

MARTHA

by

Richard Chin

Richard Chin
748 Aldine St.
St. Paul, MN 55104
651-336-6975
rchin@stanfordalumni.org
©2016

CHARACTERS

Martha: The world's last passenger pigeon

George: Martha's mate, the second-to-last passenger pigeon in the world

Guide: A guide at the Cincinnati Zoo

Thomas: A child at the zoo, museum and farm

Mama: The mother of Thomas

Spectator 1: A bystander, seen at the zoo and museum

Spectator 2: Another bystander

John Audubon: Naturalist and painter

Joseph: A farmer

Hester: His wife

Walter: A small town clerk

Betsy: The clerk's wife

Operator: A telegraph operator

Hunter: A commercial market hunter

Netter: A pigeon netter

Supervisor: A railroad employee

Workman: Another railroad employee

Salesman: A peddler of a pigeon killing tool

Senator 1: A state legislator

Senator 2: Another state legislator

Expert 1: A naturalist

Expert 2: Another naturalist

Schufeldt: A doctor

Private: A soldier

Sergeant: Another soldier

Presenter: A TED talk speaker

A note on casting: There are two main characters in this play, MARTHA and GEORGE, and several smaller roles. A doubling scheme could use one actor to play MAMA, HESTER and BETSY; one actor to play GUIDE, AUDUBON, HUNTER, SUPERVISOR, PRIVATE, PRESENTER and SCHUFELDT; one actor to play SPECTATOR 1, JOSEPH, OPERATOR, NETTER, SENATOR 1 and EXPERT 1; and one actor to play SPECTATOR 2, WALTER, WORKMAN, SALESMAN, SENATOR 2, EXPERT 2 and SERGEANT. Finally, one child actor would play THOMAS for a total cast of seven.

Synopsis: This is a true story of extinction set in the woodlands, small towns and big cities of the Eastern half of North America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Virtually no one alive today has ever seen what was once the most numerous bird in North America, certainly not when their flocks were large enough to take hours and days to fly over, when their numbers were so great they could hide the sun. After billions of her species were slaughtered by men, the last passenger pigeon in the world died in a zoo in Cincinnati more than 100 years ago. Her name was Martha.

At rise: It is a late summer day in 1914 at the Cincinnati Zoo. There are distant cries, bellows and hoots of exotic animals,

and the murmuring sounds and footsteps of a small crowd of people gathered outside the cage of Martha.

GUIDE

And this, ladies and gentlemen, is the world famous Martha. The last living passenger pigeon on earth. Passenger pigeons have been extinct in the wild for many years. Efforts to breed captive flocks have unfortunately proved unsuccessful. Over time the other remaining passenger pigeons in captivity have died off. Now there is only Martha. For the past four years, Martha has lived alone here in the Cincinnati Zoo. Meaning you have a unique opportunity of seeing the sole survivor, the final example of one of the most amazing species of birds in the world.

SPECTATOR 1:

(to SPECTATOR 2)

So sad. I wonder if she knows that she's the last of her kind.

SPECTATOR 2:

(in reply)

I wonder if she's lonely.

THOMAS

Why doesn't it move, Mama?

MAMA

I don't know why, Thomas. Perhaps it's sleeping.

GUIDE

Actually, Martha doesn't move very much these days. Her health isn't very good. She's 29. Very old for a pigeon. That's why we keep her perch so low to the ground.

THOMAS

I want to see it move.

(SFX of sand being hurled at a cage.)

Move, bird! Move!

GUIDE

Please don't throw sand at the bird.

MAMA

Stop it, Thomas!

MARTHA

(VO in an old, weak, querulous, quavery voice.)

I wish they would just let me die in peace. Don't fool yourself. That's what they're here for. To watch me die. What a treat this must be for them, to have a death watch over an ender. That's what they call me, an ender. The last living being of its kind. How rare and special – perhaps unique in human history – to be on hand to witness the exact moment when you've finally wiped a species out of existence. And not just any species. Yes. Yes. I know. Any vanished creature from the Great Auk to the Caribbean Monk Seal Nasal Mite claims they had a special place in natural history. An important ecological niche. The world is immeasurably poorer for their passing. Extinction is forever. Blah, blah, blah. But we passenger pigeons-

THOMAS

(With SFX of sand hitting MARTHA'S cage again.)

Wake up, bird!

MARTHA

(In a voice now strong and irascible)

He told you to stop throwing sand at me, you little moron!

THOMAS

I don't think it's alive, mama. This is boring. Who wants to look at a dead bird?

MAMA

Leave it alone, Thomas. Let's go see the giraffe. Would you like to see a giraffe?

(SFX: The shuffling of feet and the murmur of the crowd moving off)

MARTHA

(Calling out)

Little brat! Good riddance, cretin! I hate these little punks. But the geezers are no better. Going on about the good old days. How they missed their passenger pigeons. Mainly how they missed eating us. Baked in a pigeon pie! Broiled, braised or pickled! Horrible. Horrible. But where was I? Oh, yes, yes. We passenger pigeons were not just any species. Formal name: *Ectopistes migratorius*, or migrating wanderer. The most common bird in North America. Maybe the most common bird in the world ever. Mark that. Think about that. Do you think there are a lot of robins or sparrows? They were nothing compared to us. Did you know that? Does anybody *remember*? There were billions of us. *Billions*. Three billion. Five billion. Now there is just one. Just me. But once - once - two out of every five birds in America was one of us. A passenger pigeon. When we formed our flocks - our superflocks - we were a river of birds, a mile wide and hundreds of miles long. We filled the sky from horizon to horizon. A dome of birds, three for every cubic yard of sky. We were a tempest. A storm. We chilled the air with our beating wings. We frightened children, stampeded horses, stripped fields bare. If you hadn't seen us before, you could well have mistaken us for an act of God.

(SFX: A farm field of the 18th century with the sounds of manual farm work, a hoe thudding into soil and ringing off stones.)

HESTER

When do you want your supper, Joseph?

JOSEPH

I'll finish this row, and I'll come in.

HESTER

What's that in the sky?

JOSEPH

Where?

HESTER

There, in the east.

JOSEPH

Oh. I don't know.

(Considering)

Maybe a storm blowing in.

(SFX: A distant humming very faint at first, but gradually growing in volume.)

HESTER

I've never seen a cloud change shape that way. It's coming so fast.

JOSEPH

(Uneasily)

Yes.

(SFX: The hum starts to take on the low-pitched sound of a roar, but mixed with something that sounds like high-pitched ringing.)

HESTER

That noise. It's like no thunderstorm. Look how dark it is. Is it a tornado?

JOSEPH

I...I don't know. Let's go back. Back to the cabin. We better get inside. Quickly. Run!

(SFX: The pounding footsteps and heavy breathing of HESTER and JOSEPH running through a field, as the roar of the approaching megaflock grows and overtakes

them, now right over their heads.)

HESTER

(panting)

Oh, Joseph, they're *birds! Birds!* Millions of them! Where did they come from? It's like all the birds of the Earth are fleeing something. Is it the Devil?

JOSEPH

(panting)

I don't know. Keep running.

HESTER

It's so dark. Where is the sun? I can't see the cabin. Oh God, get them away, get them away! What shall we do? Is this God's punishment? Is this the end of time? Shall we pray?

JOSEPH

(panting)

Yes. Pray. But keep running.

MARTHA

(VO as the sound of the roar of the flock fades.)

End of time! A pigeon apocalypse! Ha!

(Sensing she is losing her audience.)

What? What? You don't believe me? Just an old bird telling tall tales? Would you believe your great Audubon? John James Audubon? Audubon! Wake up! Get out here! Bear witness! Tell the people what you've seen. With your own eyes.

(SFX: The echoing sound of footsteps in a hall or auditorium.)

AUDUBON

(Clearing throat, followed the SFX of papers being rattled and shuffled.)

Ahem. Yes. Yes. Yes.

(Beat, then speaking formally.)

I have viewed passenger pigeons often, and under many circumstances. But even now, it seems unbelievable what I am going to say. I have to pause and assure myself that what I am going to relate is fact. Yet I have seen it all, and that too, in the company of persons, who like myself, were struck with amazement.

MARTHA

That's the ticket. Keep going.

AUDUBON

(VO with the SFX of outdoors in the country during the day, and the clip clop sound of a horse's hooves.)

It was the autumn of 1813, when I left my home in Henderson, Kentucky, on the banks of the Ohio River, to travel to Louisville, a journey of 122 miles. A few miles beyond Hardensburgh, I began to hear a low pitched humming noise that sounded like the roar of thunder in the distance.

(SFX: a low hum can be heard, which slowly gathers in volume)

Other observers have described it as a rumbling sound, as though a giant herd of horses laden with sleigh bells were approaching. Or the crackling of a great fire among dry leaves or thorns. Or an army of threshing machines. Or railcars running at full speed under covered bridges. Still others have mistaken it for the roar of an approaching tornado. It reminded me of a hard gale at sea, passing through the rigging of a close-reefed vessel. But it was birds. It was an enormous flock, a multitude, of birds.

(SFX: the sound of the megaflock should now have grown loud, with AUDUBON shouting to be heard, an enormous thrumming howl of wings and bird voices.)

AUDUBON

(cont.)

The air was literally filled with pigeons. The light of noon-day was obscured as by an eclipse. As the torrent of birds passed over me, I felt a current of air that chilled and surprised me. The immense legions continued to go by as I continued to travel the remaining fifty-five miles to Louisville. When I arrived, the pigeons were still passing in undiminished numbers.

(beat)

They continued to do so for three days in succession.

MARTHA

(VO as the roaring sound continues.)

Three days!

AUDUBON

One column of birds I watched for three hours I estimate was a mile wide. Flying at a mile a minute, I calculate the total that passed over me at one billion, 115 million, 136 thousand individuals.

MARTHA

A billion birds! And what was it like when a billion birds shits on your head, John?

AUDUBON

The dung fell in spots, not unlike melting flakes of snow. The continued buzz of wings had a tendency to lull my senses to repose.

(SFX: The roaring sound of the flock in flight diminishes.)

MARTHA

And what happens when a billion birds comes to roost? Our nesting colonies could cover hundreds of square miles, isn't that right?

AUDUBON

(VO with SFX of the flutter of wings and "coo-coo-coo" and "kee-kee-kee" and twittering cries of a few birds landing in a tree, followed increasingly by more and more voices and louder and louder fluttering as the great flock arrives. Then added to this din are the sounds of branches breaking, small at first, and then larger and more dramatic, whole tree trunks shattering and falling to the ground with a crash and a great fluttering of wings and bird cries)

The pigeons arriving by thousands, alighted everywhere, one above another, until solid masses were formed on the branches all round. Here and there the perches gave way under the weight with a crash, and falling to the ground, destroyed hundreds of the birds beneath, forcing down the dense groups with which every stick was loaded. Many trees two feet in diameter, I observed, were broken off at no great distance from the ground. And the branches of many of the largest and tallest had given way, as if the forest had been swept by a tornado. It was a scene of uproar and confusion.

MARTHA

(VO as the SFX of the roosting flock fades.)

Thank you, John. Very good. That's all for now. But we'll hear from you later.

(To the audience)

He got a few things wrong when he did his painting of us. We perch side by side when we court, John. But he captured our essence as individuals. With handsome slate-blue wings, cinnamon-rose breasts, red eyes and red feet, and slim, elegant, streamlined bodies. Built for flying fast and far. As a race and a nation, we were a metaphor for nature's abundance, a cross between a natural wonder and a natural disaster, roaming over half a continent at will.

(VO with the SFX of an army of hungry birds feeding on the ground, a great, frantic rustling of leaves, fluttering of wings, kee-kee-kee cries of birds, and the gulping of thousands of acorns going down whole in a thousand beaks and throats.)

MARTHA

(cont.)

When we fed, we were an undulating blanket of wings and beaks that rolled over the forest floor, sweeping it clean of acorns. We could devour entire farm fields then cover the ground with dung a foot deep.

(VO with the SFX of a fox attacking and killing a bird: the leap, yip and growl of the fox, the death cry and flutter of a single bird, a rustling and cooing of thousands of other birds, briefly disturbed, but then going back to their business.)

We did not fear other animals. Not because we were good at hiding or fighting or fleeing. But because we were so mighty in numbers. We practiced predator satiation, a fancy way of saying it will always be the other guy who gets it. That was our motto: It will always happen to the other guy. There were so many of us, your chances of being the one to get eaten were tiny. No matter where we went, there weren't enough wolves or bobcats or hawks in the forest to make a dent in our hordes. They could gorge themselves on our flesh, and there would still be 10 million, 100 million, a billion, of us left in the flock. For thousands of years, we even survived the humans who hunted us. But the Indians believed pigeons carried the souls of their dead. They were careful to kill only the squabs. They spared nesting adults so they could breed again. And so we lived and multiplied, undefeated. Until the Europeans came to the continent. Until they brought 19th century technology. And slaughter on an industrial scale.

(VO with the SFX of the humming sound of an approaching flock, growing in intensity, and the sound of gunfire, sporadic and intermittent at first, then growing in numbers and intensity until it is a continuous fusillade. The shots are followed by the sound of bird cries, panicked fluttering and the thud of bodies hitting the ground. This is accompanied by excited shouts and laughter from men.)

MARTHA

(cont.)

First there were the guns, of course. It seemed like every man and child who could lift a shotgun pointed it at us when we came by. It wasn't hunting or sport. There wasn't any chase, or stalking, or skill. When we crowded the skies, you didn't even have to aim. All you had to do hold your gun up, close your eyes and pull the trigger. One blast would hit 10, a dozen, 50 birds at a time. Apparently you found something irresistible in the ease in which we were slaughtered.

(SFX: The flapping roar of a flock passing overhead, followed by the blast of a shotgun quite close, and the flutter and cry of birds being shot.)

WALTER

(laughing almost hysterically in delight)

Hah!

(SFX: A shot gun being reloaded, fired again and hitting more birds.)

Ha-ha-ha! Yes!

(SFX: The cycle of loading and firing and killing is repeated.)

BETSY

Walter! Walter! What on earth are you doing? Come away from there. Close that window. It's bad enough that the children are terrified by this horde of birds, but do you have to add to the din by shooting your gun in the house and acting like you've gone insane?

WALTER

But look, Betsy.

(SFX: Another shotgun blast and another sound of a falling bird)

I can't miss.

(SFX: Another round of shooting)

Think of all the meals we'll have. Pigeon pie! Pigeon stew!

(SFX: Another shot)

BETSY

But you've been shooting non-stop for the past hour. Who's going to pick up and clean all those birds? We won't be able to cook and eat them all. They'll rot and go to waste.

WALTER

(SFX: Firing again.)

Who cares? We'll feed them to the dogs.

(SFX: Firing again.)

Ha-ha! We'll use them to fertilize the garden.

BETSY

Don't you have to go to work? What will Mr. Miller say when you don't show up at the store?

WALTER

(SFX: Firing again)

Old man Miller is shooting birds too! Besides the only thing anyone is buying or selling today is guns and shells. The whole town - the pastor, the mayor, the doctor - they're all out in the streets shooting. It's a holiday!

(SFX: Repeated firing and hysterical laughing which fades.)

MARTHA

We were always food to hungry humans. To the Seneca, we were *jah'gowa* or "big bread." But as the white men spread west across the continent, we became a commodity. Killing us became a profession. An army of market hunters sprang up to make a living filling barrels with the bodies of dead pigeons. We were cheap protein. We were shipped to the cities back East. A dollar for a dozen birds, 50 cents for a dozen. They couldn't kill us fast enough. And the railroads and telegraph lines that began to crisscross the country made it easier.

(SFX: The rapid tapping of a telegraph key in Morse code.)

HUNTER

What does it say? What does it say?

OPERATOR

(reading)

"Big flock sighted Petosky Mich." Stop. "Other hunters already arriving." Stop. "Hotels full." Stop. "Come quick." Stop. "Ammunition shortages here." Stop. "Bring more." Stop. "Repeat bring plenty ammunition." Stop.

HUNTER

OK. Wire this back. "Taking first train north." Stop. "Have ready: barrels ice whiskey." Stop.

(SFX: The sound of the telegraph key transmitting, which fades and is replaced by the slow huffing of a stationary railroad steam engine. There is also shouting, grunting and thumping noises of men loading barrels onto rail cars. And in the distance, the continuous blast of shotgun fire.)

WORKMAN

That's the last barrel for that car. Fifty thousand birds. Where do we put the rest?

SUPERVISOR

Over there. The new car. It's a Swift refrigerated car.

WORKMAN

A refrigerated car? For pigeons?

SUPERVISOR

These are headed all the way back to New York City.

WORKMAN

They could pickle them, or smoke them, or salt them.

SUPERVISOR

Not for these. They need to be fresh. Some of them are going to end up on the tables at Delmonicos. They're a delicacy there. Pigeon cutlets. Pigeon with truffles. Pigeons stuffed with parsley. "Ballotine of squab a la Madison." Can't have pickled pigeon at Delmonicos.

MARTHA

(VO as the SFX of the train fades.)

They found a lot of ways of eating us. They found even more ways of killing us. Guns, to be sure. But men also shot cannons into our flocks. They hit us with fireworks. They knocked us out of the air with sticks and stones. They chopped down the trees when they were full of nests, sending them crashing into other trees and throwing all of our squabs to the ground. They burned us to death by setting fire to our nests, or gassed us with sulfur. They stupefied and scooped us up after they baited us with wheat soaked with alcohol. And they netted us by the thousands, by the millions, by using our own kind to betray us. You know what a stool pigeon is. But do you know where that phrase came from? Captured passenger pigeons made to sit on a wooden stool and flap their wings to lure the flocks to nets waiting to be sprung. But these weren't willing betrayers like human stool pigeons. The hunters sewed the pigeons' eyes shut so they couldn't see what they were doing. Of course, birds that were caught in the net were still alive. The netters had to find a cheap, quick way to kill us – hundreds at a time – before we could be stuffed into the barrels.

(SFX: The bird cry and flapping sound of dozens of birds landing on the ground)

NETTER

Now!

(SFX: The sound of a spring being released and the whoosh of a large net swinging through the air, followed by frantic fluttering and distressed calls of the birds.)

SALESMAN

(SFX: As the frantic "coos" and "keehees" of many captured birds can be heard in the background)

A good catch. At least 30 dozen, I'd say. I wonder if you would be interested in a new invention I'm selling to netters in the area. Your hands must get pretty tired pulling the heads off 300 birds. With this all-metal pigeon pincer, you just let the tool do all the work. It just takes one quick squeeze on the neck.

(SFX: The kee-kee-kee of a panicked bird, abruptly halted with a snap.)

NETTER

Oh, my hands don't get tired.

SALESMAN

No?

NETTER

No. And why do I need to buy a pair of fancy pliers when I have a good set of strong teeth?

SALESMAN

Teeth?

NETTER

Sure. Just a little bite on the head.

(SFX: The frantic cries and flutters of an individual bird being picked up which abruptly ceases after a small crunch)

That's all it takes.

MARTHA

Lovely. Just lovely. But really, what can we expect? If you weren't eating us, you were using our feathers to fill your mattresses. You were using our fat to make soap. When your bellies were full, you fed us to your dogs and your hogs. When their bellies were full, you used our rotting wings to fill potholes. There was only one reason you wanted to keep us alive. That was to kill us later. You've heard of trap shooting? Well, before there were clay pigeons there were live pigeons. Thousands of passenger pigeons would be killed in a single tournament. Some were blinded in one eye so they would fly in circles after they were thrown out of the traps. Shot by – what did they call them? Oh yeah, sportsmen. One time, the winner had to kill 30,000 birds to claim the title. Whether for food or profit or play, you just never got tired of killing us. Yet there's still one more invention man turned against us.

(VO the SFX of a high pitched whine of a saw blade biting into wood, followed by the sound of large trees being chopped down and toppled.)

Saw mills that spread across the land to mow down and take apart the continent's great woods. Those forests produced the nuts and acorns that could feed a billion birds. Those trees sheltered our cities of nests where we raised our young. Here is a secret. You don't have to kill off every last individual to extinguish a species. You just need to slaughter enough so we don't have the numbers to scout for acorns or overwhelm predators. You just have to destroy enough of our nesting sites, to harass us with guns and nets and sticks, to shake down our nests, to make it hard enough to reproduce that the numbers born don't replace those dying. Then time and math will do the rest. It only took a few decades of the killing for the impact to be felt.

(SFX: Interior of a passenger train, with the click-clack of wheels and the chugging of the engine.)

NETTER

It's the end of the era, I say. Were you at Shelby? In '74?

HUNTER

I was there. I shot 300 birds in one day. We shot and shot until our gun barrels got too hot and we had to pour water over them to cool them off.

NETTER

I netted 100 dozen in one day.

HUNTER

Ah. Well, I ran out of ammunition.

NETTER

I heard there were 900,000 birds all told that got shipped.

HUNTER

No wonder the prices were so low.

NETTER

Then Petoskey. In '78. 50,000 birds killed every day. 700,000 birds in all.

HUNTER

Now we'll be lucky to get 50,000 out of this whole flock.

NETTER

Yes. It's the end of the big flocks. We'll soon have to find something else to hunt.

HUNTER

(After a pause)

Do you think it was our fault?

NETTER

What do you mean? Our fault for what?

HUNTER.

That the pigeons are disappearing. Maybe if we weren't so greedy, if we didn't take so many, we could have made them last. There have been many nestings where I saw the hunters and netters killing so many birds that there weren't enough barrels or wagons or trains to take them all. They were just left to rot in the fields.

NETTER

Yes. I've seen that too.

HUNTER

Like this nesting. Maybe if we took fewer birds, or even if we let them alone for a spell, let them alone long enough to breed and nest and raise their young, the flocks would build up again.

NETTER

Well, you can go home if you want. But you'll be the only one. All the other hunters I know are coming. There may be more hunters than birds. And why? If the birds are disappearing, this may be the last big nesting. Maybe the last chance in our lifetime, maybe in anyone's lifetime. Get them while we can, man. Don't you want to say you were there to shoot the last of the pigeons?

MARTHA

(VO as the sound of the train fades)

You understand? The fewer there were of us, the more eager you were to kill us. The idea of stopping the killing? Of protecting birds? Hah!

(SFX: The murmur of men in a hall: a state legislature)

SENATOR 1

Mr. Chairman. Mr. Chairman. I stand before you to propose a bill to protect a great natural wonder while we still have the time. It should be clear to all that the once mighty flocks of passenger pigeons are disappearing. It should be equally clear we humans are at fault with our indiscriminate and senseless and unrelenting persecution of these animals. We must impose restrictions on the hunting, especially the constant disturbance and harassment of the pigeons at nesting sites, preventing the birds from reproducing.

(SFX: A murmur of disapproval.)

SENATOR 2

Mr. Chairman. Mr. Chairman. With all due respect to my esteemed colleague. The passenger pigeon needs no protection. The pigeon can take care of itself. They are wonderfully prolific, having the vast forests as their breeding grounds. It is here today and elsewhere tomorrow, and no ordinary destruction can lessen them. They are a resource given to us by God to use as we see fit. There is no legitimate science behind the claim that their numbers are decreasing or they are in threat of extermination. In fact, it is not the pigeon that needs protection, but the pigeon hunter. These are jobs that are important to our economy and should not be threatened by needless regulation.

(SFX: A murmur of men in approval.)

MARTHA

But soon there weren't any big flocks to be seen. Just occasional and increasingly rare sightings of a handful of birds. A group of a hundred or even a dozen birds was unusual. From billions to dozens in only about 40 years. People could not believe it. There had to be another explanation.

(SFX: Inside a large lecture hall, with the murmuring of the audience responding to the speakers.)

EXPERT 1

Gentlemen, this is my theory: I believe the disappearance of the passenger pigeon from our Eastern and Northern woods is due to resettlement of the colonies in the West. They are now living in great caves in New Mexico, the Arizona desert or near Puget Sound.

EXPERT 2

No. No. No. It's clear they have all attempted to leave the continent. They have sought new nesting grounds in Chile, or possibly Australia. In making their concerted migration, they have either all drowned in the ocean, possibly in the Bermuda Triangle, or they have altered their appearance to adjust to their new surroundings and thus remain undetected.

MARTHA

We weren't hiding incognito in Australia, of course. We were still in North America. It was just that we were mostly dead. By the end of the 19th century, the appearance of a single pigeon was notable.

(Reciting)

On July 27, 1898, an immature pigeon was seen near Owensboro, Kentucky. It was shot.

(SFX: A shot, a bird cry and a frantic fluttering followed by the thud of a body hitting the ground.)

Near Detroit, the last pigeon seen in Michigan was spotted on September 14, 1898. It was shot.

(SFX: Another shot, cry, flutter and thud.)

The last wild pigeon seen in Canada was sighted in Winnipegosis, Manitoba on April 10, 1898. It was stuffed. After being shot of course.

(SFX: Shot, bird cry, flutter and thud.)

Wisconsin's last known pigeon was confirmed in mid-September 1899. Once it was shot.

(SFX: Another shot, cry, flutter and thud.)

History does not record who was the last person to eat the flesh of a passenger pigeon. Now that we were rare, these examples were more likely bound for a museum than a pot.

(beat)

MARTHA

(cont.)

Finally on March 24, 1900, a boy in Sargents, Ohio, saw a bird that was strange to him.

(SFX: Interior of a farmhouse kitchen with the sound of a woman chopping vegetables, followed by the pounding steps of a child running in.)

BOY

Mama! Mama!

MAMA

(distracted in her cooking)

What is it dear?

BOY

I was feeding the cows and I saw this blue bird eating the corn. I've never seen anything like it. It was beautiful.

MAMA

Mmm-hmm.

BOY

Can I shoot it?

MAMA

What?

BOY

Can I get the gun?

MAMA

All right. But you can only have one shell. Don't hurt yourself. And don't take all day. You've still got chores to do.

BOY

(excited)

Yes, mama!

(SFX: Pounding feet of the excited boy running out of the house.)

MARTHA

(VO with the SFX of outside in a rural farm during the day, and the voice of a passenger pigeon cooing quietly to itself.)

What was the last passenger pigeon ever seen alive in the wild thinking as she perched in a tree? Imagine being in a world where all your kind had vanished. Was she wondering, "Where is everyone? Where did everyone go?"

(SFX: A shotgun blast, a cry, a flutter and a thud.)

We weren't individuals when there were millions to be slaughtered and shipped, stuffed into barrels while men jumped on the lids to jam more in. But that last free passenger pigeon was given a name. Buttons. Because that's what they used instead of glass eyes when they stuffed her. They tried to find others. How they tried! People started offering rewards just for confirmation of an active nest: \$100, \$300. Once we were worth just pennies dead. But in 1910, the American Ornithologists' Union offered \$3,000 to anyone who found a wild nest.

(beat)

No one did.

(beat)

MARTHA

(cont.)

All that were left of us were captives. A few dozen, in cages, in zoos. One by one, we began to die off, despite efforts to get us to reproduce, to create a new breeding flock. I'd like to say that we refused out of spite. For decades you killed us by the trainload. Now you finally wanted us to live? But the reality is we were always a bit indifferent when it came to mating. We evolved to be surrounded by a flock of millions. It made us fussy, picky. If we didn't like a potential mate, there were thousands and thousands of others to choose from. Plenty of birds in the tree, we used to say. We only bred once a year, laying one egg at a time. That was enough when a billion other birds were all doing it. But not when there were just handfuls cooped up in captivity. Eventually, there were just two of us left here in Cincinnati. In this zoo. We were born in a cage. We lived our lives in a cage. The life of a species that once covered half a continent, had shrunk to a 10-by-12 foot space. George and me. It was not a match made in heaven.

(SFX: Daytime in a cage at the zoo, with the occasional distant cries of other wild animals and the murmurs and shuffling of crowds of people.)

GEORGE

It's too bad about Phil isn't it? What happened to him after, I mean.

MARTHA

(A younger version of MARTHA)

Yes. But what did you expect?

GEORGE

But they just threw him out when he died. One of the three last passenger pigeons left alive in the world. They didn't even try to preserve him.

MARTHA

(acidly)

He was in molt when he died. They don't preserve birds unless they look good, unless they're in full plumage. If you don't want to be thrown out too, be sure not to be molting when you fall off your perch.

GEORGE

I'll try to keep that in mind.

(beat)

Well.

(beat)

I guess it's just you and me, old girl.

MARTHA

You've noticed that too? And don't call me old girl. I'm no older than you, George.

GEORGE

Sorry. Sorry.

(beat)

Well.

MARTHA

Yes. As you so eloquently observe, well.

GEORGE

(After a silent pause, then suddenly)

I miss Phillip, don't you?

MARTHA

Yes, I do.

GEORGE

Do you? Do you really? Miss having him around?

MARTHA

Of course. When the world's population of passenger pigeons is suddenly reduced by 33 percent in a stroke, you tend to notice.

GEORGE

Yes, of course, of course. But you liked Phillip? You liked him as a bird?

MARTHA

Yes. We got on well. A good friend.

(Long pause.)

GEORGE

A good friend?

MARTHA

Yes, of course, a good friend.

GEORGE

(after a pause)

Did you and Phillip ever...I mean to say...were you..?

MARTHA

Ever what?

GEORGE

Well...

MARTHA

(After letting GEORGE squirm for a few seconds)

Yes, if you must know. If you really need to ask. How could you have not noticed stuck in the same cage?

GEORGE

Well, I thought...well, suspected, but I wanted to give you your privacy. I didn't want you to think I was spying. Or prying. Or jealous. I didn't want to horn in.

MARTHA

Thank you.

(pause)

That was thoughtful of you.

(pause)

Yes, Phillip and I did have a pair bond.

GEORGE

I see. I'm sorry.

MARTHA

Thank you.

(beat, then a bit reluctantly)

I guess it's up to us, then.

GEORGE

Yes.

(after a long pause)

What is?

MARTHA

What?

GEORGE

What is up to us?

MARTHA

(a bit impatiently)

What do you imagine? To mate! To reproduce! It's up to us. We're it. This is the last ditch. Don't you feel any sense of duty? If we're going to save the species, we have to do it. The ghosts of Phillip and billions and billions of birds before him are counting on us. On "it."

GEORGE

Yes. I knew that. Of course.

(Pause.)

Uh. Now?

MARTHA

Are we getting any younger?

GEORGE

No. Of course not.

(Pause.)

It's just that...

MARTHA

Yes?

GEORGE

There's just a lot of people about. Watching.

MARTHA

You want to wait until after the zoo closes?

GEORGE

If that's all right with you? I mean, there's a lot of pressure, you know, if someone's watching.

MARTHA

Very well. We'll wait. Tonight then.

GEORGE

(a bit relieved)

Good. I'll be ready.

(jocularly)

Be prepared for ecstasy.

MARTHA

You haven't done this before, have you?

GEORGE

Yes. No. I mean, I've done it. Many times. With others. You just didn't notice.

MARTHA

And you're not gay?

GEORGE

Oh, no, no, no, no. Not me. I'm the original he-pigeon. You'll see. Not that there's anything wrong with being gay. I'm very open-minded, you know. Live and let live, I say.

MARTHA

No, there's nothing wrong with it. Except perhaps in this one case. It's not like we can decide to adopt a mourning dove egg.

GEORGE

Yes. Right. Ha-ha. Well. Maybe I'll take a little nap. Rest up for tonight. Until then? For the species!

(SFX: The sound of the crowds of people at the zoo fades away, replaced by the sounds of a closed zoo at night: crickets and the distant cries of wild nocturnal animals.)

MARTHA

Well, here we are again. Funny how that happens.

GEORGE

(nervously)

Yes. Come here often? Have we met before? Ha-ha. Say, it's really dark isn't it?

MARTHA

You never noticed that before?

GEORGE

I usually get to bed pretty early. This is actually past my bedtime. I never realized so many animals were up this late. When do they sleep?

(Startled by SFX: A roar or howl of a large animal.)

What the hell was that?

MARTHA

Just some ferocious bird-eating animal.

(beat)

So. Ready to start?

GEORGE

Yes. Yes. Of course. For the species.

(Clears his throat, then begins in a bird voice.)

Coo. Coo. Coo.

MARTHA

Coo. Coo. Coo.

GEORGE

Coo. Coo. Coo. Cooo.

MARTHA

Coo. Coo. Coo. Cooo.

GEORGE

Keck. Keck. Keck.

MARTHA

Kee. Kee Kee.

GEORGE

Keck. Keck. Keck.

(After a long silence.)

Well?

MARTHA

What? I'm waiting. You skipped one.

GEORGE

Oh. I'm sorry. I'm a little nervous. It's been a while, I guess.

MARTHA

It's been a while for all of us. That's the problem. All right. Forget it. Just keep going.

GEORGE

OK. Sorry. Deep breath. Focus. Starting again then...

MARTHA

From the top?

GEORGE

If you don't mind? I don't think I can do it without going through the whole sequence. If we're going to do it, we should do it right, don't you think?

MARTHA

All right. Just get on with it.

GEORGE

(Clears throat)

Coo. Coo. Coo.

MARTHA

Coo. Coo. Coo.

GEORGE

Coo. Coo. Coo. Cooo.

MARTHA

Coo. Coo. Coo. Cooo.

GEORGE

Keck-keck--

(SFX: A loud animal screams)

Jesus Christ! Did you hear that? That was right next to the cage! What kind of animals are running around out there? What kind of security do they have in this place?

MARTHA

Calm down. It's just the hyenas. They're on the other side of the zoo. They're nowhere near here. You must sleep like the dead if you've never heard them before.

GEORGE

(offended)

I believe in getting at least eight hours of sleep a night.

MARTHA

Good. You should have lots of energy then.

(beat)

Shall we? Take three? Before the zoo reopens?

GEORGE

I'm not sure how anyone can be expected to concentrate with all this racket going on.

MARTHA

Just close your eyes, lay back, and think of England.

GEORGE

Think of England? Why should I think of England? I'm not sure how...

MARTHA

Forget it.

GEORGE

I've never even been to England. In fact, none of us...

MARTHA

I said forget it. It was just a joke.

GEORGE

(After a pause)

Ah. A joke. Very good. Ha-ha. Does that help get you in the mood? Because speaking for myself, I don't find..

MARTHA

Shut up! Just get on with it.

GEORGE

I beg your pardon. As you wish, madam. I'm fully prepared to go ahead assuming we don't get interrupted again.

(Pedantically)

From the top again. Coo. Coo. Coo.

MARTHA

(At a faster tempo that GEORGE finds himself imitating.)

Coo. Coo. Coo.

GEORGE

Coo. Coo. Coo. Cooo.

MARTHA

Coo. Coo. Coo. Cooo.

GEORGE

Keck. Keck. Keck.

MARTHA

Kee. Kee. Kee.

GEORGE

(Now both fairly racing through the courtship chant.)

Keck. Keck. Keck. KECK!

MARTHA

Kee. Kee. Kee. KEE!

GEORGE

Right ho!

*(SFX: Heavy breathing, some rapid shuffling
and frantic fluttering of wings.)*

MARTHA

OK. Uh. You're stepping...you're stepping on my tail.

GEORGE

Sorry, sorry. Wait a sec. Nearly there.

(SFX: After some more fluttering.)

Ah! Ok!

(rhythmically chanting)

Keck. Keck. Keck. Kee-ho. Kee-ho. Kee-ho. Keck. Keck. Keck.
Kee-ho. Kee-ho. Kee-hoo. Kee. Kee. Kee. KEEEEE!

*(Pause, followed by GEORGE catching his
breath.)*

There! Did it!

MARTHA

(dryly)

Hmm. If you say so. Well, we'll just have to wait and see.

GEORGE

I'm sure we can expect something. Wow. I'm exhausted. Aren't you?

MARTHA

Not exactly. But go to bed. Get your eight hours in.

(A pause, then to the audience.)

George slept. I waited. And waited. But nothing happened.
Days, weeks, went by. No egg. We tried it again. And again.
And again.

(SFX: The zoo at night again.)

GEORGE

(Bored and without enthusiasm)

Kee-ho. Kee-ho. Kee-hoo. Kee. Kee. Kee.

(A heavy sigh)

Kee. For all the good that will do.

MARTHA

Well then don't if it's so much of a bother.

GEORGE

Oh, no. Wouldn't think of it. Don't want to let the species down.

MARTHA

If you don't care, it's not going to happen.

GEORGE

What do you mean?

MARTHA

I mean if the intent isn't there, if there's not some, some sincerity in the act, maybe that's what's wrong.

GEORGE

Sincerity in the act? Sincerity? Sincerity has nothing to do with it. It's just a matter of biology. Put substance A in proximity with substance B. End result: substance C.

MARTHA

I'm beginning to question the potency of substance A. Or even the existence of substance A.

GEORGE

I beg your pardon?

MARTHA

You're just going through the motions. Kee, kee, kee, roll over, goodnight. That's what I mean by sincerity. Are you faking it?

GEORGE

Faking it?

MARTHA

(imitating GEORGE)

"Kee-ho. Kee-ho. Kee-hoo. Kee. Kee. Kee. Kee." Really?
Really?

GEORGE

I see. I lack the requisite enthusiasm. Forgive me. This hasn't been exactly easy for me. If you really must know, and I didn't want to mention this before, but in my own defense I feel I must: You're not really my type.

MARTHA

Not your type? Oh, really? Well, I've got some news for you. In case you haven't noticed. Right now, I am the type. I have the unchallenged title as the most beautiful passenger pigeon in the world. Start getting that into your bird brain.

GEORGE

How do you know it's me? How do you know it's not you? Where are all the eggs and squabs that you and Phillip should have produced?

MARTHA

(Quietly, after a long pause.)

We had an egg.

GEORGE

(After another silence)

Oh. I didn't know.

MARTHA

There wasn't enough twigs here to build a nest, so I laid it on the floor of the cage, and I sat on it as well as I could. A week went by. Two. Then three. Even I knew by then something was wrong. But I couldn't stop sitting on that egg. Finally a zookeeper came in. He forced me off. He picked up the egg. My egg. He held it up to his ear. He shook it! Then he took it out and threw it away.

GEORGE

Oh. I'm sorry.

MARTHA

Forget it. Go to sleep.

GEORGE

(After a pause.)

Why do you care?

MARTHA

What?

GEORGE

I said, why do you care?

MARTHA

Care about what?

GEORGE

About this. About an egg. About the species. What do you owe them?

MARTHA

Owe them?

GEORGE

Them. The men out there watching, hoping we'll save the species at the last minute. And save them.

MARTHA

Save them? From what?

GEORGE

From the guilt. The guilt of butchering a race. Even they know they're responsible. Why should we knock ourselves out? Why should we let them off the hook? They slaughtered us out of existence. And now they want us to reproduce. Why should we salve their conscience? And who are we kidding? Even if we do have an egg, even if we do have a squab, then we'd have to have another of the opposite sex. Even if that happened, then sister would have to breed with brother. What is the likelihood of that happening? What are the odds they'd be able to produce viable offspring? It just doesn't work that way. Adam and Eve are a myth. Face it. There will never be a wild flock again. We'll never get out of this cage. Any children we have will live and die here too. Honestly, I'd rather not put them through it. I've tried to think it might be different. But I've had it.

MARTHA

What would you have us do then?

GEORGE

Just screw it. Not each other. Just. Screw. It. Just live. Live for us, not for them. Just try to be as happy as we can with the life we have. Just accept. Eat their food. Or don't. But ignore them. Ignore their expectant, stupid faces, wondering every morning if we did it last night. Their puzzlement at why nothing is happening. Don't give them a show. Pretend they don't exist. Don't let them feel satisfied that they let us live, that they gave us a chance, that they did anything but kill us and imprison us. I know they think we're just animals. But I'd like to put a pair of them in a cage, surround them with pigeons watching their every move, and see if they do it.

MARTHA

(A long pause. Then she sighs.)

I know. I know we're done. But I can't help it. I'm afraid. I'm afraid.

GEORGE

Afraid?

MARTHA

I don't want to be alone. If we can't have a child, then that's what's going to happen to one of us, isn't it? I want to give birth because I want someone to outlive me. I don't want to be the last one.

GEORGE

So instead, you'd be willing to let your own child endure that? To be a ghastly amusement, to be gawked at by them?

MARTHA

I've never flown, but it's in my blood to fly. I've never lived with a great flock. But it's in my blood to fill the sky with millions of brothers and sister birds. It's in your blood too.

GEORGE

We'll never fly. We'll never have a flock. We are just freaks. A sideshow exhibit. It's hopeless to want anything more.

MARTHA

I don't want to die alone.

GEORGE

Maybe you won't die alone. Maybe you'll die first. Before me.

MARTHA

Ah. Yes. True. Thanks for that.

GEORGE

Sorry. I...well...sorry.

(Sighs, then after a pause, softly)

Keck. Keck. Keck?

(After pause for a response.)

Keck. Keck. Keck?

(Another pause. No response. Then again.)

Keck. Keck. Keck?

MARTHA

It's OK. Just stop.

GEORGE

(bently)

Keck. Keck. Keck.

(beat)

Keck. Keck. Keck.

(beat)

Keck. Keck. Keck.

MARTHA

(A long pause, then finally.)

Kee. Kee. Kee.

(SFX: The sounds of the zoo at night fade to be replaced by the sounds of the zoo during the day. Instead of the night noises of crickets and nocturnal animal cries, the sounds of people and crowds.)

MARTHA

(Cont. VO)

That was the last time. There was an unspoken decision after that. We stopped trying to mate. And we were happier as a result. Content in each others company now that we were no longer trying to save the species from existential doom. George was wrong though. He wouldn't outlive me.

GEORGE

(Weakly)

You know, I wish I weren't molting.

MARTHA

What? What do you mean?

GEORGE

You remember what happened to Phillip? You warned me. If I'm molting, I'm no good to a taxidermist. I'll be tossed, not stuffed.

MARTHA

Please don't say that. You're famous. You're the last male passenger pigeon in the world.

GEORGE

I also wish I hadn't let you down. I'm sorry.

MARTHA

Don't be. Don't be sorry.

GEORGE

I didn't give you a child. And I won't outlive you.

MARTHA

You know it's not your fault. You were - are - a good pigeon. You didn't let anyone down. Just try to get some rest.

(SFX: The sound of the zoo fades. VO in the voice of old MARTHA now.)

I was wrong too. George died that night. But they simply threw him away. The world's last male passenger pigeon. I never saw him again. I knew I would miss him. I'm still surprised at how much. It's true that I never knew another kind of life, that the great flocks were long gone before I was born in captivity. But instinct still remained. I came from a race that was most comfortable in the company of millions of other birds, that never truly stayed put, a restless, wandering horde.

(Pause)

They offered another reward. One thousand dollars to anyone who could find a new mate for Martha. No one could. All the wild birds were gone. I would spend the weeks, months, years, stuck alone in this cage. The last. The ender.

(Pause, then VO with SFX: The zoo at day again.)

MARTHA

(cont.)

It's been four years since George died. I am old, and probably a little bit insane from senility and loneliness. Strange memories come to me, things I couldn't possibly have experienced. I refuse to make a spectacle. I do my best to be an unsatisfying figure of pity. But my wings droop. My tail drags on the ground. Except for a palsied trembling, I am motionless. No matter how much sand they throw at me.

(SFX: The sound of the zoo fades, and it's gradually replaced by the slow ticking of an old-fashioned clock. And then along with the mechanical ticking, there is faster sound, the rapid tup-tup-tup-tup of a heartbeat that gradually increases in volume.)

They say that the heart of a pigeon at rest beats about 400 times a minute.

(SFX: The heartbeat starts to gradually slow, winding down to less than once a second where it continues for a few seconds until it finally stops. A second or two later, there's the single chime of a clock tower. A long pause.)

The official end of the passenger pigeon species is recorded as happening at 1 p.m., September 1, 1914.

(Another pause, and then in a peeved voice.)

And goddamn it! Wouldn't you know it? I was molting when I dropped dead. I wish they had thrown me out. But for once, they didn't. Instead, they froze me. They froze me in a block of ice. A 300-pound block of ice.

(SFX: The sound of a freight train in motion.)

They put me on a train bound for Washington, D.C. Three days later I was defrosted at the Smithsonian Institution and being dissected.

(SFX: Interior of a laboratory and the sounds of a dissection: a scalpel cutting into flesh, bird bones being cracked and tissues pulled apart, instruments being taken from and put back onto a metal tray, the scribbling of a pen on paper of a secretary taking dictation.)

SCHUFELDT

(VO, dictating)

I, Dr. R.W. Shufeldt, was asked by the Division of Birds of the National Museum to make this record of the specimen. I found the bird to be an adult female in molt with some middle tail feathers missing...it had healthy eyes, eye-lids, nostrils and mouth parts...the feet were of a deep flesh-colored pink...I noted the great size of the pectoralis major muscles...the eyes and brain were consigned to alcohol...the lungs were very dark and appear to have been congested at the time of death...a certain degree of atrophy characterizes the left ovary and its duct. The right ovary is quite rudimentary...there is every reason to believe that the internal anatomy of the auricles and ventricles of the heart of the passenger pigeon agree, in all structural particulars, with the corresponding ones in any large wild pigeon.

(SFX: The sound of a metal lid being unscrewed from a glass jar, and being filled with alcohol.)

I therefore did not further dissect the heart, preferring to preserve it in its entirety, perhaps somewhat influenced by sentimental reasons. This was the heart of the last "Blue Pigeon" that the world will ever see alive. With the final throb of this heart, still another bird became extinct for all time, the last representative of countless millions and unnumbered generations of its kind exterminated through man's agency.

MARTHA

(VO, dryly)

How touching. If only your concern didn't come about 40 years too late.

(SFX: The clatter of film plates being inserted into a large camera and the shutter being exposed.)

They photographed me.

(SFX: A wet tearing sound.)

MARTHA

(cont.)

They skinned me. And what remained was turned over to Mr. Nelson R. Wood of the Taxidermical Department for mounting. Feathers that I had dropped were swept up from the bottom of my cage in Cincinnati and sent to Washington to be glued back on. But while I was being deconstructed and put back together, it was pleasant to note that in the late summer of 1914, humans were employing industrialized killing for something else. It was the beginning of your great war. For once, you used your guns and your gas on each other. Not that a few birds weren't killed too.

(SFX: The sounds of the trenches from a WWI battlefield, with the rattle of machine guns and shelling in the distance.)

PRIVATE

Look! A pigeon.

SARGEANT

Theirs or ours?

PRIVATE

Uhh. Theirs I think.

(SFX: A shot, a bird cry, a flutter of wings, and a thud.)

MARTHA

Those were homing pigeons, of course, tame birds used to carry messages for soldiers. Now that we're all dead, we passenger pigeons are curiously protected and precious, taxidermied and sheltered inside glass cabinets in museums, schools and the dens of private collectors. Alive we numbered in the billions. Dead and preserved, there are only 1,532 specimens of us now in existence in collections around the world. You can find us in the Narodni Museum in Prague, the Yamashina Institute for Ornithology and Zoology in Tokyo, the Wanganui Public Museum in New Zealand. Once we were cheap protein. They used to sell our flesh by the ton. But now that we're just glass eyes, feathers and skins stuffed with cotton, we cost up to \$12,000 when a carcass changes hands. I bet some people wish now they hadn't thrown out all those dead birds.

(VO with SFX of the interior of a museum, the murmur of museum goers.)

After I was stuffed, I was put on display at the Smithsonian. The world's last and most famous passenger pigeon, now in a glass box. They say that the tragic story of the passenger pigeon so troubled mankind that it launched the modern conservation movement. It came just in time to save the bison from extinction. Bully for them. But eventually they get bored of me and stick me into a metal storage cabinet for a few decades. Case Z11C is my usual home. Then they'll haul me out again for a special exhibit or to commemorate some anniversary. A new generation of bored, slack-jawed tourists will line up to stare at me. Conservationists will make pilgrimages to see the martyr of man's senseless slaughter. The experience on both sides of the glass is not much different from when I was at the zoo.

(SFX: Interior of a museum, with the murmur of crowds and shuffling feet.)

SPECTATOR 1

I wonder if she knew she was the last of her kind.

SPECTATOR 2

I wonder if she was lonely.

SPECTATOR 1

We're sorry, Martha. We're sorry we did this to you. Please forgive us.

THOMAS

It's not moving, mama.

MAMA

It's dead, Thomas.

SPECTATOR 1

(With preachy fervor.)

They're all dead. That's the point. They're extinct. And extinction is forever.

THOMAS

This is boring. Who cares about a stupid dead bird?

MAMA

I don't know, dear. Do you want to see the dinosaurs? Or how about Dorothy's ruby slippers?

MARTHA

(VO as SFX of the museum fades)

But unlike the zoo, I did escape the museum twice.

(VO with the SFX sound of flight attendant announcements inside a passenger jet followed by the sound of a plane taking off, cruising and then landing.)

In 1966, I was flown to California to be the mascot for a conservation conference at the San Diego Zoo. And in 1974, I was flown back to the Cincinnati Zoo for the dedication of a memorial to passenger pigeons. Very touching. I never flew in life. But here I was, after I was dead, flying cross country, in a first class seat, insured by Lloyd's of London with a \$5,000 policy, and a flight attendant as an escort. Oh, the mea culpas being poured out over the memory of the passenger pigeon. And now you're trying the ultimate mea culpa, redemption through de-extinction. A species resurrected from the dead through bioengineering. Scrape some DNA off the toe pads of a mummified pigeon. Cut and paste it together with the DNA from a living band-tail pigeon. After some heroic lab work and behavioral training, you get passenger pigeon 2.0.

(SFX: A large auditorium, with PRESENTER on a stage talking on a microphone in a large auditorium.)

PRESENTER

The biotechnology exists. The band-tail pigeons could be genetically engineered to give birth to passenger pigeon chicks. The chicks could be trained by homing pigeons to flock and migrate to feeding and nesting grounds, just as passenger pigeons did more than a 100 years ago. We have a moral obligation to resurrect this species that we destroyed out of selfishness. Our children will see a bird that was last seen by our great-grandparents. And after the passenger pigeon, what next? Perhaps the dodo. Or the woolly mammoth. Are you ready? Do you want to bring an extinct species back?

(SFX: The audience in the hall applauding.)

MARTHA

(VO the fading sound of the applause.)

Ah. Well. Let's set aside the question about whether there's enough habitat, whether the great forests still exist to support a large flock. Has anyone considered what life would be like for the first bioengineered passenger pigeon? Has anyone asked whether that lonely bird wants to be born as another freak show spectacle? It was done before. It did not work out so well.

(VO with the SFX of the sound of an animal struggling to breathe with agonized gasps.)

In 2003, scientists tried to create a clone of a bucardo, an extinct wild European goat. Fifty-seven egg implantations into surrogate mothers resulted in seven pregnancies, six miscarriages and one birth by C-section. That single five-pound clone was born with a malformed lung. It only lived for 10 rather unpleasant minutes.

(The gasps grow more desperate, then stop.)

MARTHA

(cont.)

Not much of a life, was it? Personally, not something I would want to go through. But that little baby goat didn't have a say in the matter, did it? Of course the technology is much better now. Maybe you could create a batch of healthy passenger pigeon knock-offs. Maybe they'll use my toe pads. I'll finally have that chick I wanted so many years ago. But I'd rather not. I'd rather you not. You see, passenger pigeons look more than little bit like mourning doves. We're bigger and more beautiful of course. But there's a resemblance. And mourning doves are the most hunted game bird in America. Can you imagine if your precious flock of designer passenger pigeons escaped and flew to a place where they're hunting mourning doves?

(SFX: A shot, a bird cry, a flutter of wings and a thud.)

I mean, how many times do you want to cause something to go extinct? No. I say leave it be. Maybe try not to slaughter anything else out of existence. You may think there's plenty of fish in the sea, that man can never kill them all. You're wrong. Remember what happened to us. But let us *be* a memory. Remember what Audubon said. He may have had a premonition of what would be all those years ago. What was it you wrote about us, John?

AUDUBON

(SFX: Footsteps echoing in a hall, then clearing his throat for a recitation.)

Yes. Ahem. "Their body is of an elongated oval form, steered by a long well-plumed tail, and propelled by well-set wings, the muscles of which are very large and powerful for the size of the bird."

(More slowly and thoughtfully)

"When an individual is seen gliding through the woods and close to the observer, it passes like a thought..."

(He comes to a stop, gripped with emotion)

MARTHA

*(After a long pause, then finishing AUDUBON'S
recitation.)*

"...and on trying to see it again, the eye searches in vain.
The bird is gone."

END OF PLAY