

*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 — — —