SKIRRID HILL

Owen Sheers

Parting of the ways (and other dislocations)

Sarah Crown applauds Owen Sheers' second book, Skirrid Hill, a collection that evokes ruptured terrain in taut and coherent verse

Sarah Crown

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Skirrid Hill
by Owen Sheers
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Admirers of The Blue Book, Owen Sheers's Forward prize-shortlisted debut, already know their way around Skirrid Hill. It - or she, as Sheers would have it - first appears there, as "this hare-lipped hill, this broken spine of soil / that stretches across my window / steep-sided, a sinking ship upturned". Half a decade on, Sheers has returned to the sinking ship and transformed it from the subject of a single poem into the metaphor that unites his second collection. We learn in a note on the title that the name "Skirrid" comes "from the Welsh . . . Ysgariad meaning divorce or separation". It is these ideas - which have their visual representation in the hill itself, standing broken-backed on the border, gazing east over England, west over Wales - that form the thematic core of this beguiling and, at times, brilliant volume.

The quotation from TS Eliot with which Sheers has chosen to preface his collection reflects, perhaps, his own awareness of the changes that have taken place in his poetry over the last five years. "As we grow older," says Eliot in The Four Quartets, "The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated / Of dead and living." After the raw energy and drive of The Blue Book, Sheers has arrived at a point of reflection; Skirrid Hill, consequently, is an altogether subtler work than its predecessor. Any loss of vigour is, however, more than made up for by a ripening of tone: Sheers's voice is noticeably firmer now, his ear more refined. In terms of prosody, too, this is a far tauter collection; the confident use of internal and sprung rhymes produces an easy lyricism, while his rhythms are wonderfully dextrous, at times so delicate as to be sensed rather than heard.

The central metaphor also provides the collection with the focus that his debut lacked. Although Sheers travels widely here, taking in Los Angeles, Fiji, Paris and Zimbabwe, his scenery, characterised habitually by gaps, shadows and boundaries, possesses a reassuring internal coherence, while the sites he homes in on are linked by their liminality: the ploughed-over graves of first world war soldiers; a quarry "filled in years ago"; "the invisible meridian . . . where here, tomorrow starts, / and here, today is ending". Even the familiar landscape of Wales to which the poet clings, seeking "some kind of purchase / . . . a shallow handhold", is unreliable, made up of "broken stone giving under our feet" and filled with "gap-toothed roofs and broken beams".

The ruptured terrain reflects the collection's fractured emotional landscape. Things are falling apart in these poems: Sheers's subjects range from ageing and loss to the jarring transition between youth and adulthood and the disintegration of relationships. The book is punctuated by lyrics on women that almost invariably end with parting, as in "Night Windows", which concludes with the "you" of the poem rising "with a sigh" and walking away "trailing the dress of your shadow behind you". The pervading atmosphere of breakdown throws into poignant relief the occasional poems in which gaps are bridged or people joined. In "Inheritance", in

which the poet acknowledges his debt to his parents, there is a sense almost of marvel at the beautiful simplicity of their lifelong union. This is reflected in the poem's dialectical structure, in which individual verses on father and mother lead to the joyful synthesis of the final verse:

    And from them both -

    a desire for what they forged

    in their shared lives;

    testing it under the years' hard hammer

    red hot at its core,

    cooled dark at its sides.

The euphonious half-rhymes of forged/core and lives/sides here bind the poem together and adroitly reinforce its message: not easy, perfect fits, they are nevertheless exactly right for each other.

The fact that such elegant understatement is the exception rather than the rule in Skirrid Hill is the collection's only real weakness. If Sheers's poetry has a flaw, it lies in his propensity to over-explicate at times. Take for example the final lines of "The Wake", a deeply felt poem in which an older man - a grandfather, I assumed - explains to the poet that he is dying. The poem ends with the pair taking their leave of one another. As they wave goodbye, the poet recognises that:

    we both know there has
        already been a passing,

    one that has left a wake as that
        of a great ship

    that disturbs the sea for miles
        either side

    but leaves the water directly at
        its stern

    strangely settled, turned, fresh
    and somehow new,

    like the first sea that ever was

    or that ever will be.

The final line here feels too demonstrative: Sheers would have done better, one feels, to trust in his readers' ability to construe the pleasingly flexible image of the "first sea" themselves. There is also something too self-consciously poetic about this rather grandiose statement, tacked on to the end of a poem that, up to that point, has been fittingly low-pitched. Similarly, the coming-of-age poem "Border Country" is diminished by the gaucheness of the metaphor "life put on the brakes / and pitched you, without notice, / through the windscreen of your youth". The artless hyperbole of the image, coupled with the too-poetic "youth", mar what is to my mind the finest poem in the collection (in fact, one of the finest I've read all year).

But these are only trifling quibbles with what is, ultimately, a gorgeously elegiac volume, possessing the sustained tonal quality that marks out a collection from a mere book of poems. Expect to hear a lot more from Owen Sheers in years to come.