

Daughters of Man

“He was not of an age, but for all time.” – Ben Jonson

“‘Be cunning, and full of tricks, and your people shall never be destroyed.’ ...and every evening, when Frith has done his day’s work and lies calm and easy in the red sky, El-Ahrairah and his children and his children’s children come out of their warren and feed and play in his sight, for they are his friends, and he had promised them that they can never be destroyed.” – Richard Adams, Watership Down

Humanity loves to leave behind evidence of itself. A clay pot, or a skeleton, or footprints in the mud; it’s always something. Nowhere on Earth, now, is quite the same as it was before a human got ahold of it.

Not many of these evidences are associated with both the high-brow and the low-brow among humankind. It is easier to sort them into what aspects of the highly complicated species they represent. But every so often, there is a self-portrait. Something that’s both. Something awful, something wonderful. And, two of these unique remnants of humanity, sublime and unholy at once, have dotted the streets of London for hundreds of years: the theatre and pigeons.

The theatre: holy, sublime...the playhouse; unhinged, vulgar. The dove; God’s gift, the symbol of peace...the pigeon: a rat with wings. Humans created them both; sculpting the artform from their perceptions of the world, and domesticating the bird.

And, wherever cities take root, both of them tended to follow.

Pigeons are naturally curious birds despite their distrust of the world around them. They

take interest in what humans do and pay deep attention to their behaviors. And, they have deep pattern recognition skills beyond our wildest imaginations. Pigeons can not only memorize hundreds of human faces, but they can also discern human language and tell cancer patients apart from healthy individuals at a glance. Perhaps, they understand us better than we understand ourselves. And with that in mind, it is not hard to imagine that a pigeon flew across the sky in 17th Century London, saw the shape of a certain building and how its ridges curled upward, and took the Globe Theatre for a human nest.

Strange nest, the pigeon might have thought, perching on the edge of a building for a closer look. It might have focused on the groups of people below and how disorganized they seem from afar. *Why don't the bigger humans simply smack the others around and sit at the front?* And, it would probably scent the scant traces of food and ale from the building next door and momentarily pause to think if these people seemed friendly enough to spare it some. *Not quite, however— what was it in their faces— anticipation? Anticipation for what?* Pigeons may understand humans, but *theatre* is something quite new to them. *Acting*, of course, they'd know. Any animal that knows struggle knows acting. But theatre would have to be *explained*.

The show would begin and the crowd would hush. A pigeon understands hush. *Hush* for a pigeon is the boundary between life and death, that horrible moment of holding your breath as the hawk's shadow runs over you. *Hush* in the theatre world is its own boundary of life and death, but which side is which is yet to be understood.

And then- imagining further, of course, that Daughters of Man could speak to one another- maybe the pigeon hears a voice. A voice that's both as light as an angel and a deep, smoky rumble. *HELLO*, it says.

The pigeon has never heard this language before, and yet it understands it. *HELLO*, the pigeon answers back, dipping its head slightly in greeting.

I haven't seen you before, says the Theatre. *I've seen dogs and monkeys and maybe a bear that one time, but not often pigeons.*

The pigeon thinks of the bear-baiting that goes on a few rooftops over, where the air smells even of ethanol even thicker. Those humans there look awfully similar to the humans here this afternoon. There was that same anticipation in their eyes. *Is someone about to die?*

They die, and they get back up again. Over and over. For eternity.

Eternity, the pigeon thinks. A pigeon sort of understands eternity when it looks at a church window and sees its own visage staring back. *You've lived forever?*

No, no theatre lives that long. Some day, I shall go up in flames or fall apart in a flood; the architecture conservationists will weep over my bones, and my sister, who is also myself, shall take my place. My bones will aid her memory. Such is the way of buildings and art.

Oh, the pigeon says, thinking this theatre is a bit of a downer.

You are my sister-who-is-also-myself too, the theatre continues. *I think you understand. You have longing in your eyes. Theatre is all only that, you know. Longing.*

I know longing. I feel it in my bones when I look at the church windows or the cold streets. Once, we were loved. They built us monuments, the dovecotes we shared for thousands of years. Now, we are pests.

To be Theatre is to be loved and a pest at once. These things aren't sequential, you know.

Nothing in Time, as I perceive it, really is. The pigeon does not understand, but follows its gaze anyway, to the stage before them—there's yelling, and rhythm, and beyond that the pigeon can only loosely imagine what is occurring. The theatre, of course, continues on. And, I suppose they are not sequential for you either. ... But there is something else there. We both were created by Man to resemble them, and yet we will never truly be them.

I only wish I resembled Man, the pigeon whispers. Its orange eyes flicker by the light of the stagelamps. The pigeon's pink fingers, shriveled and thinned-bone, clutch together slightly as a woman in the crowd fiddles with her purse. With thumbs, I could do whatever I wanted. They have it so easy. They are so large.

They are so... small, from here, the theatre mentions. It isn't happy about it. And yet they are so fascinating. All I want to do is to fit inside their world, to understand, to be. And yet, I am too large and they are too small. It sighs, its wood boards creaking. I don't have their eyes. I only know how to see from their descriptions of sight. I will never see moonlight the way they can.

... I understand, too. I am sick. I am sick with want, as all pigeons are. I am suffocating in the stench of my own want. I know I was created to be alongside humans, and yet now I shall never be. I can only watch them and speak of them to my squabs, if I live long enough to bear them.

That is how it feels from up here, too. A floorboard creaks as an actor's socked foot presses on it a touch too hard. And, that is the best we can do. We will never be them. But, we understand them in some ways better than they do themselves. We are one and not one.

Hundreds of years from now I think you and I shall be having the same conversation. We will still want to be human so badly. And, we will not be, but perhaps all we can do is live with it.

*Yes. Perhaps it is our earnest striving to be human that makes us who we are. Maybe it is that constant need for something soul-deep and unexplainable and Other that makes us... for lack of a better word, **human**. ... It's not a very good word for it, I suppose.*

The pigeon stops and thinks. It is so dwarfed by its companion it doesn't entirely know to approach it. For a moment it thinks too hard and that singular voice, previously so present in its brain, dissolves into cacophony. Men in poorly fitting jester suits. Prostitutes in the stands. Snarls in the crowd, the scent of rotting wood and fruits' pulp. It is all so much, and its head begins to spin at it.

You know, you are the one they say their God is in the image of, the Globe adds.

I don't know what to do with that information, the pigeon remarks.

Neither do I.

At least you are loved. All their eyes are on you.

Who knows how much of that love is real, the Globe counters. An actor sighs. *Do they love me or the actors? Or, are they in love with being theatre enjoyers? In decades to come, they will all see me as a status symbol. You can only really ever be so loved once you get to that point. Half of them will want to chop me up and display all my parts and explain them. Like a museum taxidermy, chemicaled and thin-boned. The other half will claim to understand every line, and characterize me as either Heaven-sent or a rabid misanthrope.*

This is something at least the pigeon understands. *Yes. Humans always want to categorize things that way.*

And so they call you, at once, a street rat and the voice of God. Because you are something more complicated than that – you are a mirror.

The pigeon, however, only has more questions than answers. It is too human, after all. *Are we born of the same impulse? Or, have we happened to develop separately? Is Man obsessed with recreating itself only to shirk when the representation becomes too messy and like themselves? Will this go on forever? Will you die? Will I die? What shall we do at the end of the world?* (Pigeons are very good at worrying. Worrying saves lives in the city. When you worry hard enough it becomes a vivid imagination by another name. Psychosis isn't psychosis beyond a certain point.) *Why are you so big? Why am I so small? Will they like me? Will they like you? The future scares me, does it scare you too? Was that a bear or a man wearing a rug? Was the Moor mad or was madness cast onto him? Am I doing to you what Man does to me? Why don't you answer? Do you hear me at all?*

The pigeon turns to see the audience spilling out, the air stilling, and the Globe once again returning to its slumber. The world turns as the Globe does not. Too late for that question, now- *how could it ever ask any question?* They will both be gone in the decades to come, and yet they will not be. In the London of hundreds of years hence, in the same breath as now but far beyond even our own time, a shudder has just ran across the backs of another Globe and another pigeon, as if a single ghost, spoke twice.