

Pigeon Fancier

Written for Kelly Reynolds, *Pigeon*, FELTdark, October 2019

Kelly, when you make a work you live and breathe and dance it. This year everything is about pigeons.

You explain to me that humans and pigeons move in duet, meeting in the streets and navigating cities over the generations. You address them as Mr Pidgey Pidgey Pidgey or as 'batman' for their unsung heroics and their grey cape and hood.

There is a public garden called Batman Park in Melbourne that was briefly home to a cheese grater -like pigeon loft, later sold for scrap when the birds ignored that unwelcoming metal home. You write to the City Council and they unexpectedly send you the plan drawings. One Sunday morning we got on the train out of Lisbon, in search of the big pigeon loft in Benfica. We found a dovecote built like a traditional Portuguese building, bright yellow and with a ceramic tiled roof. Hundreds of birds nest in it, only to have it regularly raided by park staff who carry out mass pigeon abortions by smashing the eggs. Pigeon eggs are nutritious, if a little on the small-side for human satisfaction. Squab used to be a delicacy. Your friend Patrick says pigeon tastes OK - but he prefers galah.

Humans used to be close to pigeons when keeping them was a sign of status. Most street pigeons are European Rock Doves that have been domesticated by humans then gone wild anew. From pets to allies, pigeons have played their part in human conflicts and saved human lives. They have carried our words high, extending the reach of our hands, mouths and ears over hundreds of kilometres. I love thinking about my words flying through the air tied to pigeon leg. I imagine a whole poem written in parts and sent to the sky. I would write a poem for a flock. I would send that poem home.

Homing is amongst the warmest of verbs. In 1845, a pigeon belonging to the Duke of Wellington was released off the coast of Namibia from where it attempted to fly to London. It made it 5,400 miles in 55 days only to die in a gutter one mile from its home loft.

In our Berlin studio you grow windowsill gardens by sprouting birdseed in every empty food container. I know you miss home, the garden and growing plants. I know you miss the pigeons you were feeding in the back yard: the way they went from three, to ten, to a flock. You are pigeon obsessed. You search Sunday flea markets for a glimpse of their shape in old photos, ceramic figurines and books. You can say 'pigeon' in three languages - but little else. I order food while you gesture and dance the words *pomba*, *taube* and *paloma*.

You want to dance like a pigeon. You make me try it and you shuffle around the studio. The magnificent discordant coordination of the bird is hard to capture because the head bobs against the rhythm of the body. Movement helps pigeons to grasp their environment; they bob their head to keep the world stable.

Pigeons are a true companion species to humans. You glean YouTube for videos of people making friends with pigeons. The men of Washington Square Park are pigeon friends par excellence; make friends with pigeons and they will climb all over you and share their warm feathered cape. They are gentle creatures and not as gemy as the bad press would have people believe. The men of Washington Square Park have become YouTube stars. They turn to the camera and speak about their broken lives and the pigeons that brought them back into contact with care, warmth and with home.

Sasha Grbich