

IN THE ORCHARD,
THE SWALLOWS

by the same author

The Short Day Dying

I Could Ride All Day in My Cool Blue Train

In the Orchard,
the Swallows

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‘Say: I seek refuge in the Lord of Daybreak’

Quran 113:1

The Orchard

It is cold, despite the woollen shawl I have borrowed from Abbas. Beneath its weight my flesh is too sparse, the skin stretched tightly over bones. I have been climbing for a long time – it was dark when I left – but I cannot walk quickly enough to get the heat to rise in my blood. My shivering grows violent and my teeth rattle uncontrollably, the sound echoing in my head. The cold causes my neck to ache and my jaw to stiffen.

The air, though, is blissful and clear. It brings the ragged mountains close, chisels their details finely to my eye. The peaks are yellow in the early sun. Later, the sunlight will climb down from the mountains and descend this road into the valley below, restoring the colours that were lost to the pale washed night.

This walk exhausts me still. I am close to staggering when I arrive, my legs almost gone beneath me. After all the years away they have not readjusted to

the mountains, and I can feel every step of the climb still in them. My breath comes heavily.

In the rose dawn light I greet the trees. Trace with my eyes their untidy forms. I imagined them for so long, summoning them up in the darkness when they were lost to me, and each morning now it is an acute pleasure to return to them. They are in blossom, their branches arrayed in scarlet and white.

To one side, as I circle the orchard, is the corn field. The crop has begun to emerge from the earth, ragged lines of green forming against the dark soil. I wonder if it will grow as tall as I remember it. I move around the furthest edge of the trees, following the low stone border until I reach its end, beside the largest tree. Here, I will wait. I press my palm against its bark, then turn to rest my back against it as I ease to the ground. My sandals slide forwards, and the feel of the cold dust on my feet is extraordinary; it runs as smoothly as water over my skin. Among the folds of my shawl I find the paper bag I have brought, and I take some of yesterday's bread from it, nibbling slowly at its edge.

The birds have woken and there are swallows in the orchard, carving arcing paths between the trees. Below them a fine layer of mist clings to the ground. Pomegranates are hardy plants, and the trees are

showing little damage from the winter frosts, though they are growing wild and have not been pruned for some time, or else the pruning has been done inexpertly. The trees are growing old, and the orchard has not been renewed as it should; no new cuttings have been taken and planted. Still, they grow vigorously. Sprouting roots have been left unchecked, blurring what were once carefully trained trees into the wild bushes they long to be. The fruit will suffer for it. If I had the tools I would be tempted to tend to them, but they are no longer my own trees to tend. It is better that I do not touch them.

From where I sit I am able to look down over the valley. Can follow the thread of the road, cutting down the mountainside along its dusty ridge. At its far end, not yet visible in the light, is the town, your old home. There, at least, the market will still be waking into life. Here, all is peaceful.

I gather my breath. I try to imagine the weakness in my legs bleeding out into the dirt, being replaced by some vitality which ekes from the tree into my back. I wait as long as I am able, until the sun has found the road above and the skyline begins to glow bright, the mountain-tops white and blinding. The light will reach me soon. But I cannot stay to see it. In a few moments, before the evidence of life begins

to show in the small house through the trees, before
the farmer comes to his orchard and finds me here,
I will stand and brush the sand from my shalwar,
stretch once again to ease the aches in my muscles
and joints, and begin the slow journey home.

Abbas

I see I have written *home*, though the home I am staying in is not my own. It belongs to a man named Abbas. I am not sure how to describe him for you. He is not family, and yet I cannot call him my landlord, because I do not pay him any rent. If I said that he was my saviour, it would not be an exaggeration, but I will come to that story in time, and so for the moment I will simply say that he is my host.

His house is larger than the one I grew up in. It sits on the edge of a small village, some distance north and west of town, a few miles from the orchard. From the road it looks small, the simple sandy wall suggesting nothing more than a farmer's cottage. But the impression is deceptive, and the building is more extensive than it appears. Inside there are bedrooms for both Abbas and his daughter, Alifa. She is ten, the same age my youngest sister was when I last saw her, though it is clear I am some way yet from earning the right to be treated as a brother.

I am patient in my efforts. There is a kitchen, and then beside that another small room which seems once to have been a larder, but which has been given over to me, a bed brought in and placed against the cool mud of the wall. And there is a study, its walls lined with books, its floor thick with overlapping carpets. Abbas spends much of the days there, when he is home, reading or writing. The house is filled with plants. Everywhere there are flashes of green. I can taste them in the air. The carpets and furniture throughout are simple, but clearly of a finer quality than I am accustomed to.

Behind the home is a walled garden, with a small terrace. There is a table, and two chairs, and beside them a tall electric fan, its green paint half given over to rust. I have not seen it in use, and do not think it has been working for some time, but it looks at home nonetheless, as though it has been forgotten, and in the process has gradually achieved the status of somehow belonging there, becoming its own ornament. But the garden, too, I will tell you about in time.

I remember waking here on my first day, lying on a charpoy, feeling the rough cords of the bed beneath my back softened by sheets. A doctor stood at my bedside. I did not know where I was. The walls of the

strange larder seemed to slant in above me, though I realised later that it was just my dizziness. I felt a terrible weakness in my body, a buzzing in my arms and legs as though they were filled with insects. I was dressed in a shalwar kameez several sizes too large – though when Abbas tells the story, he has it that it was I who was several sizes too small.

He must have paid for the doctor to come, though he will not speak of the cost, when I ask him. The doctor listened briefly to my story and asked about my symptoms. I was so dehydrated I could hardly speak. When they tried to give me water my body would not keep it down. He left for me two plastic bottles of an oily, salted liquid to drink when I could. And he gave me pills, antibiotics, sour lozenges the size and shape of almonds. Even as it knew how much I needed them, my body tried to reject them, as it purged almost everything from it in those days. I wonder if there was something in me that did not want to return from illness. Something that preferred to remain latched closely to it, resigned to circle down into the darkness, to be consumed.

Before he left the doctor massaged my limbs, a tight circled grip travelling along them.

‘It will help the circulation,’ he said.

His hands fitted completely around my thin arms, my emaciated legs.

When he had gone Abbas came into the room, and I tried to stand, respectful before my elder, but I was not able to, and collapsed into darkness. That is all I remember of my first day here. I woke once more, and from the coolness knew that it was night. I drank some water, and finally kept down the doctor's pills, and then I slept. I slept for days, lost to monstrous, appalling dreams.

So I did not meet my host for a long time, and it was a full week before the fever subsided and my head cleared enough to properly speak with him. He came in through the door as I was trying to get out of bed, though my head and limbs swam with sickness. He must have heard me moving. He introduced himself, and I gave him my name.

'You mentioned many names in your sleep,' he said, with a smile. 'And not one of them your own.'

I wondered what I had said, of whom I had spoken. Did I say your name? I have kept it secret for so long. I tried to remember, but I knew nothing of the night that had gone. I tried again to rise.

'No,' he said. 'You must lie back. Rest a while. Here, there is water beside you.'

He approached, but saw me flinch in response,

and stepped back. The instinct is not easily lost. Abbas must have seen that I did not trust him, and I wonder what he read in it then. Perhaps only confusion.

‘I want to thank you,’ I said, after I had taken some water. ‘For your hospitality. But I have to go.’

‘You are not at all well enough,’ he said.

‘I cannot stay,’ I said, and flinched again as he came closer, but I was too weak to protest, and I allowed him to ease my shoulders against the bed once more. I have learned in the hardest manner possible to read the intentions of others, and I understood, finally, that he did not mean me harm.

‘Of course you must,’ he said. ‘You will stay until you are stronger. You need far more rest than you have had. I cannot let you leave in such a state.’

And so I did not leave, and in the end I have stayed with him a long time. How fortunate I am to have found him! Or, it would be truer to say, how fortunate I was to have been found by him. I will not forget my good fortune, and I will repay him for his expenses, for the medical bills, as I will repay all of his kindnesses to me, as soon as I am able.