

The Wild Pigeon

by Nurmuhemmet Yasin

2005.06.27

Translator's note: This story was first published in issue No. 5 of the 2004 Kashgar Literature Magazine by a young freelance writer, Nurmuhemmet Yasin, to widespread acclaim among the Uyghur people. The author has since been detained by the Chinese authorities because of its strong portrayal of a people deeply unhappy with life under Beijing's rule. RFA broadcast a dramatized version of the story in Uyghur earlier this year.

Part 1:

Dream or reality?

Here I am, seemingly in flight in the deep blue sky. I cannot tell if I am dreaming or awake. A bracing wind cuts into my wing—my spirit is soaring and my body is powerful and strong. The glow of morning seems endless, and sun streams brightly, beautifully on the world. Such beautiful landscapes! I climb ever higher as my spirits soar.

The strawberry fields disappear from view, and the world is suddenly broader, like a deep blue carpet spread out beneath me. This is a wonderland I have never seen before. I love this place as I love my hometown—with all my heart—all of it so beautiful beneath my wings.

Now houses and neighborhoods appear below, along with living, moving creatures—they must be the humans whom my mother warned me to avoid. Maybe my mother has grown old. They don't look dangerous to me—how could such creatures, who crawl so slowly on the Earth, be more powerful than birds who soar through the skies?

Perhaps I am wrong, but they don't look so terrible. My mother has always told me they are treacherous, scheming creatures who would as soon trap and cage us as they would look at us. How can that be? Perhaps I am not bright enough to understand this. Suddenly I am overcome with the desire to see and know these humans, and I fly lower, hovering above them and seeing everything more clearly. And always my mother says to me: "Mankind's tricks are legion; their schemes are hidden in their bellies; be sure that you do not make carelessness your jailer."

Suddenly I know that I want to see these schemes of mankind. Why would they hide them in their bellies? This is impossible for me to understand.

The descent

I descend gradually, hovering in the air above the dwelling-places. The things below are now very clear to me. I can see people, their cows, their sheep and chickens, and many other things I've never seen before. A group of pigeons is flying around, with some of them perched on a branch.

I drop down to join in their conversation—or is to have a rest? I can't remember clearly now. My feelings at the time were quite confused. But I want very much to know more about their lives.

"Where are you from?" one pigeon asks me. He is older than the rest, but I cannot tell for sure if he is the leader of this group. Anyway, I am not one of them, so his position is not that important to me. And so I answer simply: "I am from the strawberry shoal."

The pigeon's tale begins

"I heard about that place from my grandpa—our ancestors also come from there," he replies. "But I thought it was quite far away—and that it would take months to fly here from there. We cannot fly so far. Perhaps you are lost?"

Was he so old he couldn't fly that small distance in a few days, as I had done? Perhaps he was far older even than he looked—or perhaps he was thinking of a different, more distant strawberry shoal. If his grandfather came from the same strawberry shoal, we might even be relatives, I think. But to the old pigeon I reply: "I am not lost—I was practicing flying and came here intentionally. I've been flying for just a few days, but I haven't eaten anything since I left home."

What is a soul?

The old pigeon looks surprised. "You must be a wild pigeon," he says. "Everyone says we are not as brave as you, that we think no further than the branches on which we rest and the cages in which we sleep. I have always lived here and have ventured no farther out—and why should I? Here I have a branch for resting and a cage for living, and everything is ready-made for me. Why would we leave here—to suffer? Besides, I am married. I have a family. Where would I go? My hosts treat me well," he concludes, pecking a bit at his own feathers.

"I have heard some say that mankind is terrible," I reply. "They say that if humans catch us, they will enslave our souls. Is this true?"

"Soul? What's a soul, grandfather?" a young pigeon sitting beside me asks. I am stunned that he doesn't know this word, doesn't know what a soul is. What are these pigeons teaching their children? To live without a soul, without understanding what a soul is, is pointless. Do they not see this? To have a soul, to have freedom—these things cannot be bought or given as gifts; they are not to be had just through praying, either.

Freedom of the soul, I feel, was crucial for these pitiful pigeons. Without it, life is meaningless, and yet they seem never even to have heard of the word.

The old pigeon touches the head of his grandchild, saying: "I don't know either what a soul is. I once heard the word from my own grandfather, who heard the world from his great-grandfather. And he perhaps heard of it from his great-great-grandfather. My own grandfather sometimes said: 'We pigeons lost our souls a long time ago,' and perhaps this is the soul that this wild pigeon mentions now—and today we possess not even a shadow of such a thing."

The old pigeon turns to face me and asks, "Tell me, child, do you know what a soul is?"

The pigeons' debate

I freeze, realizing that I cannot begin to answer the very question my words have prompted. Finally I reply, "I cannot. But my mother tells me I possess my father's daring and adventurous spirit...Once it matures, I will certainly know and understand what a soul is."

The old pigeon replies, "That must be your father's spirit in you now. It's not only our fathers' generations we have lost, but the soul of the entire pigeon community has already disappeared. My mother and her family never mentioned the soul to us, either, nor have I used the word with my own children. So perhaps we have already entered an era without souls. How lovely it would be, to return to that earlier time." The old pigeon smiles, and falls into a pleasant reverie.

"Without your souls," I tell him, "generations of pigeons will be enslaved by human beings—who can make a meal of you at any time. Even if they set you free, you will not leave your family and your rations of food behind. You do not want to throw away your resting place, and a small amount of pigeon food. Yet you let your descendants become the slaves of mankind. You will need a leader, but first you must free your soul—and understand what a soul is. Why don't you come with me and we can try to ask my mother?"

I cannot tell now whether it's the old pigeon or myself I want to educate about the soul. Perhaps it is both.

"I already have one foot in the grave," he tells me, "and my pigeon cage is safe. Where shall I look to understand the soul? I wouldn't recognize a soul if I saw one, and I wouldn't know where to look for it. And how will it help me if I find mine? Here our lives are peaceful. Nothing happens, and our lives are tranquil. How can I ask others to give up such a life to find something whose value we cannot see?"

I contemplate the old pigeon's words—which sound wise at first but, on reflection, are entirely wrong. Suddenly I feel ashamed, embarrassed, to find myself holding such a philosophical discussion with these pigeons, these soulless birds. I decide to go and find my mother.

Strange words replace mother's milk

At this point, a group of pigeons descends to the branch beside us. I hear them speaking among themselves, but I cannot understand their words. Perhaps they are using their own mother tongue. We also have some such foreigners occasionally flying to our place. Are they foreign visitors? Friends or relatives of the old pigeon? I cannot tell. Nor can I tell whether they wish to include me in their discussion.

"How are you, my child," the old pigeon asks, pecking at the feathers of a smaller pigeon.

"Not good. I'm hungry," the smaller pigeon replies. "Why doesn't my mother feed me any more?" The small pigeon talks on about pigeon food—I think I hear the word corn or millet, or hemp. They use many different names for pigeon food that I don't know. These tamed pigeons are very strange—so many of their words I don't recognize.

"Your mother is trying to save all the nourishment for the siblings you will have soon," the old pigeon replies. "You have to wait for the humans to come and feed us."

"I cannot wait—I should fly out to the desert and look for myself," the young bird replies.

"Please listen to me, my good little boy. It is too dangerous—if you go there, someone will catch you and eat you. Please don't go." The small pigeon tries to calm its expression. These pigeons all seem to listen to this elder of the group.

Acceptance of a caged life

These pigeons are living among humans who would catch them and eat them, but how they can do this I don't understand. Have I misunderstood the word "eat"? Maybe it means the same thing as "care for" in their dialect. If this is a borrowed word, maybe I misinterpreted it. And yet this is an important word—every pigeon must know it. My mother tells me to be careful—"don't let the humans catch you and eat you." If these pigeons fear being caught and eaten, how can they possibly have lived among humans? Perhaps they have even forgotten that they have wings, and perhaps they wouldn't want to leave the pigeon cage to which they have grown so accustomed.

"So, how is our host?" the small pigeon begins to ask the old pigeon.

"Very well," his elder replies.

"But perhaps our host is like other humans, and would catch and eat us if given the chance."

"That is different," the elder replied. "The humans keep us in the pigeon cage to feed us, and it is right that they would eat us if necessary; it is a necessity for mankind to be able to catch us and eat us. That is the way it should be. No pigeon among us is permitted to object to this arrangement."

Who is the enemy?

Now I understand that "eat" has the same meaning here as it does at home. A moment ago I was trying to guess what exactly they mean when they say the word "eat." Now I don't have to guess any more.

"But our host has spilled all of our food—and the largest pigeon has eaten it all. I cannot begin to fight for the food I need. What can I do? I grow weaker and thinner by the day. I cannot survive this way for long."

"You too will grow up slowly, and you too will learn how to snatch a little food from around the big pigeon there. But you must on no account give away anything edible to others. That is how to survive here."

The pigeons debate the soul

"But, grandpa—" the young pigeon starts.

"That's enough, my child. Don't say any more. Pigeons should learn to be satisfied with what they have. Don't try to argue for what is surplus to requirements."

A larger space

At this stage I feel compelled to speak, and I interrupt. "You have cut away at his freedom," I say. "You should give him a larger space. You should let him live at according to his own free will." I simply cannot remain silent. To live as the old pigeon suggests would destroy all fellowship among our species.

"Ah, you do not understand our situation," the older pigeon dismisses me. "To anger our host is impossible. If anyone disobeys his rules and ventures out from his territory, all of us will land inside a cage—staring out from behind bars for months. We would lose the very branch on which we are sitting."

What exactly is this thing, a pigeon cage? I have no hint, no clue. These pigeons say they are so terrified of landing in the cage, but at the same time they are afraid of losing it. Most perplexing of all is how any of these pigeons could bear to live among men. Have I discussed this with my own grandfather? I don't believe he ever gave me a clear answer.

Instead I tell the older pigeon, "You sound exactly like one them—one of the men. Taking food from weaker and smaller pigeons and forbidding them to resist. Then you try very hard to cover your bad behavior. How can this environment provide for the growth and health of future generations? You are depraved—ignorant and stupid."

"Don't insult the humans," he replies indignantly. "Without them, we wouldn't be here today. Take your anti-human propaganda somewhere else."

How could he fail to see that I meant no harm—that I intended only to help? Perhaps I should explain further.

A dream of destiny

"You have no sense of responsibility—you are condemning others to this existence; you are pushing your legacy to the edge of the bonfire," I continue. I want to go on, to press the same message even more vividly. But suddenly I hear a piercing sound and feel a vicious pain in my legs. I try to fly, but my wings hang empty at my sides. All the other pigeons fly up and hover above me.

"Look at you, stirring up trouble—now you will taste life inside a pigeon cage," one of them shouts. "Then let's see if you carry on this way again!"

Suddenly I understand. The old pigeon drew me in toward him to set me up so his host could catch me. Pain fills my heart. The humans weren't any danger to me—it was my own kind who betrayed me in hope of their own gain. I cannot understand it, and I am grieved. Suddenly I am seized with the idea that I cannot give in—as long as I can still break off my legs, I can free myself. Using all of my strength, I fly one way and another in turn.

"Don't be silly, child, stand up! What is the matter with you?" The voice is my mother's. She stares at me and I realize that I am unhurt.

My mother says: "You had a nightmare." "I had a very terrible dream." I embrace my mother closely, and tell her everything in my dream.

"Child, in your dream you saw our destiny," she replies. "Mankind is pressing in on us, little by little, taking up what once was entirely our space. They want to chase us from the land we have occupied for thousands of years and to steal our land from us. They want to change the character of our heritage—to rob us of our intelligence and our kinship with one another. Strip us of our memory and identity. Perhaps in the near future, they will build factories and high-rises here, and the smoke that comes from making products we don't need will seep into the environment and poison our land and our water. Any rivers that remain won't flow pure and sweet as they do now but will run black with filth from the factories."

Setting out from the strawberry shoal

"This invasion by mankind is terrible," she says. "Future generations will never see pure water and clean air—and they will think that this is as it has always been. They will fall into mankind's

trap. These humans are coming closer and closer to us now, and soon it will be too late to turn back. No one else can save us from this fate—we must save ourselves. Let's go outside. It's time for me to tell you about your father."

She leads me outside. Around us the land is covered in wildflowers and a carpet of green—no roads, no footprints, just an endless vast steppe. Our land sits on a cliff that overhangs a riverbank, with thousands of pigeon nests nearby. A pristine river flows beneath, sending a sort of lullaby us to where we stand. To me, this is the most beautiful and safest place on Earth. Without humans encroaching upon us, we might live in this paradise forever.

"This is your land," my mother says. "This is the land of your ancestors. Your father and grandfather, both leaders of all the pigeons in the territory, each helped to make it even more beautiful. Their work, their legacy, only raised us up even higher among the pigeons. The weight on your shoulders is heavy, and I hope only that you can follow in your father's brave footsteps. Every morning I have trained you, teaching you to fly hundreds of miles in a day. Your muscles are hard and strong and your wisdom is already great."

"Your body is mature, and now your mind, your intelligence, must catch up. Always, always be cautious with humans. Don't think that because they walk on the ground beneath us that you are safe. They have guns. They can shoot you down from thousands of meters away. Do you know how your father died?"

"No," I tell her. "You started to tell me once but then stopped, saying it wasn't yet time."

"Well, now the time has come," she says. "A few days ago, I saw several humans exploring around here. They followed us carefully with their eyes. We must find a safe place before they come here. It was at their hands that your father died."

A proud heritage

"Please tell me, Mother. How did he fall into their hands?" My mother contemplates—her face is sad.

"One day, your father led a group of pigeons looking for food for us. Usually, they chose safe areas with plenty of food. Your father always led these missions—he was a strong and responsible leader. So this time he led the others out, but after several days he hadn't returned. I was terribly worried. Usually, if he found a place with a great deal of food more than a half-day's flight from here, we would move our nest. He would never go so far or stay so long away from home."

"In my heart I was certain he had had an accident. At that time, you and your younger brothers and sisters had only recently hatched, so I couldn't leave you to go and look for him. Eventually, after several months, one of the pigeons who flew out with your father returned. This only made me more certain that that your father had fallen into some kind of trap. Then all the rest of them returned safely—one after another. All except your father."

All the while I expect my mother to wail or lament, but here a brave glint comes into her eye.

"Your father was a pigeon king with a regal spirit. How could he protect the others if he could not protect himself? How could a pigeon who was trapped by humans come back and fulfill his role as pigeon king? The humans trapped him, kept him, and in keeping with the traditions of the royal household, he bit off his tongue. He couldn't bear one more second locked in that pigeon

cage. The pigeon cage was dyed red with his blood. He refused their food and drink, and he lived exactly one week. He sacrificed himself. His spirit was truly free. I hope only that you will grow up to be like your father, a protector of freedom forever."

"Mammy, why couldn't my father find the opportunity to escape like other pigeons?"

Freedom or death

"The humans hoped your father would pair with another pigeon, a tamed pigeon, and produce mixed offspring with her. But he could never have children who were kept as slaves—it would be too shameful for him. Those pigeons in your dream were the descendants of those who accepted slavery and begged for their own lives. Child, their souls are kept prisoner. A thousand deaths would be preferable to a life like that. You are the son of this brave pigeon. Keep his spirit alive in you," she says.

My mother's words shock my soul for a long time. I am infinitely delighted at being a son of such a brave pigeon, but I feel a surge of pride and happiness. My heart feels strong and proud. With all the love in my heart, I embrace my mother.

"Now you must go," she tells me. "I give you up for the sake of our motherland and all the pigeons. Don't leave these pigeons without a leader. The humans are more and more aggressive, using all manner of tactics to trap us. Go now and find a safe place for us, my child."

My wings are wet with my mother's tears. Now the meaning of my dream is clear: that I must go forth on an expedition. But by no means, I think, will I fall into a trap set by humans.

I fly farther and farther away, first along the river and then into the area where the humans make their homes. It is nothing like the dwelling place in my dream, but I am careful—flying higher and higher. My wings have enough power. I hear not human debate, but the music of the wind in my ears.

In search of a new home

These humans are not so strong and frightening, I think. If I fly too high, I fear I will miss my target. If I fly too far, it will affect our migration plan. To tell the truth, I disagree with my mother's migration plan. Our land is on a very high precipice—how can humans climb here when it is even difficult for pigeons? We were here, one after another, generation after generation, living a happy life. Why should we leave now, to run from humans who are weaker than we imagine? Now I am flying over the human settlements. I feel no danger. Perhaps my mother worries too much.

Now the sky is black. Everything around me is going dark, and now the world disappears in utter darkness. Everything disappears into the night, and I realize that I have been flying for an entire day, and I am exhausted. I must rest. I have already explored to the West, North, and South, and still I have found nowhere we can live. I haven't yet find a good place to which we can migrate.

Perhaps I have flown too high. Perhaps tomorrow I can fly East, at a lower altitude. The stars flicker in the sky. How can anyone who lives in such a world of beauty be afraid? Slowly I descend, falling into a tree. Tomorrow I will awaken, but I don't know where. Then I will start again, flying lower in the sky. Perhaps then I will be able to find us a new home.

Part 2

A lyrical voice awakens me, dredges me up from the deep, sweet sleep that belongs only to the very young and to those exhausted beyond measure. A group of pigeons flocks toward me—I hear their voices alongside their beating wings, and I am shocked to see that they look exactly like me. At first they resemble the pigeons in my dream, but when I look closely I can see that they are different.

First, though, I must find out where I can fill my empty stomach. I ask these pigeons where there is a safe place one can find food. They change the direction suddenly, flying away from the dwelling-places. I follow them.

An empty belly

"Where are you going?" I ask a pigeon at the back of the group.

"To the mill house."

"What will you do there?"

"Look for pigeon food"

"Are you looking for something to eat?"

His eyes are icy as he asks me, "So you are a wild pigeon?"

"Originally are you a wild pigeon?"

"Yes, I am from the strawberry shoal."

The pigeon-catchers

I follow them to the mill house where I see large store of wheat covered with straw. The flavor is really sweet, and I think this storehouse looks good—without any trace of humans. The other pigeons look peaceful and contented. I also start to trust this peaceful environment, take courage, and fill my belly.

This is nothing like what my mother described of the outside world. I reach out trustingly for the wheat in front of me. Suddenly, a fierce power is choking my neck. I try to move away, as fast as an arrow shot from a bow, but find I am choking, and an unknown power is pulling me back, just as fast. I try to hide but I cannot—I am pulled down, flying, circling, without direction.

All the other pigeons scatter upward, and I fear I may crash to the ground as in my dream. I fear I am falling into human hands, but no humans are near. Time passes, but I have no idea how many hours elapse. Suddenly, two humans appear, and I think I have been caught—then the chokehold on my neck relaxes.

"This is a wild pigeon," a younger-looking human says.

"Hold him firmly—tie up his wings so he won't fly away," says the other. Together they bind my wings, grasp my neck, and stare into my eyes.

"Hey, this is a great species—it's really good luck," the elder human says, turning me over and over in his hands for a closer look.

'Set him free'

"This wild pigeon is already useless—set him free," says the elder. "Set him free. He has already bitten off his tongue. When you catch this kind of pigeon, you have no choice but to set him free. Usually it's only the leader of the flock who will do this."

"At least let us keep him for eggs," the younger human protests.

"This kind of pigeon—he won't eat or drink if we keep him. He will resist and refuse until death."

The younger human is adamant. "We can't just let him go!"

"All right then, it's your choice. You'll see that I am telling the truth. I once caught such a pigeon and insisted on keeping it—but he lived only a week," says the elder.

The ordeal of the cage

"I will certainly tame it," the younger human replies confidently."

You will never tame me, I think. I will find a way home. I am ashamed of myself for failing to take my mother's words to heart and then falling into a trap laid by humans. I draw all of my remaining strength and feel for a moment that I might fly free. Instead, I crash to the ground.

"Dirty bastard!" the younger human cries. "At least I bound up one wing—I suppose that kept him from flying free."

He packs me into a bag, apparently planning to take me with him somewhere. Perhaps he aims to bind both wings and put me in a cage. I see several pigeons behind iron bars, all gathered at one corner.

"You must have been very hungry indeed, or you wouldn't have fallen into my trap," says the younger human, as he places food and water in one corner of the iron cage. The instant he sets the food down, pigeons flock at the corner of cage, frantically rushing toward it. At this moment, anger burns through me and I wonder if crashing into the bars would deliver a fatal blow to my head and end this horror.

But my wing remains bound—and I am immobilized. I raise my head slightly toward the sun, thinking that in less than a day I have fallen into a trap set by humans. If my mother could see me now, what would she think? I lower myself to the floor.

Neither eating, nor being eaten

In my dream, I see my mother against a deep blue sky, calling to me. My father appears, tall and stately, and I feel proud of him. They call out to me again and I fly toward them—but they retreat. Again I fly toward my parents and again they retreat. I stop flying, and they stop as well. I am thirsty and call out, "Mother, water!"

A human voice shakes me back to consciousness. "'This pigeon is truly stubborn," the voice says. "He has been here five days and eaten nothing." It is the younger of the two humans who first caught me.

"Didn't I tell you that feeding him would be useless?" his elder replies crossly.

"But if he continues to fast, he will die. Wouldn't it be better if I just cooked him now for broth for my child?"

The elder is derisive. "You'd get nothing much from him now and you'd probably fall ill. Just let him go. To watch a pigeon such as this die slowly is too pitiful"

"Setting him free does us no good," the younger man replies.

'Nothing good will come of this'

"Nothing good will come of this in any event."

"We should have made a soup of him immediately," the younger man says. As he tries to unbind my wings and place me on the cage floor, I summon all the strength I have left, thinking I might fly up to the sky. But the wire is too strong, and I cannot.

I want to hurtle toward the cage door and escape, but I cannot. This cage is supremely clever in its cruelty, I think, in allowing anyone caught inside ample view of the freedoms denied to him—with no hope of regaining them.

The air inside and outside this cage are identical, I think, but the life possible on my side of these iron bars might just as well belong to a different universe. Whoever designed such a device was truly an iron fist with the blackest of hearts—determined to immobilize small creatures such as me even though I can bring them no conceivable benefit. By caging my body, they hope to enslave my soul, I think. I want to end my life but I cannot, and this is worst of all. "Heartless humans who killed my freedom," I want to cry out, "either set me free or let me die!"

A familiar smell comes to me, and then I see my mother—her eyes gleaming, anxious, noting in turn my loosened feathers, my broken mouth, my pathetic, twisted wings.

The soul's release

"Forgive me, mother," I start to say. "I wasn't equal to the trust you placed in me. I am not fit to be your son." I lower my head, like a condemned criminal in the dock. Why couldn't I have died before she arrived here?

"You did everything in your power," she replies. "Now you must end this."

"But mama, I cannot," I tell her. "I am a prisoner—without energy, without strength. Much as I would like to die, I cannot."

"That is clear," she tells me. "And so I have come to bring you freedom."

"I no longer deserve freedom," I say. "I am no longer worthy of being your child."

"Then I shall tell you again—I have brought you freedom. You are still my brave child—you must not be forced to live like a slave but must be allowed to die bravely, with dignity," she says, pushing a bit of food toward me.

A high price for freedom

"This strawberry is the poisonous variety—eat it, and it will set you free. Restore the honor of our flock. And remember always that true freedom comes only at a high price. Here, move your mouth closer to me."

I gaze at my mother for the last time. She seems peaceful, and brave. I stretch my damaged mouth out toward her. My beak, my only remaining weapon—an enemy to the humans, it protected and fed me, and then led me into the humans' trap. It is broken now, shattered by my failed collision with the iron bars.

The poisons from the strawberry flow through me like the sound of freedom itself, along with gratitude that now, now, finally, I can die freely. I feel as if my soul is on fire—soaring and free.

I see everything clearly now—the sky is still such a deep blue and the world remains so beautiful, and everything is so quiet and still. A group of pigeons gathers at the edge of cage around me, watching me, puzzled and surprised.

Maralbeshi County
March 24, 2004

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