

Feathers

During the summer of 1999, I ended up in an emergency room with an asthma attack. That night, I realized how dear to me my pitted, undistinguished life was. The following morning, a pulmonologist told me I not only had experienced an acute attack, but also a pulmonary embolism. He topped off the menu with pneumonia. My lungs were no longer able to operate without chemical fuel.

I adopted a dog who needed walking which further improved my ability to productively inhale and exhale. She also planted confidence that I would someday be running. Not that I had ever been a runner, but I could see the day when I might jog just because I could. Mountain climbers and I shared the same philosophy of action. I half-heartedly told people I was an athlete. No matter that the drugs and lack of activity had added sixty pounds, I had enthusiasm. Then an oddity interrupted my malady's comfortable monotony.

In the spring two years after the initial diagnosis, wild bird feathers made an appearance. At first, I saw them at the neighborhood park where my dog, Cleo, and I walked and played Frisbee. I plucked them from the ground one at a time, a day at a time. I hadn't been looking for them. They just caught my eye as I followed Cleo from a respectable distance. The sun flashed off their surfaces as if to say, "Here I am." In the beginning, I pulled them straight up as they looked as though they had been thrust to earth like darts or, more fancifully, as though they had grown from the soil along with the grass.

Over the months, I saw them as symbols, gifts of nature, and talismans. One particularly stressful morning they presented a darker side. I had obsessed them into a connection to my ability to breathe, to my very existence.

“What if I can’t find one? Will I die?” This terror was known only to me.

My eyes voraciously scanned the ground. At the park, I ventured closer to trees guarding a stream to my left which had over millennia gouged out a deep ravine. The gloom of the place kept me from exploring it. Breaking twigs and ominous rustling killed my curiosity.

A rabbit, squirrel, or something I didn’t want to know about yanked Cleo away from me and into the ravine on many occasions. Her tags tinkling or dry grass crackling under her paws revealed her whereabouts. I always knew where she was. One day, I only thought I did.

As usual, I let her chase a rabbit into the dense weeds at the base of the trees. To quiet my anxiety about what she might find once the rabbit had eluded her, and they always did, I spoke to an imaginary companion. A potential attacker lurking in the wild undergrowth at the stream’s edge might be fooled into thinking I was not alone.

“I wonder what this was like when the Indians lived here. Much quieter and cleaner, I bet.”

A cottonwood’s leaves clicked in a breeze skimming the treetops. I waved at no one just in case I was being watched. I scanned the thickets.

“It wouldn’t surprise me if this place is haunted by an Omaha or Otoe Indian. I think he would have been a shaman.” I thought I may have said that a little too loud. Nothing leaped from a hiding place.

Sun-dried, wild grapevines crunched under the weight of Cleo’s paws. I called to her. She bounded out of the undergrowth thirty feet in front of me.

Waist-high, wheat grass filling gaps in the vines stirred. A weary sigh floated above it. Keeping my gaze toward the source of the sound, I hastily stepped away. Something else was with us. As I walked toward the center of the field to the right and away from the stream, I

caught a glimpse of a feather. My fears dissipated. I picked it up and wondered what to do with all the feathers I had gathered over the years. Creativity replaced anxiety.

The park regularly dispensed feathers but not always in the grass. A pair of hawks presented me with one. Their screeching drew my attention away from a Frisbee game with Cleo. They soared toward each other then locked talons. Upon release, a feather fell to earth. . .to me. I thanked them for their gift. A man power-walking on the sidewalk, glanced at me and smiled. He quickened his pace to a jog. I told myself he feared my magic then laughed at what he must really have been thinking.

Only twice did I come home from the park without plumage, but both times I found it elsewhere. A crow had left an ebony quill in my backyard. The substitute for the second unfruitful walk made a bizarre appearance. I cut the leaves off a head of cauliflower and discovered a thumbnail-size, charcoal-gray feather tucked inside. It had to have landed there when the plant was very young. The leaves were too tightly wrapped against the flowerets for it to have gotten in otherwise. I sang, "That old black magic has me in its spell." Cleo eyed me as dogs do when they apparently think we've gone stupid on them.

One spring, smoke from a fire in Montana drifted into the sky over Nebraska and an unusually high pollen count on top of that kept me inside for two days. Cleo had developed allergies, too. I weighed going to the park anyway, but I couldn't risk her health for a silly superstition. Cleo had scratched and coughed all morning, so I took her to the vet. I wheezed softly as I entered his office. By the time Cleo had been given a shot and I had been given instructions on how to use the anesthetic shampoo on her, my asthma had kicked into full gear. Of course, my rescue inhaler was at home. It was happening. No feathers for two days. I was dying.

Gasping for breath, I put Cleo on a leash and headed out to the car. There, on the sidewalk, lay two feathers, one slender and black but matted, another short and gray in perfect condition. I had to peel the black one off the pavement. Putting it and the gray one into a pocket, air filled my lungs in wonderfully full sweeps by the time I slid behind the wheel.

At home, I washed the feathers and stood them in sand to dry. I was going to live.

A feather has found its way into my existence every day. Last winter, I bought a straw wreath into which I stuck all those feathers. I had created my own symbolic circle of life.

At a Pow-Wow a friend and I had attended some years ago, a Lakota medicine man spoke of the circle of life and its importance to Native Americans. "Everything in nature is connected," he said. Yoda said the same thing about The Force. I believed them both.

The feather wreath rested for a short time on top of a coffin. Mine, I think. It doesn't matter anymore. The wreath now hangs in my daughter's house. I have taken up walking along the stream with an affable Otoe medicine man who can't remember when he left his body for the spirit world. He has shown me how to plant feathers so my grandson will find them. We often and unintentionally frighten Cleo's new owner when he walks her in the park. Cleo watches us in that way that prompts dog owners to ask, "What are you looking at?"