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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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