

Shiver and Hazard

Glyn Maxwell, *The Nerve*. Picador, £7.99

Unlike most of his peers and contemporaries, Glyn Maxwell's chief concern is *not* idiom. The engine that drives his poems on is rhythm, in particular an iambic line of flexible length, often jaggedly and dramatically cut across with cæsuras. He is a virtuoso of this stop-start line, and it sometimes seems that you'll be able to hum along to the poems quicker than you get them. His style leads him into subjects and stories the likes of which you will not find anywhere else in the journals. The preoccupation with repetition, rhythm and form, and his lack of interest in a "natural" voice as the be-all and end-all of a poet's gift, marked him out as an original from the outset.

What is most attractive about the early poems is the tension between speech and writing, the unlikelihood of anyone actually using this slangy yet formal language. The downside was that when the poems lacked that riddling weirdness or fierce nostalgia, the rhythms and jigsaw-piece stanza shapes did not convince on their own, and Maxwell's earlier work could lead into a whimsical cul-de-sac. By the time of *Rest for the Wicked* (1995), typical poems (with typical Maxwell titles like "A Swing from Gotham Central", "Self-portrait with Softball", "The People's Cinema", "Love Made Yeah", "The Sarajevo Zoo") were interleaved with quieter shorter poems (with straighter titles like "Museum", or "Either"). Maxwell has written often of Auden and Frost and it is easy to see their influence on the two species of poem in *Rest for the Wicked*. But Frost and early Auden are not entirely dissimilar, and Maxwell shares their enigmatic obscurity and their desire to surprise or wrong-foot their readers. He seemed unable or unwilling to integrate their two different approaches with his own style, and in *The Breakage* (1998), he aligned himself instead with the more autobiographical voice of Edward Thomas. However, it all

seemed to come together in his long “tale in verse”, *Time’s Fool*, where he managed to yoke his own style to a first-person narrator to good effect, and it is interesting to see how this works in the short poems of his latest collection, *The Nerve*. Indeed, this is the best place to start reading, or re-reading his work.

In *The Nerve*, Maxwell returns to the themes or starting points of *Time’s Fool*, in particular the poet’s distance from his past. There is an additional *national* force now to the poems—the blurb refers to the “Special Relationship” between the UK and the USA. This works particularly well in the title poem and “Haunted Hayride”, which begins, characteristically, in the observed world—“Round here if you stop long enough then *boom*—/ tall women come in cardigans and jeans// and everything’s a stall”—before the ghosts move in: “the field,/ stretching away from Saturday like a hand,/ out into Massachusetts, towards England, into the past and from it”. “The Stop at Amherst” treats the reader to a detailed account of the short circuit that is Amherst’s shabby railway stop: in a weird reversal the much-travelled but stationary Maxwell responds to Larkin’s insular-seeming Whitsun train-ride and rebukes his contention that “Sun destroys/ the interest of what’s happening in the shade”. The Anglo-American stance is not always successful: there is some unconvincing play with American usage and custom in “The Game Alone”, which professes a bogus bafflement about American football and its fans, and almost spoils its questioning of the violence that sport *contains*.

Maxwell deals with another kind of American immigrant in the excellent “Refugees in Massachusetts”, which begins “Everyone had to leave in a bloody hurry”, before these immigrants’ dream of a new start is twisted inside out. *Time’s Fool* has also seemed to hone Maxwell’s narrative skills. Many poems in *The Nerve* pack the kick and surprise of good short stories, such as “A Hunting Man” and “The Man Who Held His Funeral”. It is not always successful, and on occasion, Maxwell gets bogged down by the facts of the case: in “Likes and Dislikes”, for instance, he takes and leaves the FBI’s baiting of pædophiles as his subject.

But it is the matter of style that *The Nerve* shares more with *Time’s Fool* than with his other collections: Maxwell focuses more on the poems’ total effect than the special effects, and the result is impressive. *The Nerve* is much shorter than any of his previous collections; even individual poems are briefer and leaner than their predecessors. This is clear in the corrected version of the poem

“Blindfold”, which seems, among other things, to be concerned with perception and belief: the first stanza sets the scene:

Far down below, what is in all but truth
the sea lights on Chicago in the dawn.
Waves whiten. Utter distance holds the breath
as if by any ocean. Boats down there
look tiny, lone
and fierce as the first stars.

On its original magazine publication, it was followed by this stanza:

Yet it's a lake, a pool, a pond, it lacks
the open end of *sea* or the way *ocean*
swallows *sea* and pityingly makes
an almost noiseless *n* attempt the sound
of our perception
ending. Turn your back.

The stanza chases an idea, and the closing imperative and unlikely enjambments which force the rhymes into place remind you that you are in a Maxwell poem. In the book version, Maxwell omits the stanza entirely, so that now the second stanza stays at the scene, and questions our perception of that scene in a more concrete manner: it begins, “Blindfold a boy, a woman, set them there”. By cutting the quirkier and trickier magazine stanza Maxwell cuts out the distraction, which is tonal as well as narrative. The cut clarifies and strengthens the poem, which ends by imagining an ominous figure who does not see himself as blindfolded, “one whom the light unwittingly makes sacred,/ who knows no bounds and nothing else, who drops/ from the white sky/ rope-ladders that start shaking”.

Maxwell has written ably before of world politics and war, in poems like “Ost” and “The Sarajevo Zoo” that hinge on their surprising turns and oblique angles. The poems in *The Nerve* again manage this most difficult feat, dealing with the states of nations and the sort of global news that normally defies poets as a subject. “Blindfold” calls religious fundamentalism and air war to mind, and so does “The Year in Pictures”, “that annual old favourite”, where a night editor flicks through photos “propelling off so many/ the air was never empty// of the white-backed and num-

bered/ snapshots, as they fluttered/ earthward in succession". "Gatekeepers on Dana" seemingly wanders bang into the middle of the same subject ("Not about it", objects Maxwell in the *PBS Bulletin*) with its depiction of a pair of pine trees as gatekeepers, which leads the reader to "wonder/ what cranks the shadows round/ together like beasts at a long feeding", and then, returning surprisingly to the poem's original image, considers the trees' wondering about the poet's conceit, "What gate/ has he in mind?" These provocative and memorable poems are reminiscent of another very different English poet who also crossed the Atlantic:

Eagle of the Rockies, bird of men that are masters,
 Lifting the rabbit-blood of the myriads up into something
splendid,
 Leaving a few bones;
 Opening great wings in the face of the sheep-faced ewe
 Who is losing her lamb,
 Drinking a little blood, and loosing another royalty unto the
world.

But, like many of Maxwell's best poems, D.H. Lawrence's "The American Eagle" rises from unlikely and unpromising material, mixing fabulous detail with reproach and confrontation.

For the most part, as you'd expect, reading Lawrence alongside Maxwell only emphasises their differences. Firstly, you notice the scarcity of polysyllabic words in Maxwell's poems, perhaps a result of his wild attention to rhythm. Also, it is a relief to observe that birds and flowers are nowhere to be found in Maxwell, although there is a terrific poem about not knowing the name for "the bird with three semitones, the bird/ that seems to be half air, the butterfly/ that seems to be half everything but word" ("One of the Splendours"). Nature's otherness is also well-caught in "The Paving Stones" and in "The Leonids" when the title, which names a November shower of shooting stars, can't seem to match the reality of the stars' appearance:

Leonids. *Our word, our speed, our date,*
 bawls the affronted mind,
 shaking the fixed
 stars this way and that.

In other poems, he uses “nature” to good but more predictable effect: usually elegiac, they test art against the brute fact of “the long haul” of time: unsurprisingly the sea of the opening poem and the snow of the final poem frame all the words and (ending this review) point out the “sure oblivion” that awaits them, us, and the “stranger walking/ at a loss through the snow village”.