

After Auden

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Glyn Maxwell, *Hide Now*, Picador Poetry, £8.99 ISBN 9780330456241

Glyn Maxwell's work carries forward Auden's concept of poems as forms of parable, as spaces in which the reader can engage, almost at a hypothetical level, with all manner of social and intellectual enquiry. It is bracingly unafraid of 'big themes', and unembarrassed about deploying traditional poetic devices, including personification. This is the case in the poem from which the title of his new collection is derived, 'Forty Forty', in which a child's game of hide and seek suddenly becomes overwhelmed by menace, when a struggle for control emerges between the male child counting, and a freaky interloper:

[...] his confidence in a game he had
quite misunderstood
was awful to see and if History didn't correct him
others would,

so History ventured slowly towards him
and – I don't know how –
very gently took little hands in big hands and said
hide now.

The tensions engaged here run across the book, as the everyday, either suburban or mythical, lives of its protagonists are suddenly confronted by forces or narratives which threaten or overwhelm them. This is a poetry of opposition, but also, as here, of shocking reversal, in which humanity seems unable to control the activities or ambitions it sets in motion. Often this is figured as a being-caught between many different 'stories', none of which seem to truly 'speak' to or for the individual, but all of which only leave the poems' speaker the more baffled and confused. 'One Thousand Nights and Counting' sees its protagonist positively victimized by its seductive storyteller; by the end of 'Tale of the Story-of-All-Stories', the poor done-over library-user has lost all ability to "understand / a word."

Maxwell gets a lot of energy, clearly, from inventing versions of what most alienates and harrows us. In the flickering sequence of poems voiced by

Cassandra, for instance, this curiously and troublingly human character mixes charm and sexiness with outright nastiness:

[...] you, by my lips, my ways, you think like me –
wake with one face a sniff away forever,

 speak the lines she speaks at the moment she
 speaks these you speak and set your lips where she does,

 then you'll see nothing coming or becoming,
 and all will be so well.

In some of the poems gathered here, such as 'The Deal' or 'Element It Has', the level of abstraction can become irritating: we yearn for the direct, everyday voice of the victims of these threats straightforwardly to break through. Some of the most impressive work, in fact, comes in the more autobiographical pieces towards the end of the book, or in the fine elegy for Brodsky, 'A Walk by the Neva'. But there is throughout a sustained bravery in addressing the various lack of potential allowed by our modern situation, a bravery which is allied with a sophisticated and involving poetic intent.

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