

BLACKBIRDS

Coming in from watering the pepper plants,
I watch blackbirds descending from the roof
onto the cat's bowl by the mock-orange tree.

They leap and peck at morsels and shake their heads
one at a time like bickering theologians
back in the days of the great heresies
troubling the Empire with anathemas
and disputations over syllables —
Homoousion versus *Homoiousion* —
that one vowel bringing in the Visigoths,
Alaric and Adolphus and the rest,
delivering Rome itself to frightful plunder.
Honorius, the sitting emperor,
survived a dozen years to sport the purple
while the Empire's fabric "yielded," in Gibbon's words,
"to the pressure of its own weight," weakened within
by murmuring monks and blear-eyed visionaries.

Mommsen would say it was slaves raiding granaries
provoked by water in the Spanish mines
or madmen belching fire and oracles,
which is your basic socio-economic
formula we hear more of latterly,
and altogether feasible, if we acknowledge
not only what we know about the Romans
but what we see each day in the South Bronx.

At this point, seasonably, I give it up
and head on in to catch the Nightly News
for a homeopathic dose of *mal du siècle*,
but on the way I look up at the blackbirds
back on the roof. They have these looks that say:
We know exactly what is happening —
We know exactly who the fuck we are.

I hope the cat's revenge is merciless.
I think I could turn and live with vegetables,
they are so savory and unperplexed.

READING AQUINAS

Maybe what Thomas means when he says grace
is its own prerequisite, or words to that effect,
has something to do with these sweet tides of joy
one feels now and then in the bottom of the breast
while crossing the street against the light
or watching children at play or cats copulating
or birds leaving the branches quivering under them
and the stillness of the branches afterwards.
Maybe it's times like these that Thomas means,
though I'm in doubt on this and other issues,
including the one correlative idea
about how the Divine Essence cannot be known
to a person who is still in the body, except
"in dreams or alienations of the senses,"
which is a truly wonderful consideration
coming from a corpulent 13th-Century Dominican—
and grace again is an explicit component here:
"the images in the imagination are divinely formed,"
involving "the infusion of gratuitous light,"
Thomas having elsewhere carefully explained
how it takes grace to prepare oneself for grace,
as in that sudden shower one afternoon last summer,
like a sparkling airy essence of divine light,
I found a portly African in a Hawaiian shirt
baptising himself in the street and marveling:
"I couldn't help myself! This rain is exquisite!"—
the two of us finally standing face to face,
one of us an angel in a shirt of flowers,
the other blessed as he could be because of that.