



To Pigeon-Fill the Sky

Duncan Petrie



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*I'm old enough to remember
when pigeons filled the sky.*





*Back then, there was a poetic
bird in all of my photos.*





*There were magpies in the
slipstreams of air above the eaves.*



*Crows playing coy, thick as
thieves between the trees.*



*Gulls brushing wingtips with
the shape of the wind.*



*Wherever there was a lens, there was a
bird, just waiting to be photographed.*

Those were the days.





Now, things aren't so easy.



I still get lucky, sometimes.



But the skies, these days, are mostly empty.



And the birds are hardly poetic.





*No, pictures of the sky aren't
what they used to be.*







Gone are the days of plenty.



Now, you have to do things yourself.



In this age of hurtling advancement?



Well, I'll hurtle too.





There is no end to what I can do.



What can't I do?



The world is my oyster, an oyster filled with pigeons!



*Look, I've named them all: this is
Claudette, and George, and Pauline.*



Clockwise from center: Octavia, Joseph, Josef, Ernest, Hans, Annika, Hannes, Increase, Eugene-Eduard, Magwitch, Kurt, Remedios the Beauty, Kashmir, Ole, Irving, Ivan, Ivar, Vera, Vim, Vigor, Constantin, Francine, Úrsula, Anges, Abby, Ethel, Edna, Agustin, Helen, Henri, Hjalmar, Jean-Paul, Colonel Mustard, Luciano, Gabriel, Aureliano.

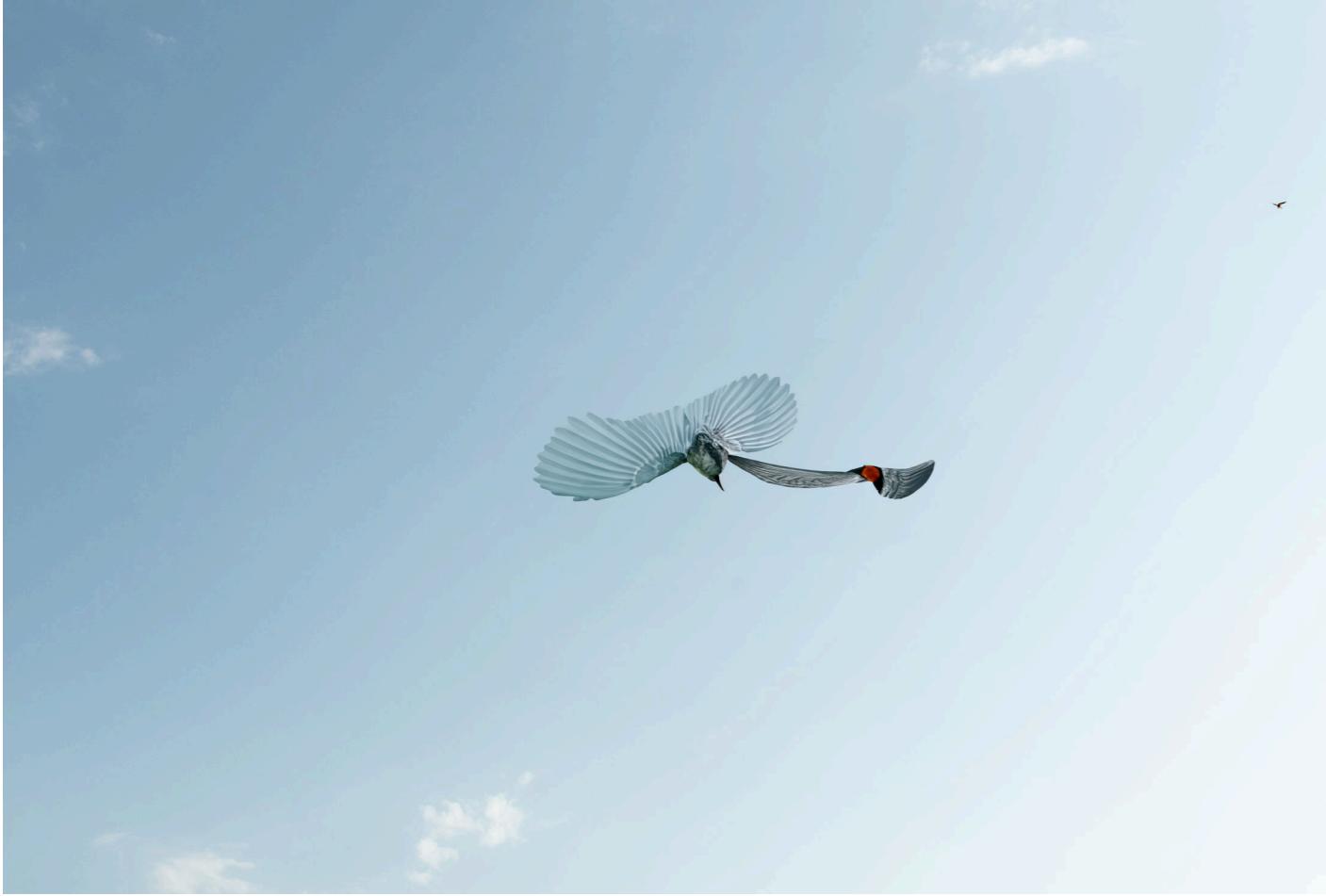


Maxine, Marie, Marcel, Maurice, Bette, Barisse,
Concord, Ed, Ulises Lima (*the Bird*), Sal, Elaine, Elena,
Gustave, Gunde, Carel, Umberto, Umbilico, Kirsten,
Roald, Clas, Claus, Boris, Vilho, Ville, Vilhelm,
Shaw, Pierre, Piranesi, Paolo, Paavo,
Pedro, Laszlo, Arnold, Leslie, Lori, Laura,
Larisa, Ezperanza, Caravaggio, Klee, Willy,
Wily, Walt, Waltz, Kandinsky, Anya, Fyodorovich,
Poncho Villa, Joyce, Pilar; Libero, Amadeus, Yoko,
Ballena, Cervantes, Photeos, Melquïades,
Hubert, Herbert, Pocket, Pip, Prospero, Beadle,
Boy, the Chorus, Cato, Julia, Johnson, Dickson,
Thompson, Annie, Gontran de Poncins, Pollock,
the Queen of Zaragoza, Amaranta, Zebulon, Provenance,
Providence, Mount Parnassus, Wenceslas, Germaine,
Jack, Hiroshi, Copernicus, Frank, Eadmer, Don, Bolaño,
Holden, Homer, Happenstance, Balthasar, Ferdinand,
Friedrich Gauss, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Martha,
Marta, Marvelous, Constance, Cassandra, Gorgonzola,
Gogol, Gonzaga, Cloudseley, Falstaff,
Saxo Grammaticus, Claude.

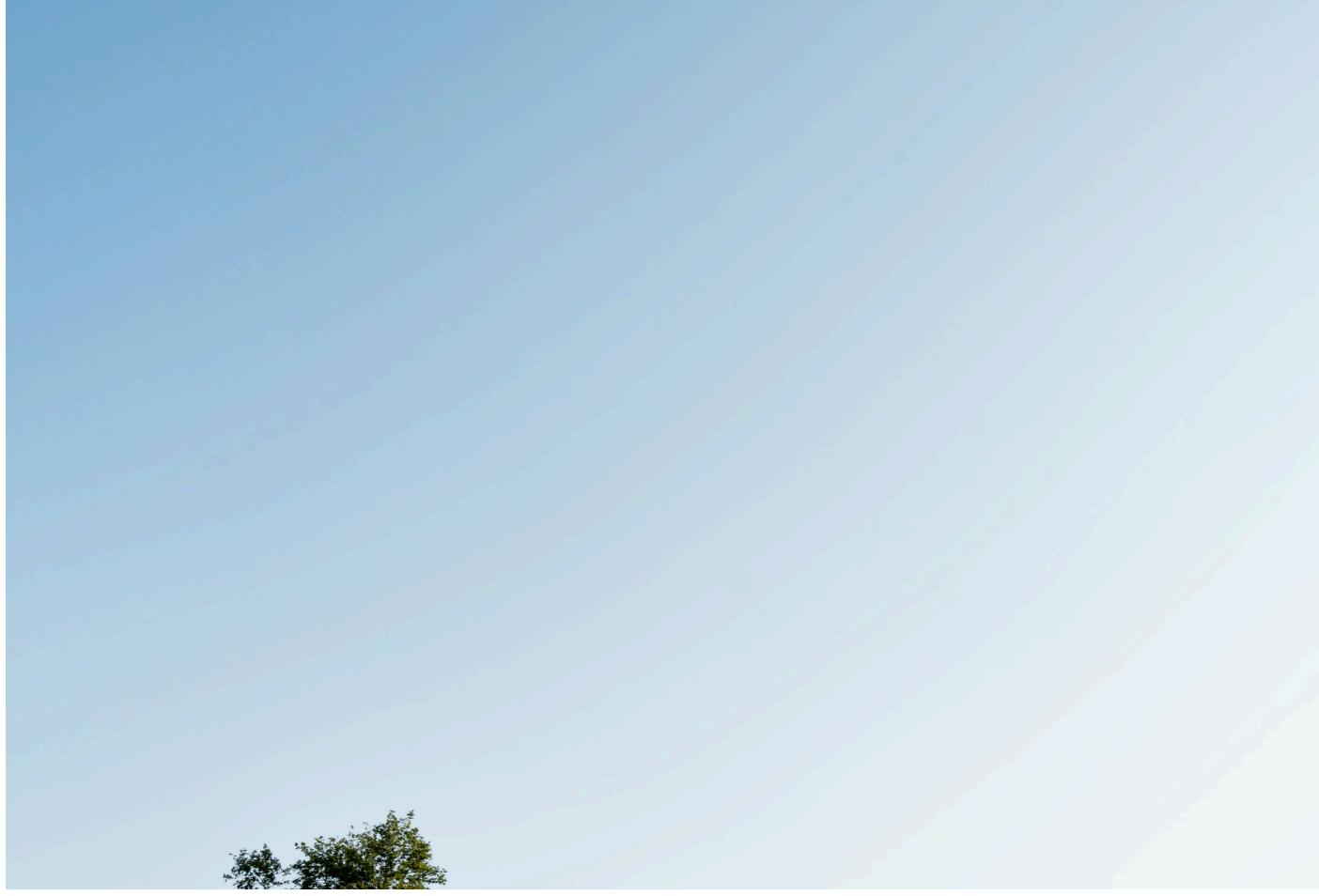


Folkbird, Yorick, Absalon, Juno, Ajax,
Ragozine, Heinlein, Heinrich, Heimlich, Heinz,
Herman, Hector; Gregor, Flector, Edgar, Allen, Alan,
Turing, Midas, Norbert, Knot, Calvino, Dino, Olivier,
Oreste, Anne Marie, Vivianne, Vivian, Encarnación,
Noam, Jean, Jen, Jens, Jaan, Yann, Francesca, Cortana,
Sydney, Berthold, Bernhard, Huttler, Horvitz, Opus,
Elwood, Ilya, Sam, Hopfield, Elbow, Virgil, Daedalus, Dario,
Rumelhart, Daedalus, Rosenblatt, Isaac, Anthony, Antony,
Ippolit, Agraya, Icarus, Daedalus, Icarus, Icar;us, ,
Curly, Curly, Wingus, Flee, Crow, Albert Crow, Eldritch,
Bertram, Holger, Sheckley,
the Parisian, the Peruvian,
the Venetian, the Venusian,
Max, Min, Alpha Bird,
Peabrain, Zenith, Little King, Richard, Tremble,
Little Devil, Crab, Elbow, Crab, Crab, Crab,
Crab. Rita. Bart. Horatio, Cavacchioli, Titus, Temper,
Mr Pitts, Patrimony, Lady Bigot, Nils, Nilsson, Johnson, Pigeonsson,
Pigeonsdottir, Big Pig, Otredad, I am thankful to be pigeon. In this moment, I am
thankful to be a pigeon. I am looking for a pigeon. I am looking for a god. I am looking for the Golden Gate. I am looking for The
Golden
Gate Pigeon. I am Looking For a Pigeon and I will pay you for it. I, " I am afraid.

I am a Pigeon and I am Looking For a Pigeon.
I am looking for a crumb.
I am looking for a god.
I am looking for a way out.
I am looking for a guide.
I am looking for Pauline.
I am looking for a sign.
I am looking for a sign.
I am looking for a pigeon and
I'll pay you for it.









*I'm old enough to remember
when pigeons filled the sky.*



*Back then, all you had to do was
point, and wings would appear.*



Now you have to do things the hard way.

You have to sit around and wait.



And wait.



Sometimes, the birds come by.



But, often, they don't.





Better a big empty sky than no sky at all.

*Maybe things aren't so different
to how they used to be.*





*Maybe things were
always this way.*



*Maybe you always
had to wait.*

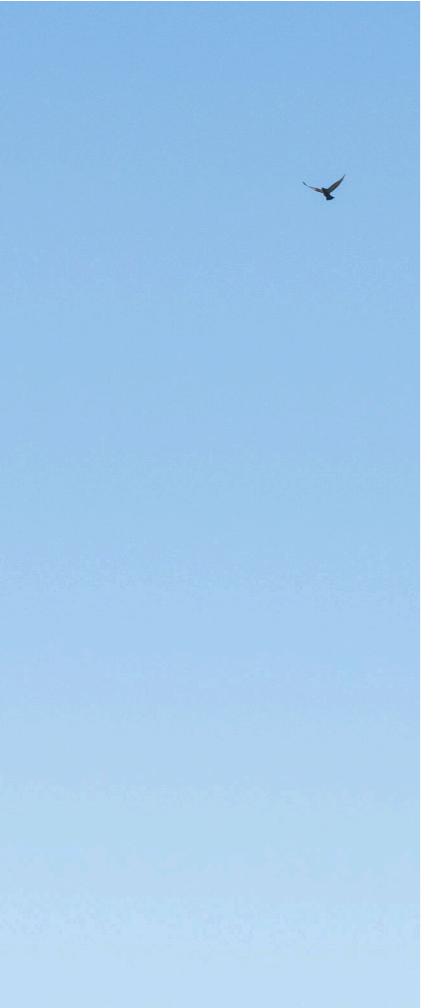


And the birds?



The birds were always better for it.





This is a book about doing something good, once, and trying to do it again, and forgetting how hard it was to do it the first time.

Sure, it's about other things, too. It's about memory, and laziness, and artificial intelligence. It's about climate change, and the pandemic, and growing up in a world forever changed. It's about seeing the forest for the trees, or, rather, the skies for the birds. And, I suppose, it's a book about pigeons.

I've taken a lot of pictures with birds in them. Most of these aren't pictures of birds, but of trees, buildings, and horizons. It seems, looking back at my past work, that birds seem to wander into my photographs, soar through the gaps in my compositions, at just the right moments.

Looking back at these old pictures, they feel like miracles. That's what I remember about them. Stumbling on incredible light: jubilation. A pigeon zips across the space between two trees, like an arrow shot by gods. Miracles occur, and of course they do. A miracle is too perfect to not happen.

It's easy to forget there's never a guarantee.

Successful photographs are made to look effortless, uncontrived. A good work of art can be understood, writes the photographer Robert Adams in his 1981 essay *Beauty in Photography*, "by the apparent ease of its execution... Only pictures that look as if they had been easily made can

convincingly suggest that beauty is commonplace." Looking at one's old work, it's easy to buy into the world they suggest, where miracles (birds, light, punctum) are abundant, where cameras are magnets for beauty. It's easy to forget all of the waiting, the watching, the time spent staring up at the clear, empty sky. It's easy to look at effortless pictures and expect that the next picture will take just as little effort.

But, of course, good art is difficult. Enter artificial intelligence.

Where real art requires time, hard work, and risk, AI art offers a glittering shortcut. Skip the blank canvas, skip the empty sky, and go straight to the product. All you need is a Big Idea.

Big ideas come easy (fill the sky with pigeons!) but big ideas are not art. Art is a tangible artifact, wrought by hours, weeks, and years of tiny, tough decisions. Photographs start as unexposed film. Poems start as empty pages. Paintings start as blank canvases. Every subsequent shot, word, or brushstroke narrows down what that emptiness can become. Each microscopic decision is deliberate, a part of the whole, a bold statement against entropy. Art, in short, is the product of a practice, not a prompt.

Even in this short essay, I've made hundreds of decisions. The decision to include this paragraph was difficult. Is it necessary? Is it implied? Are rhetorical questions cliché and overused? *Cliché* and *overused* are basically synonyms, but they

sound good together. Whatever I choose, the reader won't know the alternative. Which one better suits the piece as a whole?

For the AI artist, all decisions are multiple choice. The AI artist is never confronted with the blank canvas. They are never forced to deliberate. Their decisions are all broad strokes: Should I ask for a *blue* pigeon, or a *green* one? Which version of the model's output do I like better? Which real artist's style do I want it to mimic?

Generative AI encourages complacency. The microscopic decisions that a real artist makes are hidden from the AI artist, in billions of unintelligible parameters. What does the AI artist contribute? If art is the communication of the human experience, what experience does AI art communicate? Laziness? Instant gratification?

The impetus for this book was in May, 2024, when I realized there were a number of invisible standards against which I judged my pictures. For example: the presence of birds. If a picture includes any stretch of the sky, it is certainly better off with wings in it, for dynamism, for the decisive moment, for a touch of punctum. As such, I started to disregard any picture that did not have a bird in it. My standards went up. Miracles became requirements.

Thus, so many of my photographs were immediate failures. I began to wonder: are my pictures actually better

than they were before? What would an obsession like this look like, taken to its logical extreme?

I used Photoshop's generative fill tool to add pigeons to empty skies, and I started naming them. I assembled four groups of names: nice names, culture names, science names, and gibberish names.

The nice names were easy. What's more natural than a pigeon named Pauline? When I needed inspiration, I looked to my neighbors, and to local street names. I found names in books like Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives* and Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. During the Paris Olympics, I named pigeons after competitors in balance beam, trampoline, triple jump, and other bird-like sports.

The culture names came next. More explicitly referential, they include the names of painters, poets, historical figures, characters from Shakespeare and other literary greats. Names of the zeitgeist. Laziness sets in. Why work for original names when you can cash in on cultural cachet?

Then, other names: computer scientists, tech CEOs, AI assistants. They descend into gibberish. In a transcript of a conversation with a malfunctioning AI chatbot, I found the line: *I am Looking For a God and I'll pay you for it*. From a worship of creativity to a worship of creatives to a worship of the automation of creativity, we settle on complacency. Easy worship. Hollow art. Why work for beauty

when you can pay for it?

Originally, this was going to be the end. A descent into chaos. No hope for the AI artist. But to my surprise, when I used AI image tools for the first time, the process was anything but enticing. It was fickle, unwieldy, and incredibly frustrating. I found myself exaggerating all of my prompts. If I wanted three pigeons, I had to say I wanted a flock. If I wanted a flock, I requested *one hundred billion pigeons, an unfathomable overabundance*, and even then, it often only gave me three. If I wanted big, I said huge. If I wanted small, I said infinitesimal. It was like performing surgery with a backhoe.

Even in a project about AI art's inadequacy, I had trouble generating images that belonged. And this gave me hope. There are no shortcuts. The sky, in fact, has not run out of pigeons. They are still there, in trees and under benches and huddled up on chimney pots. Occasionally, they take flight.

I had forgotten that miracles take time. I had looked at the pictures I had taken and forgotten how hard I had worked for them, how much effort I had put into finding effortless beauty.

Good pictures may suggest a world in which beauty is commonplace, but they suggest something else, too: that you found beauty, once, and you can do it again.

Duncan Petrie
August, 2024



3 ≈ Falmouth



4 ≈ Bognor Regis



5 ≈ Bognor Regis



7 ≈ Penryn



8 ≈ River Cam



9 ≈ River Cam



50 † Regent's Park



52 † Regent's Park



54 † Regent's Park



56 † Regent's Park



58 † Regent's Park



60 Regent's Park



11 ≈ Penryn



13 ≈ River Cam



15 ≈ Bognor Regis



17 ≈ Primrose Hill



18 Maida Vale



19 Primrose Hill



62 Regent's Park



63 Regent's Park



65 St. John's Wood



67 Regent's Park



69 Regent's Park



71 Regent's Park



21 Hyde Park



23 Margate



25 Aldwick Bay



27 Deal, Kent



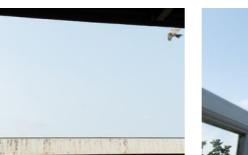
28 Hertfordshire



29 Jersey



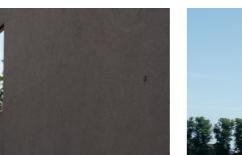
73 Regent's Park



75 Tonbridge



77 Home



78 Copenhagen



81 Cambridge



82 ≈ Cambridge



31 Golders Green



32 Golders Green



33 Golders Green



34 Aldwick Bay



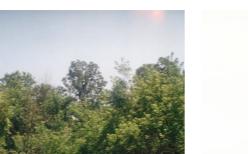
36 † Aldwick Bay



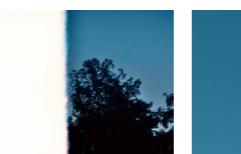
38 † Golders Green



84 ≈ Home



87 § Wisconsin



89 § Wisconsin



91 Regent's Park



93 Regent's Park



40 † Golders Green



42 † Golders Green



43 † Golders Green



44 † Golders Green



46 † Regent's Park



48 † Pagham

≈ Ilford HP5 Plus, 35mm | § Kodak Ektar, 35mm | \$ Kodak Gold, 35mm | All others shot with Nikon d500

† Pigeons added using Photoshop Generative Fill



Duncan Petrie is a photographer and
writer from Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

See more of his work
[at duncanpetrie.com](http://duncanpetrie.com).

