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Poems

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Poems

Abstract

THE SWALLOWS RETURN TO SARAJEVO, AFTER 'DESERT STORM', DANDELIONS

Graham Mort

THE SWALLOWS RETURN TO SARAJEVO

From a winter of African dawns bloodying
The veldt, the first swallows have come:
Returning to Europe, England, Yorkshire,
To some reference point marked by instinct
On the furled chart of the planet
Chased by martins and swifts, they gleam
Gunmetal blue in the April sun.

In Jugoslavia, they slice up a sunrise
Sector by sector, surprising the sky
With their outflung ambush of wings.

At Sarajevo, Serbian soldiers wait
In gardens wild with lilac and broom;
The scent of blossom smothers hearts
Tripwired by trembling gulps of air.
Sun freckles them like boys,
Their hands sweat on rifle butts;
A sniper fires and they press
Their fragile heads to an earth
Which stinks of war.

Across the suburbs, behind boarded
Windows, or feedbags stuffed with sand,
The Bosnian militia crouch, expecting
Them, expecting each moment,
Each tick of the clock,
Each passing second
Of the stillness of the day
To spill their lives into the unforgiving
Legend of their people's past.

Overhead the tails of swallows flicker,
Knitting and purling the placid air.
They signal memories of unmown fields,
Of mothers calling from doorways,

Cradling a jug of milk, folding
A white sheet from the washing line
Or dozing in a wicker chair under pear trees,
Where sun bleaches the broken fence.

Your girl still waits, the swallows say –
On a streetcorner, in a small town –
Polishing her red shoes against blue stockings,
Watching the sky for rain that just might come.
Shopkeepers slam down their shutters,
A crippled woman limps and sings, sweeping
Rotten fruit from the market square.

Pigeons scatter, surround the steeple
And return, surrendering white wings
To the church clock's halting chimes.

The boys' eyes open to take in all
That is real and here and now.
It means little:
That trail of ants welded from snips
Of copper wire, aimlessly marching;
Their own fingernails purple with dirt;
The smell of sweat, the hot stickiness of boots.

It's all changeable, mutable, all negotiable
Under the mortars' hammering auction,
The wheedling of bullets that flick up dust
From empty village squares,
Shatter plaster from the town hall,
Thwack into bodies still moving or falling
To bleed between the cold vee of their sights.

The swallows turn: metallic bunting
Blown adrift or decoys dropped to distract
Radar which scans horizons like a hawk
They search for their ruined nests,
Crying from crimson throats
For all that is lost.
Wanting to begin again,
To hatch another brood, whatever
Toll this spring may take of them.

That one urge lasers the world's map
Lodged in their heads, bringing them

To this village, to this street,
To this house, where they begin to build
On unassailable stone.

AFTER 'DESERT STORM'

Trees are glazed with half-thawed snow,
The lake's reflection flinches,
Suffering frigid air's caress as sun
Sinks to reddle the sky's dull flank

Ice chinks at the water's edge,
Chiming against the calls of coots;
Water's black meniscus freezes
And stills a slowly ebbing light.

There, where frozen tongues of sand
Spit the lake, a diver hunches,
Shuddering its dark silks, ruffled
By a bitter west wind's probing.

From cities smoking at the coast, from
Cranes and quaysides and berthed ships
It hurled inland, choosing this tarn
To weather out another killing gale.

The stark trees drip mist;
A single droplet, bloodied by the sun,
Glints in what is left of light.
The new moon is a gourd of ice.

The diver moves as I move, cautious
To the lakeside; it turns, enters water,
Sculls clear, then slips back into
The gasping mouth of its utterance.

Light-flickers smooth an outcry of waves,
Seconds flit by, a flight of mallard
Skid-lands. My breath's heat hews out
A vanishing statuary of air.

Then the lake blurs a black gondola
Tracing sleek silver on the gathering dark
No calling it back: it vanishes
Towards an interrupted journey east.

Its wing-beats lift it over lit towns
Towards the cry-strewn coasts of its lineage.
No meeting point, but swallowed words
And its sheer plunging from my world.

Here is a new moon rising, its face
Ghosting the fallen sun; here is darkness
Sprinkling a premonition of stars, and here
My footsteps, beating at the path's cold iron.

DANDELIONS

They'll grow anywhere, dandelions,
Their seeds flocking to a mist,
Swarming in faint dreams of light
From a far dimension of Space,
Weaving the sheer silk of air,
Staining it to watered milk.

They settle on our shoulders,
On the roofs of cars or houses,
On gravel paths,
Or by the roadside;
You wouldn't rate their chances higher
Than icicles in hell.

But in spring they come through:
Obvious things forgotten, which suddenly
Are remembering themselves everywhere:
Rising through damp soil and cold and rain,
Through fretted autumn leaves, loving
The lengthening days' fragile light.

They take over garden paths,
Flower beds, verges, window boxes;

They punch through tarmac in the street,
Their tap roots spiking into graveyards
To rock the headstones, their bold faces
Brightening the names of the dead.

The first flowers I took my mother
Were dandelions:
Snapping a fistful of stems,
Their sap trickling down my wrist,
Sticky as sperm,
Their yellow heads oozing a faint
Scent of piss and bitterness.
I smelled the space between their lives
And mine.

This one clings to the outhouse roof,
Gulping in heat from the May sun
With grateful little nods,
Downy as a new duckling,
It's baby head lolling in a faint breeze
That teases it to fall:
It is a ripe womb,
A belly of spores,
A full moon, a grey-headed sage
Trembling with one season's wisdom.

Tomorrow wind will strip you,
Tearing out that gloss of filaments;
Your bald pod drying to a husk,
Your root slumbering between roof slates,
Under winter stars – their suddenly
Blooming flowers of frost –
And December's inquisitive wind.
In spring you'll pull the house down,
Or try to.

And if I'm here, and you make it,
I'll come down one day, woken by
The hunger of starlings, taking in
Today's milk from the doorstep,
Yesterday's news from the paper,
To find you, suddenly overripe.