

Owen Sheers and Metaphor

Poet Jonathan Edwards pays tribute to the brilliance of Owen Sheers' use of metaphor, focusing particularly on the poem 'Winter Swans'. In the process, he reveals much about how imagery works in poetry more generally, making this an invaluable article to read, whatever poets you're studying, as a way of understanding more about poetic craft.

The blurb on the back of Owen Sheers' second collection, *Skirrid Hill*, describes Sheers as 'a poet gifted with a rare descriptive power.' It is unusual that the blurbs of poetry books bear much relationship to the poems inside, but this phrase seems to pin down more or less exactly what I was struck by when I encountered Sheers' work in his first collection, *The Blue Book*. I was at university, and just starting to write, and deeply embroiled in sonnets, sestinas and villanelles. I'd write a hundred drafts of something, fiddling with rhythm and form, before throwing the whole lot in the bin. Then I found Owen Sheers' work, with its metaphors of incredible brilliance and clarity. A lover's tattoo is 'a spider pretending to be dead;' someone sleeping in a doorway is 'a draft excluder caught the wrong side.' My writing at this time was like an apple covered in so many leaves that no reader would see it. Owen Sheers' writing is apple after apple after apple, just ready and waiting for the reader to pick – though of course, he'd have a much better metaphor for it than that.

In many ways, *Skirrid Hill* picks up where *The Blue Book* left off. The ending of that first volume is dominated by poems of romance and, following the opening few poems, including the stunning 'Mametz Wood,' *Skirrid Hill* has a group of poems – 'Marking Time,' 'Valentine,' 'Winter Swans,' 'Night Windows,' 'Keyways' – focusing on love. 'Keyways' is arguably the most sustained metaphorical performance, seeming to draw on the technique of conceit used by the Metaphysical poets, as a trip to the locksmith's becomes an extended metaphor for a relationship. But it is 'Winter Swans', with its particularly strong metaphors, which seems to best exemplify some of the key strengths of Sheers' writing.

Winter Swans

The poem begins with a striking personification: 'the clouds had given their all.' The description of the weather as

*two days of rain and then a break
in which we walked,*

might suggest that what's going on in the poem is that a moment of clarity is being reached between the two people. That first line is a strong one, but it gives way to an even better personification:

*the waterlogged earth
gulping for breath at our feet*

As descriptions of shoes sinking into mud, their slurping removal, go, this is wonderful. Not for the first time in Sheers' work, I am reminded here of the Martian school of writing, exemplified by the poems of Craig Raine and Christopher Reid. In Raine's work, a window cleaner, going about his business, all day long, 'waves goodbye, goodbye, goodbye;' the rain falling on water 'scores a bull's-eye every time.' There's that argument about Martianism that, while its metaphors allow us to see the world anew, and do so brilliantly, the metaphors sort of become the point of the poems. In Sheers, the interest might be said to be more in the emotion of the poem, and the metaphors there to serve that emotion, or to beautifully decorate the path to it.

When the swans first appear, they are described as 'rolling weights down their bodies to their heads,' a description which might remind us of the weightlifters in 'The Steelworks', who spend all day 'rolling a bicep up an arm then away.' This line in 'Winter Swans' is a risk formally; it draws attention to itself as it is much longer than any of those so far in the poem, but the metaphor is so strong as a way of describing swans' movement that keeping it all on one line like this seems to maximise its impact.

Coherence Across a Poem

The fourth stanza of the poem seems to shift up a gear, and this is partly a result of the heightened music: 'water', 'weather', 'feather'. In a wonderful way of describing swans swimming while their reflections swim beneath them, we are told 'they halved themselves in the dark water.' We are told that the swans are 'icebergs of white feather' and 'boats righting in rough weather.' By the next stanza, the swans are 'porcelain'. Unlike in 'Keyways', which sustains one conceit, Sheers shows here that he isn't particularly worried about the coherence of his metaphors across a poem. Many people say that a poem can't describe a book, say, as a bird in one stanza and then as a hand in a subsequent stanza, as the images will cancel out each other's power. As Sheers' swans bob away, one might hope that these porcelain-iceberg-boats don't collide with anything. Skirrid Hill's long poem, 'Service', shows a similar trait, as a restaurant kitchen is described as 'the off stage corridors of a theatre', then as 'a submarine', manned by staff who are 'instinctive as matadors'. The pay-off, though, is that this does allow the author that range of descriptions, each of which are stunning in their own right.

Structure – Volta and End

The emotional significance of 'Winter Swans' begins to establish itself in stanza five, leading up to the poem's powerful ending. One thing which can be crucial in poems is the volta, the turning point, and the poem seems to shift here from simple description of the swans to an attempt to draw meaning from them. The speaker's partner says the swans 'mate for life', and we begin to wonder about the significance of the swans, why we are being told this. The magic of the poem's last sentence, in which so much of the poem's power resides, is partly to do with its length, and partly with its music, the willingness to draw on full rhyme: as the lovers are 'slow-stepping [a lovely verb, that] in the lake's shingle and sand,/I noticed our hands.' The last word 'flight', meanwhile, echoes 'afternoon light', the concluding rhyme enhancing the ending's emotive power, while the five-line space between the rhymes makes the trick subtle, a technique which seems drawn from Carol Ann Duffy. There is also here, of course, the circular structure of the poem, as the lovers who have been 'silent and apart', now find their hands have 'swum the distance between us', so that in the poem's 20 lines we have been on

a real journey. All of this is enhanced by the way the poem ends on a couplet, breaking the tercet pattern we have grown used to and enhancing the power of the ending.

Ending With an Image

For all that though, I want to say that it is primarily the use of imagery which makes the ending of 'Winter Swans' – and therefore, of course, the poem – so successful. That concluding simile itself is strong enough, the hands 'like a pair of wings settling after flight.' Sheers often uses striking images as a way of ending a poem. At the end of 'Landmark', the ground where two lovers have lain is

*A sarcophagus, shallow among the long stems
and complete without them*

while, at the end of 'Service,' a Sommelier lifting a glass 'to his nose' is

*a dart player, weighting his arrow,
a gardener, scenting his rose.*

In 'Winter Swans,' though, that last image is powerful not just for itself but for the way in which it seems to draw on all the other images in the poem. The swans, who have been so tellingly described in the first four stanzas, become here in turn a metaphor for the lovers, whose hands coming together are like wings. That shift in the poem, from the swans being something to describe, something to spin metaphors for, to the swans becoming in turn a metaphor for love, that realisation as to the poem's true target, is so powerful. It's almost like a swan taking off.

Once this poetic structure has been seen in Sheers' work, it can be related to other poems. A similar structure can be seen in 'The Wake', for example, the collection's penultimate poem, in which a man 'ninety years old' who's spent his life working in medicine, now suffers with his own 'scarred lungs'. This poem uses the imagery of ships in bad weather: a chest x-ray is an attempt

to forecast the storms gathering there,

*the squalls and depressions
smudging those two pale oceans,
rising and falling in the rib cage's hull.*

*The old man's knowledge is driftwood
collected along the shore of a century.*

while the speaker's words of reassurance are 'spoken/into a coastal wind.' As in 'Winter Swans', the poem's ending seems to draw on the power accumulated in those earlier metaphors to create an ending which is a real taking off:

*Later he shows me to the door
and as he stands in its frame to wave me away
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 there ever was*

or that ever will be.

If 'The Wake' is powerful, though, the ending of 'Winter Swans,' that shift from the swans being the tenor of metaphors to the vehicle of a metaphor, from being something to describe to being something which can be used to describe love, is among Skirrid Hill's finest moments. If that shift isn't like a swan taking off then maybe, if you like, the way in which that ending is able to distil the power of the poem's earlier metaphors is a bit like a chef making some gorgeous, unctuous, concentrated loveliness from ingredients he's already lovingly prepared. Or maybe it's like something else entirely. As I said at the start, Owen Sheers himself would be the person to come up with much, much better metaphors for all of this.

Winter Swans

*The clouds had given their all –
two days of rain and then a break
in which we walked,*

*the waterlogged earth
gulping for breath at our feet
as we skirted the lake, silent and apart,*

*until the swans came and stopped us
with a show of tipping in unison.
As if rolling weights down their bodies to their heads*

*they halved themselves in the dark water,
icebergs of white feather, paused before returning again
like boats righting in rough weather.*

*'They mate for life' you said as they left,
porcelain over the stilling water. I didn't reply*

but as we moved on through the afternoon light,

slow-stepping in the lake's shingle and sand,

I noticed our hands, that had, somehow,

swum the distance between us

and folded, one over the other,

like a pair of wings settling after flight.

'Winter Swans' from Skirrid Hill by Owen Sheers (Seren, 2005), reproduced by kind permission of the author and Rogers, Coleridge and White Ltd

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