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Commentary

SPIDER WEBS

Starting my early morning walk at Thompson's Point, I noticed the lawn was soaked and rivulets of water ran down the side of the road. The rain had come down in torrents the day before but tapered off during the night. Even the Queen Anne's lace and goldenrod sagged with moisture. Drops of water resembling small bubbles about to plop, pulled the flowers down every which way.

Looking further into the field, I couldn't believe what I was seeing—dozens and dozens of spider webs draped among grasses and flowers. Spider webs consist of three or four outer foundation lines that anchor the web, then many inner radii, a central hub and a sticky central spiral.

Was this a spider festival where all had participated in a web spinning contest? Variety abounded in the elaborate workmanship of the webs—some were exquisite, done with care and artistry. One spider had pulled a chicory stem down and must have whirled over to catch the neighboring daisy as an anchor before he continued his web. This gave a clothesline effect to the finished web. One large web spanned three branches of chicory stems. It was only partially finished, making me wonder what interruption or change of mind had occurred. A nearby spider had slung his foundation lines between two twigs that seemed especially sturdy anchors. This web was modest and charming. Nothing fancy, nothing spectacular but unique.

Fascinated with this panorama I bent down to inspect each web. One was messy, with the threads strung at random and close to each other. It looked more like a nest tucked low in the grass. Another had sloppy construction and was only half finished as if the spider couldn't remember which way the lines should go. Was this spider sick of spinning webs or had she decided to start another elsewhere near a friend? Nearby a grouping of three webs faced back to back in a more communal fashion. Close to this was the bare outline of a small web which looked like a baby spider's first attempt. Two exquisite webs were tucked within two flowers, so simple and understated they could easily have been missed. Beyond that was an exuberant flying web. The foundation lines caught the tip of a chicory, then sagged a bit and were finally attached between two nearby stems—a spider showing its radical side.

Spiders have spinnerets in their abdomen with silk-producing glands. These spinnerets have ducts open at the end. In pressing fluid out of the spinning tubes, it becomes a silk, solidifying as it hits the air. This silk thread is really a cable composed of many fine individual threads, each three ten-thousandths of a millimeter which is even thinner than that of a silkworm.

The webs were ethereal, complex and fragile. I was in awe of the intricacy of the patterns. The webs are strong as spiders snag flies, wrap them quickly with their silk thread and place them aside for a later feast. Running across the threads, the spiders reminded me of trapeze performers doing their high-wire acts. I decided to share this outdoor spider art gallery with my seven and ten-year-old grandsons. But it was early afternoon before the three of us returned to the field. Where were the webs? We searched and searched, and much to our disappointment none were there. By then the sun was hot, the ground firmer; the flowers stood straight with all the drops of water gone. Every single web had disappeared. Had they been destroyed or had my morning enchantment all been an illusion?

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