

Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

Volume 9 | Issue 1

Article 21

June 2009

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Recommended Citation

Howard, Jennifer A. (2009) "Flock," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 21.
Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol9/iss1/21>

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FLOCK

Jennifer A. Howard

A racing pigeon in love will fly faster to get home to his mate. Fanciers never let pigeon couples race together because they dawdle, landing next to each other in cherry trees to brush the tips of their wings against each other's chests. They detour inside barely open windows on the top floors of abandoned buildings and settle onto windowsills. Touching beaks, they tell each other, "We could live here," imagining their beautiful pigeon babies—feathers a wash of gunmetal and church steeple like him, their backs spotted like new rain on a sidewalk like she is. They plan where they would set their nest, the part of the floor where the sun shines in the late afternoon when they would nap, naked, grappling their feet together to hold on to each other. They forget they even have jobs, that they are supposed to be competing with other birds for a win.

Once fanciers realized they were losing birds to love, they began to fly them apart. They learned to drive them to separate fields in opposite directions. The first to be let loose follows the car, keeps himself eye level as they drive away until he can no longer keep up. Then he books back to where they started. "If we are ever separated," they have already agreed, tucked together one night in the corner of the loft they share with all the other birds, "we'll meet back here." But the fancier should know what he is thinking: "Next time they drive her away from me, we will meet instead at the apartment." Next time, that's where he will go, through the attic window they discovered together. Until she gets there, he imagines, he will pluck insulation from the open sores in the walls and sawdust from the floors and make them a bed. They will spend their first night alone, without being kept awake by the other restless birds, their wings fluttering with dreams.

It is my open window these two will fly through, him first and then her later, both tired from the trip. We will hear them from the upstairs bedroom, your fingertips like feathers in my hair

and my feet coiled tight around your legs. They coo and rustle one floor above us, free from the work of always flying back to the men who own them, but wondering—though not aloud to each other—where they will find birdseed and corn out here on their own. We will hear them together, staring through the ceiling to where we imagined they are settled, our birds, unless this day when they arrive is like usual. In that case, your phone has already rung and you've already left to go back to her. Then, it is just me, alone in the pigeon hideaway and my clothes on the floor, which I will pick up and put on again even though I have no place else to head back to.