SALVAGE

by Sarah Goodman

The world will go on,
and just
having been will be
enough.

The ducks will float in the marsh,
just like you told us, and I will want
to cross the water to them.
But I will stand, as you did,
with a lens and a longing, watching

ducks, dories, sandpipers
gather and disperse.

—for Miriam

Saved by Swifts

by Richard Mabey

It's October, an Indian summer. I'm standing on the threshold like some callow teenager, about to move house for the first time in my life. I've spent more than half a century in this place, in this undistinguished, comfortable town house on the edge of Chiltern Hills, and had come to think we'd reached a pretty good accommodation. To have all mod cons on the doorstep of the quirkiest patch of countryside in south-east England had always seemed just the job for a rather solitary writing life. I'd use the house as a ground-base, and do my living in the woods, or in my head. I liked to persuade myself that the Chiltern landscape, with its folds and free-lines and constant sense of surprise, was what had shaped my prose, and maybe me too. But now I am upping sticks and fleeing to the flatlands of East Anglia.

My past, or lack of it, had caught up with me. I'd been bogged down in the same place for too long, trapped by habits and memories. I was clotted with rootedness. And in the end I'd fallen ill and run out of words. My Irish grandfather, a day-worker who rarely stayed in one house long enough to pay the rent, knew what to do at times like this. In that word that catches all the shades of escape, from the young bird's flutter from the nest to the dodging of someone in trouble, he'd flit.

Yet hovering on the brink of this belated initiation, all I can do is think back again, to another wrenching journey. It had been a few summers before, when I was just beginning to slide into a state of melancholy and senselessness that were incomprehensible to me. I was due to go for a holiday in the Cévennes with some old friends, a few weeks in the limestone *causses* that had become something of a tradition, but could barely summon up enough spirit to leave home. Somehow I made it, and the Cévennes were, for that brief respite, as healing as ever, a time of sun and hedonism and companionship.

But towards the end of my stay something happened which lodged in my mind

like a primal memory: a glimpse of another species' rite of passage. I'd travelled south to the Herault for a couple of days, and stayed overnight with my friends in a crooked stone house in Octon. In the morning we came across a fledgling swift beached in the attic. It had fallen out of nest and lay with its crescent wings stretched out stiffly, unable to take off. Close to, its juvenile plumage wasn't the enigmatic black of those careering midsummer silhouettes, but a marbled mix of charcoal-grey and brown and powder-white. And we could see the price it paid for being so exquisitely adapted to life that would be spent almost entirely in the air. Its prehensile claws, four facing to the front, were mounted on little more than feathered stumps, half-way down its body. We picked it up, carried it to the window and hurled it out. It was just six weeks old, and having its maiden flight and first experience of another species all in the same moment.

But whatever its emotions, they were overtaken by instinct and natural bravura. It went into a downward slide, winnowing furiously, skimmed so close to the road that we all gasped, and then flew up strongly towards the south-east. It would not touch down again until it came back to breed in two summers' time. How many miles is that? How many wing-beats? How much time off?

I tried to imagine the journey that lay ahead of it, the immense odyssey along a path never flown before, across chronic war-zones and banks of Mediterranean gunmen, through precipitous changes of weather and landscape. Its parents and siblings had almost certainly left already. It would be flying the 6,000 miles entirely on its own, on a course mapped out—or at least sketched out—deep in its central nervous system. Every one of its senses would be helping to guide it, checking its progress against genetic memories, generating who knows what astonishing experiences of consciousness. Maybe, like many seabirds, it would be picking up subtle changes in air-borne particles as it passed over seas and aromatic shrubland and the dusty thermals above African townships. It might be riding a magnetic trail detected by iron-rich cells in its forebrain. It would almost certainly be using, as navigation aids, landmarks whose shapes fitted templates in its genetic memories, and the sun too, and, on clear nights, the big constellations—which,

half-way through its journey, would be replaced by a quite different set in the night sky of the southern hemisphere. Then, after three or four weeks, it would arrive in South Africa and earn its reward of nine months of unadulterated, aimless flying and playing. Come the following May, it and all the other first-year birds would come back to Europe and race recklessly about the sky just for the hell of it. That is what swifts do. It is their ancestral, unvarying destiny for the non-breeding months. But you would need to have a very sophisticated view of pleasure to believe they also weren't also 'enjoying' themselves.

When that May came round I was blind to the swifts for the first time in my life. While they were *en fête* I was lying on my bed with my face away from the window, not really caring if I saw them again or not. In a strange and ironic turn-about, I had become the incomprehensible creature adrift in some insubstantial medium, out of kilter with the rest of creation. It didn't occur to me at the time, but maybe that is the way our whole species is moving.…

So I'm thinking again about my feelings for that beached, fledgling swift. Where did they come from? I don't eat swifts, or aspire to have them as pets. I don't feel they need my protection, having existed perfectly independently on the planet for millions of years. And in a view of the world based on 'resource conservation', swifts are almost certainly irrelevant. They are not (yet) endangered. No important predator depends on them (and if it did, we would then have to ask what use that is). The planet's linked ecosystems—what James Lovelock has christened Gaia—would give no more than a sigh if they vanished. It would be testing credulity to suggest that one day they might be the source of a drug against, say, air-sickness, distilled from their prodigious balancing organs; or that their scrabbled-together nests (made from flotsam gathered from the air) could provide the inspiration for low-cost building designs. No, swifts do not pass the critical tests of endangerment or usefulness.

Yet they touch and connect with us in deep and subtle ways. We do not know what it would be like to live through a summer without them. They are part of our myths of spring and the South, a crucial element in that great

gift to the temperate zone, the migration and settlement of summer birds. 'An annual barter of 'food for light', Aldo Leopold wrote of migration in America, in which 'the whole continent receives as net profit a wild poem dropped from the murky skies.' They are the most pure expression of flight, an ability which is still remembered somewhere deep in our nervous system. Swifts have become, I think, our twenty-first-century equivalent of the Romantics' nightingales—cryptic, rhapsodic, electrifying—but happy to be all these things at high speed in the middle of an urban landscape. Like the nightingale's 'darkling' song, the swift's black silhouette and utterly aerial existence give them a pliability of meaning.

When I was at school I longed so much for their return that I used to walk about on May Day clutching my blazer collar for luck. Later, when I was about seventeen, they became romantic emblems of high summer. I sang in early music choir in those days, and on June evenings we rehearsed in a local parish church with the local girls' school perched on the opposite side of the chancel. The swifts screamed round the tower, and past the stained-glass windows lit by the low sun—a shrill descant to our own warblings. It was a haunting scene of unrequited courtly lust, and though swifts are now beyond the range of my hearing, I can still recall the sound of those evenings, along with the forbidden thrill of the girls' green gingham dresses.

In my adult life swifts have become more mysterious, not a symbol of anything in particular, but creatures made of the same cells and tissues as me yet living on another, almost unknowable plane. Their existence in—and sometimes, it seems, on—air is more cryptic than the livelihood which myriads of creatures make suspended in and supported by water. Swifts eat, sleep and mate on the wing. They gather windblown debris for nests and bathe in the rain ('they take showers', wrote William Fiennes). All over Europe—in that extraordinary town of birds, Trujillo, and lost on a motorway somewhere just outside Montpellier—I've stood mesmerised as they hurtled past me at waist level, wondering what they made of me. Were they aware that—earthbound and ponderous—I was even alive?

Mostly I used to watch swifts down by the canal in my old home in the

Chilterns. I'd go to a pub an hour or two before sunset, and lose myself in their vespers ritual. They nested, a dozen or so pairs, in the eaves of a row of Victorian terraced houses, and in a disused factory that used to manufacture insecticides. And on warm, still evenings the young neighbourhood singletons would form a loose flock, trawling insects a couple of hundred feet above the town centre. They looked as if they were milling about haphazardly, like ash specks over a bonfire, but would cross and swoop over each other's paths without missing a wing-beat.

Then some ancient compulsion took over, quite pointless unless you are prepared to grant birds a sense of pure physical relish in their power of flight. At the edges of the swarm the birds began to wheel, wings stiff. One by one they dived down to a lower altitude, and began to fly and chase, first in pairs then in accumulating strands, until maybe thirty birds were careering together in a mass. They became a ragged black comet, fizzing with activity as birds throttled back, feathered, did spectacular left-right wing-tilts to avoid collisions. The comet hurtled between the factory buildings, calling to the sitting birds inside, banked like a gang of motorcyclists to take the curve back over the new wharfside flats. They seemed to be following tracks in the air that only they could see—but would then spectacularly run off them. They'd disappear only to somehow reappear behind me. Then abruptly, at no visible signal, they would fling apart and fly off leisurely in different directions, making for the high air again.

I never saw the actual moment when they disappeared for rest. I suspect they gained altitude rather like an aircraft, flying out of the town on a gradual gradient. But I have seen a film of the image south-east England's sleep-bound swifts make on air-traffic-control radar. As darkness falls all the aircraft on the screen are obliterated by an ethereal halo of bright coalescing spots, each one an individual group of swifts, bound for that state of total otherness—invisible, aerial slumber.