



a VISITATION of
SWALLOWES
Emma Gilberthorpe

Barn Swallow.

When Walter Almond made up his mind to do something, that was it, he was going to do it. No matter what. So when Walter made up his mind to go back to school at the ripe old age of 29, nothing in this world was going to stop him. He had a goal, and by God, he was going to reach it. And so it was that, on a rather chilly but splendidly bright September morning of 1959, Walter Almond arose exceedingly early to milk the cows before packing a cob of bread and triangle of cheese into a rather old satchel, sliding into his father's Wellington boots and setting off down the hill to the school on the other side of the village. Walter arrived at the blue, cast iron gates of Whitlingham Primary precisely one hour early (a ritual he'd inherited from his parents and that he himself practiced with habitual accuracy until he departed this earth precisely, his wife claimed, one hour before the good Lord intended to take him). He had been there before, of course, but the events of the intervening years had changed both Walter and the school indelibly. But on that day, the past evaporated into the cool morning air, and all that mattered was that exact moment. The right here. The right in front of him. Walter was suddenly consumed by an overwhelming sense of hope and the propitious feeling that everything was going to be alright.

Walter turned his body without moving his feet and regarded the wall behind him. It appeared to be shorter now. Shrunken by time. But it was the very same wall that Arthur Moleshill had pushed his tinsplate motorcar along, and beyond it was the very same playground that he and Arthur had raced up and down on. He was enjoying his memory when the old Headmaster sidled up beside him like a great winged bat, the black robes of academia flowing about him like a billowing storm cloud.

"Ah, Almond," he said to his newest and oldest pupil. "Welcome back." He'd been expecting him.

"Thank you, Sir."

The robes settled on the asphalt floor, and the Headmaster admired Walter's green wellies and the two pieces of his best Sunday suit.

"Come on then," he said, sweeping past him and up the dappled pathway towards the school. "You're very early, Walter." Walter followed the Headmaster through large wooden doors, catching his mutterings as they reached him on the breeze, "Most eccentric," they were saying, "Yes, yes. Most eccentric indeed."



Walter Almond was born in the year of our Lord, 1930, slap bang in the middle of two great and ghastly wars. He entered this world in the darkened depths of a dairy farm that stood on top of a chalky hill in the tiny English hamlet of Whitlingham-Rye. The room he was born in was fiercely partitioned by a pair of heavy brocade curtains placed there in anticipation of his arrival. To the left of the curtains was a waiting bassinet, and to the right, his parents' bed. Walter stared at those curtains every night of his adolescent life, listening to his parents on the other side as they discussed the farm and his future. The curtains were a dark, crimson red, and featured a perennial pattern (in a relief of textured cream) of a milkmaid dancing a jig with a yoke on her shoulders and a young rogue who watched her from behind a tree. When Walter replaced his parents in the marital bed and had only the bare side of the curtains to look at, he missed the milkmaid and the rogue. But he was glad that his children, when they came along, were able to immerse themselves in the couple's idle folly.

During the short time of their acquaintance, Walter and his parents had very little opportunity or desire to engage in discourse. From the moment he was born, he was placed in the bassinet, and though his sleeping accommodation grew, his parents' affection never did. John and Mary Almond were from hard-working stock, a characteristic that allowed little space for affection or love of offspring. The sole purpose for the act of reproduction was, in their eyes, to ensure the wheels of production kept

turning and that the good Almond name lived on. This unwavering dedication to labour made them so oblivious to the world beyond their hill that, except for obligatory engagements at the village market and an annual trip to The Royal Show, their ambitions remained confined to the hill on which their farm stood and to the modest collection of dairy cows that chewed the grass and the cowslips that covered it.

Walter Almond remained an only child and quickly found his place amidst the hive of activity that surrounded him, settling into the cycle of agricultural production with industrious ease. He was a naturally observant child and watched with intrigued precision as his father recorded the monthly yields and listened with meticulous attention as his mother read aloud from the diary of dairy entries and *The Farmer's Wife*.

And so, without either parent even noticing, Walter Almond could read and write by the time he was four. Walter applied the same exacting attention to the more practical activities on the farm. He studied the milkmaids as they perched beneath the cows and teased milk from their udders; he watched how the farmhands weaned the heifers and stacked the hay; how his father filled the churns and loaded the cart; and how his mother collected the eggs and separated the curds from the whey.

Walter Almond astonished everyone with his uncanny ability to comprehend the natural cycle of the world around him. With the innate ability of prehistoric man, Walter linked every breath in the landscape with events on the farm. He drew up a chart, which he kept on the wall by his bed, that aligned the agricultural cycle with the fluctuating shifts of the fauna and flora that occupied the hill. When the conference pear trees at the edge of the yard were conical and bouquet-white, and the horse chestnut that shaded and sheltered the cows in the paddock was in full blossom, the swallows would arrive from Africa, and the new calves were born. When the blossoms fell and the swallows nested in the eaves of the barn, the calves would be weaned. When the young swallows fledged and the fruit began to form, the bullock was instated in the field. And when the pear trees were rounded and heavy, and the conkers fell to the ground, the gestating cows were moved to the barn, and the swallows went back

to Africa. In the spring, the swallows returned, and the whole cycle would begin again. So attuned was Walter to the natural rhythms of the hill that everybody on it, mother, father, milkmaids, and farmhands, would seek his advice before making any decisions at all.

It was another hot August day when Walter's father leant back on the rickety bench in front of the cottage and settled a pipe in the corner of his mouth, "You know what they say, Walter?" he said as he kicked at the ground with his wellie-booted feet. The grass in front of the cottage had turned to dust. It had been a dry year.

"No," said Walter.

"Well," he paused to gaze up into the pale blue sky. "They say that if you kill a swallow, the milk will be ruined. Stained red by the blood of the very cows it's come from." Walter followed his father's gaze up to where a dozen or so swallows gracefully skimmed the air. "Or the cows'll not milk at all." He turned to Walter.

"Did you kill a swallow?" Walter asked.

"Not on purpose, son," his father said, shaking his head. "But they *will* die if we're not careful. If the water keeps draining off the hill the way it does. We'll kill all of them, and that'll be that!" He took a puff on his pipe. "Aye," he said, "We'll kill the buggers if we're not careful."

Walter watched the swallows ribbon through the air and pondered his father's words. Then he made up his mind to find a way to keep the water *and* the swallows on the hill.



As the years passed, Walter Almond became a very adept young farmer indeed. He was gentle with the hens and tender with the calves, and from the moment his feet could touch the floor when seated on a three-legged stool, he was milking the cows. And every year, Walter found new ways to keep the swallows on the hill. He planted troughs around the farm and kept them cleaned and watered, he dug holes in the field and sealed them with waxed cotton cloth, and he made a start on a ditch that ran the

circumference of the hill, certain it would stop rainwater from draining away. Every year Walter counted the swallows as best as he could and kept a very close eye on the colour of the milk.

Then, at noon one fresh September morning, the local pastor put an abrupt and seemingly urgent stop to Walter Almond's industrious activities. Father O'Bryan drove up the hill on a horse-drawn cart and alighted in front of the pretty stone cottage of Almond Dairy Farm just as the Almonds themselves emerged from cowsheds and chicken coops to gather at the kitchen table for lunch.

Father O'Bryan was invited to join them, and it was just as Walter's mother passed him the much-coveted nose of cheese that he informed the Almonds in no uncertain terms that Walter's absence from the local primary school had yet again been noted and that Walter really must be instated in it before the week was out. Walter's eyes lit up.

That night, Walter lay in his tumbledown bed and watched the milkmaid waltz as he listened to his parents discuss his future. He tried his hardest to stay awake and hear the outcome of their musings, but fatigue overwhelmed him, so it was not until the next morning at breakfast that Walter heard the news that the very next day, once his chores on the farm were complete, he would be going down the hill to school. Mother would take him to show him the way. He could come home on his own.

The following morning Walter rose with the cows to complete his chores. He felt a stir in the depths of his stomach as he sat on the rickety bench and swung his wellie-booted feet (Sunday shoes being strictly for Sundays) to wait for mother. He looked up into the pale grey sky and noticed the swallows were gone.

"Ah," he said out loud. "The swallows are gone. It must be time for school."

Mother handed him a cob of bread and a triangle of cheese wrapped in the weekend newspaper, and he settled them into the leather satchel that father had fetched from the attic. Then, with mother in one hand and a churn of udder-fresh milk in the other, he set off down the hill for his

first day of school.

“Everyone will be along soon enough, Walter,” said mother as she straightened the jacket that once belonged to a farmhand and that she had sat up into the night stitching to fit Walter’s much smaller frame. “I must get back. I’ll see you at teatime.”

Walter watched the back of his mother disappear into the village and waited for her to reappear on the other side of it in miniature before climbing the hill back to the farm.

Walter was alone. The schoolhouse seemed quite enormous. Solitary and stark in the cold morning of late summer. He found a stick and drew it noisily along the length of the school wall. He ran around it to keep the naked bits of his legs (between the tips of his shorts and the tops of his wellies) warm. He climbed up on it and kicked at the toadflax that grew between the cracks. Then Arthur Moleshill arrived with his tinsplate motorcar.

“Are you new?” Arthur asked with a look of confused unrecognition. Walter nodded. “I’m Arthur. D’you wanna see my motorcar?” He held the tiny tinsplated vehicle aloft for Walter to see. Walter smiled. His eyes widened.

“Yes, please,” he said.

From that day onwards, Walter Almond and Arthur Moleshill were the very best of friends. They sat together in class and played together in the playground. Mostly with Arthur’s tinsplate car, except when it was confiscated in class because Arthur had been playing with it instead of listening to Mr Hastings spout on about the Plantagenets. On those occasions (which were frequent), Walter and Arthur would race around the playground, making loud engine noises through pursed lips and knocking over Nancy Satterthwait and Martha Hemp as they played hopscotch.

As the days and the seasons drifted by, Walter grew to love school. He loved its simplicity, its rhythmic flows, and the carefree frivolity of its young population. But Walter’s academic career came to an abrupt and untimely end just two months into his second year when the new wireless

in the parlour announced, in grave, tacit tones that - "... this country is at war with Germany."

A few weeks later, the farmhands swapped their wellies for combat boots and ploughed their pitchforks into the hay to make room in their hands for rifles. After just one night of hushed discussion behind the brocade curtains, a few words of which Walter was able to grasp between involuntary fragments of sleep, Walter's parents sat him down at the kitchen table and over the top of a freshly baked loaf and pat of homemade butter, announced that on account of the war, he would no longer be going to school. The farm, they said, would provide all the learning he needed. Mother would school him, giving him just enough skills in reading and arithmetic to balance the books and record the monthly yields. Father O'Bryan was dead by then (from a stroke that took him, rather inconveniently, during Sunday mass), so he was in no position to contest the decision.

Walter's father was sat on the rickety bench smoking a pipe and waiting for rain when his own conscription papers arrived. He placed his wellies in the corner, where they remained until Walter himself could fit into them, and left the hill with his pack on his back and a churn of udder-fresh milk at his side. Walter could still swing his feet when perched on the edge of the rickety bench when his father left, and he was swinging them fiercely on the day the telegram arrived with news of his father's death in the bloodied waters of Dunkirk. The swallows had just returned from Africa, and Walter wondered if they'd bore witness to his father's demise as they'd passed over France.

"How is it that the swallows made it back but not father?" Walter asked his mother. But his mother didn't answer. His mother was knelt in the raw earth, sobbing into it and asking the good Lord 'why?'

Walter was 16 when his mother joined her husband in the castle in the sky. She was young still, but an un-mendable heart had pushed her off her three-legged stool and into a fresh pile of hay as she milked the third cow of the day. She was laid to rest in the pre-paid plot in the village cemetery, next to the uninhabited grave of her husband. Arthur came

along to pay his respects and laid a supportive hand on Walter's shoulder as he laid blossoms from the conference pear on her grave, a ritual he repeated at the exact same time every year. The new vicar confirmed Walter as the rightful and capable owner of Almond Dairy Farm, so the brocade curtains came down, and Walter continued with his daily chores.

By the time the calluses on his hands were hardened to the consistency of a bullock's horn, Walter's days were completely consumed by the demands of the farm. The farmhands who survived the war had returned to resume the duties that the milkmaids had performed in their absence, and Walter dissolved the sexual division of labour that his parents so adored, advocating instead for equality of endeavour where dress (overalls) and footwear (Wellington boots) were wholly dictated by industry. The milkmaids and farmhands melded under the composite banner of Farmer's Aids, and each one engaged in whatever duty their body was best suited to.

Arthur often came by the farm during those years. He'd help out here and there. If there were letters that went unread because of Walter's limited capacity to read them, Arthur would oblige. And night after night, Arthur would try to convince Walter to come down from his hill and accompany him to one social event or another in the village hall.



Now Walter's parents had had very little time for love beyond what they were able to give to each other. Any additional affection for their only child had been taken up by the demands of a life of heavy toil and strictly bifurcated sleeping quarters. But Walter's unfamiliarity with love was formidably challenged on the evening that Arthur's goading finally reached its limit and Walter agreed to leave the hill and accompany Arthur to a dance in the village hall. It was there that Walter became unexpectedly reacquainted with Martha Hemp. Out of pigtails, Martha Hemp, Walter thought, was really rather lovely. And in his father's best Sunday shoes and two pieces of his wedding suit (the waistcoat being somewhat

superfluous for such an outing), Walter Almond, Martha thought, looked rather refined. Unlike Walter, Martha Hemp was very well acquainted with love. In fact, Martha Hemp was positively brimming with it. And she wanted to give all of it to Walter. And Walter, it turned out, was very happy to receive it.

Martha Hemp was also an only child but, on account of her father's crippled leg, had not been orphaned by the war. Martha's more privileged background made Walter an unlikely suitor and one wholly disapproved of by her parents. But Martha was used to getting her way, and it was not long before she marched her father down the aisle with strict instructions to deposit her safely and fully in the hands of Walter Almond who, after being at the church since 6 am that morning, had been waiting patiently and nervously for her at the end of it dressed in the full three pieces of his father's suit.

The Almonds returned to the farm on the old horse and cart, decorated by Arthur and the Farmer's Aids with the newly fallen conkers and a banner announcing the recentness of the nuptials. Walter carried Martha over the threshold, her feet landing firmly and permanently in the late Mrs Almond's Wellington boots, where they remained till her own death at the respectable age of 82.

Martha took to the farm like a duck takes to water, and she thrived as much in the barn as she did in the hen house. The cows responded so well to her gentle grip that milk sales improved, and she sang so sweetly to the hens (who she called 'the mademoiselles') that their laying efficiency and capacity increased. Two children followed in quick and intimate succession, and the brocade curtains were reinstated in the back room.

At the end of the summer of 1949, the swallows left the farm on the hill, and Arthur Moleshill left the village to inhabit a new world of academic enlightenment that lay at the end of an unknown road built to take people in motorcars to Scotland. Arthur wrote to Walter about lochs and castles, and Walter replied when he could, whenever Martha had the time and energy to write at the end of a long day. But it would be quite

some time before Walter would see Arthur again.



Something was missing in Walter Almond's life, only Walter Almond never had the time to stop to think about what that thing might be.

"What is it, Walter?" Martha would ask on the occasions when his gaze would fix on the horse chestnut tree or a far-off nowhere.

"I don't know, Martha," he'd reply honestly.

"A dream perhaps," she'd say with a smile.

Arthur returned in the spring. The pear trees were in full blossom, and Martha and the children had decorated all the houses (theirs, the cows', and the mademoiselles') with sprigs of fresh blooms. The young family was guiding their cows across the narrow lane into the chalky pastures when they were stopped in their tracks by a low, droll hum that had suddenly filled the air and was getting progressively louder.

They all turned to see a snow-white motorcar gliding up the hill like an elegant swan on the crystal still waters of an enchanted lake. The windscreen glass glistened in the bright spring sunshine, and the children strained their necks to see who was sitting behind it. The motorcar stopped at the rickety bench, and out of it climbed Walter's very best friend, Arthur Moleshill. Walter, Martha, the children, and a full herd of cattle headed back across the pathway towards the vehicle. The cows stopped at the pear trees and munched away at the blossoms as the children and Martha headed for the motorcar. Martha stroked the pale, milky bodywork and ran her feminine fingers across gleaming headlights as the children climbed on the fender and stretched their vernal bodies across new leather seats.

Arthur banged his pipe on the edge of the rickety bench before filling it with the tobacco that he kept in a pouch in his pocket.

"Well," said Walter. "Goodness me, Arthur. That's a mighty fine vehicle you've got yourself there." Arthur nodded without saying a word.

"I suppose you're wondering how I did it?" he said at last.

“Well, yes,” came Walter’s reply. “I was rather.”

“It’s quite simple, old chap. I went up to Edinburgh and got myself a degree. It’s the key to everything these days, you know.”

Walter stared at Arthur. “What is?” he said.

Arthur leaned in, “Education!”

Walter pulled his cap from his head, leant back against the cold stone wall of the cottage, and gazed up into the pale grey sky. The swallows were back.

“What degree did you get?” Walter asked, twisting his cap thoughtfully in his worn-out hands.

“Law!” said Arthur. “I was hired by Cannon & Vale before my mortarboard hit the ground. And I bought that beauty,” Arthur gestured to the motorcar that Martha and the children were still admiring, “with my first wage packet.”

Walter ran his fingers through his hair to tidy it and wiped the back of his hand across his brow.

“Are you alright?” Arthur asked, noticing Walter’s silence.

“I am,” said Walter with a sudden and determined nod. And then, “Arthur,” he said, pulling his cap back on his head and leaning his elbows on his knees.

“Yes, Walter?”

“I’m going back to school.” And that was it. Just like that. Walter Almond had made up his mind.



“You must go, dear,” said Martha once Arthur had left, and the children were busy pushing tinsplate tanks through the very dust that Walter’s mother had wept into. “We’ll manage. We’ll get another boy from the village. And the children will help.”

“I’d do the cows before I went,” Walter promised. “And be back to put them out in the fields.”

“We’ll manage,” said Martha again as she rested a gentle hand on top

of Walter's. "And you know what, Walter?" she said. Walter turned to look at his wife. "I think you might've just found your dream."



Two days after his 29th birthday, Walter Almond found himself stood once more in front of the blue, cast iron gates of Whitlingham Primary precisely one hour early, dressed in his sober, second-hand suit (no waistcoat), old green wellies, and very best Sunday hat. His fingernails were scrubbed to the indelible layer of dirt. He was clean-shaven and washed. A wave of hope passed through him as he breathed in a deep, contented sigh.

Walter was given a suitably sized chair (taken from the staff room), but the desk would have to do. At nearly six-foot-tall, most of Walter hovered above it, so he sat at an angle, legs stretched out to one side. It was a good spot, though, right by the window. He could see his hill from there and watch the Farmer's Aids as they delivered milk on the old cart and horse just before playtime.

And so it was that Walter Almond rose with the sun in summer and the moon in winter. He milked his cows and checked his troughs and pools before scrubbing his nails, changing his clothes, and walking down the hill to school. He was meticulous and thorough in his learning, polite in his manner, and respectful in his engagement with his much smaller peers. He learnt his lessons, and his knowledge expanded at such record speed that he graduated with his eleven-plus certificate firmly in his grasp just one year later. He approached grammar school with the same vigour and passed his O-level and A-level examinations in quick succession, completing secondary school after only two years of study. By the time Walter entered agricultural college, his sober, second-hand suit had completely worn at the elbows (from years of leaning on too-small desks), and the material had thinned at the knees. Martha used the redundant waistcoat to patch them up, and the suit got Walter through a three-year degree in only two.

Agricultural college was a revelation to Walter. A conduit to the techniques that his parents had resisted for so long, satisfied it seemed with the more artisanal approach to dairy farming. Walter learnt about advances in breeding and feeding, refrigeration and developments in milking, optimising herd health and foraging patterns, manure and nutrient management, and good water quality. He learnt about trees and bees, soil health and organic fertilisation, and the complex nature of bovine communalism (vowing, as a result, never to separate his cows again).

But more importantly, Walter learnt how to keep the swallows on the hill. His chalky hill, it turned out, devoured rainwater and stored it in its deepest depths. So Walter took classes in irrigation and engineering and, for his final year project, designed a network of pipes that tapped the rich water source below, drew it to the surface, and intermittently leached it back into the soil. The design included an artery of dykes that drew the groundwater into large pools for watering cattle, vegetation, and swallows.

Walter graduated from college just as the swallows were nesting in the eaves of the barn. Martha and the children bought him a new pair of green wellies to mark the occasion, and he slipped into them with undulated pride. Back on the hill, Walter brought in the experts to construct his invention, he planted more trees and brought in some bees to pollinate them. He planted maize and barley to diversify his crop base, and bought a harvester to improve efficiency (Martha hung the scythe above the mantelpiece).

Two years later, the hill flourished, business boomed, the pale blue sky was alive with swallows, and the milk was a healthy shade of white. Walter presented his invention at The Royal Show of 1969 and sold it to an American for a generous sum.

On the first day of autumn, Walter plucked a ripe conference pear from one of the trees at the edge of the yard and munched at it contentedly as he walked his new green wellies down into the village. He sat on the wall outside the car showroom, and when it opened its doors to the public

precisely one hour later, he walked in, made a purchase, and drove it back up the hill. That afternoon, Walter Almond of Almond Dairy Farm sat on the rickety bench as he watched Martha and the children caress the milky-white frame and blood-red upholstery of their brand-new motorcar. He leant back against the cold, grey walls of the cottage and gazed up into the empty pale blue sky.

“Ah,” he said aloud, “the swallows are gone.” He filled his pipe with tobacco and struck a match against the wall to light it. “But they’ll be back,” he said to himself as he took a series of soothing puffs.

Emma Gilberthorpe was born in Cyprus and raised in England and Australia. She is a Professor of Anthropology at the University of East Anglia in the UK and conducts research on the social and economic impacts of extractive industry. Her academic works include *Natural Resource Extraction and Indigenous Livelihoods: Development Challenges in an Era of Globalization* (2014) and *Development and Industry: A Papua New Guinea Case Study* (2009). Emma has worked on a number of TV shows including Channel 4's *The British Tribe Next Door* (2019), and has made a film called, *From the Horse's Mouth: Perceptions of Development from Papua New Guinea* (2007). Her interest in kinship, exchange, sociality, exploitation and inequality are themes that infiltrate and inform her fiction writing. Emma is represented by Jon Wood at Rogers, Coleridge and White (rcwlitagency.com/authors/gilberthorpe-emma/) and has recently completed her debut novel, *I, Victor*.