John Charlot

THE GREAT HAWAIIAN FEATHER WORKER

In Memoriam, Johanna Cluney, 1978

Ha‘ina 'oe e ka 'ō'o
E ka manu o Kanehili.
You have been proclaimed by the 'ō'o
By the bird of Twining-Kane.
—Kekuapo 'i 'ulaokalāni
What makes my life good makes my death good also.
—Chuang Tzu
Your aparition will not be enough for me.
For I have placed you myself in a place of porphyry.
The rite is for the hands to extinguish the torch
Against the thick iron of the gates of the tomb.
—Mallarme'

Nothing seems more fragile than feathers. Breathe on them and they stir like ash. In our hands, the down tapers into the microscopic. The bird can fill them with air as it crouches to begin its flight. Yet they catch the light better than pure solids. Flash at us in the forest despite their earners’ hiding behind their song. Become the colors of the rainbow as they disappear into the radiant blue mystery of the firmament.

From that sky comes falling the vivid rain, impulsion of the bright green sprouts. The birds descend as messengers. The snarer invites them to his limed stick. Encloses them in the cage of his long, developed fingernails. Takes this feather and that, and lets them go. The waiting owl leads the snarer home.

The feather worker shows us what the feathers mean.
We are like birds. Down covers us along our bones. Our shoulder blades move like vestigial wings. In dreams and death, our souls will fly.
Covered with our feathered cloaks, wearing our beaked helmets, we are reminded of our origin in the sky. We are lani, chiefs and firmamental. Niau sings on the death of Ka'ahumanu the Younger a chant which plays on the meaning of her name, The Bird Cloak:

You are Halulu, the bird that calls above the long houses
You stand on the perch of that bird’s outstretched wings
The Kiwa'a is calling, the prophetic bird of the upper spaces
He kino manu, he inoa manu, no ka lani—ko inoa e.
A bird body, a bird name, from the sky, for the chief.
Your name!

Birds announce and bear our beauty. In S.N. Hale'ole's novel La‘ieikawai, those who await the appearance of the heroine hear the stages of her journey marked by birds of increasing preciousness:

"At the edge of evening, the voice of the 'a'o called; at the end of the evening, the voice of the 'alala; in the late night, called the voice of the 'elepaio; at the approach of dawn, the voice of the 'apapane; at the opening of the flaming way, called the voice of the 'i'iwipolena. As it was calling, a shadow darkened the opening of the house. There! The interior was thick with mist. As it rose, she was lying there on the wings of the birds with her great beauty."

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Over Johanna's body, her fellow nobles watch. They wear their feathers. Their feathers standards stir the air. Birds gather, dart and call.

Johanna calls no longer. The fingers do not lift the lei while the voice explains. The lei speaks for itself. Nothing is left but beauty.

Her spirit wanders where the birds are found. Shy no longer, they ring her round. Show her their feathers as they really are. Her eyes and fingers, trained so long in life, are even more delicate now, follow the shapes and colors to the very end, ruffle the feathers like a gentle breeze, and experience them at last in flight, skimming the tree tops into bands of green, swiftly through the glossy spray and over the blurred dark sea of peacock blue.

She comes to the place prepared for her and which she knew was there. The place where all the birds have gone to wait. They wait for her now. As she alights, refreshed from the sources of the rain, the birds part. She sees her house thatched with yellow feathers. Beside it are the treasuries of feathers of all sorts, netting and twine. Her work begins.

While she was here, she pictured what was here: the Portuguese women returning in their bright bandanas from their baths; the fish market's heaps of multi-colored catches.

Now she can compose a cloak of what is coming, what shone dimly through her nights of dreams. A large cloak, a difficult task. But she has always been strong. She will need all the feathers, all the netting and twine.

She told a few on earth what she suspected. They will remember, she knows, because of the way she spoke in words and leis. They will need all the time she will take—to develop shoulders, to learn to stand tall enough to wear what she will make.