

Harry Giles

Oam

*Poems fae
Govanhill Baths*

English translation

Contents

1. Somethin tae dae in an empie puil
2. Blue ghaists
3. Nicht shift at the slipper baths
4. [haiku]
5. Hoo tae chap an ingan
6. In yer haunds thare are nae deid things
7. The hairdest man in Govanhill
8. Lifegaird
9. Scenes fae a protest
11. Tae a cooncillor
13. Treisur
15. [concrete puil]

Note

This pamphlet was written as part of a residency with Govanhill Baths. The Baths is a once and future swimming pool (and steamie and slipper baths and Turkish baths and more), closed by Glasgow City Council in 2001, occupied and defended by a strong community campaign, and now reopened as a community centre, soon to be a swimming complex again.

The poems are written in a mongrel and magpie form of Scots. If you struggle to read Scots, don't worry: you can download an English gloss of the text from my website at www.harrygiles.org/oam. Remember, though, the English versions aren't poems proper, just literal renderings of the words: they're there to help you read this and enjoy the Scots more. And a bit of advice from Dick Gaughan: when you read the poems aloud, don't try and put on a Scots accent; just read the words in your own voice and they'll come out fine.

Also know that folk in Govanhill don't necessarily speak like this. For one thing, this is a poetic (and syncretic) Scots, so nobody really speaks like it just as nobody speaks like most poems. For another thing, the Scots of Govanhill is tangled up with Romani and Bangladeshi and Polish and a hundred other great languages.

Many, many thanks to the people who gave their time and support and willingness to be interviewed during the residency, including Nathan Akhtar, Frances Diver, Nadine Gorency, Andrew Johnson, Jim Monaghan, Joanne Neill, Marion Nisbet, and Fatima Uygun—and the whole amazing community of volunteers at the Baths as well.

Learn how to dive in and support the Baths at www.govanhillbaths.com: you'll find no better place to put your time and energy and love.

Something to do in an empty pool

If you want my advice, what to do is
take your lungs bang into the middle of the big pool
make sure you're alone
roll your shoulders
find a stance
stretch your mouth
and start singing

Start small if you like. Start with a hum of satisfaction
then build it. Nick bits of tunes
from your favourite telly shows, pile them
one on the other, weave in a lullaby,
a homesong, an anthem, keep building—

all you need for hermony is your own echo
all you need for applause is the flecks of peeling paint you're shaking softly landing on the tiles
sing a winding song

through twenty-three years of marriage
through forty-five years of struggle
through ninety-nine years of swimmers

til you've nothing but sound
and the pool is nothing but sound

then let it go

and steal back a breath

Blue ghosts

Blue ghosts always swim up and down the pool.
Two hundred toothy ghosts cheer from the balconies,
 clap ghost hands,
and a glittering ghost swings from the ghost trapeze
 over the ghost water.

If you sound here, the song you're given
isn't an echo but the answering yell
 of a ghost diver
at long last making her triple somersault
 above the ghost water.

The ghost-hunter said there are good ones and bad ones.
Your finger-thrum's a child saying *Come in,*
 play Murderball,
and the shudder up your thighs is the gless eye turning
 under the ghost water.

When we drown the stage in good swimmable
water, when we clean the walls and scrape
 off the ghost grandeur,
and open doors to let the ghosts escape
 out of the ghost water,

and fill the pool with galas, parties, lengths—
I think the best is, that many of the last
 century's spirits
would stay and welcome a hundred more years of ghosts
 into the water.

Night shift at the Slipper Baths

scrape off your uniform / strip yourself /
hang the night on a wee metal hook /
duck your foot in the water and scream
at the cold or the boiling / scream and shriek

for always that bath's like a kiss all over /
knees up to armpits and scrubbing away
with a bit of carbolic / one bar between four /
Cath rattles your wall so you flip the small

scrap of soap / its arc drips comfort /
she yelps as it smacks her right in the mouth /

that woman win the purse / she scowls
and hushes us like we're in church bare-arsed /
we turn our faces up and howl /
and the sun starts pouring through the glass

steel shutters / bursts
from red brick a blooming
purple horn

*

paint curls away
in the heat / ferns climb
rusting drain-pipe

*

thunder shower over-
flows the roof / moss unmortaring
our high red wall

*

iron wreath, gold paint /
abandoned web catches time
from the dandelion clock

*

in high windows,
the city's ghosting crest / above,
buddleia browns

*

damp's drooling
dirt down the tiling
mould has thrived

*

a pool's dry lengths /
in the deep end, unseasonal
algal bloom

*

boots on old
white tiles / something soft gives way,
some wee herb

*

branches heaving
at boarded windows / four nails
holding out the green

How to chop an onion *for Govanhill Grub*

Open one end and peel
the toughest layers,
two or three only.

Top it
then hold
the good big heart.
Half it with a neat cut.

Set the parts flat
and begin with
careful slices
—no need for showy
speedy hands.

Be cautious, keeping
the root between
thumb and finger.

Hold it together
and cut the other way.

Yes, you'll weep—
it's just because the onion
is that good.
Wash your hands in cold water.

Soon you'll have
a hundred good
pieces of onion.

The last part is
drop them in a pot
that's to be shared.

In your hands there are no dead things
for Rags to Riches

I heard you teach the healings arts
to the hungry, so there's no old rag
goes without a chance at being
wrapped around a heart again.
What's rubbish, then? I've painted a sign
to stick to bins across the town
that reads: *Miners' Club*. I heard
of a famous sculptor who can see
the angel in a block of stone
and then of ragged folk who build
cities of ragged schools among
the chippings on his workshop floor.
I heard of a public palace (white tiles,
red stone, air thick with steaming words)
condemned as rot an rubble by lonely
scraps of men, and then of folk
who like to gather ends and clean
and mend til all the scraps are gleaming,
the doors are open, and in the old
is new is old is old is new.

The hardest man in Govanhill

The hardest man in Govanhill has those long white scars on both sides of his mouth from smiling that damn wide.

He lost two teeth from brushing too keenly
and his lips are chapped from kissing babies.

His voice moves bus routes

The hardest man in Govanhill has arms like rebar from carting about old folks' shopping.

He spits that hard it fills potholes.

He pisses that hard it cleans stairwells

blast-cleans

and it smells of roses too.

He farts that hard it blows the clouds from the sky an the sun shines hard on Victoria Street.

The hardest man in Govanhill had to stop playing football because whenever he kicked the ball it burst

but he'll stand in for a missing goal post

without you even asking.

The hardest man in Govanhill can make Cooncillors tell the truth

just by turning his eyes in their direction

from up to eleven miles away.

The hardest man in Govanhill is that hard that sometimes when he reads the news sitting in his arm-chair in the middle of the junction

he just

cries

pal, just

cries

and the pools of his tears stop traffic

and kids swim in them

and he cries harder just to please them

or maybe at the sheer existence of their laughter in this world

oh

yes

this world.

His chin is that hard he shaves with a rasp and has a contract with Brillo for the clippings.

His feet are that hard Sustrans hire him to flatten out bike paths wherever thay fancy.

His nose is that hard it can chisel in the names of the dead on a hundred-year-old headstone.

His hair is that hard he gives it to canal-boats for hawsers.

He's that bloody hard he has a heart tattooed with Dulux on his bicep and all it says is

I LOVE YOU.

When the hardest man in Govanhill steps up to you and looks ye hard in the eye and says in diamond sounds—*I'm the hardest man in Govanhill*—he means

Aye.

You too.

Lifeguard

Maybe you've heard of the water kelpie
—the spirit horse who lives under lochans,
formed from froth with wet-pebble eyes,
who gallops out to bless you, or eat you.

Aye, well we'd a pool-kelpie. Her breath
was bitter chlorine, and her cry echoed round
our steel rafters. She saved first-timers
and gave justice with a wave kick.

For now though she is barely vapour:
just at your ear's farthest stretch
the splash of her hooves on our roof at night,
the roar of her boiler lungs. She waits

for the first trickle of water, the first
back in the big pool, whose braggart dive
will call her back to waterform, and she wonders
what way she'll work her joyous magic.

Scenes from a protest

old woman brought a plastic bag
looked packed with sandwiches
I thought you'd need these
she must have given hours to them
water bombs

*

we had walkie-talkies
the folk inside would say
eh eh eh
coud you get us
a packet of twenty fags?

*

we got the call
that they were coming
ran down
linked arms
puring with rain

*

my young boy was
on the front page
of the mornin edition
by the evening edition
he was replaced by horses

*

what they called a riot
let's call it a rammie yes
let's call it that / it was
some fun but
hard times though

*

bloody pineapple! where
would we get a pineapple?
no there were maybe
five hundred eggs but I never
saw a pineapple

*

young boy sported a helmet
marched the station
and loved it / Ah don't
think the police
were that impressed

*

it was all very
at the end I mean
it was all very
tragic though
here we are now

To a councillor

Wee stupid, useless, irksome bastard,
what strange world makes you our master?
What magic has you rising as fast as
projectile vomit?
It's time to give your nasty fester
an honest soak.

It's folk like you will always take power,
however small, to reassure
your shrunken soul you aren't poor
like all around you;
and when your perch is quite secure
their wrath astounds you.

So you bow your head to gods like profit
better to reach the trough and scoff it,
better to mouth the needy: *Tough! It's
a striver's Scotland.*
I'm here to teach you now, come off it,
your patter's rotten.

You and all the folk who're like you,
the playground bully with corrupt psyche,
the police running an estate reich with
Protect and Serve,
the middle manager who sneers his spiky
More'n my job's worth.

I'd think that rogues would have ambition,
would aim for a CEO's position,
would be PM-type politicians,
the more to plunder;
but you're content with puny visions
and mean wonder.

I know that we should save our loathing
for hangmen that are worth our breath;
but despite your little crimes
you're very gruesome:
you'll cut the libraries, cut the baths,
cut all that's lovely,

cut all that folk have come to treasure.
Your life's so hollow your only pleasure
is smugly using rules and measures
to cut what life
you can't understand, what leisure
we need to live.

(I'll take a moment before concluding
To say my attack's not including
the folk in Councils not colluding
 in your fustian rule,
who take their power and spread it, proving
 they'd join the pool.)

So know you now, our rage's expanding;
we'll seize what's ours and, notwithstanding
the few who're loyal, we'll laugh, disbanding
 your crew and all,
and though not first, you will be standing
 against the wall.

If harsh words seem awful stern
a fate that's out of whack, a theory
unruly—your wrongs were tiny—
 I'll wish instead
you see yourself as others see you:
 already dead.

You've one chance still to rest your ghost—
you're lucky fer that's more than most
will get from you—so make your move,
 I'm still pretty furious.
Now, Councillor, resign your post
 and get to swimming.

Treasure
for Camcorder Guerillas

See: Roses. Red noses. Flower bouquets, spokeshaves, microcassettes,
oilskin hats, drill bits. Sycamore leaves, bark from trees, golfing tees, cups of tea.
Chains, padlocks and keys. Scissors and circuits. Goggles and glesses.
Windmills and waterproofs. Buttons and books. Tapes and trowels.
Coal. Guns. Masks. More.

We'll paint them gold.
We'll paint them all gold.

Gold for glory, gold for loss;
gold for our stories and all they've cost;
people's gold, false gold, folk gold, fool's gold;
gold for the fire of our fury wants fuel gold;
gold for what we've fought for
and what we've grown and defended;
gold for what we've gone through
and gold for those we've known

We'll paint it all gold.
Paint it all fucking gold.

Yes but we'll leave
some red for our blood
and black for our rage
and green for our green shoot hearts;
and through the gold's cracks,
quakes of colour underneath—
our many gems and metals,
sharp, strong and sure.

At least for tonight.
At least while the gold paint is flowing

and for a short while
all the world's wealth is ours.

From top to bottom, left to right:

- WHAT! A! DIVE! . . . haaa
- up and down up and down that's me always up and down up and down always
- safe corner
- nyoo! nyoo! oh shit get out the get out the
- pant pant pant
- she didn't? / she didn't? / what? / no / yes / no / well / she did? well / I don't know
- when you're done / with exercising / you get just / rest and float
- holding on holding on letting go . . . it's amazing
- INSTANT PAIN relief / stretch oooooout / and nobody bats an eye

Govanhill Baths Community Trust

A local campaign has been fighting to reopen the Govanhill Baths since their closure in 2001. The Govanhill Baths Community Trust was formed in 2005 and after years of struggle, in 2012 the building was made accessible to the Trust via a long-term lease from Glasgow City Council. Work is now well under-way to rescue the building and reopen it as community-run baths within a Wellbeing Centre. Volunteers do a tremendous amount of work and the wider community use the building for a range of activities.

The Trust is keen to work with artists and formed the Govanhill Baths Art and Regeneration Team (GBART) in 2007. The art team was responsible originally for setting up the hugely successful Streetland Festival and it organises regular art events in and around the Baths with exhibitions monthly.

The National Theatre of Scotland, The Royal College of Surgeons, The Citizen's Theatre Glasgow have used the premises for major events and in April Glasgow City Council will use the baths as a venue for its International Arts Festival). The Strathclyde Theatre Group (STG) has recently moved into the baths building using it as base for its highly successful productions with plans to link its work to community theatre development on the south side of Glasgow.

The trust wants to thank funding organisations Foundation Scotland (Scottish Community Foundation), Arts Development Scheme (Glasgow Life) and South Area Service Vibrancy Fund (Glasgow Life) for their support.

2014 marks the centenary of the laying of the foundation stone of the Baths in 1914. The Trust is envisioning a programme of celebratory and reflective events on the Baths' history and its campaign to reopen them.