A Single Swallow

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Extract

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Preface



Some years ago I sat on the tarmac at Bole airport in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, talking to a soldier. We had been chatting about not much for a little while when his officer approached. This man's skin was very black and his eyes were hot, red and suspicious. He shouted at the soldier in Amharic, and then he barked at me:

'Where are you from?'

'The UK,' I said, 'I am British.'

I was squinting up at him against the light. My face was sunburned.

'No,' he said, angrily, as if his suspicions had been confirmed. He jabbed a finger at me.

'You are Russian,' he said, scornfully.

I stuttered. The officer was right, in a way. My father's mother was a White Russian who fled the revolution, with her mother. She met my grandfather in Shanghai. Over half a century later Russian soldiers, 'advisers', had come to Ethiopia to assist the Marxist dictator, Mengistu: this officer must have recognised their fair hair, their sunburned skin and Slavic features in me. As I struggled to pacify the officer I felt a deep blush, as much in me as on my skin. Nothing I could say would erase my face or the story it told him. It was the only time I have felt the fear and humiliation so many have known, of being condemned for the tribe you belong to, of being unable to escape or disguise your ethnicity and the perceived sins of your people.

Yet, for all the bitterness this man felt against the Russians with whom I shared an ancestry, and for all his evident suspicion of what I

had been doing – talking to his soldier, spying, perhaps, inveigling myself into the confidence of the farmer's boy who I had discovered behind the dusty uniform and the hefted gun – I was doing nothing more subversive, as I sat on the tarmac, waiting for a plane, than watching birds.

'There are no frontiers in the sky,' my mother was fond of saying, quoting T. H. White, who gives the words to a goose in *The Sword in the Stone*. I was brought up to believe that all people were equal. Opposition to prejudice and discrimination was a family tradition, I told myself, proudly, when I was young: my father had been banned from South Africa, where he grew up, for opposing the Apartheid regime. As a child of the Cold War I covertly supported the Russians, when I learned I was quarter Russian, and though I had never been to South Africa, I believed – romanticising freely – that the blood of a South African freedom fighter ran also in my veins. My parents divorced when I was seven; seeing little of my father made him all the more heroic to me.

An imagined Africa was part of the landscape of my childhood. We lived high up on a sheep farm in South Wales; we had a hill at our back, rearing over the house, and a view across the valley to a range of mountains which carved the far skyline into waves, cuts and crests.

'It looks just like Africa,' my mother said (she had been to Kenya), and then she quoted Karen Blixen: ' "I had a farm in Africa, at the foot of the Ngong Hills . . ." '

And we had visitors from Africa, too. They nested in the Big Barn and perched on the telephone wire; they filled the whole summer with their comings and goings and their twittering calls.

'Look! The swallows are back!' we said, when they arrived, and 'Ah, the swallows are going,' my mother announced, with a kind of mourning, in the autumn, when they gathered on the wires.

She marvelled at the great distances the birds would travel, and wondered at what they would see, on their journey to Africa, and we bade them farewell, and hoped that they would return safely.

When we moved down to the foot of the mountain the house we bought had an attic with an unsafe floor, broken windows and swallows' nests on its beams.

'It was one of the reasons I chose it,' my mother said.

She often said she would like to be a swallow when she died, which I understood: in the back of your mind, in a dreamy way, you could not help but want to go with them. In your hand a swallow weighs little more than a full fountain pen, yet twice every year it makes a journey of a scale and precision unmatched by our mightiest machines. Theirs is an extraordinary existence, even by the standards of birds.

The Cold War ended, and apartheid was swept away. I no longer 'support the Russians', and have grown out of claiming my father's deeds as my own. Although our valley is little changed, the farm I grew up in is no longer a ramshackle smallholding but a comfortable home for a retired couple. The buildings have been modernised: only the Big Barn is still as it was, and every year the swallows still come and go. But though the lives of the children of our valley are now more pressured and less isolated than those of my brother and I, at root the expectations of the young, and what is expected of them, are perhaps much as they were. If we do not stay on our farms, and eventualy take them over from our parents, then we are supposed to go out into the world, make our fortunes – or at least our own way – find someone to love, and put down roots. By the age of thirty-three I had not honoured this tradition. I had not settled down with anyone, nor had children. I had no home of my own.

One bright morning in the late summer of last year, I opened an upstairs window and startled five swallows on a wire. They were only a couple of feet away and taken completely by surprise. In the instant before they leapt into the air I saw them in vivid detail: the red patches, like the masks worn by medieval knights, covering their faces and chests; their dark blue backs, creamy underparts and the marbled span between their long tail feathers. That was all it was, and I did not know it, but everything that followed began then.

Within a couple of days of seeing the birds I had a plan, a scheme for an adventure and an education. In January the swallows would be in their wintering grounds, thousands of miles away in the heat of the South African summer: I resolved to fly to South Africa, find the birds and follow them all the way home. I would trace the flight of migrating birds between the South Africa my father came from and the Welsh hillside where my mother raised me. I would test the beliefs that I had been taught: that people, regardless of creeds and colours, are equal; I would rely on the best of the oldest of humankind's traditions: kindness to strangers. By devoting myself to one thing, these birds, I fantasised that I might discover – or at least understand better, in microcosm – something of the working of the world. And beyond this, by following swallows, I hoped to put down a marker on my own life, something to separate the boy-man I was from the man I wanted to become.

I spared no expense on preparation: everything I had I threw at visas, vaccinations and equipment for the expedition. At the same time I embarked on a crash-course of research into swallows. It soon became clear that I had had no idea of how extraordinary were the creatures I blithely planned to follow, or how powerful, old and strange are the relationships between us and them. As they gathered on the wires, ready for their departure, I stared at them, and wondered what they were saying.