

Paolina and the Condor

By Don Mathis

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Bird Day is recognized on May 4 to foster interest in birds. To celebrate, this ekphrastic poem offers an imaginative narrative of a creature brought to life on a mola. It speaks of the power and beauty of nature, of the indigenous women of Panamá, of art, and the calling to create.

Paolina works on her fabric
amongst the other women
on the islands of San Blas,
the patron saint of animals
They call it a mola

Paolina keeps one eye
on her work
When her brother
works on ceramics
removing one layer of clay
to show another beneath
they call it sgraffito

Yet when she removes
one layer of cloth
to show another under-
neath
they call it appliqué
She laughs

Paolina watches her process
The mola metamorphoses
from abstract to concrete
The condor emerges

Paolina keeps one ear
tilted toward the idle gossip
as the women chatter
She hears of the fights
the make-ups and the love
women share with men

Once in a while she hears
talk of trading secrets
how to make this effect
or that
to make the mola glow

The designs go back
to the day they wore tattoos
like clothing

before the missionaries

Efforts to convert the Kuna
stopped a long time ago
These people of Panamá
still carry their old ways

Paolina keeps one eye
to the sky watching
the condor in flight
Some see a vulture
a bird of prey
others see a buzzard



Mola, purchased in Colombia in 1985, from the collection of Don Mathis

looking for carrion

Paolina sees a majestic flight
She can see how the thermal
drafts keep the creature aloft
and admires its beauty
how it tilts its wing tips
to change direction
or altitude and marvels
at its cunning

The condor has an eye too
far stronger than Paolina's
and it gains honor
at Paolina's portrait
smiles at the wondrous
branch it grasps
with a flower at the end
or is it a caterpillar
or a butterfly or more

Paolina keeps one ear
tuned to her heart
her head her hands
The language they speak
predates the conquistadores
and she listens well

Her condor tells her
of flying through a rainbow
picking up the colors
of the cosmos
She listens and understands

No border
can contain the condor
so she breaks the border
on her portrait

She listens to the sounds
of the sky, the vast space
deafening in its silence,
and she includes that too
in her mola

The beauty Paolina makes
lasts as long
as its construction
to her at least

To the international traders

and the individual customers
in far off lands
the beauty of the mola
lasts and lasts

Paolina laughs
as she receives her pay
Her job is done
The pittance she receives
will keep her
in rice and beans
for a week maybe more

She buys more fabric
She lays out her scissors
her needle and thread

Paolina begins work anew
but is distracted by a shadow
Another condor passes by

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