

“Eagle Feather”

By Siobhan de Cleir: 1st Place Short Story
Writing through Art Literary Competition
Walton High School
Teacher: Sheryl Davis

I tightened my fingers around the slippery smooth surface of the cliff. Bracing my aching arms, I force myself onto the cairn that marks the top of Golden Eagle cliff and fall onto my back. My breath comes swiftly, and I attempt to breathe deeply in order to allow my burning lungs some respite as I relax into the calming ambiance of clear blue spring sky. Not a single cloud mars its singular beauty, and just by staring up into it, I can feel the aching, burning sensation leave my body as my heartbeat slows and the playful breeze teases my hair into knots.

Closing my eyes, I inhale deeply, greedily sucking in the clear air that seems to be in abundance. I open my eyes and stand, slipping for half a moment until my moccasins find purchase in the small pebbles that are scattered aimlessly around the cliff's top. Just by turning my head to the left not even a quarter of a turn, I can see the homelands where I was born, the camp fires of my tribe, the forest of the red deer, and the grassy knolls that rise far beyond here, where wild horses graze.

But today, I am not here for sightseeing. I brace myself and turn towards the right, where golden green grass ripples slowly over a spacious plain. To an unknowing observer, the plain would appear to be unmarred. But I know the truth. Beneath the ocean of grass lie the bones of my ancestors in unmarked graves.

It is for their sake that I am here today, for I made a promise on that day of smoke and fire to obtain a feather from the messenger of our people, the eagle, who traverses from our physical world into the spiritual world at their own whims. By doing this, I will prove my courage and strength, while honoring the memory of my beloved family, who died many years ago on that whirlwind day of bones and ashes.

I exhale softly and begin walking quickly towards the gray pillar of rock where eagles nest, dried twigs crunching beneath my feet. Advancing swiftly, I scale the first few rocks until I reach the nest. I hastily brush aside the rustling branches on the top of the nest, ready to obtain a sacred feather, only to find that the nest is empty! I cast my eyes wildly about my surroundings in search of where the feather could be. For myself to go back without a feather from a golden eagle would be the same as committing a misdeed against the sacred memories I still retain of my beloved family.

After searching the pillar and the surroundings, I have given up hope of earning glory when a screeching battle cry suddenly pierced my ears. I stumble backwards, watching the sky. It is the Golden Eagle! My body fills with admiration as I watch his magnificence soar through the peaceful calamity of the heavens.

His wingspan is larger than the length of my entire body and his wings block the sun as he descends. I can make out each and every buoyant feather, even the ones of soft down that line the tips of his wings. I crouch down, steadying myself as I eye the fierce talons that seem to glint in the light. Pulling out a length of deer hide from my loincloth, I wrap my hands as to protect them from Golden Eagle's beak and claws.

Golden Eagle cries out, once more, before diving towards me, ready to punish the intruder. Steadying myself, I look into the depth of the eagle's golden brown eyes as he descends, screeching, ready to castigate me for disturbing his roost. I close my eyes, reach out, and grab him.

We fight, his talons battering my face and shoulders. As he realizes what I am about to do, he attempts to ascend, but I have a firm grasp on a feather now. My cuts sting, even more so as the wind batters them, but I know that the pain is nothing compared to the glory that I will soon receive. I yank hard – knowing that I will not receive another chance – and the feather is suddenly in my hand.

I stumble backwards, and Golden Eagle rises, soaring high, until he is just a dot in the pinnacle of the sky. But now I have no eyes for the eagle, for I have gained what I have been searching for.

I stare down at my prize, a feather that even the Chief would be proud to call his own. The brown spots are intermingled evenly with the gold, and the white tip stands proud and alone with not a taint of grime.

But yet, I do not feel proud. I have not gained what I have lost from the day of smoke and fire, the day of bones and ashes. The feather flutters in the whispering wind, which wraps around me, singing a promise of the return of hope.

I look towards to the land of my ancestors. Would they be proud of my actions? Would I be able to look upon them and know that my actions were sanctioned? I remember the wisdom and strength that I had perceived in the depth of Golden Eagle's eye. In that moment, I know what I must do.

I bow down in front of the rocks, and then turn towards the rippling field of my ancestors. Already, I hear them calling me, urging me to take action. The wind encircles my being, bringing the scent of sage, and blows towards them. Raising my hand, I release the feather towards the golden fields and turn away. I don't need to see it land.

There is no need for me to raise my voice; I know that my words will be carried by the wind.

"Thank you."