

## Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

*Sharon Ankrum*

### **Pigeons and Pandemics in Texas**

10/24/2020

A Friday evening in October: uncomfortably warm all day, but now a cool breeze recalls the ice of winter remembered and lost. I long for New York, need the symphony of color in autumn. Chicago and Oak Park offered a brisk chill, which energized me on my walks in the city. The breeze caresses my cheeks and nose, dim reminders of the days when I nearly ran to the El or subway, thinking I could escape the freeze. No worry of freezing here in Texas.

Behind my home, I wander through beds of greens: the blue green fan of cabbage catches my attention. I'm new to so much intense gardening but learning quickly. Tried compost years and years ago in NYC, and all I got was an invasion of fruit flies. This differs, although we do find bites on leaves from one bug or another. The kale, I'm familiar with. After picking, I run fingers over the long and narrow leaf, which feels jagged and rubbery, the taste bitter – not sharp like pepper – more a flat sour. This is not the curly kale I'm more familiar with, the kind that tickles my fingers when touched. I have looked this one up and found it called Lacinato, which sounds Spanish to me.

The colors please, a bit of autumn in the sun belt: red veins dancing through beet greens, the blue-green of a fan shaped leaf. Remembering the tall, spindly green of corn stalks last summer. These greens would have been dwarfed by the towers of emerald that protected and welcomed corn. Now the short ones rule and offer sustenance. I'm treading on what feel like tiny pebbles, the crunch of it not heard but felt – a grainy massage through the soles of my shoes. What I love about this yard is that I'm always learning something new. Variety prevails with so much to take in. Three raised beds of greens and of the reds of new tomatoes.

Running alongside these beds is the cage with my grandson's homing pigeons, all shades of brown and copper, grey and white. Twenty adults now and at least 4 new ones. Babies the size of an unshelled pecan and yellow as butter. I don't hear their squeaky peeps out here, only when my grandson brings them in to my study (where I find white feathers of the older pigeons he's brought in scattered on the wooden floor). Adult pigeons emit a throaty cooing sound, sometimes for hours. I listen and am soothed when in my kitchen or sitting reading in the chair nearest the kitchen. A singsong coo-coo-coo, similar to the purr of my cat.

My grandson, ten-year-old Wyatt with golden hair, watches over these birds. I'm remembering when the first pair of homing pigeons was born in the spring. They always come in twos, often a few days apart. Standing nearby, I heard Wyatt softly sing Silent Night to the babies. He cooed to them, a soft whisper. These birds have saved him in this time of pandemic, of few friends – actually only one – to interact with. Of school on the computer. He was gifted two or three of these birds on his ninth birthday a year and a half ago, so they were here in March when school attendance ended and homestay began. Wyatt lived through the death of Sarge, his favorite. He survived the escape of two of the birds, who flew away to avoid

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the wrath of a hawk spotted nearby. Wyatt learns from these experiences in a direct, rather than classroom, way.

Wyatt has learned to interact with the pigeons; he guides them as they fly away from and back to the cage. He's responsible for walking into the cage in order to feed and clean (and nurture). These daily chores have become a blessing for this child. Now that he's back in his small school (class of only eight or so) he can inform his peers of the wonders of homing pigeons. And he can recite the names: many of them Greek gods and goddesses because of Wyatt's love of Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson novels.

And there are the chickens. The fluffy and squeaky chicks began life sheltered in Wyatt's room upstairs. Tiny creatures he cared for until they grew enough to be taken outside. There were four, and he asked each of us to name one. Mine was Persephone, who turned out to be a rooster we later had to re-home because of his startling crow. Now in a coop, these Rhode Island Red chickens lay eggs for Wyatt's family. We're lucky that our duplex fit both myself and my son's family nicely. In this time of isolation, I'm blessed to have the contact provided, especially by my grandson.

Wyatt's interaction with the pigeons and chickens is a blessing right now, as are the greens, which he can name for me when I'm unsure. I think having his grandmother, another family member, close by has helped in this confusing time. When days blend into other days and morning becomes evening, Wyatt has carved out a routine and visits my home once or twice a day with new ideas, math problems, and sometimes with baby or grown pigeons. Once with the new rooster, a beautiful black, quite small creature, whose crown of red radiates astonishingly above dark feathers. An Ayam Cemani, an Indonesian breed, Wyatt informed me. For me, the best of this miniature rooster are the feathers covering his legs and dropping down to the ground. I love to watch him walk and think of Chaplin. My mind wanders to a desire to watch one of his films later. It amazes how many movies and books one can consume when alone day after day after day.

There are new trees to enjoy behind and in front of the house: orange, peach, avocado, jujube, kumquat, moringa (also known as miracle tree), lemon. And there are grapes! All this new growth, the trees, the greens, the fruit, captivates me. Just like the pandemic, they're new and unfamiliar. Rather than fear, however, I feel joy in their presence. My son, his wife, and their 10-year-old child have gifted me with all this emergent life. For that, I am grateful.

February 23, 2021

Three weeks since I've sat out here. I look back at notes and see that February 4th offered a false springtime. Then ten days later – on Valentine's Day – freezing weather, unexpected snowstorms invaded, as did hours of no lights, no heat, and finally, if you had water you must boil it on your electric stove that lacked power.

In this yard, wintry blankets covered delicate greens and trees. A bit of lettuce survived in one of the raised beds. Purple cabbage and green Brussels sprouts (and I just tasted bitter leaves of both) survived.

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All the kale: deceased, both the curly and the bumpy lacinato. No tomatoes. The Meyer lemon tree appears limp and sad. I don't think citrus does well in freezes. I remember smudge pots in orange groves in Southern California when I was a child. My father was a builder, and he must have taken us on drives through one of the many groves that eventually became housing tracts.

One cabbage plant out of six or seven under the lemon tree looks to have persevered. Nearby, opposite limbs hang from the matsuma tree, limp leaves droop. These leaves are green, not moving toward a rusty orange color like those of the lemon tree (not so pretty and the fruit of which will be impossible to eat – not because it is sour but because it may not return).

The miracle tree – moringa – is bereft of leaves, just the snake-like trunk remains. One limb left of the main trunk reaches down, around, and back up. The other limb curves to the side a bit but quickly heads straight up and beyond the other. Like two siblings: one of whom took her time progressing while the other shot on ahead. Or two dancers, one following but soon en avant.

Tiny birds climb what's left of the "trunks" of broccoli plants. Most likely titmice or migrating cedar waxwings. These flyers are not much larger than hummingbirds, tiny dancers. They hover around what's left of plants. I imagine there are seeds they can pluck at.

I worried about the pigeons in the storm and cold. Wyatt and his dad closed up all openings in the coop with thick cardboard for the four or five days' duration, and they borrowed a lamp from me to place inside the coop, using an extra bright bulb for warmth. I researched: one pigeon owner in Canada reported his pigeons had done fine even in negative ten degrees. Another mentioned that pigeons did better than chickens, a fact I know pleased Wyatt and that he can add to his talking points when proving to Moses that pigeons are better than chickens.

All appears normal with the flock of thirty-two or so birds. Two hatched during the snowstorm: Blizzard and Tundra, of course. All the squabs did fine. On Sunday, a blessedly warm (above 60°) day, Wyatt brought in to me three-week-old Kulahari, Jr., a third generation pigeon he excitedly pointed out.

Kulahari had been the first pigeon actually born in our yard, so second generation. And now Kulahari had mated with Grizzle (named for the spotted pattern on her feathers). There's a grandfather somewhere in that mix, but I lack memory of which bird it might be. The baby, Kulahari, Jr., lay snug in Wyatt's welcoming hands. He even let me take a photograph, which he never allows, usually wiggling frantically so as to blur or blocking face with arms and hands.

He did allow me this time, actually excitedly, to take a photo of him holding Kulahari, Jr. He then walked over to my credenza and picked up the photo I had secretly taken a few months ago of him sitting lotus at my meditation altar with Kulahari standing calmly on his head. He asked me if I would someday make a copy of it for him. I gave it to him and have now ordered a copy for myself, and a copy for him of the photo I took of him with Kulahari, Jr. Family album!

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Few sounds from the pigeons today. Much looking out at the bright blue day. Three or four, sometimes five, stand in the bump-out. All grey. Three white and one red stand on the ledge, gazing out. I imagine the four or five days in darkness may have been strange and difficult for them. I cannot, of course, know for sure, but I know what it was like for me to have electricity suddenly go out at night and be in the inky dark with no heat. The sound of heat source ending coupled with sudden darkness startled. I definitely heard the heat end, and I was sure I heard sound from the absence of light.

I thought of privilege a great deal during the fifteen hours, from midnight to the next afternoon, I lacked heat and light. Thought of women and men out there who were alone, all over this city and state, with no access to an explanation of what was happening let alone any respite from the cold and dark. No one near to help them understand. A day after the final storm, I made a few phone calls, through a site a Texas politician had set up for needy seniors. One man asked that his daughter be contacted, which I could do. Another wanted for nothing but was thankful for the contact. The site had put together lists of places throughout the state that people could go to for warmth, or food, and maybe water.

I had a son nearby who made sure I had all I needed, and he and Wyatt brought me the warmest and heaviest blanket I'd ever encountered. A wolf graced the cover, which reminded me of wolves and ravens and all the ranger talks my husband and I attended during our Alaskan visit. Ravens and wolves play the predator-scavenger game to the advantage of both; ravens tease wolves by dive-bombing and pulling on tails, ravens use sticks to play tug-of-war with wolf cubs. The birds also lead wolf friends to carrion. Ravens have always interested me, and my husband loved wolves. Before leaving Alaska, we purchased two folk art masks of a wolf and a raven to hang in our home. When we renovated the attic of our Oak Park condo, we placed a raven tile and a wolf tile in the bathroom wall's tilework.

Pigeons aren't ravens, but I have grown to love these birds, and they were protected from the storm by Wyatt's tending to their needs and safety. Unlike nearby dove, which we haven't yet seen in the numbers we've become accustomed to.

Just now, a pigeon sounded brief: coo-ooo-coo. They're so calm and peacefully quiet today. Not much movement, and I've seen no mating rituals. The most interesting sight right now is a white pigeon jumping straight up and down, as if bouncing. Is she playing? Celebrating?

Just past the pigeon coop hangs a toddler-sized pixie wearing red trousers, a green striped shirt, and a pointed green and red hat. Smiling, no, grinning. Surprising in this landscape, except that Wyatt hanged it there after his father found it on the road and brought it home. It definitely belongs in this backyard mix of fruits and vegetables, pigeons, and chickens.

Dry, crinkly leaves fall from the bank of trees bordering the fence behind the pigeon and chicken coops. And speaking of the chicken coop, they're fine. I imagine they missed their days of romping in the grass, but they survived. I slipped them some scratch a few times.

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To the side of the chicken coop sits the dead, I'm sure, avocado tree. The nearby kumquat tree appears to have survived.

I walk to the shed to transfer laundry to the dryer, and returning I see a lovely display in the bumpout of white, flanked by one grey and one red. A pleasure. As is the blue, blue sky this afternoon and the caress of a soft breeze. As I head back inside, I notice how lively the surviving basil and sage appear. They're telling me, "See, we made it through and didn't let you down."