

## A Pigeon on the Window

A moment earlier, the pigeon had been blustering about a bright artificial lawn, bullying the smaller birds and hogging the seeds scattered every morning by a woman in a grubby yellow dressing gown before she massages her son's pale legs, straps them into callipers and drives him to his begging pitch at the motorway services. The sparrows, tits and squirrels had smartly flitted at a speck growing alarmingly in the boxboard-grey sky, and only then did the pigeon, reflexes slack as old knicker elastic, lurch upwards, huffing and squeaking and flapping, escaping catastrophe by inches.

Now, swooping over the prefab bungalow and barely clearing the neighbouring squat, drab supermarket, stocked by the ships of the port and patronised by their crew – one of countless loops by which wealth is generated – the pigeon cannot tell flight from the onrush of space. She is pure commotion. The quick shadow finds her. Fear floods up from the ancestral place. She surges on, until—

Bang.

The window punctuates one facet of the octagonal dome housing the great bell of the Emblematic Invisible College. The Actual Invisible College is scattered about the globe, its campus an uncharted complexity of back rooms, telephones, nods and codewords. This small palace made of sandstone, set on wheels and with huge wings which span out from its roof and flutter in perpetual readiness, is its symbolic manifestation and a hive mind literalised. It had once been two smaller, semi-detached palaces, one dedicated to thought, the other to action, but an early Prime Docent knocked them into one.

In the instant before the pigeon hit the window, she came beak to beak with another pigeon. And it was this other pigeon, not the falcon, that engulfed her with its absolutely nothing. A retiree from the local hospital, the falcon had protected the guttering, vents and drains while medical staff tended port workers crushed by dropped shipping containers and a general population prone to asthma, arthritis, appendicitis and asbestosis. Her edge over all other birds was gradually chipped away by a diet of breaded fried chicken on foam polystyrene trays abandoned by anxious relatives. As pigeon and pigeon clash, the falcon has already changed course for easy pickings by the bins.

The window shudders in its frame, and this shudder passes through the architecture, exiting as the merest shiver via the four points of contact between wheels and barren ground of the port town, which lies in a groin between blasted hills. There are no trees here, and the soil has been scraped up and sold to gardens in the north, where tulips are the latest sensation again and bunting forever tizzies in the breeze. Standing on a concrete ramp that runs down into the sea, the small palace looks a little like a bathing machine, though there has never been a beach here, and any bathers would be scorched by the mercury that trickles steadily from a local artisanal gold mine. The window glass was supplied by a factory beside a secluded sandy cove hundreds of miles away, where the workers inhabit a trance state as fluid as molten glass so that whole years slide by in a hot, quiet glow and nothing troubles the surface of the panes, the perfection of which has confounded generations of French industrial spies.

The pigeon's wings crumple and she drops, her body snatched up by talons while her life spills as downy contour feathers drifting to the ground, a delicate temporary monument. And she also remains on the window, a perfect impression rendered in oily wax and fatty acid, her beak, outstretched claws and every feather of her breast, wings and tail legible. She becomes icon at the very moment she ceases to be bird.

The bang of the pigeon's breast against the window and the crack of her beak, which compacts the brain, fatally wrecking the vital control centre, makes the College librarian jump; a little wee dribbles out. She has been ignoring her bladder's neural alerts so that she might finish cataloguing a new intake of data. She eats frequent fistfuls of costly imported walnuts to boost selenium levels in her brain, which she no longer trusts to keep on top of these complex processes. Her short-term memory is faltering with age, helped along by a regular quaff or three of fortified wine. 'There should be a port in every girl', they had

crowded as students, raising their glasses and joyously ignoring the future they believed would never come. The librarian will let her underwear dry by body heat alone. Retrieving a bottle of lavender eau de toilette from among the stationery and painkillers in the desk draw, she spritzes her pelvic region. She laminates herself in scent only when absolutely necessary, and is saving up for a new pill that will perfume her from the core outwards, lasting up to three weeks.

She leaves her desk to investigate the noise, recognising that this is a horror film trope. But lately she has come to refuse to accept that she is in a horror film. Having daily to handle data on volcanic eruptions in Japan's Edo period, organised crime in contemporary China, the wavering of late eighteenth-century Swiss assets in response to the neighbouring revolution, the tossing of prophets into pits in seventh-century BCE Southern Levant, flooding in Miami in the immediate future and so on, she is under no illusion as to the horrific probabilities of everyday life. The College will augment this gathered information with its own research. Its wheels will roll it down the ramp to consult the deepest currents informed by whale song and other ancient knowledges, and the wings will raise it up to cross-check with the sunspots and solar flares, whose vacillations of super-heat and relative cool sculpt histories. All current qualities and causes are studied, so that futures might be swayed. But because of this interruption, the librarian does indeed make an error. Two data points misfiled in reverse order is a minor slip, but one that can seep into multi-stage calculations, pollute interpretations and become a problem of any scale. Somewhat predictably, just such a flawed but convenient interpretation will be seized upon by a politician needing to prove that the population's unhappiness clusters around policies that constrain trade.

The Librarian is struck by the ingenuous bleakness of the image on the window – a death aria that simply declares 'here I was'. Using greaseproof paper and a cool iron, she removes the waxy imprint and etches copies onto copper, ebony and gold. The College adopts it as a symbol of frankness – a highly prized emotion – and the Prime Docent guilt trips the new director of the mint into embossing it on the nation's coins. The director's skin will thicken before long in the job, and so there will be just one pressing of these pigeonated coins, which will be smoothed by the people's rough handling and withdrawn by the banks within twenty years. The boy in callipers by the motorway services will jingle and gaze at them, assuming it is allegorical eagles that they bear, albeit the size of tiny hummingbirds. He knows eagles to be scavengers, and wonders what the money is telling him.

Within a hundred years, 'a pigeon on the window' will become a saying the meaning of which lies at the slender intersection of 'a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush' and 'the spirit of the staircase'. A PhD and a musical, each further stretching the already distorted legends grown up around the phrase, will, respectively, promise revelations about the people among whom it circulates but ultimately deliver nothing new, and unleash a sensational new dance which makes onlookers shriek and jump to their feet in astonishment.