

Margaret Gilbert

Swallow Barn

I

I TELL ABOUT BLACK HATRED, A MAN ON A HORSE
 PLOUGHING THROUGH
 VAST STRETCHES OF JUNGLE, CUTTING THROUGH
 VINEHUNG WOODS,
 STANDING IN YELLOW WATER, THE HORSE GALLOPING
 BEYOND TOWNS
 AND CITIES, OVER WHITE SANDSTONE CLIFFS AND WINE-
 COLORED RIVERS,
 INTO THE LUSH, WILD UNDERGROWTH OF THE ALABAMA
 BLACK BELT.
 JOAB KING COULD SEE THE SINKING MOON BARRED BY
 STRAIGHT THIN TRUNKS
 OF LOLLING PINES AS THE HORSE TRAVELLED THE NARROW
 DIRT RED ROAD,
 ITS SLIPPING HOOVES KICKING UP RED DUST-COLORED
 CLOUDS. WHEN
 HE STOPPED TO LET IT COOL AND DRINK FROM THE
 STREAM, IT STRUGGLED
 AND TURNED, AND THEN BEGAN TO RUN AGAIN.

HOW LONG THIS WILD RIDE HAD LASTED KING DIDN'T
 KNOW.
 TOWARDS THE END, HE KNEW THAT HE HAD COME OUT OF
 THE WOODS
 AND WAS GALLOPING BACK TOWARDS THE BARN. KING
 URGED
 THE HORSE ON FASTER AND FASTER. THEY WENT UP KING
 MOUNTAIN,
 MAN AND HORSE, BLACK WITH FORESTS OF CYPRUS, PINE
 AND CEDAR, PINE

SEED SPLITTING THE CLIFF'S LEDGE. STRAIGHT TRUNKS OF
 PINE AND CYPRUS
 THEY CUT INTO. THE HORSE ENTERED A GROVE OF TREES
 WHICH RAN
 BEHIND THE BARN AND STOPPED.

KING'S FIRST THOUGHT WAS:

— WHEREVER HE IS, HE WILL WANT
 TO GET OUT OF SIGHT. —

KING GAZED BEYOND THE BARN, THROUGH BLACK SWAMPS
 WITH NAKED
 AND DEAD TREES. THE TREES WERE LIKE TALL GUNS, AND
 KING
 WAS FILLED WITH A GRAVE AND RECKLESS JOY, AND KING
 WAS THINKING
 TO HIMSELF:

— SOMEWHERE, INSIDE THAT BARN, HE IS WATCHING
 ME, EVEN NOW HE WATCHES ME ON THE
 BIG STALLION AS I ENTER THE GATE AND
 RIDE ACROSS THE YARD — THE BIG GAUNT HORSE, WHICH
 IS ALMOST THE COLOR OF WHITE SMOKE,
 LIGHTER IN COLOR THAN THE DUST, WHICH HAS
 CAKED ON ITS WET HIDE: ME, JOAB KING, DAMP
 FROM THE RIVER, AND I BELIEVE HE WATCHES
 ME THROUGH A BROKEN WINDOW IN THAT BARN. —

THEN KING SAW WILKERSON, SAW THE MAN SMALL WITH
 DISTANCE APPEAR OUT OF
 A DITCH, WILD-EYED AND MANACLED, HIS HANDS CLOSE
 TOGETHER AND BOUND
 WITH SILVER, AS OF A DREAM BEING DRAWN, AND AS HE
 WATCHED, HE
 SAW THE SILVER WHEN THE MOON STRUCK THE SHINE OF
 THE WRISTS AND HE COULD HEAR
 THE LABORED BREATH OF THIS WHITE MAN WITH BLACK
 BLOOD, RUNNING FOR

HIS LIFE INTO THE TREES. KING RODE ON SWIFTLY, THE
 HUGE, HOT-
 BLOODED, MILK-WHITE HORSE OPENING THE WAY FOR HIM
 LIKE A PLOUGH. NOW,
 HE GOT DOWN OFF THE HORSE, RUNNING, TOO; HE
 WHIRLED AND TURNED AND SPRANG
 BACK PAST THE CORNER OF THE BARN, DRAWING THE GUN,
 A DOUBLE-BARRELED
 PISTOL WITH A PISTOL GRIP, HIS INITIALS "J.K." CARVED
 UPON THE SILVER-PLATED SHIELD. FOR AN INSTANT THEY
 GLARED AT EACH
 OTHER, AND IN THAT INSTANT, WILKERSON SAW THE GUN
 THAT KING CARRIED, KING'S FULL-FLOWING SEPIA-COLORED
 BEARD. THEN WILKERSON
 RAN FULL CIRCLE THROUGH THE WOODS BACK TO THE
 BARN AND VANISHED
 INSIDE THE ANCIENT SAGGING BARN INHABITED BY BLUE
 SWALLOWS
 WITH A BLACK ROOF HANGING TO THE GROUND AND
 THATCHED A FOOT THICK WITH SUNBURNT
 STRAW, WHICH REACHED BELOW THE EAVES IN RAGGED
 FLAKES. PARCHED AS BASKETS
 OF PEACHES, THE COLOR OF BLOOD, IT STOOD IN THE
 SINKING MOON BONE-DRY
 WITH DEATH AND HEAT; HOME TO NO ANIMAL IN THE
 DROUGHT, ITS CROPS RETARD-
 ED BY STRAYED AND STOLEN LIVESTOCK, BROKEN FENCES,
 A CAVED-
 IN WELL. A RELIC GERMAN WAR FLAG HUNG FROM A
 WINDOW AND CANNISTERS
 OF KEROSENE LITTERED THE YARD. KING GRABBED ONE.
 KING WAS INSIDE THE BARN NOW, TOO, WITH HIS HORSE
 AND PISTOL,
 ALREADY FIRING, AS WILKERSON FELL. KING FIRED AND
 FIRED AGAIN
 BECAUSE HE WAS NOT YET DEAD, THEN SEIZED A
 PITCHFORK
 AND TOOK OUT THE KNIFE, STOOPING OVER THE BODY. FOR
 A MOMENT

WILKERSON LOOKED UP AT HIM WITH WILD EYES, THEN HIS
 FACE,
 BODY, ALL SEEMED TO COLLAPSE, TO FALL IN UPON ITSELF,
 AS
 FROM OUT OF THE SLASHED GARMENTS ABOUT
 WILKERSON'S HIPS AND LOINS,
 WHERE KING WORKED THE KNIFE BACK AND FORTH INTO
 THE TESTICLES,
 THE PENT-UP BLACK BLOOD SEEMED TO RUSH FORTH LIKE
 A RIVER,
 SPILLING OUT ONTO THE BLACK BRICKS, OUTSIDE WHERE
 THE PINE TREES
 ROSE LIKE VERTICAL BARS TO THEIR TUFTED TOPS HIGH IN
 THE MOONLIGHT,
 AND THE SCREAMS OF THE WHITE MAN RANG OUT OF THE
 GLITTERING
 STONES LONG AFTER HE WAS DEAD. KING GAVE A CHOKED
 CRY AND LEANED BACK
 AGAINST THE HORSE, AND BEGAN TO VOMIT.

II

HOW SHALL A MAN ESCAPE FROM HIS ANCESTORS OR DRAW
 OFF
 FROM HIS VEINS THE BLACK DROP WHICH HE DREW FROM
 HIS FATHER'S OR MOTHER'S LIFE?
 KING CAREFULLY SLICED THE TESTICLES AWAY, AND THEN
 HE BEGAN TO BURY THEM IN THE DIRT.

TREMBLING HE STOOD UP. THE BARN WAS DARK WITH
 MOONLIGHT, INTO WHICH CAME
 NOW AND THEN THE LOUD CLOUDY FLUTTER OF THE
 SWALLOWS.
 IT SMELLED OF BLOOD AND SEMEN. LONG COBWEBS HUNG
 FROM THE BEAMS.
 THERE WAS SOMETHING IN THE AIR THEN, THE SMELL OF
 DEATH, LIKE SICK SWEAT.
 KING LOOKED UP. THE DOOR MOANED ON HINGES AGED
 WITH RUST. THERE WAS

NO ONE HE COULD SEE BUT RATS, AND THEN HE HEARD
SOMETHING. HE
THOUGHT THAT HE HEARD SOMETHING. IT COULD HAVE
BEEN THE WIND, OR THE
RAIN, IT WAS RAINING, WIND, LIKE WEEPING. THE RAIN IN
THE BARN
WAS LIKE A WEEPING WOMAN. A WOMAN WHO WEPT IN THE
BARN.

FIVE FEET AWAY LAY BERTHA IN THIS LOVELY RED DRESS
ON HER FACE, SPILLED LIKE DARK COFFEE OVER THE
STONES. HER FACE
WAS BLOWN AWAY, WHERE KING HAD SHOT HER BEFORE
SUPPER IN
THE BARN WITH WILKERSON. THROUGH THE DOORWAY
KING COULD SEE WILKERSON, HIS HIRED MAN. HE WAS
DEAD LYING IN THE
MIDDLE OF THE BARN. HE HAD A HARNESS IN HIS LEFT
HAND
AND A PITCHFORK STUCK RIGHT UP BENEATH HIS HEART,
AND
HE'D BEEN CUT. HIS OVERALLS HAD BEEN RIPPED DOWN,
WHERE KING HAD CUT HIM,
AND BOTH OF THEM WERE DEAD, NOW.

SLOWLY AND DELIBERATELY KING TIED THE HORSE TO AN
EMPTY STALL.
HE SEIZED A LEATHER WHIP FROM THE HARNESS RACK, AND
WITH THE WHIP HE BEGAN
TO BEAT THE HORSE LIKE HE USED TO BEAT BERTHA,
WHEN HE
HAD FUCKED HER. BREATHING IN GREAT GASPS, ITS DARK
COAT CURLED WITH SWEAT, THE HORSE
AT FIRST MOVED RESTIVELY ABOUT THE BARN. KING KEPT
ON
BEATING IT UNTIL AT LAST IT STOOD MOTIONLESS AND
GAVE A BROKEN SIGH.
THEN HE STRUCK THE HORSE IN THE FACE WITH THE
REINS. IT STUMBLED

ON A FEW PACES FURTHER AND STOPPED. A POOL OF
 SWEAT DARKENED THE PINE STRAW
 BENEATH IT, AND ITS HEAD HUNG DOWN.

SAID KING: — I CAN MAKE YOU MOVE! — TO THE HORSE,
 POURING THE KEROSENE

OVER THE BEAST AND THEN LIGHTING IT WITH A MATCH.
 IT BEGAN TO RUN SPREADING ITS FIRE. THROUGH THE
 BLACK BARN BURNING
 THE HORSE RAN, WHITE LIKE SNOW AND RIMMED WITH
 GOLD FIRE
 ALL AROUND, ITS EYES TWO POINTED FLAMES.

KING SANK DOWN UPON THE GROUND AND BEGAN TO
 MOAN.
 HE HAD NEVER KNOWN REAL LOVE. HE IMAGINED HIMSELF
 DEAD.
 THE HEAT WAS LIKE A DEAD HAND ON THE FACE.

KING THOUGHT: —
 WHEN EVERYTHING IS FINALLY DEAD,
 RELIEF FROM THIS HEAT, THIS PAIN WILL COME.
 PERHAPS THE PONDS WILL FILL UP AGAIN.
 THE SUMMER PASTURES MIGHT COME BACK WITH RAIN. —

KING TOOK SOME ROPE FROM HIS BELT AND TIED IT TO A
 DOOR POST
 ABOVE HIS HEAD, AND WATCHED THE RAFTERS FALL. HE
 LOWERED THE ROPE AND
 PLACED IT ABOUT HIS NECK AND LAY QUITE STILL. BERTHA
 HAD TRIED TO HANG HER-
 SELF WITH HER DRESS. BERTHA'S DRESS WAS VERY LONG. IT
 WILL GROW LONGER
 AND LONGER AS WE FUCK HE HAD SAID TO BERTHA. WHAT
 WILL? SAID BERTHA.
 AND THEN THE BARN CAVED IN. IN THE EARLY DAWN WITH
 THE HEMP ROPE ABOUT

HIS NECK IN THE FLAMING STAIRWELL OF SWALLOW BARN,
THE HORSE
WAS BURNING ALL AROUND AS IF IT HAD JUST BEEN LIT.
ITS WHITE COAT HAD A FRINGE OF FIRE, RED FLAMES, THE
FLAMES WERE RISING — — —