research? What questions does the essay raise about what you're supposed to do in your research assignment?

- Explore your thoughts about the contents of the essay. Did you find you could relate in some way to what the essay seemed to say? Did you learn anything about yourself, or about pigeons, or our relationships to nature that struck you in some way?

The Bothersome Beauty of Pigeons

by Bruce Ballenger

The cardboard display tables of the mostly African vendors in Florence's largest piazzas are marvels of engineering. They are designed to be light and portable, and to fold in an instant without disrupting the orderly display of fashionable sunglasses, silver cigarette lighters, or art posters. I watch these street entrepreneurs from the steps of the city's great cathedral, Santa Maria della Fiore, as they work the roving bands of Italian schoolchildren on school holiday. It is a hard sell. The vendors line up side by side and though many sell exactly the same kinds of sunglasses or lighters or posters, they don't seem to aggressively compete with each other; in fact, they borrow money from each other to make change, and laugh together at quiet comments I can't hear.

For a few moments my attention to the scene strays, and when I look back the vendors and their cardboard displays have simply vanished. At first, I can't figure out a reason for the disappearing act. Nor can I explain the street vendors' sudden return minutes later, sweeping in like the flocks of pigeons that are everywhere in these squares. Then I see the small Renault of the Florence polizia driving slowly down an adjacent street, where two officers sit stiffly in their crisp blue uniforms and white leather belts; the police seem bored, indifferent, not even remotely interested in the sudden flight their slow passage through the square inspires.

The vendors are apparently unlicensed and the police routinely attempt to flush them out, but this is clearly a half-hearted campaign. Who can blame them? The vendors are everywhere, lingering at the edge of crowds, a fraternity of friendly bandits clutching their neatly folded cardboard tables, each equipped with a convenient handle of rope and duct tape. Within seconds of the officers' departure, the vendors descend on the square again, once again unfolding their tables to which the merchandise magically adhered.

I watch this flight and return again and again, and along with it I notice the pigeons, who participate in a similar performance of their own in these same squares. The birds are also everywhere, in bold flocks that peck at the heels of the sloppy eaters, each bird turning a greedy red eye up at the diner, the other eye fixed on the ground before it. It is impossible to ignore the pigeons, and tourists delight in tossing food and witnessing the free-for-all at their feet. I find myself looking for crumbs from the pannini I have just finished for lunch, wondering at my own impulse to feed a bird against which I had recently waged war.

Pigeons seem to inspire such paradoxical feelings. Pigeon racers in the Bronx tenderly kiss the beaks of their birds, finally home after flying 500 miles to their lofts after a remarkable feat of solar navigation (Blechman). Meanwhile, pigeon haters host Web sites like Pigeonsmakemesick.com and propose plans for ridding cities of the "vermin," including the tactical use of tennis rackets and loaves of bread (Thorne). Most of us, I think, can swing both ways in our feelings towards pigeons, an ambivalence that doesn't seem to apply to other "pests" because pigeons occupy an odd category of creatures that we can both love and hate, animals that are untidy and irritating yet, at times, utterly enchanting.

Florence does not feed a pigeon lover's longings nearly as well as Venice. In Florence's Piazza San Giovanni, where I sat, there were no seed sales, a business that thrives in Venice's St. Mark's square. For one euro, tourists there can buy a small bag of seeds to feed the pigeons, who respond to the encouragement by gathering in great flocks around the seed thrower. The birds lose their grace and shamelessly stumble over each other with eagerness, pecking wildly at the stone street and even eating out of the tourist's hand or perching on his head. This becomes a photographic occasion as tourists stand, arms outstretched before the great church, covered with pigeons.

One guidebook recommends that this feeding should be followed by throwing an article of clothing in the air, which like the police and the sunglass vendors, makes the pigeons take flight in a sudden pulse of wings, only to circle back in their greed and quickly land again at the tourists' feet (Steve 91). The same guidebook offers advice on dealing with pigeon droppings in one's hair—an obvious hazard for the pigeon lover and hater alike—suggesting that it's far better to wait until the stuff dries because it's easier to remove (85).

Such a thing goes completely against instinct. Among my most chilling childhood memories is politely heeding the patrol boy who commanded me to stop before I crossed the street in front of my home. He towered above me, no doubt growing some in memory, and I didn't see him gather the spit in his mouth to deposit on the top of

my head. I ran home, heedless of traffic, my vision blurred by tears and my fingers wildly clawing at my fouled hair.

It is also, I think, instinctual for human beings to respond warmly to many other animals, particularly those that we find attractive. Pigeons would seem to qualify. They are, after all, close relatives to doves—the lovely white birds of peace—and despite the unsettling red eyes, brown in the youngsters, most *Columbia livia* have smoothly sculpted bodies of blue-gray, and a certain grace when they're not pecking at the stale remnants of someone's lunch. While people rant online about the pestilence of pigeons, it's easy to find organizations of pigeon lovers all over the Web, including the many pigeon fanciers who race them from the rooftops of New York City and other urban areas around the world. Apparently, the fighter George Foreman and actor Paul Newman are among them. Others admire the pigeons' intelligence, something that has been demonstrated by behaviorists like B. F. Skinner who selected pigeons as their primary study subjects. "Pound for pound," gushes Pigeons.com, citing a University of Montana study, "[the pigeon] is one of the smartest, most physically adept creatures in the animal kingdom" ("Resources"). One recent study even demonstrated that pigeons could learn to distinguish between a Van Gogh and a Chagall (Watanabe 147).

It takes special skills to thrive in the world's cities, and pigeons, also called rock doves, are endowed with several ecological advantages that allow them to indulge in "high risk" behavior and escape unscathed. The birds, introduced to North America from Europe in the 1600s, possibly find in urban canyons the high cliffs of their wild ancestors ("FAQs"), and from their high perches they can live and breed and look down on the rest of us.

But they have other evolutionary advantages as well, some of which save them from the well-placed kicks of pigeon-haters or the tires of speeding taxis. For one thing, they "suck" puddle water rather than take it in their beaks and throw their heads back to swallow it, something like the difference between drinking a juice box and slinging back a shot of tequila. Sucking is quicker, apparently, and in very short order they get the water they need, 10 to 15 percent of their body weight daily. In addition, because they can store food in a crop, a pouch in the throat, pigeons can quickly gorge on bread crumbs and seed as the birds weave between the shuffling feet of busy urbanites and then fly to a safe roost to digest what they gathered (Wells and Wells 324).

It's hard not to admire these traits that give the birds such biological success, and yet somehow these evolutionary gifts seem unfair and unearned. I'm disappointed that, say, bluebirds weren't given these advantages, birds that would use them more graciously, judiciously. Pigeons are punks. Looking them in the eye, I'm sure they know this but they just don't care. Yet looking at pigeons also reminds me of my own arrogance, and I both hate them and love them for it.

"The problem with pigeons," said Lia Bartolomei, an Italian who led me through the churches of Lucca one day, "is that they turn marble to dust" (Bartolomei). She then pointed to the small statues and marble carving on the church that were pocked and disfigured. The blame seemed clear. Apparently marble is particularly vulnerable to the acid in pigeon droppings, an unintended consequence of the birds' passion to roost on high places as their ancestors did on cliffs.

This is made worse by the pigeon's social nature. Unlike most other birds, they apparently are not particularly territorial, something that is obvious watching pigeons stumble over each other pursuing breadcrumbs. In great concentrations, the birds produce especially damaging piles of droppings, stuff that not only turns marble to dust but can be an ideal medium for fungus that can cause histoplasmosis and cryptococcossis, both lung infections in humans ("Health Hazards"). It costs the city of London $150,000 a year to clean up pigeon poop in Trafalgar Square alone ("Proposed").

It's the decay of marble monuments, the caked pigeon poop on city bridges, the messy nests on office buildings, and the health threats of dung fungus that long ago thrust the pigeon into the category of "pest." This is an undesirable label if you happen to be the plant or animal that earned it because life for such things can suddenly become complicated. The rock dove—cousin to the bird of peace, messenger for the Romans, brave racer for the homing pigeon enthusiast—also earned the unlovely name of "skyrat." Pigeon-haters find comrades on the Web and confer on the most effective poisons. Their anthem is folksinger Tom Lehrer's song "Poisoning Pigeons in the Park," a macabre tune noting that *When they see us coming, the birdies all try an' hide / But they still go for peanuts when coated with cyanide* (Lehrer). But despite the rants of pigeon-haters, (some of which are tongue-in-cheek) pigeons are not rats because among other things they aren't ugly. "Pests" like these make things complicated for us, too.

Like every urban area in the U.S., the pigeon thrives in Boise, Idaho, where I live, and recently I went to war with a pair determined

to roost in the eaves of our turn-of-the century craftsman home. Let me be clear about one thing: I am a lover of wild birds, even hooligan crows who moodily gather in the neighborhood trees in late afternoon muttering curses. I never disliked pigeons, and even admired their success and intelligence. But the white and green streaks on my windows, and the pile of droppings at my back door turned me against them. The pigeons' indifference to my shouts and shirt waving whenever I found them on the eaves began to infuriate me.

It is human to rail against nature from time to time, and it may even be human nature. It's true that one of the ecological lessons of our time is that our determined efforts to dominate the natural world are not, generally, successful or wise. Ecologically speaking, then, the belief that we're apart from nature, that it can be easily "managed," doesn't help ensure our survival as a species; in fact, our grand engineering efforts often endanger our survival. But aren't these often matters of scale? Pigeon wars, like the battle against dandelions in a suburban lawn, may not matter as much in the ecological scheme of things, or at least this is what we tell ourselves. Still, these campaigns against the wild things that threaten our tidy world—bugs and weeds, rats and pigeons—can say a great deal about the ecology of emotion that shapes our response to nature.

Pigeons, unlike rats, aren't very good enemies. They *are* attractive, and the sweep of their flocks in and out of the squares and streets in Europe or America, expanding and contracting against the bright sky, can almost seem like breathing. Virginia Woolf compared the movement of the great flocks of starlings in the fall to the throwing of a net with "thousands of black knots" expanding and then contracting as the birds settle on the tops of trees (Woolf 5). From a distance, flocks of pigeons can seem like that, and unless you've imprinted images from Hitchcock's film *The Birds,* even the throbbing wings of dozens of the birds landing at your feet can be a little thrill.

Years ago, when I lived on the New England coast, I went on several whale watches to Stellwaggen Bank, an offshore area where there is an unusual concentration of the animals, including some of the rarest like the Right Whale. On every one of these trips, I noticed that there was a longing not only to see these great animals but to *get close* to them. I sensed this desire had as much to do with the longing to make contact—to look in the eye of a whale, to feel a mutual presence between watcher and animal—as it did the desire to simply get a good look at something that large. I wonder if it's that same longing that feeds the pigeon watchers in St. Mark's square as they feed the pigeons. This might explain why there could be such an outcry when, several years ago, London's mayor proposed to end the long history of pigeon feeding in London's Trafalgar Square.

"People come from abroad just to do it," said one critic of the proposal. "For many children the pigeons are the first contact they have with animals. If a pigeon lands on a child's shoulder, it will paint a good picture in their mind and who then know that animals are worth caring for" ("Proposed"). I'm not sure what is behind this longing to get close. But perhaps it appeals to the biological memory, buried deep, that we are indeed a part of nature, not apart from it. Eye contact is the closest thing we get to a language of intimacy with wild things, though we won't look a rat in the eye. We don't want to get close to just anybody.

Yet these two feelings, our separation and connection to the natural world, are always in conflict, even among those who have tutored themselves to believe in one rather than the other. This seems especially true when confronted with creatures like pigeons, who aren't easy to hate and aren't easy to love, who both foul the nest and yet possess the beauty of a gray river stone, smoothed by the timeless movement of current. All of this was on my mind as I pounded small nails into my pigeons' favorite perches under the eaves and cut the tops off of them to make them sharp, one of the many methods recommended by experts for "controlling" pigeons. Another popular method that uses something called Avitrol, corn bait laced with toxic chemicals, might even mean killing them. The language of "pest control," like the language of warfare is not immune to euphemism.

Most of the tactics recommended against pigeons, however, are intended to simply make life uncomfortable for them, methods that are more likely, as one combatant put it, to create "a good public relations image" (Loven 3): a perception problem, by the way, that campaigns against rats don't have. These more benign methods of pigeon combat include "porcupine wire," electric wires on roosting places, or chemical pastes that the birds find distasteful. Several cities are experimenting with pigeon contraceptives. Shouting, water pistols, and twirling T-shirts provide momentary satisfaction but are not considered effective. It was a plastic long-eared owl with a head that moves in the wind that finally scared my pigeons away. I moved the owl every two days, and found a strange satisfaction in bullying the birds with what I imagine is their worst nightmare. A big owl with a twirling head would scare the devil out of me if I were a pigeon.

My pigeons moved next door where an elderly couple feed them bird seed and have the time and the willingness to clean up after their new charges; so it seems, in this case, things worked out for everyone. But the large flocks still haunt the piazzas in Florence and Venice, the squares in London, and similar places in nearly every city across the globe. Despite their ability to distinguish between a

Van Gogh and a Chagall, pigeons still deposit droppings that deface the great marble statues and facades—the works of art and architecture that are part of our human heritage—and yet people still buy bags of seed for about a dollar and pose for photographs, drenched in doves. Meanwhile, officials in these cities continue, sometimes quietly, to wage war against the birds.

Some historians believe that another war, this one in Viet Nam more than thirty years ago, was one that we could never win because politicians were unable to convince Americans to fully commit to it. That was a hard sell, too, because most Americans were smart enough to eventually realize that even with a full commitment the rewards of "winning" would not be worth the cost. We battle the birds with the same lack of conviction. Like Viet Nam, "pigeon control" is a war that we will never win because we also battle our own conflicting desires: the feeling that it is our obligation to protect and preserve humankind's great works and our hunger to coexist with at least the more appealing creatures with which we share space in our cities. We struggle, as we always have, with the sense that we are both a part of and apart from other species on the planet.

I've managed to scare the pigeons away from the eaves of my house. But it's not so easy to flush them from where they roost now in the back of my mind, cooing and clucking defiantly, daring me to hate them. I can't. This aggravates me because I know that part of the reason is, quite simply, that pigeons are not rats. It seems unlikely that pigeons know this, though certain philosophers believe that some animals know what it's like to *be* that animal (Nagel 435–50). If this is true, I imagine pigeons may be aware that they're fouling the head of a human being when they roost on the copy of Michelangelo's *David* in Florence's Piazza della Signoria. It is part of the pigeon "experience" to sit confidently on marble heads, knowing that the unthinking stone beneath their feet is neither a source of food nor threat, just a benign roost from which they can turn their red eyes to the humans on the ground below. We look back at them with amusement and disgust, curiosity and contempt—the conflicting feelings and desires that bothersome beauty in nature often arouses. Meanwhile, pigeons hasten the mortality of marble, turning a dream to dust.

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The Question Habit

The most uninspired research writing lumbers along from fact to fact and quote to quote, saying "Look at what I know!" *Demonstrating* knowledge is not nearly as impressive as *using* it toward some end. And the best uses of research are to answer questions the writer is really interested in. In the next few days, your challenge is to find those questions.