



Feathers



Last night I had a dream that I was riding through the night sky on a bicycle, covered in feathers, a thousand different coloured quills. Ever since Elliot pedalled ET across the moon on his BMX, I've wanted to be up there with the birds. And last night I was the bird and I was the bike. And I wasn't just soaring. I was velo soaring. I am dear friends, a Velosaur. I am the peak of the evolutionary arc.

For Jung, the psychotherapist, flying dreams represented transcendence. For Freud, the psychoanalyst, they represented, like almost everything else, sex. I like to hang out with Jung more than Freud (Freud is always stubbing his cigar out on my brake pads, "Hey Freud, leave those pads alone.") Jung, with his archetypes and metaphors, understands my Velosaur, my cycling bird of paradise.

Recently in the UK we have had a series of Tour de France winners and Olympic medals and cycling is, according to the press, "undergoing a renaissance". But renaissance is the wrong term. Resurgence seems more appropriate. There is more of everything now, more bikes, more cyclists, more cycle lanes, more sports drinks, more Lycra, more cycle computers, more wraparound sunglasses. But I am not yet convinced there is more understanding. And by that I mean an intuition of what cycling is and can be.

Hey Mr Righteous Dream Cyclist Velosaur, who are you kidding? More cyclists: right. Less carbon emissions: right. More fun. Huh? Hey?

As yet another body-suited bike ninja blanks me, looking less like a cyclist and more like a torpedo, a lactic acid drone, being controlled by ambitions far beyond his ken, I do wonder. I wonder how much of this 'renaissance' is about achievement and not just about the simple pleasure of achieving. A medal-spattered thing, in which to ride you must consume the podium, you must break the pain barrier, you must, you must, you must. Where you do not nurture your feathers, you pluck them and ride Lycra skinned through the flightless dark.

Feathers are God's gorgeous gift to the nude dinosaur, or perhaps, more scientifically, Darwin's birthday present. All the fossil evidence suggests that birds are the last remaining dinosaurs and are not, as some have argued, reptiles with wings. The dinos got downy feathers to regulate temperature, and then flight quills to soar above the ground. (The biologist Thor Hanson has written eloquently about this in his book *Feathers*.)

Yet despite all this evidence there is a small group of deniers, known as BAND (Birds Are Not Dinosaurs) who argue the opposite; that birds evolved from reptiles and feathers are a logical extension of the scaly plates on lizards.

Why, say BAND, would dinosaurs develop flight, being land-based animals and sand scratchers? Well, if you study young partridges (bear with me here cyclists, your time on the evolutionary arc will come) you discover that they like to climb up the sides of trees, and flap their wings as they do so, not to give them flight, but to act as a hydrofoil, in other words to give them downward pressure and maintain their stability as they climb into the branches. This, one argument runs, is how dinosaurs might have run up the sides of trees, Buster Keaton like, before their first plunge into the unknown. (This is called Wing Assisted Incline Running, or WAIR, in case you're interested.)

Jet McDonald, being a fantastical writer of a Jungian bent, would like to convince you that the next development in Cycling Sports Science should not be millisecond-stripping plastic bodysuits, but feathers.

Feathers would take us further. They would take us higher. They would take us up the sides of walls and into the sky. And they would take us there in a thousand different colours.

One of the main drivers of the multimillion pound cycling clothing industry is the problem cyclists have with temperature regulation. We generate heat, we shed it, we ride up hills, we tumble down them, we put one layer on, we take another off. "Buy our breathable, waterproof, triple layer, carbo-poly-reactive-thermoregulation smooth suit," the adverts tell you. And buy it NOW.

I say to you don't buy their perforated tea bags. Just evolve. Evolve feathers. And evolve them NOW.



Birds live in the widest range of habitats of any hot-blooded animal. From the Arctic to the deserts. And this is down to their downy feathers, neatly layered beneath the waxy waterproof sheen of their flight and contour feathers.

If cyclists had feathers, imagine how far could they go, and how far could they survive, in sweat-wicking comfort.

"OK", you say to me, "Mr Feathers, Mr Jungian boom tune fantasy cyclist, that's all well and good but I'm a cyclist, right. I'm a pragmatist. I've got to get from A to B now. I haven't got time to evolve first."

Well I say to you, evolve your psychology, evolve your thinking, evolve your dream-life. And then maybe you can fly and cycle through the night. I've done it. With a thousand coloured feathers. You can't do that in a jumpsuit sponsored by Sky.

Thor Hanson explains how the feather pillow production chain begins. A single trader in China bicycles round his local villages picking up bags of goose and duck down, surplus from poultry meat, and when he has enough he packs them into a truck which transports them to a regional factory and thence a larger processing plant before it all gets shipped to the West to be graded and made into comforters and high end camping gear. I like to wonder what would happen if that small trader on a bike didn't get sucked into this vortex of global duvet production. If he kept those feathers to himself, if he glued them to his arms and legs, covered them with flight vanes and, pedalling the Himalayas, went moon cruising.

It's not like other cyclists haven't been thinking the same thing for over a century. The first flying machines were built around bicycles and prop mechanics. "Put wings on it," these entrepreneurs thought, "make it fly." "All she needs is a coat of feathers," said Dan Tate, assistant to the Wright Brothers in 1902, "and she will stay in the air indefinitely."

Nowadays human-powered flight is a bit of a joke. Beginning with events like the 'Birdman Rally' on the South coast of England in 1971, people rolled home-made machines on bike wheels off the edge of piers and into the sea, in the hope of a picture in the paper and a damp pint in the pub afterwards.

This is all a jolly good laugh but it belittles the possibilities of our two wheeled hero, it relegates to the funny pages the feelings of flight that the bicycle inspires.

We live in an era where the weather is wacky and the seasons unseasonal. But we seem unable to imagine an alternative. The cities get 'greener', the cars get cheaper, the motorways get widened. We need to evolve our thinking, to imagine the unimaginable. Despite all the new cyclists, the majority of the population still understand cycling as being 'old', a forgotten technology, which the combustion engine has long ago supplanted. But we need to re-evolve our imagination into wilder pastures. Bikes needn't just be good for a trip to the shops, we need to believe they are good for a trip to another continent. They needn't just carry a can of beans, they could carry the whole family. They needn't just be there for the run to the shops, they could be the shop, bringing the goods to you.

OK so I may never float through the sky like Elliott and ET, but I reserve the right to dream of it.



A bike that we have ridden day in day out is an extension of who we are, its tubular core a light touch beneath our hands. And on a fair day with a tailwind, it is a feather taken flight.

Here is a poem by Louis MacNiece from 1957:

*To Posterity
When books have all seized up like the books in graveyards
And reading and even speaking have been replaced
By other, less difficult media, we wonder if you
Will find in flowers and fruit the same colour and taste
They held for us for whom they were framed in words.
And will your grass be green, your sky be blue,
Or will your birds be always wingless birds?*

And sometimes this is how I feel about the Kindle and the e-reader. With its grey, slate-like screen, its single unturning page, its dull thudding gaze over the libraries and once inked presses. You can smell the world from a bike like you can't smell it from inside a car. You can smell the page of a book like you can't smell the 'backlight' of an e-reader. If we want to preserve this world we live in we first have to live in it. If we want to dream a sensuous future we first have to live in its sensuous present. Am I saying we should all cycle to hermit caves and read the King James bible from pieces of parchment as the world rockets past? No. But neither should we just jump on the rockets, plug our eyeballs into a USB port and hope for the best.

The word 'pen' comes from the Latin word *penna* for feather and the quill. The natural hollow core of the feather shaft or rachis provides a perfect reservoir for the ink into which it is dipped. The experience of writing with a quill is unequalled. "If I dropped a feather into your hand you would feel its touch but no perceptible weight," says Donald Jackson, a calligrapher. "When you fashion a pen from weightless material, it becomes part of you." You should be able to walk past a quill writer and "pluck it from their fingers without them noticing".

A bike that we have ridden day in and day out is an extension of who we are, its tubular core a light touch beneath our hands. And on a fair day with a tailwind, it is a feather taken flight.

OK, so I'm pushing the metaphor here until it breaks. But Jung would have approved. The feather, like the bike, like the human body, has a fragile strength. And when we fall asleep, when

the plug on the unconscious is pulled and all these ideas spill out into dreams, the meanings merge, and you find yourself a feathered birdman on a floating bicycle.

Many had childhoods haunted by Cold War nightmares of nuclear apocalypse. But my particular nightmares grew out of news reports of oil slicks and seabirds washed up in black tides on the beaches near sunken tankers, footage of hardy volunteers scrubbing wings with buckets of detergent. It felt like these white feathers were engaged in a moral war; light against dark, good against evil, white clouds in hand-to-hand combat with the terrifying shadows of childhood, a darkness beyond the cot.

These dreams come back to me when I see 'Ghost Bikes', memorials to victims of traffic accidents, bike frames painted white and chained to the side of the road. I am reminded by the 'die-in protests', where hundreds lie down alongside their bikes to advocate for road safety. When, during a terrible two weeks in November last year, in which six London cyclists were killed, the UK press went into an apoplexy of risk rhetoric and the black slabs of headlines suggested you weren't just risking your new trousers, you were risking your neck in the tides of petrol traffic. When we all know the benefits of cycling far outweigh the much smaller risks of accident. It's almost as if there is a wilful slick of propaganda lapping at the door of the free-flying cyclist.

At the annual mass naked bike rides, I want to turn up with a tub of wallpaper paste and some feathers and adorn a few sexy human bodies with the multi-coloured power of flight. When I dream of feathered flying cyclists I dream that we are both absurdly fragile and utterly powerful. I dream I will not be defeated by your tin box petrol junctions, by your binary statistics, by your gravity of information.

When I open my eyes I have this same sense, not as a thought, but as the afterglow of dreaming. I pull on my shoes and head into the sunlight as my girlfriend picks a bit of fluff from my beard.

Cycle always. Ride boldly. Take flight.