

“Let us be free, be air!” The poetic origin of Swifts

The Bethlehem Gadfly Environment, Swifts January 3, 2021

🌿 Latest in a series of posts on the Swifts 🌿

“How could we throw them away”

Matilda Snyder



The campaign to save our Bethlehem Swifts has begun.

Won't you join with us and contribute?

Click [here](#) for the GoFundMe page.

Swifts

Spring comes little, a little. All April it rains.

The new leaves stick in their fists; new ferns still fiddleheads.

But one day the swifts are back. Face to the sun like a child

You shout, ‘The swifts are back!’

Sure enough, bolt nocks bow to carry one sky-scyther

Two hundred miles an hour across fullblown windfields.

Swereee swereee. Another. And another.

It's the cut air falling in shrieks on our chimneys and roofs.

The next day, a fleet of high crosses cruises in ether.

These are the air pilgrims, pilots of air rivers.

But a shift of wing, and they're earth-skimmers, daggers

Skilful in guiding the throw of themselves away from themselves.

Quick flutter, a scimitar upsweep, out of danger of touch, for

Earth is forbidden to them, water's forbidden to them,

All air and fire, little owlsh ascetics, they outfly storms,

They rush to the pillars of altitude, the thermal fountains.

Here is a legend of swifts, a parable —

When the Great Raven bent over earth to create the birds,

The swifts were ungrateful. They were small muddy things

Like shoes, with long legs and short wings,

So they took themselves off to the mountains to sulk.

And they stayed there. 'Well,' said the Raven, after years of this,

I will give you the sky. You can have the whole sky

On condition that you give up rest.'

'Yes, yes,' screamed the swifts, 'We abhor rest.

We detest the filth of growth, the sweat of sleep,

Soft nests in the wet fields, slimehold of worms.

Let us be free, be air!'

So the Raven took their legs and bound them into their bodies.

He bent their wings like boomerangs, honed them like knives.

He streamlined their feathers and stripped them of velvet.

Then he released them, *Never to Return*

Inscribed on their feet and wings. And so

We have swifts, though in reality, not parables but

Bolts in the world's need: swift

Swifts, not in punishment, not in ecstasy, simply

Sleepers over oceans in the mill of the world's breathing.

The grace to say they live in another firmament.

A way to say the miracle will not occur,

And watch the miracle.

Anne Stevenson

Poet Laureate for the Swifts



Listen to Jennie Gilrain

introduce

commentary by **Matilda Snyder**.

Save our Bethlehem Swifts on Gadfly:

ref: **Bethlehem's dolphins of the sky**

ref: **Gilrain gets scared**

ref: **The Noble family: "We will do everything we can to make sure that these birds are protected"**

ref: **Saving the Bethlehem Swifts: this is a worthy cause”**

ref: **Gilrain on the nest . . . hatching a plan**

ref: **When renovation turns to conservation**

ref: **S.O.S. GoFundMe page now available**

The Bethlehem Gadfly