



Photo by Rachel Liebling

Pigeon Mumblers

Beyond the trees with last year's plastic bags gnarled in their bare branches, and above the still factories on a gray winter evening, several flocks of pigeons flew into the sky. They curved on the slight breeze, then rose over the water towers. Other flocks moved further away into the distance until they were just glances of white, sparks of teal blue, and glints of burned orange. The birds ascended into a crescendo above the city skyline then dipped back down and orchestrated a synchronized return to the buildings they had left. On each of these tar-brushed rooftops stood solitary old men, brandishing long poles at their flocks of pigeons and directing them back into their pens for the night.

"Oh, yeah," my neighbor Frankie Tuomey told me. "Those guys on the rooftops are pigeon mumblers, and they're crazy. I used to be one."

"Yeah," another neighbor, Paul "Dukey" Capobianco said. "Everyone used to do it, every rooftop on the block had pigeons."

Weather permitting, Frankie and Paul are outside, monitoring the people passing by the corner of Union Avenue and North Eleventh Street. Behind them a new apartment complex is building an addition. Down the street, an old paint factory is being demolished. Garbage trucks on their way to the growing USA Waste sites along the East River downshift at the lights, then drive by. Frankie and Paul sit on the bench with their arms crossed over their chests, legs spread, in a way that conveys a sense of propriety earned from living their entire lives on the north side of Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Frankie layers on lots of jackets so he won't get sick, then complains about being too hot. Paul talks tough, out the side of his mouth, but now wears very thick glasses that magnify his eyes and give him a soft edge. They're out there everyday, weather permitting, on this corner

busy with car and foot traffic, sitting and watching as things pass by.

“Now, with the pigeons what you do is fly them in a circle, further and further out,” Paul said. “You fly them so they’s next to the other guy’s, so some of his pigeons join your flock. See then you got a bigger flock, his is smaller. You can sell ’em back to the guy, or you can trade ’em for feed, or you keep ’em.”

“A little like marbles?” I asked.

“Nothing like marbles,” Frankie said. “Some of these guys, like Ralphie the Bug over there, played catch-kill.”

“Definitely not marbles,” Paul said. He shook his head and continued. “Ralphie killed one of Charlie the Horse’s birds, and so Charlie the Horse starts playing catch-kill.”

“Yeah,” Frankie said. “He’d catch your pigeon, hold it up so’s you could see it, yell, ‘Hey, this your bird?’, then, while you’re looking over, he bites its head off, then throws it on the ground. Then there was Anthony, he was a crybaby. If you caught one of his, he’d come begging for his bird back.”

“Don’t forget Junior,” Paul added. “Junior would wait until everyone brought their pigeons in before he’d fly his, scared he’d lose ’em.”

Both men chuckled, unfolded their arms, then re-crossed them. When I asked why they didn’t do it any longer, they shrugged, muttered about getting old. Then I asked them why it’s called mumbling.

“Cause of how you have to talk to your birds,” Frankie said. “You gotta mumble to them.”

“You want to know about pigeons?” Paul asked. “Go see Carmine Ruphrano, he’s got the biggest coop around.”

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All pigeons belong to the same species, *columba livia*, the rock pigeon, sometimes called the rock dove. The dove became a symbol of love around 4500 B.C. in the Middle East because they kept the same mate and procreated frequently. It wasn’t until the turn of this century that pigeons began roosting in cities in such huge numbers. This proliferation was due to perishable food being discarded, and people feeding them. Because of their rapid urban propagation, they became associated with the spread of disease, and are not commonly

referred to as doves, but as “rats with wings.” However, their role as carriers of diseases that might harm humans has not been proven, and pigeons’ similarity to rats lies mainly in both species’ similarity to humans. This is illustrated by the frequency with which they are used in scientific and psychological studies.

Pigeons are often used in studies involving visual perception. They, like humans, are highly visual, and though much of the racing pigeons’ navigating skills is still a mystery, their ability to utilize directional cues such as the sun, stars, and moon in a city or the country, and then make decisions, is uncontested. Pigeons can distinguish recognizable landmarks, and some studies argue that they can sort objects according to perceptual similarity, and even sort objects according to abstract relations.

Japanese psychologist Shigeru Watanube at Kero University in Tokyo assigned paintings by Monet and Picasso to separate groups of pigeons. He conditioned them to respond to the paintings by rewarding them with a hemp seed when the pigeons pecked at a key in response to the slides by their artist. The group conditioned to Monet then pecked for seeds when shown paintings by Renoir, but not to slides of paintings that were not Impressionist. The group conditioned to Picasso responded when shown slides of other Cubists (166). This study might say more about art or education than pigeons, but one of the most famous of all scientific studies, *Origin of Species*, relied heavily on pigeons as well.

Charles Darwin wrote, “...nature gives successive variations; man adds them up in certain directions useful to him. In this sense he may be said to make for himself useful breeds” (36). The finches in the Galapagos might have triggered the theory of evolution, but Darwin chose pigeons to base his study on. His reason for this choice was because of all the diversity of breeds within one species. He also used pigeons to illustrate the impact of the domestication of animals by humans. Darwin began raising pigeons, and noting all the variations within the species. He also joined a few pigeon clubs in London, and wrote of animal breeders:

Not one man in a thousand has accuracy of eye and judgment sufficient to become an eminent breeder. If gifted with these qualities, and he studies his subject for several years, and devotes his

lifetime to it with indomitable perseverance, he will succeed, and may make great improvements; if he wants any of these qualities, he will assuredly fail. Few would readily believe in the natural capacity and years of practice requisite to become even a skillful pigeon fancier. (37)

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“Mumbling is different than racing pigeons. Mumbling is just a hobby. For mumbling,” Carmine Rufrano told me, “you got your triplets, and your flights. The flights are the long-faced ones with white-tipped wings, look, look here.”

His mumbling coop was divided in half. The flights’ cage was open, and the birds pecked around the roof of their pen. The triplets remained in theirs.

“Those on the corner are Denizenos, those blue ones. Look, look,” he demanded, pointing at four birds on the roof. They looked white with black markings. “You might think they’re white, but they’re powder blue.”

“Are those triplets or flights?” I asked.

“Come here,” he said. “Come in this pen, and let me explain this. You got all kinds of pigeons. Your racers, you got fantails, the runts, the pouters. Sort of like how you got Polish, Italian, Irish, and Puerto Rican in this neighborhood. Not too many Irish left. See they spoke English, nobody else did. So’s they got the jobs, and then left the neighborhood. The way property value is going up, bets they wished they stayed, though.”

As property values and rents in Manhattan continue to rise, people are overflowing into the outer boroughs. Rents and property values in Williamsburg, Brooklyn are doubling and tripling every year.

Carmen pointed out the buildings and sites that he owned. The parking lot next door, the apartment building across the street, a few other houses and storefronts on the block. Neighbors couldn’t complain about his pigeons, because he owned all the buildings in the area.

He swatted downy feathers away from his face and continued. “So’s your mumblers gots triplets and flights. Same birds, just a little different. Now you know what some of the Puerto Ricans do? When

they move into a new place they buy a white pigeon and have it fly around their apartment. Then they let it go, and all the bad spirits go with it. It's good luck to have a white pigeon join your flock. But look here, those two, in the cage, those are park rats, they come up here to feed, and I keep 'em separate, then get rid of them."

Carmine grabbed a rust-and-white pigeon that walked by and showed us its tag. It read "The sky's the limit, Maspeth, N.Y."

"All the way from Maspeth," he said. "Look, here's another from someone else's flock that came home with mine."

The tag on its leg read "Sunnyside. Tony. Terminator."

"Is that how you know it's someone else's?" I asked.

"You know your birds," he said. "Another one comes home with fifty of your birds, same colors, still, you know it's not yours."

He shut the door to the nesting bird's pen, and locked it.

"Times have changed, they'll steal your birds now," he said.

"I've heard you've got the smartest pigeons, how do you do that?"

"Listen, how do you get smart kids? You spend time with them. And what did I tell you about the racing pigeons? There are three things—good habits, good health, and incentives."

In his pens for the racing pigeons he kept the females and males separate. He'd choose hens to race when their eggs were 7-14 days old, because they would hurry back to incubate them. Any earlier, and they were weak from laying them; any later, and they would be out of shape from sitting on the nest. The cocks took over feeding responsibility when the chicks were about fourteen days old, so they would fly home faster because of that responsibility. Some races they would put a mating pair together for an hour before the race, then take one out. If it was the cock racing, they might put another cock in with a mating pair. The cocks would fight over the hen, then they would take the hen's original partner out to race, and leave the other cock in there. The one racing would really hurry home. But those were the money birds. Mumbling was just a local hobby.

"Everyone should have a hobby," Carmine explained. "Especially when you're old. I come up here and forget about my aches and pains."

It was quiet and beautiful up on the roof. Traffic was a muffled hum beneath us. The afternoon sun shone against the Manhattan sky-

line, and reflected the golden hue onto the East River. Smoke streams rose from a few factories, and seagulls were flying over and under the 59th Street bridge.

“Why don’t people do it so much anymore?” I asked.

“I own this building, so’s I can keep ’em. Other guys had to get rid of them,” he said. “Everyone in Manhattan used to have them, now nobody does. New people move in, they complain, you gotta get rid of them. Now the new people in Brooklyn are complaining. The old timers who don’t own their own buildings, their families moved away, can’t have ’em. It used to be that every family owned their own house here, and every guy had pigeons.”

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I had a different explanation of the term “mumbling” from Carmine. He said that it was because Brooklyn guys don’t talk right.

“We don’t speak in complete sentences or finish our words,” he said. “So they call us mumblers.”

He doesn’t remember starting with pigeons. His father did it, and his grandfather did it. Every man and boy in the neighborhood had birds, but his kids don’t.

“My son’s a doctor, he doesn’t have time,” he said. “But some evenings, when he was a kid, he helped me with them. But he doesn’t have birds. My daughters are teachers. None of them talk like me neither. That generation is different.”

I told him about Dukey, Frankie, and Charlie the Horse playing catch-kill.

“That’s cause Dukey and Charlie hated each other. They were always fighting. That had nothing to do with the pigeons. Did he tell you about Oddie Madden, the Irish guy from here who used to rackateer with Capone? If you killed one of his boids, he’d send his guys around, and they’d throw you off the roof.”

Carmine picked up a bamboo pole, about twelve feet long, and held it with both hands.

“No, I would never kill pigeons,” he said. “I do this cause I love birds.”

He walked over to the coop and waved the tiplets off the pen.

The flock circled around us, a few feathers fell, their beating wings created a warm wind on our faces. They were stunning birds, the forest greens iridescent, the peacock blues regal, the white sparkling. They circled around us and around us, and then they flew off further, and further, between the church spires and the far-off clouds. Carmine stood there, leaning against the pole, and we all watched the other few remaining mumblers wave their birds off the rooftops. From a distance, they looked like conductors, each leading his own symphony. The flocks rose and dipped in the sky, a silent, strange rhapsody of times gone by.

WORKS CITED

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