Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird by Wallace Stevens

I

Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird.

A startling if not disturbing beginning: a massive white landscape where the bird is a black speck and within the black speck, an eye – two zooms of the mind’s camera — one seems a repetition of the original view: the white sclera with a black pupil; like Aunt Jemima holding up a box with a picture of Aunt Jemima on it or the matryoshka doll where one is nested in the next. We have gone from the expansiveness of twenty snowy mountains to the solitude of the singular eye. But the eye is moving. It must be focused on something… The oddity here is such a massive landscape with nothing moving except the eye. It’s unreal, if not unsettling.

II

I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds.
The first person appears, perhaps recounting a memory or is he reacting to the earlier landscape of the first stanza. We know the expression of being of two minds but here Stevens takes the familiar and introduces THREE minds, which we would rarely ever think about. Does it mean three choices? No, he gives us the image of three blackbirds in a tree. Each blackbird corresponding to a different state of mind, perhaps? Will they startle and all fly away at once?

III

The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.
It was a small part of the pantomime.

...The blackbird’s flight is carried by the wind, the bird “whirls”. Its flight is like “pantomime,” a drama played out through soundless motion. More juxtaposition: we move from winter to autumn, yet another haiku like transformation. But it’s only a small part of the play, something remains hidden like the object of the bird’s focus in stanza one.

IV

A man and a woman
Are one.
A man and a woman and a blackbird
Are one.

Another radical jump. In terms of a Christian anthropology, the... differentiation of mankind into man and woman is much more than a purely biological fact for the purpose of procreation. The biology is unconnected with what is truly human in mankind. In it there is accomplished that intrinsic relation of the human being to a Thou, which inherently constitutes him or her as human, the very basis of our personhood... The likeness to God, the imago dei is, with regards to [gender], prior to it, not identical with it.

This relation immediately expresses itself in and as relation also to others, which is realized in a privileged way through relation to another who is the same kind of being as myself, but differently: man and woman share a common humanity in the different ways termed male/masculine and female/feminine. Yet we are all part of nature, so even man woman and blackbird can be at one: atonement (at one ment) nothing alienated from the other.

V

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

A farther stretch, more abstract and symbolic but following on the “at one ment” of the previous stanza, the speaker is of two minds now (stanza II) whether to prefer inflections to innuendos –
a seemingly paradoxical choice but delicately related in the mind of any wordsmith. Both involve an alteration of sorts. An “inflection” is a sound that changes in tone. Birdcalls are full of inflections although blackbirds are noticeably harsh in their calls. Maybe I have the wrong blackbirds in my mind. See George Harrison for the singing variety.

An “innuendo” is a hint or suggestion, an oblique allusion, something implied but not stated outright but usually derogatory. The silence “just after” the bird whistle is like an “innuendo” because you can still hear the whistle in your head even as the sound has died away – it lingers, like the shock of the derogatory. The “at-one-ment” seems over now, a split, a suggestion of falling away.

VI

Icicles filled the long window
   With barbaric glass.
The shadow of the blackbird
   Crossed it, to and fro.
   The mood
   Traced in the shadow
   An indecipherable cause.

Suddenly all the images are informed by a mood. The dagger like crystals, a throwback to an image of modern glass, an incessant movement back and forth (like the eye of the blackbird in stanza I?) now transformed to the shadow of the blackbird moving to and fro behind the glass and icicles. Mood is obscure to us, why do we feel the way we do? We are once removed from any reason or image – is the mood caused by the “indecipherable cause” in the shadow or is the mood, traced in the shadow an indecipherable cause? Being human is at once to be impenetrable to ourselves. Only God knows us and, with faith, we know him. By ourselves we know nothing.

VII

O thin men of Haddam,
Why do you imagine golden birds?
Do you not see how the blackbird
   Walks around the feet
   Of the women about you?

“Haddam,” a vaguely Biblical name also the name of a town between Steven’s Hartford and New Haven. He faults the men of Haddam (men of Adam?) for imagining “golden birds,” while the blackbird is right there in front of them at the very feet of the women that surround them. Are these people who chase wealth, an empty idea, and neglect reality? The thinness alludes to a spiritual poverty. Golden birds are elusive, blackbirds don’t spook because of people.

VIII
I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know.

Like the golden birds of Haddam the speaker knows the elevated rhetoric and rhythms of classical poetry—filled with noble thoughts and compelling beauty. At the same time he knows that the pedestrian blackbird also plays a part in all that. But he only seems to be aware of an “involvement,” there seems little in the way of real knowledge.

IX

When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles.

The horizon can be likened to a circle surrounding us. The bird passes out of sight when it clears the horizon. Horizons are all relative—the bird’s horizon is one of many. Since stanza one every view of the blackbird has included the blackbird—this is the first showing the absence of the blackbird.

X

At the sight of blackbirds
Flying in a green light,
Even the bawds of euphony
Would cry out sharply.

Blackbirds flying in a green light, blackbirds in spring, a sharp break with the previous seasons of winter and autumn in the poem. Bawds of euphony: a bawd is a woman who keeps a brothel; a madam, someone who arranges for someone else to buy pleasure, the Japanese called prostitution “Selling Spring” (baishun—not sure if Stevens knew that or not, but he was a connoisseur of Japanese and Chinese art)—someone who reduces a complex beauty (love, blackbirds in a field of green light) to a cheap pleasure. Even they would cry out sharply if confronted with an epiphany of beauty, a zen moment of satori. Is it a cry of pleasure or pain—or is the line thinly drawn?

XI

He rode over Connecticut
In a glass coach.
Once, a fear pierced him,
In that he mistook
The shadow of his equipage
For blackbirds.
A sharp break with the character of the poem, the “I” is now a “He.” Observing himself on the move in the third person, the man becomes afraid when he sees the in the shadow of his coach (“equipage”) blackbirds. Glass harkens back to the stanza VI, the icicles now a fear piercing. The shadows are the mood, now of fear. Blackbirds are long a symbol of death. I lived for many years in Japan and a folk image of the farmers who surrounded me was that on the day of someone’s death, blackbirds would circle the home of the deceased. “See the blackbirds around Ohashi’s farmhouse. The old woman died today.” And sure enough, there they were. I still remember my neighbors there.

XII

The river is moving.
The blackbird must be flying.

The river is moving. Spring is approaching, the river is free of ice, the blackbirds must be on the move, flying. We are back in an all natural environment, away from the human preoccupations of the past stanzas. Subtly, a move from the past to the present.

XIII

It was evening all afternoon.
It was snowing
And it was going to snow.
The blackbird sat
In the cedar-limbs.

Further tense changes highlight the blackbird in an eternal pose. The day is so dark and cloudy that it looks like evening in the afternoon. Snow was falling and it will continue into the night. Stevens is mixing up tenses and time— we don’t really know when it will stop snowing. The snow is an immense backdrop to the day, like twenty snowy mountains. The blackbird sits in the cedar limbs. Is it motionless? A cycle is complete…