[Sonnet 9]

The symptoms of the illness, so common but so disturbing, are considered. There are reflections on the anger that can accompany dementia - such a contrast to the wife he knew.

“I can’t believe this changeling can be you!

Here is a stranger I have never known.

A worn Samaritan I bind your wound.”

[Sonnet 11]

And Hallucinations -

“I dread the days when you hallucinate;

But neighbours keep on knocking down our fence.”

[Sonnet 18]

The day when full time care is necessary approaches -

“It is now one week we’ve left before you leave,
What am I doing doodling time away
In this small world of words and make-believe,
While you prepare your trousseau for the day?
The clothes where laundry tags will soon be sewn,
Momentos, snaps of moments you’ll recall;
Already you must make that room your own;
My portrait you want hanging on your wall.”
[Sonnet 20]

The small actions captured by Micheal paint such an evocative picture of each step along the journey. Here, as at other times, it is clear that Micheal is writing his ‘journal’ to help him cope with the unravelling of their lives.

A conundrum for family and friends often is how to relate to a relative when a person is ill. We wish to be supportive, not to cross the street, or ignore the person.

However, a query can cause pain, as Micheal describes:

“When people ask - although it’s genuine -
‘How’s Bríd? I bite my lip afraid to cry;
I can no longer look them in the eye
But will myself to hold what wells within.
I wander in a world that is still unreal.”
[Sonnet 25]

The harrowing difficulty of visiting Bríd daily, who rails against the routine of the nursing home, is captured in many lines. Thus:

“But then you rage at me. ‘Why must I stay?
Why will I not get better. What of bail?
I’m tired of all the inmates of this jail!
And you, you would last here one wet day!”
[Sonnet 34]

However, there still remained good times:-

“I love the early evening when at ease,
Your spirit debonair and dignified,
We talk or fall to silence side by side
In sacred moments we’re allowed to seize
Before the time your mind begins to tire.”

[Sonnet 35]

After some dramatic events Micheal brings Bríd home for a visit - to enjoy the garden - forsythia in bloom. But the time comes when Bríd returns to care -

“But how, you ask, will I get out of here?
Once home I’m haunted by your parting glance.”

[Sonnet 38]

Micheal examines his work and wonders whether it betrays the years of trust - the private pain of both he and Bríd. He asks himself the question -

“My cries at first seem only self-communicated
Unshared half-thoughts that shuttle through my head.
How can I best now weave the crimson thread;
Will someone else find solace in our wound?
My words bear witness to unbroken love.”

[Sonnet 39]

We are grateful to Micheal that he recognised that indeed these sonnets will be of great solace to others. They address the human condition profoundly. For those in similar circumstances, they will be of inestimable help.

The daily difficulties arising with Parkinson’s disease are described. The loss of old age together -

“But damn you, Mr. Parkinson, You sneak!
You’ve thieved the mellow stage we thought we’d share;
I mourn those ripened years we meant to reap,
The autumn of our lifelong love-affair.”
The travails of modern medicine are addressed, as it transpires that it is the years of medicines that has “zonked” Bríd’s mind, not dementia:-

“Though years of medicines had zonked your mind,
Psychosis wastes and you’re more self-aware,
What broke the spell that overcast your brain -
A tended soul on drugs or both combined?
I’ll never know, my love, and I don’t care;
I only know that you are you again.”

[Sonnet 63]

Slowly the long journey continues - with further letting go, as Bríd asks:

“You won’t mind, will you? You are asking me,
‘I’d like to give this necklace to a niece’ -
‘Of course I don’t’, I say and yet I see
Another letting go, a new release.
[Sonnet 85]

While this is a collection of poems which stands on its own - there are references back to “Love Life”, the crimson thread runs through both. Thus, the question asked in “Love Life” “If one of us was to go first?” is answered in this collection.

Micheal told me that he had intended to complete this volume at the 100th sonnet. However, then, unexpectedly, Bríd died, and so the journal continued.

We are told of a Friday lunch, when Bríd seemed to fret and Micheal leaves, planning to visit in the evening. Yet - the mundane and the cataclysmic rhyme -

“Our roofer rang to say he was delayed -
I had, it seems, forgotten he was due!
Though I’ve come home I half-wish I had stayed.
To share this news, I find I’m phoning you.
‘Just since you left I’ve been unwell,’ you say,
‘I’m lying here, just hold on now a bit’ ;
I’m listening to the silence of delay
Where every second seems it’s infinite.
A sudden sound. A rattling breath as though ...
I phone you back at once, then phone the home.
Please get to Bríd! But should I wait or go?
Each moment ticks its silent metronome
And minutes lapse into delirium.
The dreaded call-back says ‘You’d better come’ .”
[Sonnet 102]

The A and E that follows [Sonnet 104], the move to intensive care [Sonnet 105], the recognition that the end is near:

“It’s hours until we have to let you go,
You’d lain too long and that impaired your brain;
They can’t undo the damage you’ve sustained.”
[Sonnet 108]

Micheal is told that they will stop the ventilator - let Bríd go.

“Of course, they say, they can delay the end
Until I tell them - I myself decide.
To die alone, my love, has been your dread;
A roomful gathers now around the bed.”
[Sonnet 11]

Despite her death, Micheal writes of Bríd’s continuing presence in his life:-

“O I know you’re there in all I dare to do,
The way I think and every time I write;
As if in absence you are yet more you
And still my muse, my silent second sight.”
[Sonnet 141]

Through these sonnets Bríd is with us too, in this collection.

I would like to say how much I admire the cover portrait of Bríd - by Mick O’Dea. He has captured her spirit.

This is a sad sequence of sonnets, but in my opinion, this is Micheal at his best. It bares the soul, in situations we find difficult to discuss.

It is exquisite poetry. But more than that it puts words to deep emotions. To a traveller in these sad lands it describes the topography. A reader will recognise, and not feel alone, in meeting their travails.

I believe that this collection will become a resource – a handbook – for families and carers who are caring, fearsomely, face to face, with the long goodbye and that crimson moment itself, death.

Frequently dark and often very bleak, this collection is a wonderful tale of love.

My congratulations to Micheal for this superb sonnet sequence.

I have great pleasure in launching “One Crimson Thread”.