

Thirteen Ways to See



By Megan Troyer

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Editor's note: Megan Troyer took Introduction to Literature at Rosedale Bible College in the spring of 2012. The class wrote six short responses to various works, sharing their personal reactions to what they were reading. Here is how Megan worked with a famous poem by Wallace Stevens. The original appears in the sidebar.

In order to write an imitation of Wallace Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," I paraphrased each stanza, then isolated the main ideas of each. For example, I might paraphrase stanza IX as follows: "I have a circle that encompasses my life and all that I see. The blackbird disappeared from my circle of sight. There are many circles, many lives. It flew out of my circle, but the

edge of my circle only marked the beginning of another." Then I identify the idea of circles of life and sight—how my circle intersects with and reaches beyond another's, but how my circle is limited. Then I try to think of an idea in which my perspective reaches beyond someone else's, or vice versa.

A word of explanation on the second version ("Tin Plate"): Two summers ago I was privileged to spend six weeks in India, four of them with a Christian family that runs a children's hostel. "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Tin Plate" is largely inspired by these children, especially a little girl named Seema, who, it seemed, was forever losing her own tin plate and worriedly searching through her entire room lest she not find it in time for dinner.

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird By Wallace Stevens

I
Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the black bird.

II
I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds.

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

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

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

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.

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?

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Dandelion

I
Among twenty thousand miles of sky,
The only moving thing
Was a floating dandelion seed.

II
I was looking three directions,
North, south, east
In which the dandelion fluff was
blowing.

III
One dandelion dipped in the grass.
It was a small part of a fluttering,
swelling, curling drama.

IV
A child and a lily
Are one.
A child and a lily and a dandelion
Are one.

V
I do not know which to prefer,
The golden dandelion
Or the white dandelion,
The gem smirking
Or flying.

VI
Sulfur clouds filled the sky
With dirty wool.
The shadow of the dandelion
Bobbed.
Happy
In its shadow
Were the ants.

VII
O satisfied home-owners,
Why do you mow your lawns?
Do you not see how the dandelion
Twinkles at the feet
Of the women about you?

VIII
I know tulips and lily of the valley
And warm, sour mulch;
But I know, too,
That the dandelion's resiliency
Is sweet.

IX
When the spider crawled off the edge
Of the dandelion, it spun a line and
soared
And left its circle.

X
At the sight of the green beast
Charging the dandelion
Even the hardest of landlords
Would cry stop.

XI
He rode into the lawn
On his green steed.
Once, a fear pierced him,
In that he mistook
The shadow of his mount
For a monstrous dandelion.

XII
The ants are marching.
The dandelion must be glowing.

XIII
It was light all night.
They were twinkling
And it was twinkling.
The dandelion couched
Itself in the earth.

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

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

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

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.

XII
The river is moving.
The blackbird must be flying.

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



Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Tin Plate

I

Among twenty terraced mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the flash of a tin plate.

II

I was of three places,
One soul in the plate-lands
In the (porcelain) west, and the (tin)
east, and a (plastic) airplane.

III

The plate spun where dropped on the
table.
It was a small part of eating dal.

IV

A child and a plate
Are one.
A child and a plate and a curry
Are one.

V

I do not know which to prefer,
The sound of the plate scraping
across the floor
Or its echo against the hard stucco
walls,
The child seeking
Or finding.

VI

Little girls filled the tiny stucco room
With hugs and kisses.
The shadow of the plate
Fell on one's face.
The mother
Traced in the shadow
Was not here.

VII

O thin-legged children of India,
Why do you imagine golden
America?
Do you not see how your plate
Stays by your feet
And I can't take you with me?

VIII

I know London and Paris and Rome
And sonatas and theme and variations
and golden tone
But I know too
The plate,
And yet I don't.

IX

When I flew out of sight of the tin
plate,
I marked the edge
Of the tin plate's circles.

X

At the sight of a plate
In the under-bed dim
Its seven-year old owner
Would cry out excitedly.
The visiting American
Would cry out, perturbed.

XI

I rode through Ohio
In a Honda Civic.
Once, a fear pierced me
That the shadow of my car
Was taking me to a land
Of tin plates.

XII

Maya is making chai.
Seema must be looking for her plate.

XIII

It was sunset all day.
It was hot
And it remained hot when I left.
The tin plate plopped
Onto the table.

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Cross

I

Above twenty thousand crosses of
earth
The only reality
Is transcendent.

II

Cross pointing four directions
Like a river
Flowing north, west, south, east.

III

Convict hung on cross.
It was the apparatus of deliverance.

IV

Divine as creature
Is one.
Divine and creature and cross
Are one.

V

I do not know which to prefer,
The cold hard smooth of truth
Or the warm strong force of grace,
The transparency in the cross,
Or just after.

VI

Shards of darkness filled the land
With despair.
The shadow of the cross
Invisible.
Light
Blazing in the shadow,
Mystery unexplainable.

VII

O actors of the Negev,
Why do you imagine that the scepter
is yours?
Do you not see how the cross
Grasps the feet
Of the divine among you?

VIII

I know transubstantiation
 And Calvinism and ecclesiology,
 But I know, too,
 That the cross
 Is all I know.

IX

Bread and wine in sight,
 They mark the edge
 Of much that is out of sight.

X

At the sight of divine
 Hanging in earthquake eclipse
 Even the Gentiles
 Would cry out sharply.

XI

He rode into Salem
 On a donkey.
 Once, a fear pierced him,
 In that he took
 The shadow of his mount
 For a cross.

XII

Morning is breaking.
 The cross must be emptied into the grave.

XIII

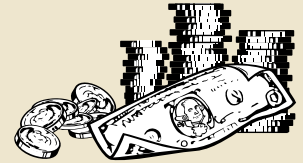
It was evening all afternoon.
 And it was shaking
 And it was going to shake.
 The cross stood
 Stained.

Megan Troyer is from Elida, Ohio, attends Pike Mennonite Church and is currently a junior at Cedarville University. She finds that the world is too big and has too many fascinating options to choose from, so she is currently pursuing a Liberal Arts major, and in the future would possibly like to work in some sort of ministry or overseas missions.



Uncommon \$ense

Reflections on the Season of Giving



Dan Ziegler

Christmas is often called “the season of giving,” and rightfully so. It is through the act of gift giving on Christmas Day that much of the Christian world reenacts God’s greatest gift to us, that of his son Jesus Christ.

At its best, each year on December 25th the world’s biggest birthday party bustles with activity centered on the theme of giving to others in recognition of God’s generosity toward us. But Christmas is not the only Christian celebration with gift giving as a theme. In fact, there are two other days, associated with the ancient church calendar, where gifts play a prominent role. One month apart, these ecclesiastical bookends frame the Christmas giving season.

Saint Nicholas day is celebrated on December 6th, commemorating the occasion of this Greek bishop’s death. Brother Nicholas, a church leader who lived just a few hundred years after Christ, was characterized by his devotion to Jesus and his quiet generosity. It is said that he spent much of his life’s resources responding to the needs of the poor. In this way, Saint Nicholas is a wonderful example for all of us to live lives of faith-guided generosity toward others. Our family has joined a growing movement of people seeking to rescue Nicholas’ legacy from the commercialism of the modern day Santa, by gathering on December 6th to exchange gifts and recount the story of the real Nicholas. In doing this, we have also chosen to reserve our Christmas celebration as a day of reverent and joyful reflection on the coming of the Christ child.

The celebration in the church calendar that comes shortly after Christmas day is Epiphany. This ancient feast day on or around January 6th dates back over 1,600 years, and is recognized as a reminder to us of Christ’s manifestation in human form. On this occasion most Christians recount the story of the Magi from the east, the first non-Jewish people to worship Jesus. Scripture tells us that they came of their own accord bearing gifts of “gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” Their gifts, given out of reverence for the newborn king, remind us all to offer ourselves as living sacrifices to Christ and to his service. He is the King of Glory, and is worthy of our adoration.

As the New Year dawns, and we reflect back on the passing of this season of giving, may its many lessons of selfless benevolence reverberate in our hearts and actions throughout the coming year, and may we reflect God’s boundless generosity to those around us.



Dan Ziegler