

## Paper Mache for 6-26-26 by David Read

Most mornings, especially this time of year before the world comes crashing in, we take a moment to sit on a yellow bench in our backyard, take inventory of new blooms in the garden and watch and listen to the birds. We have attracted quite a few species to our avian sanctuary in the suburbs. Right now, we're hosting a pair of mockingbirds with a nest full of open-mouthed chicks in our bougainvillea. I've lost count of the kinds of birds we've seen either as year-round residents or the ones that pass through during their annual spring and fall migrations up and down the west coast of North America. Of course, the fact that we offer them a steady diet of sunflower seeds, suet, meal worms and fresh homemade hummingbird nectar surely helps. More than 300 species of birds have been recorded in Yuba County, making our region one of Northern California's hidden treasures for birdwatchers and nature enthusiasts. My first inkling of career aspirations was to be an ornithologist. Never made it to the premier ornithology school in the U.S., Cornell, but still love to watch them.

Without question, my favorite bird is the mockingbird with which I have a lifelong history. In his poem, *Cenzontle*, Marcelo Hernandez Castillo, the Yuba-Sutter Poet Laureate, the mockingbird becomes a powerful symbol of memory, migration, language, and identity. The cenzontle, whose name translates as "bird of four hundred voices," is celebrated for its ability to imitate many songs. Castillo uses this remarkable bird as a metaphor for the immigrant experience, blending multiple cultures, languages, and histories into a single voice.

Birds have inspired artists in pretty much every art form from the paintings of Audubon to the ballet, *Swan Lake*, to the works of Shakespeare where eagles, hawks, and falcons often symbolize strength, ambition, and high status. In *Macbeth*, the kingly Duncan is compared to a majestic falcon, while the forces of disorder are represented by lesser birds that attack it. Such imagery reinforces the unnatural upheaval that follows Duncan's murder. Not all of Shakespeare's birds are ominous. Songbirds often symbolize love, beauty, and the passage of time. After secretly spending the night together in *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet laments the sound of the lark signaling the dawn and the tragic separation that must follow. One of my favorite Shakespearean bird references is in *Hamlet*, when the prince says, "there is special providence in the fall of a sparrow," suggesting that even the smallest, most humble creatures are part of a greater divine plan. Through these many references, Shakespeare transformed ordinary birds into symbols of love, ambition, mortality, and fate.

In *The Raven* by Edgar Allen Poe, the famous bird becomes a symbol of grief and unending loss, death and our inescapable fate. In that sense, the raven may be literature's most famous bird of sorrow, a dark counterpart to the dove of peace and the eagle of triumph. The Bible's many bird related quotations include "...he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove..." from Matthew 3:16. At the baptism of Jesus, the Holy Spirit appears in the form of a dove, forever linking the bird with peace, purity, and divine presence in Christian art and symbolism. So now we've got a nice list of famous birds in literature from the Dove in the Bible bringing hope and renewal, to Juliet's Lark in Shakespeare announcing a new day, Hamlet's Sparrow symbolizing divine providence, to Poe's Raven bringing neither hope nor comfort, only the certainty of loss.

Perhaps birds endure as artistic subjects because they occupy a unique space between earth and sky. They are familiar enough to observe closely yet mysterious enough to inspire wonder. They migrate across continents, sing elaborate songs, and seemingly defy gravity. In many ways, they embody the same qualities artists seek in their work: beauty, imagination, and the ability to rise above ordinary experience.