

WILD PIGEON

BY NURMUHEMMET YASIN

Nurmuhemmet Yasin was detained on November 29, 2004, shortly after publishing his short story “Wild Pigeon” in XUAR’s official *Kashgar Literature Journal*. In February 2005, Yasin was sentenced to 10 years in prison on charges of inciting separatism. Titled “Yawa Kepter” in the Uyghur language, Yasin’s story concerns the son of a pigeon king who is trapped and caged by humans when he ventures far from home. Rather than sacrifice his freedom, the pigeon commits suicide by swallowing a poisonous strawberry, just as his father did years before. In the following excerpt, the wild pigeon has flown down among some pigeons that live among human beings on a farm.

“You must be a wild pigeon,” an old pigeon 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, is 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 word 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?”

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



Photo: Associated Press

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.

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.

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 would not want to leave the pigeon cage to which they have grown so accustomed.

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"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.”

“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.”

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.”

“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.”

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 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.

“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.

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“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. 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.”

“Wild Pigeon” was translated from the Uyghur into English by Dolkun Kamberi, director of RFA’s Uyghur service, and edited in English by Sarah Jackson-Han. The full English translation can be read at http://www.rfa.org/english/uyghur/2005/06/27/wild_pigeon/ and http://www.rfa.org/english/uyghur/2005/06/27/wild_pigeon2/.