

Mercury's Feet

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The air is cold like ice in the shade. Trees with ancient wisdom retreat into hibernation leaving a brilliant show of yellows and reds that glow like earthly flames, reflecting the heat of the sun as it shines. This has always been the sweetest feeling, to be out in the cold fall air, warmed by the heat of the sun. I am free now to sit where I want. An old retired professor, I sit and feed the pigeons in the park.

Today a pigeon appears who stands out from the flock. When all the other birds find it most sane to peck away in the wildflower-sparkled lawn, one pigeon Picasso seems to need to flutter up from the flock into the sky. Straight up he goes, his iridescent feathers catching the afternoon sun in flashes. At his apogee he lets loose a bomb, excuse me for mentioning it, but he does. And he hovers for a moment then descends to examine his resultant abstraction. I take special interest and find my favorite creations come from the wild purple berries that grow along the paths of the park.

This pigeon bomber makes me think of WWII when B.F. Skinner, the famous behavioral psychologist, trained pigeons to guide missiles to their target. They were quite successful. But the military rejected the pigeon in favor of an electronic black box.

Skinner was famous for housing his own infant in a box of his own design. I shiver with icy dread at such an inhuman act. But now I sit in the park and feed the pigeons and think as I wish.

I am an old man now and ready to reveal the story of my youth.

The jail cell is tiny, so tiny I can't move. I crawl in. When I lay down they move the walls and ceiling in on me, so I can't move my arms and the breath is

almost crushed out of me. Sometimes I wish they would just get it over. They crush me so I can't breathe, and I pass out from lack of air. Then I wake up gasping. That is how I sleep most nights, suffocating, passing out then waking to wish I were dead. Sometimes they make it freeze. I freeze sometimes and become a block of burning ice. My mind is working, but I am ice, steaming and hot. My arms don't move but the smoke from me curls around like snaky arms, reaching around the room and moving things on my stand.

When I was a child my father bought fish at the noisy, smelly fish market, where stinking old trucks would rattle by blowing billows of blue. I would cough and choke. The fish came in newspaper and the man in the blood-stained white apron would put a piece of burning ice in it. "To keep it fresh," the fish-man said. "Don't touch it kid, it'll burn you."

We get home and I just gotta touch it, maybe real quick, and I do. "Ha, it didn't hurt," I say.

"Stupid kid!" the old man yells as he grabs my hand and shoves it onto the burning, steaming ice.

I see the newspaper and the words are stuck to it with shiny fish scales like little rainbows through the clouds rising steam. I see the words printed on the fish-wet paper as my old man pushes my hand onto the ice. It burns and burns. I don't make a sound. Stupid pigeon, he yells and plunges my burning little hand into the sink of water he'd been running.

Then he flips that burning ice into the sink, and man, it crackles and boils. He lets my hand loose, and we both stand there stupefied as the steam bubbles and snakes onto the metal Youngstown Steel drainboard. It crawls around the dishes and oozes onto the floor in sinister rivulets. I scream, "It's coming after me, it's freezing my feet!"

My old man, he laughs and laughs. I don't remember having fish for dinner.

I knew Jamie was scared of snakes, so I'd wait for her near an old vacant lot full of brush and trash and snakes. She'd come around the corner alone and I'd push one right into her face, eye to eye, and she would scream bloody murder. I'd laugh.

I loved to play with matches. I studied them for hours and found I could put them out with my fingertips. The sulfur would burn into my skin, like burning ice; it was cold. I couldn't do my lessons; I never learned to read. Stupid teacher. When school got out that summer, I set it on fire. They sent me away to reform school where nobody read anyway. I learned how to fight there. Knuckles are like blocks of burning ice, and I wanted the pain.

Dumb gray birds would fly into the traps the cook had us set up in the filthy backyard behind the kitchen. The cook called it squab and we had it for dinner. When I ate, it would bubble and boil inside me.

Some new pigeon would get thrown in with us and we'd grab him and yell, "Squab the deck pigeon!" And we'd mop the floor with his shiny new face 'til he cried. "Thought you were tough," I'd say with a last kick in his side.

When I got outta there I was in and out of the Army in six months. I rode the rails awhile, stealing here and there and drinking hooch. The bums were afraid of me and stayed away. A big railroad guard caught me and tried to push me around, so I smashed his ugly face yelling, "Screw you old man!" I smashed him again and again. Ten of them jumped me then, I guess.

I woke up in a sick gray-green room with bars on the windows. That's when they poured me in the cement. White cement. I couldn't move, and sure as hell, an

ugly white pigeon would come and sit in the barred window day after day. He talked to me about squab and laughed because here I was poured in white cement and he could fly away.

“Fly, fly, fly!” I would scream at him until blood would come in my mouth and they’d run in and give me another needle.

The judge sent me to jail. Bars were on the window. I never really got out of the cement. They poured me in cement and when I walked, I walked real slow dragging the big gray blocks along. They put me in the library to work.

I didn’t waste time reading—I just moved the blocks of wood they call books around. They didn’t seem to mind about the blocks of cement on my feet. I didn’t talk to nobody.

As I looked out through the bars I saw pigeons in the yard. They flew in and out real quickly and laughed at me stuck here wingless. One landed on my window as I laid smashed and frozen in my cell. I never fed it. It came back again and again. It made stupid noises; I learned them, and we talked. The pigeon made me angry, because it could see so much of the world outside. We talk about the sky a lot.

“Look,” I told it one day. “I got no news to talked about with you.”

But it stayed and talked about everything it saw like the train you could hear in the distance at night, and the men who worked on it, and I listened. So I got mad, and in the library I picked up a book and tried to see the words through the steam. Some guy in a suit saw me. He got me in a program. They called it LITERACY.

Yes, that is why I learned to read, so I could tell that pigeon something new. When the words poured into me they melted the burning ice. Words flowed like water into my legs and feet, and all through my insides. They dissolved away the ice and the cement like sugar candy on a rainy sidewalk.

Now my cell is big inside. I can see through the walls to a map of the county around me. I see the cities in the state and nation. I see the nations of the world and

their peoples. I see the sea with the whales and dolphin. Most of all I like to tell that pretty little bird about the sky. How the stars are arrayed through infinite space, about the dark side of the moon and what colors are the nebulae. I tell it that the nebulae look just like its iridescent feathers. She likes that. I found that the pages of books are my wings.

That is how I began, and I went on to discover others that could not read, and I taught them to find their wings. Then as I learned and taught the years flew by, and I was out in the world a free man. A local college I had been working with enlisted me as a professor and counselor.

Now my years are ending and my favorite pleasure is here in the park. I am free, yes free, inside and out. I love to feed the pigeons in the park.