

*An Interview*

Glyn Maxwell was born in 1962 in Welwyn Garden City, England. He read English at Oxford and studied poetry with Derek Walcott at Boston University. He is the author of *Tale of the Mayor's Son* (1990), *Out of the Rain* (1992), *Rest for the Wicked* (1995), *The Breakage* (1998), *Time's Fool: A Tale in Verse* (2001), as well as a number of verse plays. His most recent collection, *The Nerve*, was published by Picador in 2002. He received the Somerset Maugham Award for *Out of the Rain* and the E.M. Forster Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He spoke with Evan Rail via telephone—once from New York, where he teaches creative writing at The New School and Columbia University, and once again from England during a visit home for the Christmas holidays.

*Are you an exile?*

(Laughs) Well, yes. It's difficult to share that word with some of the people who have to be exiles, but yes. It's a voluntary exile: I'm here in New York City because I want to be. I was at Boston in 1987-88. I arrived back in Massachusetts in '96 and was a Visiting Writer at Amherst College for a few years.

*Does it feel like home yet?*

Home is a difficult business for me, because there's original home—that's where the real tonic note of the octave is, the really deep note in that word. But New York feels strangely like home after three months.

*How has it changed your writing to live there?*

I don't think the place I am has ever had an affect on the way I write—it's only ever affected what I write about. And I think I wrote voluminously about my original home in *Time's Fool*, and I did most of that in America, and planned most of that in America.

I found a clarity about my origins, about what life felt like where I come from, and perhaps attained that clarity through distance.

The last book, *The Nerve*, has mostly American material. And there are changes that are happening to the work, but I don't think that they're to do with where I am. I think they're to do with simply advancing through the years. If they're to do with anything, I think they're to do with teaching, somehow being in contact with people, day after day, and looking at their work. Really holding stuff up against the flames.

I used to be superstitious about this and think that it would be bad to consider my own work in any way like that, to consider the aesthetics of it or consider the practice of it, but it hasn't really been a problem at all. I think I just allow less into the ring these days, because I'm quite vigilant about my students' work, so I've become quite vigilant about my own, almost to the point of preventing any of it from happening (*laughs*).

*Recently in Poetry Neal Bowers wrote about the danger of American poets all working in the same field, saying that there would be quite a fuss if they were all employed in the petroleum industry, for example.*

There is a problem. You can't compare the universities to Shell, but there is a problem. The problem is simply mathematical: how many decent poets can there be? And you take that number and you compare it to the number of people who are put in a position to look at the thousands, tens of thousands, of young people who want to be poets. How much of that is going to be decent advice? In any MFA program, it seems to me, even the good ones, any MFA student is going to have four or five different aesthetics to deal with. And they may all be quite good, and they may be contradictory, and that is good for the students, because the students then have to figure it out for themselves, what they really think. But I think in some places if none of those practitioners really know what they're doing, then what exactly are they passing on?

*Can you talk a bit more about your sense of "home" and the origins of Time's Fool?*

Well, I wrote it two years after moving to America, to Massachusetts. I think there were two things dawning on me. One is that I was about to be thirty-seven, which I thought was the cut-off point for youth, and I wanted to have it finished by my birthday. More seriously, it was dawning on me that I wasn't ever

going to live in my old home again. I couldn't. Not because I haven't always been happy there, which I was, but it was thoroughly in the past, and perhaps Britain was the past, too, for me. You can stare at something for ages till you see it.

Also, because I was mostly out in America, I'd been going back less and less frequently, so I did start to have this rhythm to my life where I'd be away for months and then be back for shorter and shorter periods of time, as the demands of family, of America, started to increase, and also the number of my friends that were still there sort of decreased. Those things made home get smaller and smaller, till it was just the bar I used to go to and it was just my parents' house. Now it's just my parents' house, or it's just the kitchen. It's less and less the whole time.

I was struck by that. I felt I was at the point where I should face my own experience of passing time. Because it's the only thing I've ever had to write about, not having been born into discomfort or trauma: I've really only ever had that to write about, and it is essentially all I write about. Poetry is quite good for writing about it. Of course, *Time's Fool* is a metaphor for a writing life as well.

*How so?*

Well, I suppose because the bits in between those isolated moments of life are all imagination. But it also has this kind of loneliness of existing only in the things you wrote. I didn't really plan it on a conscious level, but the things that he's stuck with when he's on the train in the seven-year periods are very limited to three voices that don't understand him and changing landscape that he's never seen before. So in a way it's all a kind of crude metaphor for what life's like, or what my life's like. I think I found in our mythology the story that allowed me to expose my heart, to expose the feeling.

*How did it feel to know that you were writing a novel in verse?*

I never thought of it as a novel.

*Well, it's a really long poem.*

Yeah, but it's not as long as some others. Not many others (*laughs*). But I didn't want to think of it as a novel, because there's something about that word I really dislike. People say they're writing a novel, and a novel means something new. To say you're writing something new seems presumptuous.

*So what did you think of it as?*

As a story, a story in verse lines. I just felt that this would be form in which I would be able to be most fluent. Now I think I would have done some things slightly differently, but on the whole I'm happy with it. It grew. It was something that I woke up in the middle of the night with and felt I had to attend to till it was done.

*How is it different than your new book, The Nerve?*

Well, I think maybe because it's entirely driven by story, that every line is three seconds of time, whereas *The Nerve* is mosaic—fragments of experience. *The Nerve* is less autobiographical. Of course it's all autobiographical in the tone and the way you pitch it, but *The Nerve* was quite outward looking, in terms of finding matter that I wanted to write about. It's quite difficult to generalise about it, but with *Time's Fool* I can say that every line is part of the same organism. Most people, except possibly my mother, would be horrified to hear it, but I could still be writing it now. It could now be a hundred thousand lines long. It was very difficult for me to very stop doing that (*laughs*). Actually, no, don't include my mother, because I'm not sure she finished it.

*How else do you feel your writing has changed over the years?*

Better (*laughs*). And that's how it should be: it should be better. But I have young stuff, and it's to the credit of Bloodaxe Books and Neil Astley that they published a lot of the young stuff of contemporary poets, and they certainly published my young stuff. A poet should have that stuff. It should speak with a voice that is overexcited about a kind of rhythmic, lyrical push, that is overexcited about free-associating nouns: that should all be there, and it grows out of that. Those are, it seems to me, youthful manifestations of the verse art.

*As a reader of contemporary poetry, do you split your attention between poets from the US and the UK and Ireland, or are you simply more focused on your contemporaries from the UK?*

Well, we probably have to establish some basics. One is that I don't read much contemporary poetry, largely because I don't like much. Or perhaps it's the other way around (*laughs*). And because I have to read it professionally, because I get a lot at *The New Republic*, this has a different effect on me. The nationality

thing I don't really care about. I'm aware, roughly, of what's going on in Britain, and slightly less aware of what's going on in Ireland, but nonetheless relatively aware, and I'm increasingly aware of what's going on in America. But I'm really taking the whole thing poem by poem.

It's nice to be able to do that, to have a professional position where I am able to just look at the poem from anyone and say: does that work? I don't care what kind of form it's in, I don't care where or who it comes from, so actually my mind is a blur about the different regions of English: I don't really care where this stuff comes from. I don't care what the differences are. It still seems peculiar to me that more isn't shared between these three, not to mention Canada and Australia or whatever. It still seems peculiar that it is not easier for poems written in English to cross those barriers.

*I'm surprised that you say you don't read much contemporary poetry. What do you read, then?*

I read magazines (*laughs*).

*What ones?*

I read *Harper's* and the *Atlantic Monthly* and obviously *The New Republic*. I read good magazines. And I do read contemporary poetry, but I'm a bit tentative about saying who I read. Maybe because I have this job, and I wouldn't like to think that people would feel their work wouldn't have a chance at *The New Republic*. Because I'd actually like to see more submissions, if we can possibly advertise in that way. I don't get enough good stuff, and I'd like to see more, so I don't want to alienate large groups of people.

*If you don't want to alienate poets, what about readers? Can you describe your ideal reader?*

Well, it's not someone with a position in an American university (*laughs*). You know, everyone has an ideal reader that is comically far from the truth, from reality. It's not that there's an ideal reader, but there's a spectrum. I'd like to think that I can reach other walks of life than people who want to be writers and people who teach. I'd like to think that I can reach other age groups than twenty to thirty-five. It's that kind of thing, really: that it crosses borders. I'd like kids to get something out of it. I'd like people to take it seriously or take what they want from it. I want

everything. I want everyone to read it (*laughs*). Somebody who might read it because it has something of the world in it, and it's not about the art of poetry. I'm a bit tired of poetry about the art of poetry.

*Then what are you looking for instead?*

I'm looking for a human voice, listening out for one. Not any style, any strategy, any damn school. I'm looking for an authentic cry, something that includes time hurtling by beneath it, includes breath, includes humility, mistakes even, inarticulacy. No poem works for me if you can't hold the thing up to the light and discern the shape of a human being behind it: some sort of heart-beat, some sort of pulse.

I just turned forty and it's made me kind of stagger up to the plateau and sit there for a bit and think: what do I really feel about this? What have I got time to deal with? And I haven't got time to deal with that sort of playfulness anymore. Playfulness is fine, but I want to see a human shape behind the paper. I don't want it to be about language. I don't want it to be about poetry anymore.

I would like poetry to be voices—genuine, authentic voices of people talking about the world. That allows for a huge spectrum. But I'm sitting here looking at the stuff I'm getting for *The New Republic*, and I find it unbelievable how many people who are quite widely published, how far they are from getting it right, from any kind of accuracy, from any real kind of attention to the sound or the light. I just think that it's not an art that's being practised at a very high level, and I'm just becoming a crusty old disciplinarian about it (*laughs*).

*Do you feel The Nerve is less personal and more universal in theme than The Breakage was?*

I think it's less personal in that the occasion for much of what's in it is outward-looking, whatever the result is. Whether the journey appears to be inward in *The Nerve* or not, often the occasion for the poems are looking outwards. I don't know, actually. I'm just riffing through *The Breakage* in my mind and I don't know if that's not outward looking as well, just outward-looking at different things. It's certainly more historical.

*But in The Nerve there are these extremely tight short poems, like "Gatekeepers on Dana", which it seems almost any reader could discover and say: that's my poem.*

Right. I felt I had some success in that book with short, focused poems. I think that the distance between the books may just be something to do with the threshold, the feeling that I have to write something that has some grit in it. There has to be something said. There has to be some movement, something that is unexpected and arrives. And perhaps not everything in *The Breakage* had that. Maybe it was looking for it and didn't find it. But in *The Nerve*, I felt that a thing can be very short as long as it takes a step. If it takes a step then the length doesn't matter any more.

*How do you find the things that are unexpected and which arrive when you are writing?*

I think I probably have developed an instinct for what's in the subject that might lead me to it. And this sounds strange, but I haven't written any poems since the last poem I wrote for that book, "The Leonids", which was written in early 2002. So that's a long time, for me. I trust my instinct that a subject is going to yield something. I think perhaps in the past and when I was starting out, if nothing was yielded I would try to compensate for that with music, with the beat, with rhythm, and I know I don't want to do that anymore: I would just throw it in the bin if it's not going to happen.

I want there to be that unexpected—I always call it "the third thing", although the math doesn't always work out—that arrives. I'm sure not all poets are like this, but it's the thing that I didn't know was there. I never know it's there. It's the place that "Haunted Hayride" arrives at, the place that "Gatekeepers on Dana" arrives at. I didn't know that was there. And if it's taken me aback, then I trust in it. I think that my instinct was right for that subject matter, and it's taken me to this place. It's yielded something up.

*For a reader, it can be surprising time and time again.*

Good. I may never be able to do it again, but I certainly feel that I'm at a point where this has been happening to me, where I've been able to do it. But it may be over now. All poets think like that.

*How has it affected you to change publishers and editors several times?*

I don't think it's really affected anything. What it probably has affected is the way that my trajectory is perceived. Perhaps I look

difficult, awkward. Who cares? I talked about Bloodaxe before, and how Neil Astley was happy to publish anything I wanted published, it seemed to me at the beginning. I don't know if it was conscious on his part or not, but it seemed to me he was doing everything Faber wasn't doing. Faber seemed to me kind of constipated, and the other London publishers, too.

*But you were with Faber for one book.*

Yeah, I was, two in fact, *Moon Country* with Simon, and *The Breakage*. But I'm talking about the early days. Perhaps if Faber had taken some of my early poems, the shape would have been different. They would probably have tried to mince it down to a much shorter book, whereas Bloodaxe were happy for me to pour out three very long books. That probably gave a certain kind of flamboyant slant to what I was doing. And then I did leave, because in the end I had a sense that I wanted to live in America for a while, and I didn't think Bloodaxe would ever have any kind of distribution that would be of any use in that way. And then I went to Faber, and then they were a bit nervous about *Time's Fool*, and I just moved on to Picador. Picador looks terrific these days, and meanwhile Houghton Mifflin came in, and that's been a different experience again. That's been excellent. My editor Pat Strachan worked with Lowell. It was a privilege to work with her.

But I suppose what I'm saying in a long-winded way is that it doesn't really matter. No editor has really tried to affect me in a line-by-line way. Neil didn't really do that at all. Chris Reid and Don Paterson are very good on excess, when it's just too much, and on what poems to leave out. All you want from an editor is a mighty fine ear, so I've been thrice blessed.

*So how long was The Nerve in the making?*

Well, I suppose *The Breakage* was finished in '98. "Haunted Hayride" is perhaps the earliest thing in there, and it must have been written in a fall, so I imagine it was written in the fall of '98. So about three years.

*How do you self-edit?*

I don't know: I think it's kind of subconscious. I never really think about it when I'm doing it.

*Do you throw poems away?*

Yes. Well actually I put them into a sort of big, great B-team that

sits in a drawer and occasionally I send them out to magazines, and rightly, they usually get sent back. But if I haven't got something right within a few weeks, then I will let it go. I've got hundreds of things, thousands of things in boxes, but most of them are dead. You can't bring them back to life if they were written a long time ago. It's just a different person writing them. It's old silent film.

*Did The Nerve change much over its construction?*

Yes, for quite a long time I only had half of it, and then I had a long break when I was writing plays. And actually what happened—I don't really want to say this, but...

*You can say it off the record.*

No, no, I don't mind saying that I don't want to say it, but it's about September 11. It didn't exactly get me writing again, and I never wrote anything successfully about it, although I did sort of try in a kind of aghast sort of way, but I didn't print it. But there was a period after that happened where I found myself writing again. Because it was a very, very long autumn—I don't know if you remember, the weather was good for weeks and weeks, before it happened and after it—and I just remember writing quite a lot there. I felt that "A Hunting Man" was about it. I felt that the ending of the poem had arisen from the feelings of trying to look for something, somehow to have a card to play against the horror, for myself, not for the world. Just a little card to say—I can still do the thing I do best in the aftermath, and I can say "Love holds its own". And think it, and know it.

*Paul Muldoon picked The Nerve as one of his books of the year, calling it "spectacular from the get-go". What does the success of this book mean to you now?*

Well, you say "success", but it doesn't seem to be on anyone's short list (*laughs*).

*It was on Muldoon's short list.*

I mean something that a big trophy goes with (*laughs*). I'm talking quite facetiously because I don't really care, and it means an awful lot more that Paul should mention it.

*But there have been other critical appraisals.*

There have been some very nice things said about *The Nerve*, and

I know that it's my best book. I'm not green anymore. I know what's good from what isn't, I can hear it. But I know the business too, I know that little old world. Let's just say the poets I admire seem to admire *The Nerve*.

*In this book you seem to enter into politics, subtly, in "Chile".*

I suppose that stands out a bit. I'm trying to remember how that arose—that's one of the first things in it. Just exasperation, really. It was just a shame that so much of the political establishment in England embraced Pinochet. And I don't mean it was a pity, I mean it was a shame, it brought shame. In a way it doesn't really fit in the book.

*I think it does.*

(*Laughs*) Well, thank you. I always thought of it as a little bit different because I wouldn't normally go after a specific historical figure.

*Do you actually avoid them?*

Well, it's not often that it presents itself. You know, there's a line in *King Lear* where Kent says "anger hath a privilege", and sometimes I just think: okay, I'm angry. Through the '80s there were plenty of times I tried to do Thatcher, but I could never get it right.

*How come?*

(*Laughs*) I don't know: it's too easy? Too easy, and too much preaching to the choir. Auden saw her coming: "And the seas of pity lie/ Locked and frozen in each eye". Everyone felt the same, really, everyone you'd want to be in the same room as felt the same. It's the same with the American government now. It's really impossible to write about in verse, and you don't want to give them the honour, really. But nor do I want to help spread that smug grin of moral superiority poets tend to have about politicians.

*What do you try to teach your students?*

What I find myself coming back to the whole time is—I tend to use the word "integrity", although that has the wrong sort of connotations. It's not a moral integrity, it's an æsthetic integrity, stanza by stanza, so that in each line, just on a very crude level, you can't be a yard from something in one line and twenty yards from

it in the next line. And this is, I think, the area in which people are often sloppiest. If you can't make sense of the time and place, if you can't get the light right, what kind of time of day it is, where something is happening—of course, this doesn't apply across the board to every kind of poem, but a lot of poems that are coming to me from students and indeed, from people more advanced than that who are sending into the magazine, that seems to be the thing that's shakiest.

This is what I suppose mean when I talked about holding a paper up to the light and trying to discern a human shape, because if those elementary details are blurred, then the whole thing is blurred. You don't feel you're being addressed by any kind of coherent wisdom. That coherent wisdom can be quite inarticulate or cracked—it can be quite strange—as long as there's a coherence to that, to the consciousness that appears to be articulating something. That's the thing that students are least attentive to. It's just accuracy, remembering that a line is said by a voice, and that a voice is subject to certain pressures, pressures of where the air is coming from, pressures of how the blood is moving. How panicked is the situation? How stressed is the situation? And we ought to be hearing that, somehow, in the vowels.

*Could talk about some of your poems in this issue of Metre, such as "Photos from Before"?*

This was written after September 11, but I guess it's a general thing about any time that has passed. It has that pivot in the middle with the two I's.

Let me go off on a tangent that may or may not be illuminating. I was just reviewing Merwin's translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* for *The New Republic*. I always thought there was this sort of archaic peculiarity about it, which is that the poet keeps shifting into the present tense. I just sort of thought that that's just what they did then. And then I started looking at it and looking at when he did it, and I started to realise that it was a fascinating effect, and there were certain times he tended to do it, and it was very, very effective. People don't do it: people are told not to do it. For me, I always said you don't do that, it doesn't work. And quite often I tell students this change in tense doesn't work. But I have it here in this poem; I didn't realise I'd done it.

I suppose I'd been thinking, when can it? And certainly after looking at *Gawain* again I thought, yes, this can work, and we've

talked ourselves into an atmosphere where it doesn't work. And in relation to what I was saying about the third thing, I suppose I go into a poem thinking I need the right atmosphere and the right form. I suppose those are the two things that are working if it starts to have a motor and shape itself into stanzas, but it won't work unless a third thing appears, so it's not only form and atmosphere.

*"Wasps in Sweetness"?*

That is, by my standards, a hell of a revised poem: I've had about twenty versions of that. I was in Provence, and we'd made a wasp trap. It was called lots of different things.

*What about "Contours of Fall"?*

The first line is "A show expected of them", and it's almost like "A show expected of us". These things are so beautiful, those New England trees, that you feel something's expected of you. Also I'd come around the back of the cliché of writing about leaves in autumn. Now it's so much of a cliché to me that I feel it has to be done, almost, so I got started on that. This is quite a good example of how I work: in the second stanza, "like girls of old New England", I don't think I knew what I was going to do with that.

This is a classic example—you do the trees, then you get the atmosphere of the Emily Dickinson kind of New England, but a little bit more sociable. You have the girls, and the men that they have to look good for, and I suppose the third thing just comes in toward the end. Because the end of the poem is coming, the whiteness is coming, so for New England, that's the winter: the snow is coming, always. So whatever colours, whatever favours, whatever ribbons are worn, the end of it is greyness, the end of it is winter, the end of it is death. And death is the missing full rhyme, I suppose. But none of it's consciously planned like that, and I almost never have an intellectual idea of what a poem's about to do. I find it in the language, or the accidents of the form, or I find it in the metaphor.

*Are you writing now?*

Yes, I'm writing a libretto for a Russian composer, Elena Langer, for the Almeida Opera in London. We're working on a version of *The Snow Maiden*. I'm doing that, and I'm re-writing a play which may have—may have—some luck in London; there are some people who are interested in it. Oddly enough, it's in prose, because

all my other plays have been in verse, but this one came out in prose. Perhaps for that reason they're more excited about it, and they think it's got more potential. It's about a woman, a kind of messed up woman, who thinks she's being stalked. I'm doing that, and (*laughs*) I'm doing a stage adaptation of *The Name of the Rose*. (*Laughs*). I know. The people I'm working with have an option on it for this year.

*You're very busy.*

Yes, but I'm not teaching this spring, so that's an advantage. It'll be mostly plays. I haven't written any new poems for quite a while, and I'm starting to get into that slow panic about it, but I've had that before. We all have that. And actually, the older I get, the more I can deal with it, I suppose because I love working on plays as well. And I've been reviewing quite a lot lately. I've been enjoying that, and thinking of reviewing and the odd essay as being more exciting and worthwhile than I used to.

*What do you want from your writing?*

To get it right. And when you start out that's not necessarily on your mind. You're amazed to be through the door, name in print, voice on radio, face in paper, and you just try to repeat the notes that got you there. In the wider culture, that's the way to Madame Tussaud's, where you end up trying to look like your waxwork. Current English culture—the celebrity thing—stunts artists grotesquely, because it wants people you can describe in a single line below a photo. So it gets them. Go elsewhere or do otherwise. I can't go back to poems that are only form, or only atmosphere. I grew. I'm not satisfied with the song unless there's a germ in it, that thing that arrives unexpectedly. I need to be taken somewhere by the poem before anyone else can be, and I won't trust that will happen unless it happens to me. Well, it's been happening, and it means the world.