



Requiem for Martha
Elizabeth Kolbert

The last known passenger pigeon was a female named Martha, who spent her final years at the Cincinnati Zoo. Before becoming the last passenger pigeon, Martha had a companion named George. The two occupied a cage ten feet wide by twelve feet long. Whether they ever tried to mate is unknown; like the Washingtons, they remained without issue. Not long before George's death, in the summer of 1910, the Bronx Zoo offered to pay the director of the Cincinnati Zoo a thousand dollars if he would send the pair to New York. He refused.

Martha lingered on in Cincinnati, becoming weaker as she grew more famous. A reporter who visited her toward the end of her life described her as "atremble with the palsy of extreme old age." Her wings drooped and her tail feathers had gone white. Zoogoers were disappointed to find that she barely moved. In frustration, some tossed sand at her.

On Sept. 1, 1914 or perhaps a few days earlier, Martha died. It's been claimed that at the moment she expired she was "surrounded by a hushed group of distinguished ornithologists;" however, as is so often the case, the truth is drearier. Martha's lifeless body was found lying at the bottom of her cage. The zoo director's son delivered it to the Cincinnati Ice Company, where it was frozen into a 300-pound cube. The gelid bird was then shipped by rail to the Smithsonian, where its organs were removed and its skin preserved. The physician who performed the necropsy, Dr. R. W. Shufeldt, felt moved to observe, in his otherwise dry description of Martha's internal anatomy, that she was "the last, the very last, of the millions upon millions" of passenger pigeons that had "darkened the heavens for days at a time."



ECLIPSE

The passenger pigeon was once the most abundant bird in North America, perhaps on the planet. It's estimated that when the first Europeans arrived on the continent, there were somewhere between three and five billion passenger pigeons and that they made up a quarter of all birds in what would eventually become the United States. Early accounts marveled at their extraordinary numbers. William Strachey, an Englishman who disembarked in Virginia in 1610, described pigeons of he knew not "how manie thousands" filling the air "like so many thickned clowdes." Thomas Dudley, of Salem, Massachusetts, wrote in 1631 of pigeons in such abundance they "obscured the light." And Adriaen van der Donck, of New Amsterdam, in 1656 described so many pigeons passing overhead that "they obstruct the rays of the sun."

In their great, sky-darkening flocks, the pigeons made easy pickings. In the seventeenth century, a solitary hunter could bag dozens of birds a day; by the nineteenth, trappers had figured out how to net hundreds of pigeons at a go. One of the last great nesting colonies was sighted in northern Michigan in 1878. News of the flock quickly spread, and so many pigeoners descended on the area that upwards of a million birds were soon slaughtered. By the mid-eighteen-nineties, the only reported sightings of passenger pigeons were of small, straggly groups. A decade later, even these were gone, and a reward of \$300 was offered for information leading to a pair of live nesting pigeons. The reward was never claimed. By that point, George and Martha were probably the only passenger pigeons left.

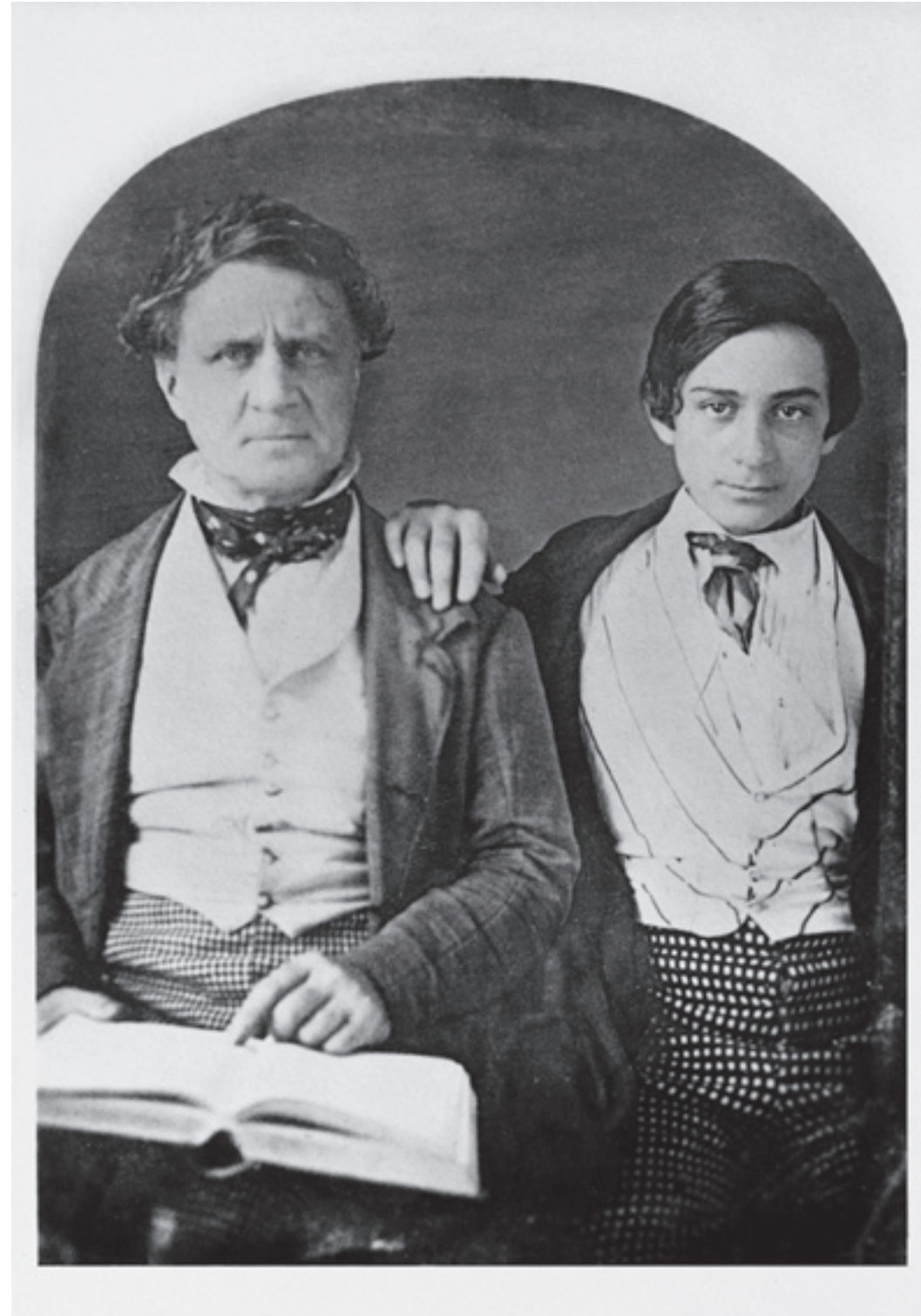
"For one species to mourn the death of another is a new thing under the sun . . . unknown to most peoples and to all pigeons," the naturalist Aldo Leopold wrote in an essay composed in 1947, "On a Monument to the Pigeon."

All extinctions should shock us. Yet even today, as we rush toward a new mass extinction, the demise of the passenger pigeon still represents an extraordinary event. It is amazing that the bird was once so numerous, and that, so quickly, it was gone. Some who have pondered the passenger pigeon's demise have tried to find a redemptive message in it. A few years after Martha's death, the United States and Canada, which at that time was still a British possession, signed a treaty to protect migratory birds, a development that is sometimes pointed to as a signal that the lesson was learned.

But trying to wring consolation out of an extinction is a dubious proposition. The "death of a species" deserves to be commemorated for what it is—an irredeemable loss. Best to use the centenary of Martha's to remind ourselves of this, to recall our responsibility. Or, as the artist Todd McGrain has put it, to "fend off the callousness of forgetting."



Junius Brutus Booth was an English stage actor born in 1796. He rose to prominence in 1817 with his portrayal of Richard III in London and moved to the United States in 1821. He was known also for his intense empathy with animals, which he accorded the same level of respect as humans—a faculty that was largely regarded as insane at the time. He died in 1852 on a steamboat called the Eclipse, heading from New Orleans to Cincinnati.



From *Memorial and Biographical Sketches* by James Freeman Clarke:

“MORE than twenty years ago, being pastor of a church in Louisville, Kentucky, I was sitting one evening meditating over my coal fire ... when a knock came at the door. On opening it, a negro boy, with grinning face, presented himself, holding a note ...

The note the boy brought me was as follows:

UNITED STATES HOTEL:
January 4 1834

“Sir,—I hope you will excuse the liberty of a stranger addressing you on a subject he feels great interest in. It is to require a place of interment for his friend[s] in the churchyard and also the expense attendant on that purchase of such place of temporary repose.

“Your communication on this matter will greatly oblige, sir, your respectful and obedient servant,
“J. B. Booth.”

It will be observed that after the word “friend” an [s] follows in brackets ...

Taking my hat, I stepped into the street. I walked on to the hotel, and asked to see Mr. J. B. Booth. I was shown into a private parlor, where he and another gentleman were sitting by a table. On the table were candles, a decanter of wine and glasses, a plate of bread, cigars, and a book. Mr. Booth rose when I announced myself, and I at once recognized the distinguished actor. I had met him once before, and traveled with him for part of a day. He was a short man, but one of those who seem tall when under excitement. He had a clear blue eye and fair complexion. In repose there was nothing to attract attention to him, but when excited, his expression was so animated, his eye was so brilliant, and his figure so full of life, that he became another man.

Having told him that I had not been successful in procuring the information he desired, but would bring it to him on the following morning, he thanked me, and asked me to sit down. It passed through my mind, that, as he had lost a friend and was a stranger in the place, I might be of use to him. Perhaps he needed consolation, and it was my office to sympathize with the bereaved. So I sat down. But it did not appear that he was disposed to seek for such comfort, or engage in such discourse. Once or twice I endeavored, but without success, to turn the conversation to his presumed loss. I asked him if the death of his friend was sudden.

“Very,” he replied.

“Was he a relative?”

“Distant,” said he, and changed the subject.

It is so long since these events took place that I do not pretend to give the conversation accurately, but what occurred was much like this. It was a dialogue between Booth and myself, the third person saying not a word during the evening. Mr. Booth first asked me to take a glass of wine, or a cigar, both of which I declined.

“Well,” said he, “let me try to entertain you in another way. When you came in, I was reading aloud to my friend. Perhaps you would like to hear me read?”

“I certainly should,” said I.

“What shall I read?”

“Whatever you like best. What you like to read I shall like to hear.”

“Then suppose I attempt Coleridge’s ‘Ancient Mariner’? Have you time for it? It is long.”

“Yes, I should like it much.”

So he read aloud the whole of this magnificent poem. I have listened to many eminent readers and actors, but none of them affected me as I was moved by this reading. I was by the side of the doomed mariner. I was the wedding guest, listening to his story, held by his glittering eye. I was with him in the storm, among the ice, beneath the hot and copper sky. As the poem proceeded, and we plunged deeper and deeper into its mystic horrors, the actual world receded into a dim, indefinable distance. The magnetism of this marvelous interpreter had caught up himself and me with him, into Dreamland, from which we gently descended at the end of Part VI, and “the spell was snapt.”

“And now, all in my own countree, I stood on the firm land,”—returned from a voyage into the inane. Again I found myself sitting in the little hotel parlor, by the side of a man with glittering eye, with a third somebody on the other side of the table.

I drew a long breath ...

Booth rose, and, taking one of the candles, said to me, “Would you like to look at the remains?”

I assented. Asking our silent friend to excuse us, he led me into an adjoining chamber. I looked toward a bed in the corner of the room, but saw nothing there. Booth went to another corner of the room, where, spread out upon a large sheet, I beheld to my surprise, about a *bushel of wild pigeons!*

Booth knelt down by the side of the birds, and with evidence of sincere affliction began to mourn over them. He took them up in his hands tenderly, and pressed them to his heart. For a few moments he seemed to forget my presence. For this I was glad, for it gave me a little time to recover from my astonishment, and to consider rapidly what it might mean ...

I decided that it was a sincere conviction,—an idea, exaggerated perhaps to the borders of monomania, of the sacredness of all life. And I determined to treat the conviction with respect, as all sincere and religious convictions deserve to be treated.

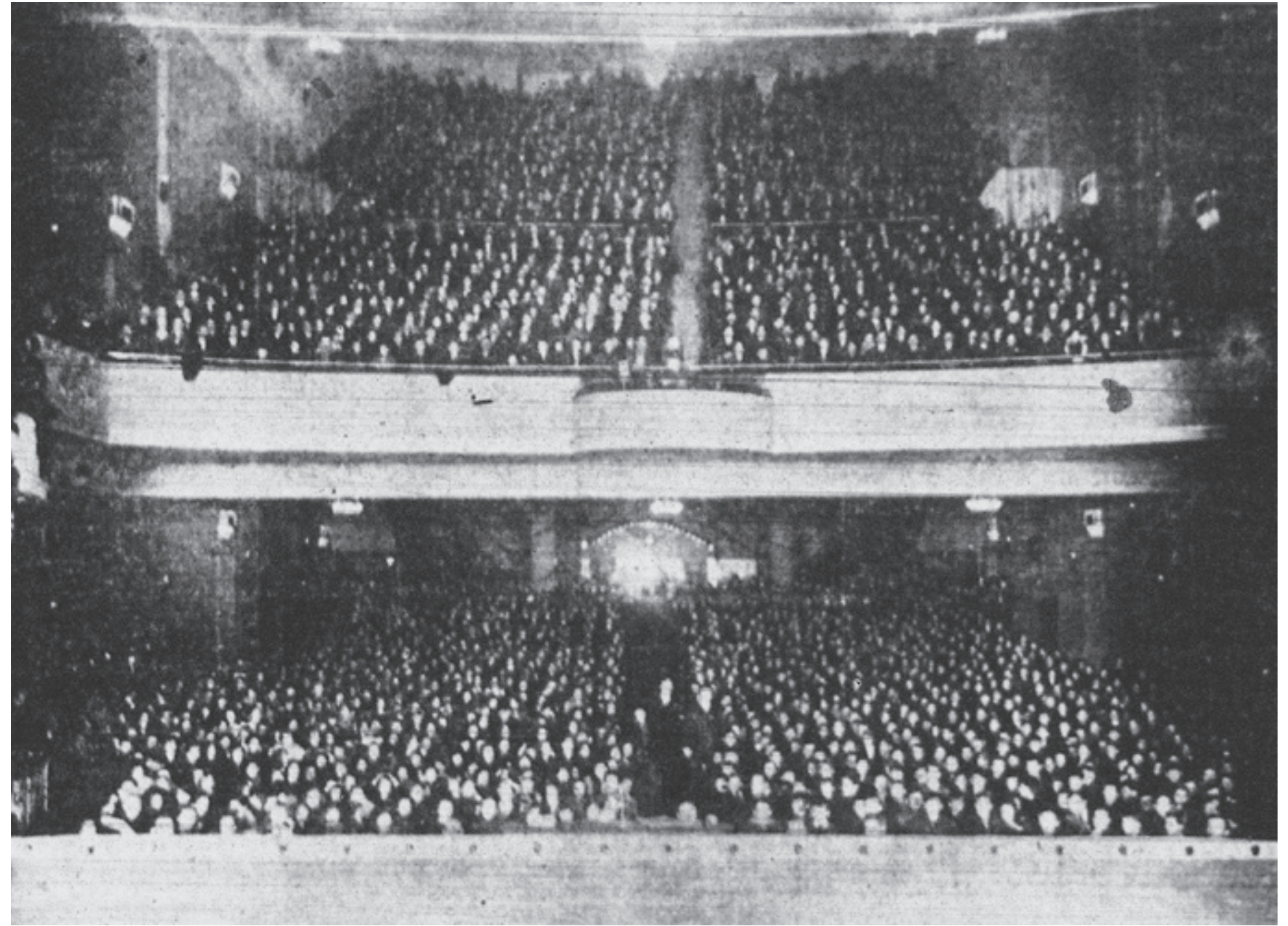
I also saw the motive for this particular course of action. During the week immense quantities of the wild pigeon (Passenger Pigeon, *Ectopistes migratorius*) had been flying over the city, in their way to and from a roost in the neighborhood. These birds had been slaughtered by myriads, and were for sale by the bushel at the corners of every street in the city. Although all the birds which could be killed by man made the smallest impression on the vast multitude contained in one of these flocks,—computed by Wilson to consist sometimes of more than twenty-two hundred millions,—yet to Booth the destruction seemed wasteful, wanton, and, from his point of view, was a willful and barbarous murder.

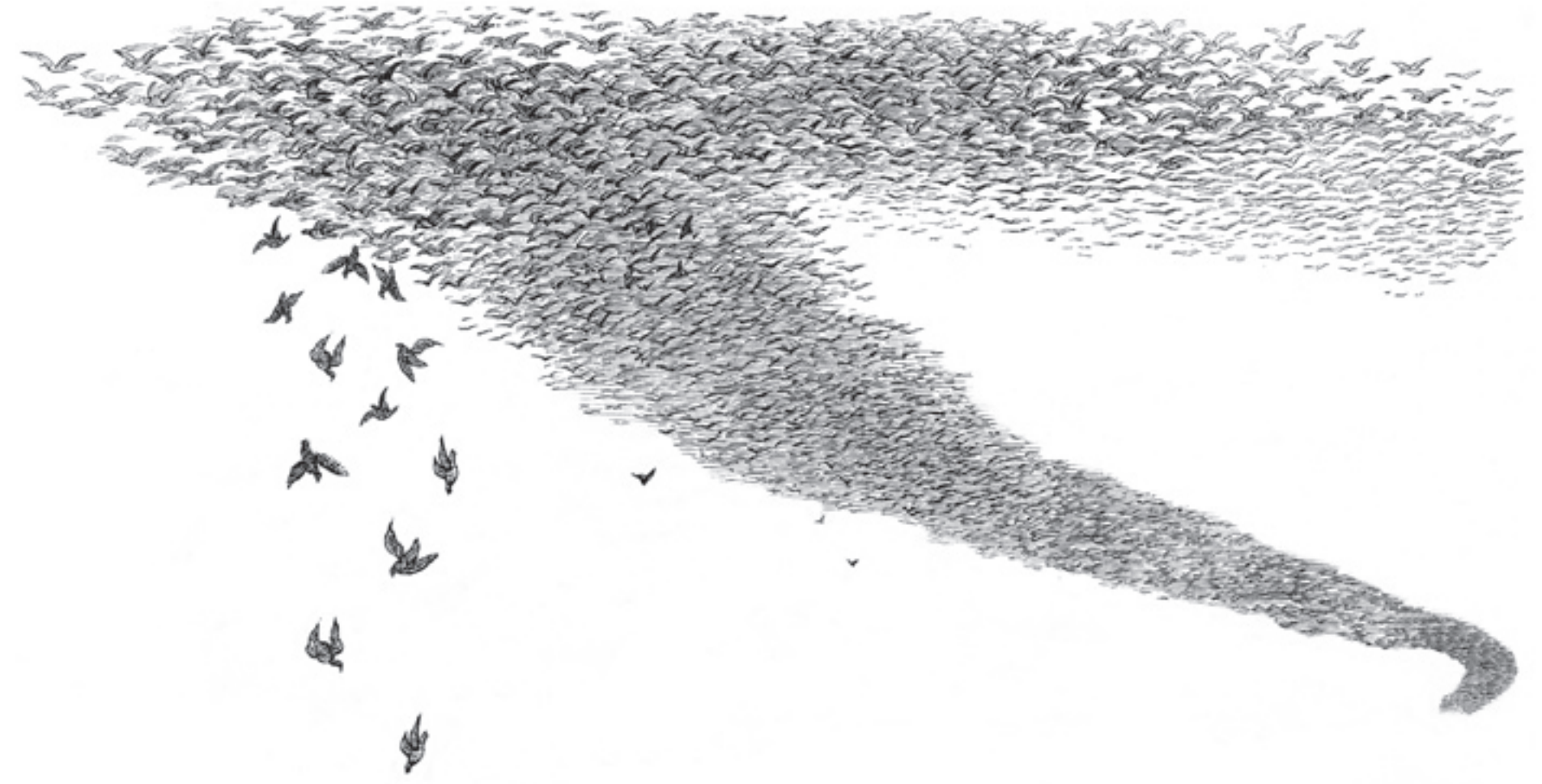
I could not but feel a certain sympathy with his humanity. It was an error in a good direction. If an insanity, it was better than the cold, heartless sanity of most men. By the time, therefore, that Booth was ready to speak, I was prepared to answer.

“You see,” said he, “these innocent victims of man’s barbarity. I wish to testify, in some public way, against this wanton destruction of life. My intention was to purchase a place in the burial-ground and have them put into a coffin and carried in a hearse. I might do it without any one’s knowing that it was not a human body. And I wish you to help me. Will you?”

“Hardly,” I replied. “I expected something very different from this ...”

“But now you are here, why not help me? Do you fear the laugh of man?” ...





September 1, 1914









The air was literally filled with pigeons; the light of noonday was obscured as by an eclipse; the dung fell in spots, not unlike melting flakes of snow; and the continued buzz of wings had a tendency to lull my senses to repose.

After arriving at the swamp they circled round and round til dark, when they settled down, covering every limb and twig.





Upper mandible slightly declinate at the tip; edges inflected. Head small, neck slender, body rather full. Plumage blended on the neck and under parts, compact on the back. Wings long, the second quill longest. Tail graduated, of 12 tapering feathers.

Bill black. Iris bright red.
Feet carmine purple, claws blackish.

Length 16 1/4 inches; extent of wings 25; bill along the ridge 3/8; along the gap 1 1/2; tarsus 1 1/4; middle toe 1 1/8.





The noise which they made, though yet distant, reminded me of a hard gale at sea passing through the rigging of a close-reefed vessel. As the birds arrived, and passed over me, I felt a current of air that surprised me.

At once, like a torrent, and with a noise like thunder, they rushed into a compact mass, pressing upon each other toward the center.

Gurgling, rumbling sound, as though an army of horses laden with sleigh bells was advancing ... distant thunder ... Nearer and nearer came the strange comingling of sleigh bells, mixed with the rumbling of an approaching storm. The trees were filled with them ... uttering to their mates those strange bell-like wooing notes.

... low notes ... almost like the breathing of great trees.

In these almost solid masses, they darted forward in undulating and angular lines, descended and swept close over the earth with inconceivable velocity, mounted perpendicularly so as to resemble a vast column, and, when high, were seen wheeling and twisting within their continued lines, which then resembled the coils of a gigantic serpent.

In the spring, on the 11th, 12th, 15th, 16th, 17th, 18th, and 22nd of March, but more especially on the 11th, there came from the north an incredible multitude of these pigeons to Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

Their number, while in flight, extended 3 or 4 English miles in length, and more than 1 such mile in breadth, and they flew so closely together that the sky and the sun were obscured by them, the daylight becoming sensibly diminished by their shadow.

The big as well as the little trees in the woods, sometimes covering a distance of 7 English miles, became so filled with them that hardly a twig or a branch could be seen which they did not cover; on the thicker branches they had piled themselves up on one another's backs, quite about a yard high.

As the period of their arrival approached, their foes anxiously prepared to receive them. Some were furnished with iron pots containing sulphur, others with torches of pine knots, many with poles, and the rest with guns. The sun was lost to our view, yet not a pigeon had arrived. Everything was ready, and all eyes were gazing on the clear sky, which appeared in glimpses amidst the tall trees. Suddenly there burst forth a general cry of: "Here they come!"





ECTOPISTES MIGRATORIUS (passenger pigeon), an extinct North American bird. It was once the most abundant bird in the world, by some estimates accounting for more than a quarter of all birds in North America. Physically it was adapted for speed and maneuverability in flight, with a small head and neck, long and wedge-shaped tail, and long, broad, and pointed wings. It was similar in its plumage to the Mourning Dove, but larger. Some reduction in numbers occurred from habitat loss when European settlement led to mass deforestation. Further, pigeon meat was commercialized as a cheap food for slaves and the poor in the 19th century, resulting in hunting on a massive and mechanized scale. A slow decline between about 1800 and 1870 was followed by a catastrophic decline between 1870 and 1890.



ECLIPSE

Project Credits

Eclipse is a video and sound installation originally created for exhibition at MASS MoCA (September 1, 2014–September 1, 2015). The work, including this publication, was conceived as an act of commemoration for a lost species.

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Image Credits

Cover

Eclipse I, Sayler/Morris, 2014. Photographed at The Roosevelt Wild Life Station, SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry

Intro

Passenger pigeon illustration, artist unknown, *The Passenger Pigeon in Pennsylvania* by John French, 1919, pg. 105

I

Junius Brutus Booth in theatrical costume, Mathew B. Brady, c.1839, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Daguerreotypes Collection

Junius Brutus Booth with Edwin Booth, photographer unknown, 1852, The Players Foundation for Theatre Education

Lyric Theater, *Hamilton Spectator*, January 2, 1914

Drawing the Badger, Henry Alken, c.1820, Bridgeman Images

Anti-vivisection demonstration in Trafalgar Square, London, photographer unknown, 1907, *The Anti-Vivisection Review*, 1909–1910

Sayler/Morris, 2014, adapted from a woodblock engraving of passenger pigeons in flight in Louisiana, *The Illustrated Shooting and Dramatic News*, artist unknown, July 3, 1875, North Wind Picture Archives

Steamboat Messenger No. 2, photographer unknown, c.1852, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, Murphy Library, Special Collections

II

World War I gas attack on the eastern front, photographer unknown, 1915, German Federal Archive (Deutsches Bundesarchiv)

III

Eclipse II–X, Sayler/Morris 2014. Collections: The Division of Birds, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution; The Roosevelt Wild Life Station at SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry; Cornell University Museum of Vertebrates, Ornithology Collection

Back cover

Total eclipse of the sun, observed July 29, 1878, at Creston, Wyoming Territory, Étienne Léopold Trouvelot, New York Public Library

Text Credits

I

James Freeman Clarke, *Memorial and Biographical Sketches*, 1878, pg. 261

III

The air was literally ... "The Passenger Pigeon, accounts by Peter Kalm (1759) and John James Audubon (1831)," *Annual Report, Smithsonian Institution*, 1911, pg. 419

After arriving at the swamp ... Morris Schaff, *Etna and Kirkersville*, 1905, pg. 104

Upper mandible slightly ... Peter Kalm and John James Audubon, pg. 424

Bill black ... ibid

Length 16 1/4 inches ... ibid

The noise which they made ... ibid

At once, like a torrent ... ibid

Gurgling, rumbling sound ... "The Wild Pigeon of North America by Chief Pokagon," *The Chautauquan*, Volume 22, 1896

low notes ... Craig Wallace, *The Expression of Emotion in the Passenger Pigeons*, 1911, pg. 108

In these almost solid masses ... Peter Kalm and John James Audubon, pg. 419

In the spring ... ibid, pg. 409

Their number ... ibid

The big as well ... ibid

As the period of their arrival approached ... ibid, pg. 421

Ectopistes migratorius (passenger pigeon) ... adapted from Wikipedia, entry for passenger pigeon: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passenger_pigeon