



## To the Swallows I'm about to Distress



It's August and you're here as I write, perched on a broken aerial outside. It's not song I hear but a series of pips, a timer counting the hours of summer left. They say one swallow does not a summer make but I know summer makes a swallow. Makes you come, makes you go, compels you to seek other suns.

I don't know how you make the flight. It can't be easy with my heart in your mouth. Last year I listened to rain when you left, drop by drop news drizzled in of storms in Europe. I pictured you flying 6,000 miles against wind. Would you survive? Who would be lost on the way? I know you can't answer.

Honestly, until five years ago we were strangers. You were as real to me as the faded tattoo of old sailors, a print on a Vintage style dress I didn't buy. Viewing this house, I saw you. I opened a door and you flew out so close to my face I saw air rearranged, a flick book of life other than mine. Yes, I said, I am home.

I'm not sure if I should tell you about symbolism, why carry the burden? But that's what you are the world over, the spirit of home, a million glazed wings on Portugal's gables. I've hung ceramic birds on walls I don't own, for decades I used you as cheap decoration, a charm against bad landlords and rent. I know you are more. Why must we see all creatures through the lens of ourselves? Swallow, you are the bird we have made everything we aren't.

Faithful for life, you leave to always return. I can't say I've always been the same, though I've finally found home in this cottage. I've never been so happy as here. Or so sad. For a while you were my most constant visitor. I needed no kettle, no patter, no swag, just a hole in my roof. A willingness to learn to walk the long way round, past shovels and tools, my footsteps bulldozers under your nest.

Last spring, the one before, the one before, you came. I'm sure you were here before I was born, that this place is yours more than mine. Yet it's falling. The small building I call shed was so damaged in Storm Arwen whenever the wind blows pantiles domino. The roof buckles over your babies. I know it needs replacing, but what about you? The riverbanks you scooped up and spat out to build home, a thousand beaks full moulded to that high beam. I don't want to make anything harder.

Each year you arrive a little later and I see there are less of you. It's the weather. Wildfires, wind, snow in Andalucía, fewer insects to feed on. The sun is blazing as I write. The days have forgot how to rain. I'm afraid for you, Swallow. The first brood of chicks has flown. By now, you should be raising your second or third. I

see nothing. No dip and dart, in/out. I hear no squabble of hungry mouths. Just one swallow on my roof. The picture postcard sky is bereft.

You deserve more, more than this fire we lit, more than eviction from your ancestral home. The swallow cups I bought are concrete and seem part of the problem. The fast fix, this concrete tenement flung up in place of your nursery. Yet I must do it. I'm sorry, I hope you'll forgive me, my flawed humanity, even the selfishness of this apology. I'll be thinking of you on that journey, hoping I'll see you again. Winters are grey here. I sleep through waiting to be woken by you colouring my corner of sky brilliant blue.

All apologies,

Angela



By Angela Readman