

A DYING LANGUAGE

MONICA CORISH

Vincent Woods

Dermot Bolger and Jane Clarke endorse this collection of poems by Monica Corish, and I quote them because they each articulate something of what I felt in reading these poems and carry away from the book in the light of reading.

Dermot Bolger wrote: 'Monica Corish's deftly crafted poems manage to be unflinchingly honest about the actuality of terminal illness, while simultaneously remaining tender, lyrical and deeply humane about the emotional tapestries of family life.'

Jane Clarke said: 'A Dying Language' is a beautiful and intensely moving account of the author's experience of nursing her terminally-ill mother... This striking collection puts words on what can seem unsayable, and, while contemplating suffering and loss, it ultimately celebrates commitment and love.'

TO BEGIN AT the end – and on the note picked up by Jane Clarke: 'love' is the last word in this book; and it is the spirit that shapes and guides the poems. Not love as an easy, romantic, soft love, but a hard-won, tough, enduring, suffering and ultimately transcendent love which out-lives flesh and animates spirit.

We journey with Monica Corish, her mother Teresa, her father Michael and her family in this account of illness, death and aftermath – survival, more than survival – celebration. The shocking, sudden news of terminal cancer; the shock, denial, hope, earthquake in family life; the practicality of caring, giving, witnessing, supporting; the tiring and fraying in the face of it all. And the strange business of surviving the loved one who has suffered and is gone, the shaping and reshaping of the altered space, the striving to make sense of it all, to find grace, and in this personal experience, the striving to find the right words.

And Monica Corish has found the right words, words negotiated with caution and sensitivity. The dying language comes alive in poems like Garden, Twilight, Sewing Silk, Still Upright, Hitting the Rapids, Bitter Honey, Wing Mirror, Butterfly... The domestic, medical and personal merge in factual accounts illuminated and distorted by slowed-down, sped-up time and by sudden, glimpsed-and-gone image and intervention. A room, a bed becomes the centre of the world and the world moves in and out to hold it, to hold the beloved mother at the centre of the centre. Africa enters – the heat-cracked sky of Sierre Leone,

the Atlantic between Cape Horn and Cape Town, and in the Dreamtime after death, mother and daughter become giraffes on 'the wide plains around Nairobi, stretching south to Masai Mara, the Serengeti and beyond'.

An expansiveness of vision is one of the strengths of this book, but strong too is small and intimate domestic detail, and the almost casual but meticulous detailing of medical care: the laying out of tablets, catheter, syringe, needle and sterile gloves, the unavoidable business of flesh and suffering, of morphine and the eye-to-eye confrontation with mortality, endurance, hope, anger, hopelessness, sought grace, and death.

I imagine there isn't a family in Ireland that hasn't experienced something of what Monica captures so acutely in these poems... I know the terrain too well - my own mother died from cancer in 1992 and I helped care for her with my sisters Teresa, and Maureen who died five years ago. I know the delicacy of the unsaid but understood, the hope-against-hope, the harsh facts and sometimes harsh words and thoughts, the anger and helplessness. And I know the power of hospice care and the quiet, dignified strength and support that hospice brings to the person who is dying but living, but alive, and those who are caring for her or for him.

It's entirely appropriate that Monica Corish's book, 'A Dying Language' helps to raise badly-needed funds for the Irish Hospice Foundation and the North West

Hospice, and I salute the Hospice Foundation for having had the courage and foresight to publish this book. As Sharon Foley says in her foreword to the collection, Monica does not hide from the struggle that the Hospice philosophy of 'living to the end' can involve. And I agree with her that what she calls 'the dance of language, of knowing and not knowing that death is near, of sharing and hiding, of anger and tenderness, make Monica's poems worthy additions to the canon of grief poetry'.

As Gréagoir Ó Dúil points out, this poetry of grief is also a kind of love poetry. And so we return

to the end, and that final word 'love', the word and spirit which gives these poems their truth, their power and their impetus. With love, and bound within it, binding it, is a deep exploration of the complexity and simplicity of being human, of being alive, of dying, and of being a witness to death. Monica's mother, Teresa, comes vividly to life from these pages – funny, strong, determined, tender – and blessed to have had the family she shaped and gathered around her.

These poems are a blessing of sorts – making a living language, striking a flame of light out of shadow and sorrow.

Yeats wrote:

*Wine comes in at the mouth
And love comes in at the eye
That's all we shall know for truth
Before we grow old and die...*

There is love in the eye of death.
There is love in the end. These poems bear witness to those small consolations.

A *Dying Language* is available online from www.moniacorish.ie, and from Barnes & Noble and Amazon. Also from Liber Books, Sligo, The Reading Room, Carrick on Shannon, A Novel Idea, Ballyshannon and The Winding Stair, Dublin.

Vincent Woods, *launched "A Dying Language" in Sligo on 28 July 2016.*

Sewing Silk

Monica Corish

When the consultant says:

*I'm booking you in for next Tuesday, the 17th,
for more tests, you ask for time:*

Please can we make it the 18th?

There's a do in the golf club on Tuesday night.

You sound hoarse on the phone: :

*There's a little blood in my cough
from that tube down my throat, that camera thing,
but that dress I got in one of 'those' shops for only €20?*

*I found the perfect bolero to go with it,
the most gorgeous colour, a deep peach.*

*All I need now is to adjust it
in time for the dance. I'm so glad*

I have something to do while I'm waiting.

I need to take it in, just a little bit.

Your father is setting the sewing machine for silk.

Bitter Honey

Monica Corish

I hand you your tablets,
you hand me a request, written
in your newly-wavering hand:
*Please play One Day at a Time
over and over on a loop.
Sometimes He needs some help
so He can help us.*

Sweet Jesus, not an hour
of Country and Western piety!
But when I set it playing —
I'm only human, I'm just a woman...
the rhythm's too good to resist,
my hips start swaying
the way you love to see
and you laugh

The air in this house
is shadowed with sorrow and golden,
like honey gleaned
from bitter herbs.

Still Upright

Monica Corish

So dry
a sinkhole of earth has fallen

One conifer,
roots half in earth half in air

Like the crab
that tightens its grip on your
windpipe

Still upright
until the next hard rainfall