19th Century Folktale

Feathers in the Wind

There is a 19th century folktale about a young fellow who went about town slandering the town's wise man. One day, he went to the wise man's home and asked for forgiveness. The wise man, realizing that this man had not internalized the gravity of his acts, told him that he would forgive him on one condition: that he go home, take a feather pillow from his house, cut it up, and scatter the feathers to the wind. After he had done so, he should return to the wise man's house.

The young man was puzzled by this strange request, but he happy to be let off with such an easy penance. He quickly cut up the pillow, scattered the feathers, and returned to the wise man's home.

"Am I now forgiven?" he asked.

"Just one more thing," the wise man said. "Go now and gather up all the feathers."

"But that's impossible. The wind has already scattered them."

"Precisely," answered the wise man. "And though you may truly wish to correct the evil you have done, it is as impossible to repair the damage done by your words as it is to recover the feathers. Your words are out there in the marketplace, spreading hate, even as we speak."