

The Way Home

Artist's Statement

For my Dietrich Grand Challenge First-Year Seminar, Science on Stage, we were tasked with writing a play about a scientific topic. The course, co-taught by Sharon Dilworth and Marlene Behrmann, encouraged us to think and create with an interdisciplinary mindset, and specifically to break down the constructed barrier between art and science. We discussed plays like *Proof*, by David Auburn, a story about the daughter of a brilliant mathematician, reconciling with her father's recent death after being his primary caretaker and finding her own way in life. She reckons with her own mental health, her mathematics career, and holding onto control in her world. The work was one of many examples of amazing plays that paid homage to science—in this case mathematics—while also approaching themes of love and loss with depth and nuance. The science is intertwined and integral to the story, and the story is an essential communication of the science it contains.

The play that I wrote for this class is about a disgraced ornithologist studying pigeons who recently lost his daughter. I was fascinated by carrier pigeons at the time, both in terms of the poetic potential of a bird always able to find its way home, and the scientific literature and intrigue surrounding how these birds physically were able to do this. Of course, for this class, I was able to delve deeper into this science side of things, which in turn, helped me flesh out the themes of loss, family, and “returning.”

The Way Home opens on Matthias Anderson on his roof with his pigeons. He was a scientist, with work published regarding how homing pigeons can accurately find their way back to a specific location. However, his research was halted after the death of his eldest daughter; now, a year later, he is trying to start a new experiment with his pigeons. The play is ultimately about how Matthias is trying to cope with the death of his daughter by throwing himself back into his work, unconsciously trying to hold onto her memory through something they both loved—the pigeons. At the crux of the play, when a pigeon crucial to his findings does not return, the play's themes of nostalgia, loss, and memory collide. The play is really centered on this idea of “returning”: Charlotte will never return home and Matthias and his family will never be able to return to a life before her death. They can remember the past, but cannot return to it. The only way home is to move forward.

The play format for this final project allowed me to experiment with these very intimate and personal themes of loss and family while also exploring the very rich scientific community surrounding a topic I was fascinated with. As someone who is studying English, Political Science, and Human-Computer Interaction, I am always fascinated by interdisciplinary storytelling and communication. I believe that combining people's strengths across all areas of study can lead to beautiful, creative, and innovative ways of creating art, and this play was a wonderful opportunity to work within that space.

- Lucia Shen