

CAROLINE HARPER NEW

## Notes on Devotion

A man by the name of Skinner becomes famous  
for keeping caged

pigeons, whom his clock feeds or starves  
at random. Their tiny twitching heads exaggerate until

one bird swings its weight like a pendulum;  
one turns counterclockwise three times;  
one aims its beak to the corner and sings, *My love*

*let me break*, which has nothing to do with the cage.

The point is, the pigeons

invented their own religion. Aimed litanies  
at an empty sky until something  
broke, and something

was mechanical.

I still hold the shape of his skull to my sleeping chest

and call his name

over and over

to the wrong man. Though the manna that fell was nothing

but accident, it conditioned the birds to aim weapons.

The accuracy with which they pecked the homing radar

was unswayed by Skinner's pistols  
or pressure chambers—the centrifugal loop that swung their bird-bones  
broken, until their hearts

were locked in place.

If you feel pressure on the neck, remember—loquets

used to be a sign of mourning, stuffed  
with hair or cutouts of a lover's eyes. I've seen love

pecked to death and the gods  
sculpted from that accident. I've aimed  
my head to the corners of the sky and opened  
my mouth so wide, I've thought  
my beak would break. Like clockwork

I coo

*Let me break*

*my love*, and skin the feathers  
from that wound. Religion requires ritual:

to do the same thing over  
and over

despite pressure in the skull, or a pistol to the breast, but I still remember

my own young Sunday. The hollow sanctuary,

where behind the preacher's head  
a bird flew into the window over  
and over, and we

just kept singing.