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Athchuart ar Chúirt: Cúirt Revisited

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Caitlín Nic Íomhair, winner of this year's Poetry Ireland Cúirt festival bursary, reports back on her experience attending the festival.

I have a thing for voices. Not accent, mind. Not oratory flare. Just the mundane miracle of air squeezing through vocal cords, the quiet collusion of lungs, brain, teeth and tongue to turn vibration into meaning.

Take the bald statement 'I love poetry' and play with it as much as you can, from a whisper to a song to a shout to your best RTÉ newsreader voice. Play with emphasis; whirr it up and slow it down. Treat it like a record; try it with the precision of a needle finding the deserving groove, or the anarchy of fingertips scratching it back and forth to make it strange and new. Go on, I'll wait.

There is a Welshman whom I would pay handsomely to read my bank statements to me, while I know others who could make an epic sound like a shopping list. Being both a generally shy person and a more-than-willing resident of gaeltacht na leabhar, the society of books, I'm mostly stuck with my own voice these days. Deep, unbecomingly accented and constantly hurrying through words like so many crowded clothes shops - luckily for me, I've learned to live with it mar ghuth. It's not so bad, really, but I still prefer to listen.

It strikes me that a lot of the driving force of poetry is to restore, through tricks and graft, what words lose when they're written not spoken. The Irish word 'brí' helps here - 'meaning', yes, but much more besides: substance, sparkle, purpose. It's why, love them though I do, song lyrics are typically easier to write than poems, and in greater danger of sounding mawkish in any other voice.

My job as a poet is to use all the tricks in my box to whittle away, rather than to build, until the voice my poem needs in order to work can be carried through the page into your brain through words alone. My job as a reader, whether amateur or professional, is only ever to listen keenly - idir intinn, anam agus phutóga, with my intuition, my intellect or both - to see if I can detect the murmur that tells me gur beo don dán: that the poem, though squashed on a shelf or lost in a jumble of programming code, lives yet.

So you can imagine, a dhuine liom, the appeal of spending a week listening intently without having to be furtive about it. Turn off my brain and I'd still have got my - well, Poetry Ireland's - money's worth from the wonderful Cúirt festival by eavesdropping alone. Fortunately my brain was wide awake, though also exhausted, because listening is a labour too.

I feel that listing highlights is the sort of thing one does in (very tardy) summaries like this, but I also didn't attend every event, so please forgive me if your name or one you root for isn't here. So, working backward: the festival ended for me with John Cummins' wacky, adorable, completely compelling performance of spoken word. I swooned throughout Lewis Kenny's set, especially his piece about mothers and his off the cuff and totally assured promise that, forget fighting, "real men write poetry". Continuing to go backwards in time, because I've started so I'll finish, bhí sé d'uaisleacht ag Louis de Paor bualadh liom le dánta liom a phlé agus comhairle mo leasa a chur orm, agus níl cur síos i bhfocail (i bhfuaim, b'fhéidir.....) ar an tairbhe a bhain mé as ár ndáil.

(I know you might not understand these words, but they're still yours to play with like we did a minute ago. Ar aghaidh leat!)

Do I even need to mention the thrill of seeing Louis de Paor and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill read in the Taibhdhearc? Two words: bucket list. Fad is atá muid ag caint ar laochra na Gaeilge, now is as good a time as any to confess that I strayed a

little bit from my mandate by going to the Alan Titley event, though in fairness (and to paraphrase Bidy Jenkinson) only a poet could write prose like this.

On the topic of voice, Titley has done something truly extraordinary with his translation of *Cré na Cille* into *The Dirty Dust*. His is one of the most irrepressible, individual voices on this island, dar m'anam, and yet he manages both to stay true to and do justice to the appallingly underrated and ever-shapeshifting voice of Máirtín mór Ó Cadhain himself. Read it!

Speaking of justice, there are three more people that I want to mention (and I'm rapidly running out of space here). Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil mé ag déanamh paidir chapail de thábhacht an ghutha, but Naomi Shihab Nye had me convinced before I even had time to process her words. Her writing flourishes when she reads, and her hilarious poem about declining invitations will stay with me for a long time.

Jane Hirschfield was a very gracious and enthusiastic convener of the poetry workshop. Better yet, her affirmation at the start that there is a place for introverts in the poetic ecosystem was a much needed comfort for a sapling exposing her most tentative leaves under the canopy, both protective and stifling, of a bumper crop of redwoods.

Lastly, Paul Durcan's deadpan self-deprecation had me homesick for the black north, and I took great pleasure in talking to him as his ice cream melted the night before the festival began (kindly orchestrated by Maureen Kennelly, whose support of poets is so graceful you almost don't notice it's happening).

In conclusion, and I promise I'm really going this time, I want to say a whispered thanks to all those whose noses didn't screw up and whose distaste either didn't register or didn't exist when I explained that, yes, I write, but no, not in English. At times I felt a bit mean-spirited that my own feet of clay were hidden as others stood vulnerably on the stage. (God knows we all blush or rush or cringe through that one word or line or verse that isn't there yet.) My apprehensions were unfounded, as

people treated me like a human and a poet-in-training, not as An Irish Language Poet or museum exhibit.

I met and remet people, listened til my brain ached, and followed my nose to the sea to paddle under a searing sun faoi choimirce Éigse Éireann. Anois cad déarfá le Gaillimh?!

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Ábhar scoláire i Roinn na Gaeilge Choláiste na Tríonóide í Caitlín Níc Íomhair, Dúnach. Tá a croí istigh sa litríocht agus go háirithe san fhilíocht, idir léamh agus scríobh.