Nuala Reads Gaelic In Waco

I'm at a reading where the poet reads only Irish Gaelic.

That's the only language she writes in.

A camera films her for the festival archives.

The fifty disturbed students

who crawl out of their skins

are not being filmed.

They already sweat

because the air conditioning is off

due to energy conservation.

I’m here because I didn’t read the program.

Not all of her reading is Gaelic.

She reads occasional translations of her work by others.

She criticizes them. Then she reads Gaelic again.

It's the most miserable Friday night most students will suffer.

Maybe they can get laid later

and erase some of the wretched time

they sink deep in the bog of Gaelic,

choking on syllables like gobs of peat.

Some of the students laugh too loud at her patter between poems,

which has not been updated since the 1980s.

She says the next poem is about a mermaid and goes into the shifting vowels.

Heads lean back.

I count five students that stare at the ceiling tiles. The tiles are bland white.

They seek desperately for refuge, keening for relief or whisky.

Others slip out their phones and tablets,

and skim discreetly on the internet.

What possessed the person who booked her?

The heads lean back, almost gasp for air as they drown in the gaelic,

composure smashed to smithereens.

One student, sitting closest to this Irish woman,

abruptly laughs a harsh laugh

and nods at the Gaelic sounds.

Several eyes roll in disgust at the ceiling.

Thirty minutes still to go.

Students that choose English degrees dwindle.

Enrollment drops for literature.

The epitome of scaring students from the great texts,

two lovers walk out.

Rebellion.

Not bravery but compulsion.

Professors glance about, worried.

I study them. I don’t think any of them know Gaelic.

This isn’t Boston, where’s still an Irish stronghold.

The number of those who speak Irish in the world

is less than the population of Waco.

“Everyone wants to sit in George Washington's chair,”

Nuala states suddenly in English.

The students stare stupidly, unsure.

An exhaust fan kicks on, then off, then on, then off again.

Two professors sweat profusely

as they slip into the chairs vacated by the lovers.

Nuala states as part of her patter that she’s catholic,

but will renounce Catholicism on her deathbed

because of the evil done by the church in Ireland.

Students perk up. It’s English,

and they understand.

Then Nuala lapses into Gaelic.

I look at the program. I see the past participants.

W.S. Merwin read in 2001. Billy Collins read in 2002.

Phillip Levine read in 1999. Louise Gluck read in 1997.

Oh, to be at those readings. But no.

I’m at the 2011 poetry festival listening to Nuala.

I read she went to University College Cork.

She was the Ireland Professor of Poetry.

Her poetry’s been translated into many languages.

Even Seamus Heaney translated her work.

But she’s reads Gaelic

to students who don’t know Gaelic.

Many to scratch uncontrollably

at unexpected eczema.

Gaelic continues. In the scheme of things,

how polite we are

as ancient Celtic words fall like scree

in our wee brains like banshee-vexed

hooligans. We are true rubes.