

# APPARATUS FOR THE INSCRIPTION OF A FALLING BODY

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*Thalia Field*

8:04

What is it exactly to perform philosophy?

8:35

We arrive at the food court ready to think. Someone polished buildings all night, sandblasted limestone, washed the billboards — we hear they're using prisoners for the labor. It's time to think about the problem again.

8:37

Instead of narrative build-up, what if we have Icarus crawling right into the water — wings on, indifferent to flight — skipping past the story-part to lie down in the ending?

8:39

What about ten thousand Icaruses crawling into the water, wings untested?

8:40

What about a million — convinced just to skip the whole drama, wade in and float there — wet, sinking, unmoved by the sun.

8:43

The people who build large things — cities, monuments, stadiums — find themselves with unexpected trouble. They call on their friends. They drum up enemies. But finally, it comes to thinking about it. Historically, philosophers haven't been in the food courts. Or have they? The life of the mind hasn't exactly been on people's minds. So? Look at life from the "side" of architecture? In point of fact, some of these buildings have a real pigeon problem.

8:46

There's an old man we saw just this morning: suit coat, hat, walking stick. As he stepped between cars, pigeons flurried at his feet;

crumbs. He crossed before we caught his face.

8:48

If pigeons were the only problem, this might be an easy contest to win.

8:50

No one else seems to be here.

9:01

Unlike objects, people's lives reveal meaning when they're over. In other words, wings are fine, but the best way to see where they really got you would be to lie down awhile in the ending. Old men have seen history in all its costumes, and they have seen pigeons on the stage. But at what point is a story told?

9:04

Somehow this is the question we've come to consider as we sit in the food court with our watery coffees, notepads, and an old paperback by Corbusier. We're weighing out a variety of ramifications of the falling body problem. There will be heat produced by falling bodies; this seems impossible to fake. If an entire animal were burned, there would be the measure of its potential energy. A nonfalling Icarus would drown cold from unused momentum.

9:08

In this vast agora there are distant figures polishing counters. There are maybe one thousand chairs and a quarter that number of tables. It's the biggest food court we've ever seen. Scattered umbrellas, nonnative plants, trash stations. But here are old oily pigeons, and pearly ones with a bright look. Many with one foot clubbed or dismembered — by car accidents? Disease? When they take off, it is with a blast of effort and an alarming closeness.

9:17

We saw a pigeon on the ramp as flat as a leaf — a leaflet — just beside the guardrail. People turned their eyes from the clotted feather and bone.

9:19

It's not quite a 'war' on pigeons yet. There is some public opinion to constrain the brutality of government, and we think that's what we're here for. Handguns are not drawn. If employees eliminate pigeons with air-powered pellet rifles, the sports fans get upset. So they say "no shooting on game days." The cheering once scared pigeons off, but it seems they've adapted. On the contest flyer it said owners have tried strobe lights, fake owls, netting. Nothing works, and word is spreading.

9:22

So they advertise a thinking contest and try to bring the problem home.

9:23

Just yesterday a boy placed an injured pigeon at the top of a playground slide, with a capful of water and part of a sandwich. One pigeon or many pigeons, number is marked on the noun in our language. This is what they're working against. When small boys are the enemy, it's hard to draw the right weapons. An unnamed number of cars crosses the ramp. An unnamed number of pigeons receive food. It's a philosophical problem suffocated with anecdotes; where the line between "many" and "a few" is perceived. A group of sparrows finds something worth pecking a few tables away. The "instinct" for order, the tidying up. Is that it? Sparrows don't bother anyone? They hop on and off our tables with barely a mention.

9:28

On the same day, the same pigeon can be treated with indifference, hostility, or friendliness — the latter mostly from small children and the elderly. Imagine a cookie falls to the ground. Several pigeons work the larger pieces into manageable size. It is impossible to tell which response will come — but there are generalizations. Women react as if pigeons insult them. Boys chase them for a good rise. Men scoff. Flying rats. A home consists of a color or smell. During library hours, heaps of bags appear around a few chairs. A public trespass? Restaurants leave food at the back door, heated on steam vents. We've heard theories that say we are the children of space dust. What other kind of life did we know?

9:37

One gets the feeling in this food court that the buildings are watching, but no one can see us. We know, logically, that there are millions of workers, and yet we feel no contact is possible. Where do they eat? We notice a half-muffin on a chair.

10:10

If we were in need of help, we don't think anyone could reach us in time. For what? To avert some sort of ending.

10:14

We saw the flyers around our block, saying come here and think about the pigeon problem, offering a prize, maybe some money, or fame. Clearly someone would like the problem to become our problem. Clearly they want to split us up.

10:18

To start, we consider architecture and pigeons descended from rock-dwellers. Atrium ledges staggered higher than trees. Pigeons don't love trees, but smooth glass can't be comfortable. There aren't many places to sit without being watched, and every few yards a "No Loitering" sign. Covering railings and glass with barbs is unsightly and impractical — shit falls fast and sticks to anything. It seems these birds are social and want to gather where people gather.

10:25

But where do people gather? We can't find trash anywhere, just a strong smell of ammonia and dirty water.

10:30

Another consideration (and this, again, with bad coffee) is that a freely falling body is a repository of force, a pent-up release of velocity in time, the product of the weight of the body and the height to which it would rise from the earth if it were rising from the earth — or raised. But potential energy is more about the "having fallen," which was never a free falling. And in some respects this problem is about potential that has dropped, been dropped, or about the way that the past has a gravity which menaces and pollutes the best intentions of architects. Someone's

work has to kill the bird. Someone's work winds the clock.

10:32

Normal pigeons are not into constant work. Like us, they lounge in sun, bathe in rain. They don't travel far for a meal. They maintain close contacts. Statues to military heroes line the moving walkways. These are what we're asked to consider. Young birds learn to feed from watching older ones hop on and off the bronze cannons near the gates.

10:34

Architecturally, then, we're not experts, and we do live in houses, not a "nomad's camp" or circus caravan, and not being quite of donkey-minds either, we have the capacity to organize thinking along right-angled models, and calculate vested interests inclining toward their own investments rather than those of even the nearest kin or species. This is geometry for the city of tomorrow, as architects conceive it.

10:42

But just to the left, in fact between where we are sitting and the rest of the horizon (not the parking garage ramp or the highway entrance) sprawls exactly the sort of unbuilt field that appears every few days and we haven't much clue what to make of it — the sort that seems to fall outside all planning whatsoever. On the far side of the field a group of teenagers takes turns on short bikes.

10:44

Given the platitude that human life has hegemony over all life, and building follows — what building is really for a bird but a rook, or a pigeonerie? And here is a clue perhaps — that some birds long ago had their own architects — and luxury accommodations in the castles of our European, Egyptian, even Asian forebearers. Pigeons were once every people's treasure. Sultans' palaces were topped with pigeon-holes, and the birds traded as richly as rice or salt. In Europe, vast dovecotes satisfied the birds' needs, with thousands stacked happily near the kitchens. Roman slaves prechewed hundreds of loaves of bread for pigeons whose legs were snapped and feathers clipped; a pampered disability. Antiquity's best engineers couldn't make troughs to water and feed the nests fast enough.

10:52

Then the medieval king Charlemagne decreed pigeons fit only for nobility. If a field-hand even looked on an escaped pigeon, he was punished with mutilation and lost livelihood. Peasants couldn't legally keep pigeons, talk to pigeons, interrupt them from eating the crops, or in any way think about pigeons.

10:59

Early this morning we watched two long-legged spiders swinging in space by the ceiling. They batted each other aggressively — we couldn't tell if it was courting or competition — until one spider bashed the other then dropped with a hard *ping* against a table. It fell about four feet, which may or may not be high for a spider — but the impact was unexpectedly sharp, and had it been followed by an “ouch!” we wouldn't have been surprised. But there was only silence. The other spider briskly carried on in the airspace without so much as a pause. Were they enemies, friends, family, strangers? The end came (it seemed) quickly.

11:10

What if groups of pigeons could be coaxed into the unbuilt field with a special breakfast — a crusty cake — bagged, and taken? Unfortunately this trap would have to be set in daylight when pigeons want to be feeding, not roosting or resting. Judging by the traffic, there would be thousands of cars on the ramps — where the most pigeons tend to gather, jumping on and off the railings expectantly. In early days of animal behavior studies, German scientists wanted to know “Can pigeons count?” The question was really “Do they count?” There seems no end to cars. It would be hard to execute a putsch with so many witnesses.

11:15

A shadow splashes on the floor of the food court and disappears. Edge species like skunks and pigeons watch shadows closely. “Skunk” was once the people's word for smelly. Dormant in winter, rarely feeding, skunks enjoy a strange immunity. When active, they take unwanted mice and insects. Clear carrion. Do more than a man's work and with a gentler disposition. Shadows imply overlapping territories, where one pigeon may soon be subtracted. We scribble “hawk” on our notes. A thousand hawk-

shaped kites suspended between skyscrapers? You'd expect birds circling the unbuilt field, but there is empty air. Could hawks be enticed to grab pigeons for sport? Will wild animals kill on someone else's behalf?

11:16

Mind you, despite good ideas, we won't be doing anything. We're only here to think, and hopefully win something. We'd love a cinnamon roll and another round of coffee. There is no one else here, no line at the counter a half-mile away. We flip for who will go, then gather our coins.

11:29

With one of us off, we admit we may personally know some of the so-called pigeon-people who feed birds and worsen the problem. We write a few names, but cross them off. Like good citizens, we keep to ourselves. If someone opens sacks of bread to excited birds every morning, we wouldn't automatically know about it, but we could. The gardening of steel, glass, and electricity, the landscaping of concrete curved up to parking structures, the seasons marked in greeting cards, this isn't our business. We carry nothing practical with us, only floppy bags at our feet, full to the brim — nothing you'd find in the malls. Edging up, the cars pass into the scaffolding. In this neighborhood, it's not the style, but the scale that surprises. We realize we may be the only ones in the food court all day. Where is everyone? We're not actually very good in the Socratic sense. We don't talk about thinking, don't think up good questions, don't think for a living, don't even really like it. We saw the flyer and were curious. We thought there would be thousands of people here. The invasion of edge-specializers is usually swift and complete, but even squirrels are rare now, unable to cross the roads to scattered, isolated trees. There are thousands where we live, though, so tame they could sit the children.

11:40

At first we only heard rumors — fragments — small and vulnerable populations wiped away when the world slices open its interiors. In some sense, it's true — we're on display — and that's great for those who can use it. But edges are tiring, and all the gate codes, powerlines, security checkpoints, unbuilt fields — tiring. The air smells

sour. There are almost no places for folks to relieve themselves, fewer to bathe. A big tent hangs a hundred feet up, but we're sweating in the cushiony diffusion of weather. We're not sure it's really even outside. A few dogs sniff at the perimeter of the field. If dogs were hungrier, could they round up pigeons?

11:55

We agree the food court might be the lowest form of common space — you can't walk a straight line or sit in groups larger than four — you can't move the furniture or clear an area. We watch our friend weave slowly back to us with one coffee in his hand.

12:01

When we were little, you would never be given coffee without something to eat. A biscuit. A small chocolate. Land too didn't mean what most people think today — a place with grass and stuff. "Land" only meant crops in a field. To land on something was to make it productive. Hard Landing. So a "landscape" — as in, it lands on its feet. Crash lands. "A portion of land which the eye can comprehend at a glance"? Maybe. But first it was the culture of the glance, ground cultivated in rows. A plowed field. Or earth now, or soil. But that's later. After the seeds are turned under, rotated. A land is the well-defined part. To have perspective, to plot the meaning of the scape. Legally it's the definite site — political, visible. My lands. Scot-land. Ire-land.

12:08

We walked across it this morning, but we don't know anything about that field. Not even how to see it — what to see in it, any idea. It's impossible to tell if something is going to happen there, or if something recently came down. How do we tell which way the unbuilt field is headed — to the forest or to the city? It keeps presenting itself to the senses, but we don't know what to make of it.

12:10

Things do happen in their own time. Coffee, for example. We nod gratefully as our friend pours out shares.



12:13

Then crawling into the ending. The having fallen. The laying up. In trying to figure out what is not just the easiest solution, it helps to start with the ending you are trying to avoid. Mobs roused to corner and trample pigeons. This option involves the violence of names and a basic ignorance of history. Pigeons know us, whatever we call them. They can pry their way by memory. Then they live thirty years. In stable pairs. What if someone replaced the eggs in their nests with stones?

12:15

What if someone could shoot them, scare them, tazer them, gel them, poke them, pluck them, infect them, humiliate them, glue them, bomb them, heat them, tar them? Poison, guns, nets, huge rakes, it would be possible. But it isn't yet possible. Why? These birds were cared about once. Then minds changed. Dirty pests. But we're not absolutely sure. So a few "crazy" people — people without big responsibilities — who have little else to love — carry and scatter everyone else's hesitation.

12:28

Maybe the problem started when the revolution came to France. All those pampered pigeons massacred alongside their noble protectors. They weren't birds but symbols of oppression. The pigeons in the dovecotes brutally attacked, and the few survivors fleeing to the cities where they hid above doors — refugees of political action. Forced to fend for themselves in the streets, they kept low profiles, their numbers down. Breaking into roofs and attic crevices to nest, they ate only when people offered handouts or left garbage. Once pampered and domesticated, they suddenly found themselves in a semiwild state — encountering weather and accident — in other words, a world with slim protection. These feral creatures would never again be landed as they had been, and who can forget? These are their descendents, a few thousand generations later.

12:37

We may be sitting here thinking, but we feel unimportant, and though our contemplations may not cause any direct action, is there anything more active than the solutions we are considering?

We're not bitter. People from the past who have withdrawn their affections pretend not to know us. The heights to which they encouraged us, the lofty ideals and unspoken promises — all this potential energy has been released. Old praises, well-worn comforts, even the nonchalance of an idle summer — these things which are gone do not burden us so much as make us think harder.

12:45

What do the people looking down see? Maybe we saw it once? The view from the high floors: rooftops, patents, profits, building vents — even tiny buses, speeding around. The view from board rooms, tax offices. View from Space. Moving at the speed of light. Vehicular mortality just a smudge of data. Evaporating and blowing away like a sandstorm. Bird's eye. We once stood at the top of the architecture, and so we have a good sense of what gets seen there. Lands spread in all directions. And the Plan. The plan in which the body is a plotted point. Everyone in the top floors sees someone else and is seen by no one. Everyone wants to be one flight up. Even those at the very top, who believe completely in their privacy, cannot come off the graph, formed along two axes, one from the buildings to the edge of the trash forest, and the other running up the side of the sky. The lines meet at that tiny person bent over a bench, jetting a handful of seeds underneath. A satellite catches sight of her back, her coat, her shape, is this enough?

12:50

There aren't places to walk here without using elevators or moving sidewalks. We didn't come by car, but to reach the food court took several rides. In fact, the reason we can't stop staring at the rubble of the unbuilt field is that we had to stumble across it this morning. It wasn't there last night, or at least we didn't notice. Even walking on it we couldn't tell whether the dessicated dirt was turned up from the ground or brought in from somewhere else, something like broken concrete. It had practically no moisture, the dust making caustic ointment on our skin and bags. Deep furrows as though vehicles were stuck. It looks to be advancing outward. Some of us have houses nearby, in the stumps and ditches.

12:59

We feel removed from the subject of our consideration. The old environment of the dovecote appears for contemplation, and the mind prepares to think abstractly about past places, in the place of this place which gunks up the senses. There is the potential to fall into thought and out of time — and this, for professional thinkers, is paydirt. But this, for the nonprofessional, might lead us astray. The pigeons have been shown the exit but will not take it. Privileges removed, places they loved and knew — pleasures they were allowed once to adore — blocked. Were we all kings and children of kings? Did we gaze once across landscape we were responsible for but did not work? That we sit in the food court now shows how far we have fallen. This sort of breakfast is not exactly what we were given to expect. This is not really our intended office. Nor our intended coffee. But the distance allows us to contemplate what falling means as a problem. Now we see trash. Urine-stained stairs. Loading docks. We watch pigeons scurry under the table, tacking their eyes left and bobbing right, swiveling their heads before flapping off. Birds leave powder-prints on glass windows where they hit them.

13:10

But what equation governs the potential energy of the bird at rest? Can this potential be conveyed to other birds? It is likely that one potential of rest could become free movement in another body. Is this how resistance spreads? Failure advances with age and becomes increasingly political. The past bird falls into the present — but can this convert to an ending?

13:16

Our stomachs grumble with hunger. Still no one else has come.

13:19

There are not many pigeons who would stop and think like this. And yet, don't they? When they explore the bench bases, or puff their necks proudly — what do we know about their powers of analysis? Perhaps the pigeons are making the most of their people problem. Perhaps they fly toward the sun in bursts of pure reason, only to return to sit in their shadowy caves with their mates, philosopher-kings one and all.

13:24

North America is the only place (other than the Arctic and Antarctic) where rock doves and homing pigeons are not native. Native instead: the passenger pigeons of the continental forests. Narragansett Indians called them wuskowhan, “wanderer.” Sure they moved frequently, but their giant flocks took up the entire space between towns. As towns edged out forests, imported rock doves, who thrive on city streets, took the passenger pigeons’ place.

13:30

Revolutions or not, if people had any recognizable authority — obeyed unquestioningly and without the need for force — then this thinking would be superfluous and someone could simply insist “go away.” But pigeons don’t recognize political authority or speak English. In fact, to a pigeon, it might seem there’s an abundance of inviting opportunities. It’s simplistic, but none the less true, that the pigeons’ abundant love of life and pursuit of happiness is what gives them power. Commuters are not ready for dead pigeons bouncing off their cars. The outcome of this contest may be a massacre, but the architecture will be ruined as well.

13:41

People probably remember the ending of the passenger pigeon story. But people may not know that passenger pigeons roughed-up their own world — denuding a forest in a single day of nesting. This was simply the way these pigeons did things. And when you’re the most numerous bird on the planet, you think you can afford things your way. Flocks in flight cast a shadow a mile wide and up to 300 miles long — and they weren’t moving slowly — sixty miles per hour. For all that power, each passenger pigeon laid a single egg, often broken in the jostling of the crowd. Both parents assiduously fed the surviving squab until the flock departed — leaving the baby alone. Poking at the nests or simply shaking trees could drop thousands to the ground, too fat to fly. If they weren’t killed like this, after two days on their own they would fall out anyway, too lean enough to take off. Anyone could get them at this point too.

14:05

Just as we’re thinking this through, an unmanned cart starts

vacuuming in small circles, escorted by green wagons. It's part of the mystery, we realize, looking up at the gauzy tent. There are 10 million people here somewhere, but no one needs to eat? Irritation sets in as the coffee seeps through our bodies without the accompaniment of food. We look back to our task, uncomfortable on the plastic chairs.

14:07

Their reliance on enormous populations as protection against single predators actually made passenger pigeons easier to kill. Firing a gun at random into a flock would provide a hailstorm of dying birds. Placing tins of sulfur near their nesting trees could “daze and drop” up to 100,000 in an hour. There were no laws or regulations on how, or how many, birds could be taken; the “new” trains and telegraphs tracked flocks efficiently.

14:27

Perhaps they should have simply lay down in the ending. Famous bird massacres aren't well known. At Petoskey, Michigan, 1878, 50,000 birds were slaughtered every day for five months. A few adult survivors tried second nestings at new sites, but couldn't move fast enough. This “harvest” persisted another twenty years, until the last wild flock, the quarter-million passenger pigeons remaining, got routed in a single day in 1896. The last wild bird just walked up to the rifle of a fourteen-year-old boy in Ohio and lay itself down. A while later, the last captive pigeon caught a ride back to Washington, DC, went straight to the Smithsonian, struck one last pose and named herself MARTHA, Last of her Species, dying at 1 p.m. on the first of September, 1914, age 29. EXTINCT.

14:37

We should all go lie down in the Smithsonian and skip the rest of the story.

14:39

We decide who of us should find a bathroom.

14:40

What is a feral life? This kind of bird, once-wild, then tame, now forced out again — this is feral. An “echo” of wild nature, whatever

that means. Feral was once wild, but now just means living wild. We all know something about that. When architects think they are philosophers, a lot of slogans are made. "A town is a tool," "A source of poetry," "A great protection," "A city!"

14:57

We're stuck. Some skateboarders assault the unbuilt field. Loud crunching under the wheels. Dogs in small skirmishes or forays of sniffing. Closer to us, a pigeon coos in amorous pursuit, strutting past with persistent charm.

14:58

Pigeons, we suddenly think, will always try to go home. Egyptian sultans, Greeks, Persians — all established Pigeon Posts. This desire for home-landing feels familiar, and might explain why flies are nuisances while pigeons have betrayed us so deeply: distance over time. Pigeons have been seen hitching rides on subways and buses, knowing which stop to get on and off, making themselves at home. Hatred is inspired and irrational — mixed as it is with dried-up love.

15:06

At our house, we have been trying to relocate an ant colony with its main thoroughfare through our room. Hour after hour for the first few days, we swept the ants into a pan and carried them outside. Then, miraculously, the steady parade stopped, and the ants seemed to have understood something. But the next day we were dismayed to see the same ants joined by larger, winged ones — some other layer of ant bureaucracy come to check out the situation? We don't know — we only quickened the sweeping and relocating. The new ants not only differed in appearance, but they fanned out from the hole in a more committed way — not single file, but in great crowds, heedless, and less organized. More desperate? Again, we can't know. This story has no ending because we are still locked in this daily struggle. We blocked the hole. It reappeared. Some days there are no ants at all, other times hundreds. The landlord left us a thick paste. We've seen what it does and we're trying to hold off on that.

15:10

But most problems don't have landlords and poison paste. The pigeon problem has no direct officer, and the government doesn't provide a point person to handle it. The ad simply said to come here. One of us pours water from a flask into our cups. The next of us takes a turn for the toilet.

15:12

For anyone looking out from the skyscrapers, only those on the lower floors would see us in any detail. The others, living off the earth at an elevation, can't make out faces. With scant experience of the ground — floating in windows on layers of people, on scaffolds of other people's work — edges are still where communities overlap — even vertically — and edge species suffer more. Ground nests are vulnerable from predators, disease, and stress, but nests in the branches are targets of brood-parasites and storms.

15:15

A falling body does not fall in a straight line. It falls in a curved parabola of space-time. In other words, a straight line of space-time is curved, so things don't land directly where they fall. Architects might become more edge-adept if they spent some time lying on the sidewalks looking back up. Taking all this into account.

15:16

We keep coming back to the fact that if the pigeons are not exerting any will which can be controlled, the only means to control them is to control their benefactors; a sustained program of food-reduction. Day one: a few hand-throws of seed. Day two: less. Etc. But how will authorities stop folks from helping pigeons? Close public spaces? Criminalize the association of human and bird? Regulate the sale of bread? Fines? Deportation? New defenders will emerge. Some rich person will secretly donate. Crumbs will fall. How will intention be proved? Special police can lock folks up, disable them. Finally, the government can set up a bogus "Pigeon Feeding Program" to fool the public that they will handle everything — and then slowly starve them — until no birds remain.

15:29

Perhaps if we leave today having thought about it properly, no one

will feel forced to use force. Only those who cannot reason need to be coerced. If people such as ourselves can change perspective — to see, as it were, from the point of view of buildings and monuments — can we really think about a species like a story?

15:35

In the past few days, single ants have appeared everywhere in the house, near each other but not in lines, more on a grid, as though each claims its own part of the whole. They look even smaller than the others, like the very least of ants, the most nimble, perhaps, or disposable. Some new specially trained worker designed to solve their problem with us? This new kind moves fast, erratically, and alone. It is now too hard to sweep and relocate. We feel trumped.

15:48

We read a quote: “All the works that man has achieved are an ‘ordering.’ Seen from the sky, they appear on earth below as geometric objects.” But do these objects feel natural? Who has the right to sleep where, walk where? Maybe pigeons are suffering, or not suffering, the poverties of this inheritance.

15:55

We could propose a sterility program, or just smoke them out, poison their roosts. For accuracy, it’s worth remembering that even Native Americans killed the passenger pigeons for food by burning their trees. Overcome, birds plunged from the branches. Rain of dead birds isn’t an original idea. Melancholy sets in with the feeling that someone you sort of liked is no longer wanted.

16:10

We’re slowing down and hungry. We’ll have to go soon.

16:20

People’s satisfaction hinges on doing meaningful things. We travel in small bands because there aren’t many contests like this anymore. The public is not worth much. People, once political, are now simply manageable. We are free, but not free, to figure this out. Few left to argue with, few to pressure for answers. So thinkers wander around. Or we thought they did. Someone wants the little guy to do the work. If violence would just get things



started, they think, it will all go downhill from there. "Reform" will lead to more reform, and freedom and action disband.

16:35

Because they always fly home, pigeons could be used to ferry messages between soldiers and commanders behind enemy lines. During the Siege of Paris in 1871, pigeons were the sole envoys of information between the city and the outside world. Flown out on balloons and sent home with microfilm in tiny canisters, pigeons brought millions of messages to families and politicians cutoff in occupied Paris. Joyous relief, applause, and dancing, at the sight of a returning pigeon.

16:48

In the first European world war, pigeons served at the front, mounted with cameras to record enemy positions. Trained from four weeks old, they spent their lives in the military. The death sentence was imposed on anyone interfering with a pigeon's flight. Pigeons traveled in aircraft, submarines, tanks, patrol boats, and mine-sweepers. Tossed into the air, the pigeons would flap toward home. Enemy soldiers shot them on sight. Trained falcons hunted them. Many WWI pigeons became famous: "The Mocker" for flying fifty-two missions before getting wounded; "President Wilson" for losing his foot but still getting his message through; and "Cher Ami" the most famous of all, for saving a group of soldiers from being bombed by their allies. The note on his leg read "For Heaven's Sake, stop it!" He got a fake leg, *a croix de guerre*, and a pension for life.

16:51

Orbiting in a space ship, if we let go of our papers and loose change, they would float beside us. In orbit we think it's all weightless, even though we're falling just enough to keep us from flying off at a tangent. We all fall at the same speed, so it looks like hovering. But inertia isn't different (how we feel it) than a free-falling frame in some gravitational field. If everything starts to move, inertia will act just like weight does and pull us down harder.

16:56

In WWII, 200,000 'deployed' pigeons parachuted into occupied

Europe. Of those, pigeon ‘enthusiasts’ had donated 50,000 from their private roosts, including “GI Joe” — who flew twenty-five miles in twenty minutes to save stranded soldiers. Bombers brought pigeons in the cockpit in case they ditched. If caught, pigeons cried out, and then played dead. Pigeons have even been put in nose-cones of missiles to steer toward target ships in forced murder-suicides. Could any of this help rid us of them now? Monuments to their invaluable service are all over Europe. In America, pigeon heroes are on display at the Army Signal Corps museum and the Smithsonian.

16:58

No one has ever figured out how they find their way. Sun? Magnetic fields? Basic ability to ask directions? They have been shown to fly along human roads. For the military, pigeons could fly up to 1,000 miles in two days, often in the dark from mobile lofts. Without much thinking, it seems these pigeons could solve seemingly impossible problems.

17:01

Could we give them sleeping pills? Contraceptive pills? Could we ever be more famous or get more prize money than the most famous pigeons? Pigeon-heroes were pensioned for life. Humans want something and so poverty creeps in. Raised with a view of abundant sky, reared on the smiling hand-outs of parents, children don’t learn properly what it means to want. It looks disgusting to people with money to see others chasing it. It looks wrong for adults not to feed or house themselves. Whose children were they, they ask? There’s always something more to fix. Some small annoyance to remove. Every night, unbuilt fields appear in new places. It gives a sort of vertigo to think of a story backward, lying in the ending, looking upward through time, into the sky where it all started.

17:07

Across the food court a woman cuts quickly from an elevator with a banana-shaped bag similar to ours. She hunches her back at a table closer to the garages. Finally. Maybe we can think this through with some company. Maybe start a dialogue, a dialectic. We watch her for a few minutes.

17:14

Technically, like us, she may not be loitering if she's engaged in something meaningful. Thinking is the most extreme action, a slow moving leap. In a Skinner box, a pigeon shown the word "peck" will peck, shown "turn" will turn. Motivation for food will induce every creative behavior.

17:15

We need to approach the woman, to stretch our legs anyway. We take all our things, afraid to leave them. Our hands stay visible, not to scare her. We're aware of making something happen. This may disqualify us from the contest, but it's a gamble we feel like taking.

17:15

In 1957, after the Korean War, military pigeon service effectively ended.

17:17

The remaining relative of the extinct passenger pigeon is the mourning dove. Ironically, the extinct dodo bird belonged to the same order as rock doves. Ultimately, we conclude the prejudice against pigeons is not technically that — not an irrational fear, nothing beyond reason — it is merely self-interest, and as such other interests can counter it.

17:19

"Are you here about the pigeons?"

17:19

We smile, afraid to ask so directly. Our question is not really our question and sounds dangerous out loud.

17:20

Pigeons retain any learned behavior even if rewarded only one in 10,000 times. They engage in unnumbered counting as part of their unnamed thinking, the unnamed names they insist on, the unnamed name of their home, the unnamed name of their mate, the unnamed number of their flock, the unnamed thought of their thinking. Gifts given, taken away. This creates an extreme form of willfulness. Makes them easy to train. Easy to exploit. So for all the

fake childhood, they had a fake child.

17:21

“They pay a day’s work for thinking about it.”

17:21

Every problem must be stated in a blissful standard.

17:22

“Maybe a prize...”

17:23

No response. She does not show her face.

17:24

A body falling gains properties it didn’t have while resting. It becomes a weapon, able to overcome feebler objects, and gains the power to make an impression. Icarus could fall again and again, but without the great height there is no story. This then, the grave mistake. That impressions can be made without falling. And that the inability to gain momentum from the height of a standing figure prevents us from marking the ground at all. There is no trace, a failure to graph the event, to impact the senses of an observer. On the moon, jumping could for a moment feel like flying, and vice versa. But it’s not really about how it feels.

17:25

“Well, good luck then.”

17:25

It’s also not really about one individual or another with competing self-interests. There are no “selves” in the bureaucratic world, and there can be no selves opposing it. Pigeons aren’t thought to have selves that can have interests. “Cultural Carrying Capacity” is the fancy name for the animal death rate resulting from how willing humans are to put up with them.

17:27

On this side of the food court, the limestone looks especially

deteriorated with pigeon poop. People over here have clearly tried perch-preventions, nesting and roosting preventions, string, wire, electricity, poison, spikes, netting, repellents, grease, trapping, high frequency sound waves, fireworks. But if fed by their human friends, pigeons will survive all this. The problem of the house begins at the stoop. The problem of the street begins at the curb. The problem of the city begins with junk — that stuff we don't want but can't make go away.

17:27

We flip through the book. We have kept very busy, but have we gone far enough?

17:28

"The purpose of construction is to make things hold together; of architecture, to move us."

17:28

As she nears the elevated ramp, the woman hugs her bag to her body and sneaks in a hand. We're not done with her, it seems. She looks at the cars, the empty trash station. She couldn't possibly try to feed pigeons here, could she?

17:29

Have we lost those places we thought we possessed, if only through knowing them a little? Seasons, a lizard, farmers working. No accounting, just the memory of specific ducklings scrambling to a freshwater pond; the time the hurricane killed the trees with salt. Flying home is easier perhaps, if memory makes a difference.

17:30

Where the woman sat there's a wet wrapper with something in it. It is as though all this is a mental problem. And there will be a mental solution. Are we going to eat? The reason, the will, the power of discrimination and judgment — how can philosophy solve the problem of the pigeon? Or the falling body? Well, we're not sure it's going to happen today. We pull the sandwich into pieces. Who will do this thinking if we don't? Someone else will get the prize. Assigned groups of professionals and their computers. There aren't real philosophers to work out these problems because it would be

impossible to focus on thinking of pigeons all by itself. Here we were hoping to get paid for the day, but we never saw where to sign up. “Without plan we have the sensation, so insupportable to man, of shapelessness, of poverty, of disorder, of willfulness.”

17:33

Perhaps we should give the pigeons back to the architects — give them homes again, feed them, hobble them, eat them, let them be. In all cases, it is the presence of an active force of resistance which causes the falling body to appear to have fallen and be done falling. If falling bodies were affected by any other of the body's properties (like kindness, or IQ) then we'd all fall differently. But on the moon, the hammer and the feather land at the same time. The only difference on earth is the resistance. Falling body problems can best resolve when a body is indifferent to motion. Then it accelerates uniformly and no mover is required to sustain it. It can be a dead body or a live body — making falling a state not a process — and rest merely a motion of zero speed. A body, therefore, can have no inclination to move or rest, it can be indifferent to these things. Perhaps that is our best thinking.

17:39

“In actual fact a bird's-eye view such as is given by a plan on a drawing board is not how axes are seen; they are seen from the ground, the beholder standing up and looking in front of him. . . .”

17:45

The rest of the notes are messy. Why is it that if you kick two bodies off a building, the heavier one will move slower, and if you don't kick them they fall at the same speed?

17:46

Someone on one of the ramps, a youngish man, gets out of his car with his hand raised, and an entire circuit explodes in honking and screaming.

17:47

“It must not be forgotten in drawing a plan that it is the human eye that judges the result.”

17:48

We don't live in the sky or build in the air. We can't move into space, and laws which govern large-scale physical and geological things don't mean much to animals in our medium-sized lives. The worlds of living things might be nested in other big things, which themselves are nested in bigger things, higher things, farther away things. But the ground is still where we grow our food, build our houses, sleep — and it's still perpendicular to gravity. This is why to skip the story part, to forget and to rest, to fade — we lie down. But it's also why some of us burn our dead upward in smoke at the end, rather than bury them farther.

17:54

Sirens switched on full-bore join the screaming and honking. We are definitely rounding the dinner hour. Out of a darkening corner of the unbuilt field we watch a small group lope heavily toward the elevators, pause at a dumpster on the ground level and disembark at the food court with crumpled pizza boxes. Glancing eyelessly in our direction, they commandeer tables, piling up bags and carts, disheveled and serious. We assume they too have come to think? They put out notebooks and paperbacks.

17:57

The field is unmapped, its function indeterminate. Is it part of the future? Theoretically. Clouds soaking up the red lights of the traffic, double and disappear across buildings. Lamps all the way to the field switch on. Even if a few more groups show up before midnight, we think the pigeons are safe for now. They can sleep tonight. We've done the best we could with the problem, and feel confident we've identified the salient points. Until their power over the cities becomes too great, we think the pigeons will be able to continue. Then we think thinking will no longer help them.