

# Beth Brant

## Prayer



Beth Brant was a Mohawk writer, essayist, and poet of the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte First Nation from the Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory in Ontario. Brant wrote numerous books, including *Mohawk Trail*, *Food and Spirits: Stories*, and *Writing as Witness: Essays and Talk* as well as editing two groundbreaking collections of native writing called *A Gathering of Spirit: A Collection by North American Indian Women* and *I'll Sing 'til the Day I Die: Conversations with Tyendinaga Elders*.

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I CAN'T REMEMBER the first time I saw you, Great Blue. It seems as though that moment should be imprinted on the cells of my brain that record memory. The other times, the hundreds of times you have crossed my path of vision, sent messages to my heart, are always the first time. The quick intake of my breath, then silence, as I watch you glide across the marsh, or flap your wings for a take-off of indescribable grace; the patient watch on your particular hunting place, or the speed of your beak spearing a fish, a frog, and the easy way it slides down your long, lovely throat. I have watched you through binoculars, asking a quick forgiveness for this ineffably human way of looking at you.

I have seen you in Michigan, in many provinces of Canada, in California. I have watched you with my lover, with my grandchildren, with special friends. I have met your cousins – Egret, Sandhill Crane, Bittern, Green Heron, Night Heron, Little Blue Heron, Least Bittern. I have watched you build nests, have seen your babies. I have gathered your feathers from the waters where they drifted as you travelled on your journeys. These make a bundle on my altar where I pray.

You have come to me in ordinary times, extraordinary times. Before my surgery in 1987, I saw you. Before my surgery in 1994, I saw many of you. When I was separated from my beloved, two of you flew close over my head as I sat weeping. I am not arrogant enough to believe that you chose to show yourself to relieve my human pain, but I do believe that your presence was a gift, is the gift that keeps me spiritually bound to life.

I am Turtle Clan. That deliberate creature who is comfortable in water and on land. That being who wears a shell for protection and camouflage. But you, Great Blue, are the means by which I fly and dream. You are the way to worship. You are the physical manifestation of my love – you and I become one-in-my-body as my orgasms call forth the spirit of you. You are *there*, in the sky, on the land, stepping through the reeds. You are in me. You are Creator's mark.

Once I saw you dead beside a road. As I prayed over you and plucked some of your feathers, that moment became a story. I clumsily attempt to explain the mystery of my relationship with you. Nothing can explain you. Nothing can describe the way the sun turns your feathers blue as you gaze into the waters. No human being can relate the strength of your neck as it folds into yourself when you reach flight. I cannot tell the story of seeing your eyes meet mine – you were unafraid, but my heart was beating so fast in awe, in fear, in gratitude. I am humble and small in your presence, Great Blue.

Your story is in the air, in sound, in your yellow legs gently walking through the shallow waters. Your story resides in each stick you bring to the dead treetops to make your nest. It lives in the curve of your great wings; it shapes itself in the pale brown ovals of the eggs you lay in your huge stick house. Your story tells itself in the open mouths of your chicks. Your story goes on ceaselessly as you fly to find food, fly home to bring food to those open beaks. You relive your story through generations.

I am blessed to see you. I am blessed to hear your infrequent squawks. I am blessed to come onto your territory and visit with you. You have taught me that it is possible to soar without benefit of wings. That it is possible to live. That it is possible to love. That hope endures with each silent minute searching for sustenance. That faith can be as tangible as a bundle of feathers that lie on my altar. That a story is always in the beating of a heart. That I cry in wonder of you.

You have lived on this Earth and in the skies for centuries beyond imagining. You have completed transformations and resurrections that have brought you into the *here* where I reside. You once lived on an Earth that had no humans. What was your thought the first time you encountered one of my kind?

You do nothing that is not perfect and beautiful. Even your chicks, in their newborn awkwardness, give promise of glory: the large beaks that seem too big for the delicate neck to hold; the down that sheds and leaves bare patches soon to be filled in by the colours that will become you – grey, brown, blue. Everything about you is a covenant with the rest of creation.

You have become a Clan. Peoples have worshipped you. Peoples have longed to uncover the secrets they think you are hiding beneath your feathers. Peoples have wished in their human souls to *be* you. You are that glimpse into what is

possible. Flight. Moving your great wings over trees, over expanses of water, and over those of my kind who look up in awe as we point – “Look, look.”

You sojourn in my dreams.

During the winter months there was that one day in late January when I heard your familiar voice and looked up, into the grey, cold sky, and saw you flying overhead – – alone. I wondered what had kept you behind in this cold place. Your body was almost etched into the air, a solitary being. I felt the immense solitude of your Journey. I heard a kind of music in my heart. I smelled the air – snow, cold, perhaps the hint of thaw. I cried, “Thank you, thank you.” I lifted my arms as if to embrace you. A portrait of a woman gone mad from winter – standing in her backyard, turning in circles, shouting her thanks, arms reaching for possibility. I fell in the snow; sparrows eating from the bird feeder flew away in distress as I laughed and ate snow. I laughed, pulling myself up, returning to the warm kitchen.

You have brought me so much. What can I bring you? Assurances that your territories will not be polluted and blasphemed by the corruptness of man? Promises I cannot keep? I will bring you this: As each of our grandchildren come into the age of seeing with their hearts, I will point you out to them. I will say your name with reverence. I will draw in my breath as we watch you fly. They in turn will know what prayer is – the hushed moment of discovery. The quiet flame of regeneration. They will love you and treasure the completeness that is you. They will honour you in their lives. This I promise you.

*Nia:wen.*