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## Poems

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### **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 gapping 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.