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## Martha

gillian harding-russell

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# gillian harding-russell

poetry



## Martha

(on visiting the Royal Saskatchewan Museum)

Just past the plaster crescent-flame of meteorite  
that finished off the dinosaurs near the entrance  
and then at our elbow on the way back from  
the final exhibit with cement simulacrum  
of garbage heaps' electronic apparatus  
discarded for bigger and better, Martha sits  
on a glass-encased pedestal in the aisle's  
mid-stream. A downy creature, her deceased

mate is more spectacular, brighter, purpler  
but Martha shines iridescent garnet, her long neck  
and red irises blue-circled, a dove-grey bird  
with solitary elegance how life-like  
my companion says, but I see no spark  
just the shell of Martha, her spirit fled

when her kindred dwindled, once  
a gregarious bird making nests among  
the eastern deciduous trees, her domain  
as far as the Rockies, so many of Martha's  
kind once upon a time. *Amimi, omiinnii, tourtre*  
*Colombia migratoria* or just wood pigeons boys beat  
with sticks, hunters drove from the bushes

smoke them out with sulphur or dement their birdwits  
with alcohol-soaked grain to catch them live in nets or just set fire  
to nestling bushes cooking their scrawny goslings alive  
for dainty finger foods (no plucking needed). Bird stew  
or potpie popular or as feed for hogs – The birds  
a magenta cloud against the sky

flying in silken V-strings like geese –  
how could there be danger of running out?  
With one side of our face we guard ourselves:  
colder winters killing those migrating north  
too early in the spring or could it be  
logging along the eastern sea border?

Martha perched, looks out mid-air  
at my thoughts, but no lies may be told  
today, how a world-size population  
of birds was reduced

to a population of one: Martha  
coming from large stock and family  
unable to breed in captivity, a spinster  
at twenty-nine years dreaming of a mate  
who'd fluff his tail feathers  
most handsomely and do a winsome drooping wing  
dance just for her. *Kee kee* or more softly  
*keck, keeho*. For this pigeon was also a dove  
and icon of all that was plentiful

that could be lost. Pigeons common  
as sparrows and the dove on Mt Ararat  
was also a pigeon.

\* Martha was the last passenger pigeon and is preserved. She was exhibited at the Royal Saskatchewan Museum during the autumn 2014.

“Amimi” (Lenape) and Omiimii”(Objibwe ) are name for the passenger pigeon, and “tourtre Columbia migratoria” is French/Latin for the passenger pigeon pie.

**gillian harding-russell** was born in Toronto and grew up in St Jean, Quebec, outside of Montreal. She now lives in Regina, Saskatchewan. Between 1986 and 2005, she was poetry editor for [Event magazine](#) and at present works for the [Event Reading Service](#) editorial. She reviews books for many literary journals, most regularly for the [Prairie Fire](#) website. She runs creative writing workshops privately or through the [Saskatchewan Writers' Guild](#). (<https://hardingrussell.wordpress.com/>)

To read harding-russell's excerpts from "Stories of Snow" in *The Goose* go to <http://www.alecc.ca/uploads/goose/TheGOOSE2012Winter10.pdf>

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