

# ART IN MEDICINE

## The Catherine Wheel For Michael O'Reilly

Jack Coulehan, MD  
Stony Brook, New York

One day in early spring I turned on the computer and found an E-mail message from Shane O'Reilly in Dundalk, County Louth, Ireland. "It is with a heavy heart and much sadness," he wrote, "that I must inform you that on the 20th of March, 1998, my brother Dr Michael O'Reilly was found dead in his bed. After a long fight with depression where he won many battles, my brother, no longer able to continue, lost the war. Forever poetic, his last written words were, 'Why won't you let me land when I am so tired of flying!'"

I had never laid eyes on Michael O'Reilly, yet I too felt a great personal loss. I corresponded with him for 3 years and reveled in the passionate, musical voice of his poetry, and through his writing experienced a fierce and almost overwhelming empathy. Here was a man who truly understood the healing power of words. Here was a physician who bashed down the barriers of detachment and spoke tenderly, lovingly of his patients. I imagined Michael as a curly-haired bard of a doctor, wandering around the northwest of Ireland, a sort of Celtic Johnny Appleseed, planting seeds of compassion and healing wherever he went. In my mind, Michael was a young man whose energy and skill were of mythic proportions, like those of the great Irish hero Cuchulain.

"Every time I open a medical journal," he wrote to editor Paul Fischer in 1994, when first submitting poems to the *Journal*, "I see a story about some obscure bacteria that only grows on the iced windowpane of a lab slide, or a letter from an aging surgeon who found a strange coloured growth in a patient's brain, pushing all her thoughts and memories to one side.... And yet whenever I see a patient, I just want to write a poem." In another letter Michael opined, "There is a poet, painter, and musician in every doctor, subdued by a fear of being ridiculed in a profession dominated by machines." Michael railed against what he saw as the failure of compassion in medicine. He wanted no part of clinical distance. He wanted no part of detached concern. He wanted to touch his patients, and he allowed them to touch him deeply.

Michael O'Reilly was born May 6, 1966, in Dundalk. His father was a general practitioner in that town, having moved his family back to Ireland from Baltimore, Maryland, the year before Michael's birth. Michael attended St Malachy's National School and St Mary's Secondary School before going to Trinity College in Dublin to study medicine. To fulfill his degree requirement to write an essay on the general practice experience, Michael produced a series of poems about his patients; these were later published in *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* (1992). After graduation, he pursued 3 years of postgraduate training in general practice in County Donegal, northwestern Ireland—the first 2 years as a registrar in Letterkenny Hospital, followed by two 6-month stints with general practitioners in Stranorlar and Carndonagh. In 1997, he did locum tenens work in Carndonagh and spent several months volunteering with an international aid agency in Luanda, Angola. Michael joined his father's family practice in Dundalk in January 1998.

From Carndonagh Michael wrote, "Family practice has been good to me so far. I love where I am working, this wild northwestern fishing village, Irish-speaking, heavy-drinking, hard-living, easy-dying community, living on the edge of centuries, tattooed with stories and traditions, loyal to their disloyalties. I spend all morning on house visits, mostly elderly, isolated, mostly in their nineties, still farming and fishing. They have so many stories to tell. I am in awe of their innocence. Then, surgery and clinics all afternoon—mostly children, mothers. Singing almost, with that gentle Donegal Celtic lilt. The art of fam-

---

All correspondence should be addressed to Jack Coulehan, MD, Institute for Medicine in Contemporary Society, Department of Preventive Medicine, Health Science Center L3-092, State University of New York at Stony Brook, Stony Brook, NY 11794-8036.

ily practice can be so rewarding when the patients are your friends and neighbors."

He spoke tenderly of his patients. In a letter to me in 1996, he wrote, "Emma is a German girl who moved to this fishing village to escape something dark behind her, in her past but still ahead of her. She makes beautiful pottery and nettle-cheese, and on her thirty-third birthday found out that she is dying. She is my patient but mostly my friend." Emma is the subject of his beautiful poem "potter." Of the patient to whom Michael gives voice in "old," he commented that the poem came to him "on a housecall to a man with advanced lung cancer, who does not want to die in hospital wired to a machine, but wants to die at home in the house he built, against the wishes of his children, who have not visited him in over a year."

Later, from Angola, Michael cried out in anguish against injustice, "Here I am, banging my beautiful head against a mud hut wall, trying to make a difference, naively, the first gentle beach-head forming from a Live-aid generation.... We came here because one child in twenty is dying before they open their eyes, we were told. We were lied to, it's higher. Twice that, in fact, and worse. Then malaria, meningitis, malnutrition, and minefields. Children torn apart like forget-me-nots on windy days, limbless and hopeless. We have found an old hospital in this town and are starting from scratch. No medicines, no beds, no doctors, no water, no electricity, no sanitation, no future. Basically, a room built around a part of the world where innocent children come to die. We have gutted it, started to rebuild; me, three nurses, an engineer and a logistician, a carpenter, little money, big ideas, hot and cold running beer."

In his poem "a small girl brings an injured bird into the surgery," he tells the child

they will hurt you, when I was  
a boy I found three fox cubs with gunwounds  
in our barley field with their dead mother,  
and could not save them.

and I am learning to be a doctor, now, to pass  
dying children by

because they have burnt me at the catherine wheel.

The Catherine wheel was an instrument of torture named for the early Christian martyr, St Catherine of Alexandra. It was a wheel with sharp spikes around its circumference that would pierce the victim's flesh, gradually going deeper and deeper. Indeed, Michael was pierced by the suffering of children and the old and infirm and by the world's injustice. But I will focus on the image of burning, the fire by which the martyr was finally consumed. To me, Michael O'Reilly's life is like one of those giant blue stars that are too hot, too intense, too powerful to last for very long. The type of star that soon explodes. His poems are the streams of light that reach us; we look at them and marvel at their passion and loveliness long after the star is gone.

### a terrible beauty

for michael o'reilly (1966-1998)

there is a solitary place  
in the mountains of donegal  
where beyond the tarmac's  
next ascending curve  
the lanes begin to go down  
to the sea,  
and if you turn around  
to look at the land behind you,  
the granite hills are impossibly green  
and the motion of fog  
in the valley  
is so tentative  
it's hard to believe  
that fog will rise to engulf you  
and carry you off to the center  
of whatever it is  
we haven't found words for

ah michael, my lovely  
lovely  
tangle-haired friend,  
the terrible beauty is in us!

---

*Selections from Michael O'Reilly's poetry appear on the Journal's Web site at [www.jfp.denver.co.us](http://www.jfp.denver.co.us).*