

Anticipating the return of swallows and springtime

THE air is still this morning, as though waiting with baited breath. There are shoots of growth popping up and the days are welcoming in more warmth and light.

It is Easter time - a moveable feast based on the lunisolar calendar which reflects the ongoing cycles in our world.

Soon there will be a burst of bright colour and a flurry of activity as lambs are born, rabbits scoot across to their holes in the ground, seabirds populate the cliffs, and the swallows swoop down after their epic flight.

Meanwhile, the thrush is now singing its lilting and varied tune, an overflowing melody.

When it comes to perseverance and sheer determination, I never cease to be amazed by the tiny swallow. While small, it has a larger than life journey every year. The task of flying from South Africa to Scotland is no simple feat, and they battle



By Monique Sliedrecht

Northern Drift



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to survive an incredibly treacherous journey over sea and desert, through all weathers.

I have kept their wonderfully-made mud nests in the porch, and am looking forward to when they fill them with some new broods this summer. On the property here at Freswick, a space was cut in the wooden garden shed door, some years ago, so the swallows can always return to their beautifully-built nests of previous seasons.

As friends in South Africa have observed, they wistfully say goodbye to the swallows around March 10. Between then and late April here in the far north, the tiny, but agile creatures are spanning huge distances, travelling over 200 miles a day at low altitudes to reach



Swallows face a long struggle during their annual migration.

their destination as quickly as possible.

It has been amazing to witness their arrival in these gardens on exactly the same day, for many years (April 24) although last year they came two days early. Migration is a truly hazardous time and many swallows die from starvation, exhaustion and in storms.

In TS Eliot's *The Wasteland*, he writes: "April is the cruellest month". I have often wondered about that seemingly harsh view of springtime, with all its life and energy.

As time goes on, I've come to understand this poignant phrase of poetry more deeply.

*"April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land,
mixing
Memory and desire,
stirring*

Dull roots with spring rain.

*Winter kept us warm,
covering*

*Earth in forgetful snow,
feeding*

A little life with dried tubers."

No doubt the poet is evoking that familiar feeling of comfort, self-protection and hibernation, which is familiar from the winter months, which can be so easily disturbed by sudden and painful change.

But TS Eliot was writing in a world that had seen the literal "Wasteland" of the World War I only a few years before he wrote his epic poem. The whole world was still emerging fearfully from the darkness and horror. There were huge challenges, economically, politically and spiritually for Western civilisation.

Springtime in 2021, in a world devastated by the

pandemic, has some of this mixture of desolation and hope, of hiding away yet longing eagerly for a good future.

Growth does not come easy. Transition contains its own struggle - of breaking ground and travelling long distances, literally and metaphorically - in order to birth new life and create fresh pathways. The swallow shows us that growth, birth and all good hopes for the future cannot happen without taking great risks and persevering.

I look forward to when their swoops, chatters, and twitters become part of this northern Scotland tapestry, lifting all our hearts.

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