

Tonguit

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English Glosses for the Scots poems

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Brave

Because incomer will always be a dirty word,
because this tongue I jibber with will never be the real thing,
because for all that we're all Jock Tamson's etcetera, are we though? Eh? Are we.
Because of mountains, castles, tenements and backlands,
because of whisky exports, because of airports,
because of islans, A sing.
Because of pubs that aren't doing so well out of the smoking ban, I sing.
Because it's great to sit with a lexicon and a weary mind, I sing.
Because of the piss in the stair, I sing.
Bcause of you,

I sing of a Scotland that wouldn't know working class authenticity if it came reeling off an
oil rig, downed six pints of Tennets and glassed it in the cunt,
which it wouldn't,
by the way.

I sing of google Scotland,
of laptop Scotland,
of a Scotland so dulled by bit-torrented HBO drama series and DLC
packs for postapocalyptic RPGs that it wouldn't know its "gowk" from its "gadje",
to whose lips and fingers "amazeballz" comes more freely than
"bangin".

I sing of a Scotland that thinks the preservation of a genuine Scots literature is of particular
value and importance but couldn't write it with a reproduction claymore sharp at its throat,
that thinks Walter Scott scribbled in an easier time
that thinks Irvine Welsh scribbled in an easier tide.

I sing of a Scotland that wants independence from Tories
and patronising glances
and chips on shoulders
but struggles to assert any kind of cultural autonomy that isn't
grounded in honeytraps.

I sing of a Scotland that thinks there's probably some sort of God, right?
that would like to go for sushi one night but couldn't handle chopsticks,
that signs up for internet dating profiles and never replies to the messages,
thar dreams of living in London.

I sign of a Scotland that gives tourists wearing See You Jimmy hats a serious deathstare,
and made a point of learning all the verses to Auld Lang Syne,
and owns a whole signed collection of Belle and Sebastian EPs.

I sing of a Scotland living in real dread of one day finding out just how parochial all its
cultural references may be,
and can only cope with the intertextuality of the Scots Renaissance with huge
annotated editions,
and guesses it's the same with everybody else.

I sing of a Scotland that hasn't been to Skye,
 or Scrabster,
 or Scone,
 but can give you an absolute diamond of a rant on the plurality
of Scots identity from Alexandair mac Alexandair to Wee Eck.

I sing of a Scotland that couldn't think of a better way to end the night than with a portion
of chips and curry sauce,
 that checks the date of Bannockburn on Wikipedia,
 that's not so sure about proportional representation,
 that draws charts on the backs of beer mats to learn you about rifts and
glaciation
 and when it does it feels this strange shiver,
 this undeserved warmth
 of inexplicable love,
that is lifted up,
 in the blanks before anxiety is lifted up
 by the lithe curve of a firth.
That wants you to catch the drift.
That's starting to lose the point.

I sing of a Scotland that'll sing its heart out downstairs of the Royal Oak, that'll pluck its
nervous clarsach heartstrings, that like magic will sing its heart into existence, that wraps
song around its bloody fist heart,

 that sings.

Visa Wedding

Listen, it's simple:

in Orkney I'm English;
in England, Scottish;
in Scotland, Orcadian –

this slippery, many-coloured tongue
snaps at identity as though
it were an insect morsel lathered
with the sweet and sour of BELONG.

Like all the other songsters I

ballad the isles from the city,
buzz the city from the isles,
burn frantic through hydrocarbons

for transatlantic escapes where home
is wrapped in bacon, fried on grits,
bundled in so much memory and made up
ancestry it's finally huggable.

Hey, hold me close, America,

make me your kilted mascot,
make me your island exotic,
make me your immigrant son,

melt me in southern sun with mountain
pine sap and serve me on ice cream,
unnest me, unnest me, show me vistas,
spread me thin across plain and valley.

Look, I grew up dancing

the Gay Gordons to Blanket on the Ground,
Stripped the Willow to On the Bayou,
shuffled and spat every word of Hit the Road

Jack and never come back no more, give me
land lots of land, take me home
to the place I belong, send me off forever
but I ask you please, no more no more no more.

Reception

I smile british against your
american orthodoxy, family:
you're very warm and those greens
smell really perfect to a tannin tongue,
but I reckon I cry ironically, grin
crooked, more weblike than gridplan.

Jings, and this voice is floating all
midatlantic, like, or hopscotching
astride Hadrian's wall, hid half
in something new, half in camouflage.
But is it tho? You want to know
my origin story. It's not spelled

in ionic columns and firs as was
your dear dear revolution, kin,
and it mightn't be told at all.
But I've hugged your grans
and trees now, and see my scraps
of forest with a foreign eye.

Honeymoon

Sometimes, the tide and the light begin
to say their hesitant goodbyes together --
the soft sand-lapping-stroking, the sunslant
fixing an hour in amber, the tide going
a little further back every time – altogether.

Two welcome guests sorry to go, remembering
to ask after your kids, and then, a few
steps closer to the door, turning back to say
how lovely and *we must* and *more often*,
and so on, till watched down the driveway.

At these too infrequent times, the stones,
wetted and fired, worship. They are colour.
Sapphire, ruby, diamond, diamond, -- you would not
have believed there were so many gems in the world,
so many prisms on one familiar shore.

Maeshowe: Chambered Cairn, Winter Solstice

Still in the tomb
of five thousand years,
we wake the burning
edge of winter
while it blesses
the runed flagstones.

We're faithless: jabbering,
loosing shadows,
reaching for some kind of
meaning in the movement
of stars and stones.

Hold hands and breath.
All unconcerned
the thief called sun
steals into the fog.

The ghost called moon
takes back the sky.
We sigh with the spinning.

Bones were never
stored here.

No faith but in time.

Govanhill Baths, July 2013

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

*

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

*

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

Night Shift at the Slipper Baths

She scrapes off her uniform, strips herself,
hangs the night on a wee metal hook,
ducks her foot in the water and screams
at the shock of heat – screams and shrieks,

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 her wall so you flip the small

scrap of soap. Its arc drips comfort.
Cath yelps as it smacks her right in the mouth.

That woman with the purse seriously scowls,
and hushes them like we're in church bare-arsed.
They turn their faces up and howl,
and the sun starts trickling through the glass

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.

How to Chop an Onion

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

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 chipped 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.

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 then most
will get from you – so make your move,
 I'm still pretty furious.
Now, Councillor, resign your post
 and get to swimming.

Hogmanay

Let us be arsonists. Let us burn the year.
Let's baptise each month in petrol and take a match
to day one. It was too good. Let's make like artists
and burn the libraries because we shouldn't, and burn
Parliament because we should. Let's build a pyre
of everything that is lovely and everything that isn't
and burn it. Oh it will be glorious. The kittens will burn.
The christmas trees will burn. The traffic will burn.
The honeybees will burn. The oceans will burn. Oh the fires
will bloom like bruises on the Earth, which will burn,
and the sun will burn, and the planets of gas will burn,
and the planets of ice will burn, and when the universe
has caught and needs no more tenderness from us,
we will burn ourselves, and the idea of fire.

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
could 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

aald rede for biggin a kintra
old advice for building a country
version efter lao-tzu

Because these are themselves translations from the classical Chinese, rather than provide an English gloss, I am providing a glossary.

20

Dule: grief. Dytit: stupid. Gangin: grinning/gaping. Belly-rive: feast. Tawie: passive. Wean: infant. At: that. Forfaren: folorn. Aabdy: everybody. Fouthie: having abundance. Guip: fool. Steero: confusion. Gleg: sharp. Laar-snuvit: turning in the breeze. Ettlin: trying/planning. Thrawn: uncontrollable. Unco: strange. Creel: womb.

29

Ettlin: trying. Ower: subdue/control. Cog: vessel. Tints: loses. Greet: weep. Lilt: sing cheerfully. Rapple: grow fast. Cryne: shrink with age. Thirl: oppress. Syne: thus. Aald i the horn: wise. Wanthrif: extravagance.

36

Hint: gather. Skael: scatter. Sap: soften/soak. Big: build. Faa til: begin. Leam: illumination. Swack: pliable. Stark: robust. Stieve: stiff. Jouk: escape. Weel: deep pool/eddy. Gleggest: sharpest. Kythed: revealed.

53

A bit: a little. Wittins: knowledge. Dree: trouble. Snod: smooth. Ramse: rough. Loanins: fields. Grown-up: overgrown. Kists: stores. Heidyins: bosses. Claes: clothes. Braw: splendid. Barrie: fine. Stecht: stuffed. Gey: very. Rowthie: abundant. Darg: day's work. Reivers: thieves/plunderers.

57

Sneller: sharper. Strowe: resistance. Sleer: cannier. Sleyts: strategies. Waar: worse. Ring: reign. Syne: thus. Tuim: empty. Fouth: abundant. Haemelt: simply/homely.

61

Muckle: big. Lowden: lowers/makes weak. Peedie: Small. Bides: stays. Haen: protect. Ser: serve. Maun: must.

80

Peedie: small. Curn o: few. Gibbles: devices. Mynd on: remember. Fare: travel. Whirl: wheel. Yole: boat. Hurl: take for a spin. Graith: armour/gear. Wag: wield. Raes: knots. Claes: clothes. Lown: peaceful. Lillie: lovely. Bide: stay. Gang: go.

Dusk

version after Abdel Rahim al-Sheikh

there is a bird, alone... alone and measuring the may sun with the beating of his wings,
more eager than the east, he grooms, speeds past, clips the mountain crest, a feather harp,
known to lovers by his eyelashes, his fierce dance, his acrobat desire, on raffia rope, his two
black feet,
and all is fleeting but him, the camera shutter, the full rainbow... a world without end or
sorrow,
and he is not the night warden, does not tell each morning of the night returning at sunset,
as the night will always return, and the feather harp... a lover out of a luck and a luck out
of love,
a meeting point, a river, a fire, a brink of all things, again and again and again,
his feints and flits were far from tender... he settles on her breast, as round as the world,
holding in his butterflies, a blanket for the grieving, his partner in sleep,
and his dreams are aches which march onward, and there are no maps for the crossing,
and she warns him:
that child, your sea, is taking off his shoes, is leaning on the mountains of the moon,
a stait where paths break, a quenching blue, a clouded pearl...

oh his fire! oh his flute!
oh the changing world...
and who makes the final turn!