

THE WEB

A Thesis

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by

Francis L. Olson

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Michelle Bonssen

Director of Thesis

Master's Committee: Michelle Bonssen, Chair

George E. Ecklund
[Signature]

7/9/92
Date

The Web

Francis L. Olson, M. A.
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Director of Thesis: Michelle Bissler

The poems in this creative thesis have evolved from my exploring the two main geographies of my experience. My youth in the Southern California of the 1950's and my present life on Mauk Ridge in Elliott County, Kentucky are the two dominant locations that flow into and through each other in these poems. I find that my writing focuses on the inconsistencies of these two places. As I look at one place from the vantage point of the other, a new relief forms from the contrast. I also have found that blank verse adds both a natural rhythm to my line and a solid foundation upon which to build a poetic rhetoric. I like the way it seems to help my poems move down the page. Through this process I have been challenged in my thinking about the

individual and the sense of place. The web of the title suggests the connection and reconnection these geographies make with my imagination. The process of making these links results in the poetry I continue to write.

Accepted by: Mitchell Buesen, Chair
George E. Gildard
Robert M. J. J.

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Taking a Purchase

December was dry the year we bought this farm
so cold the tree trunks cracked like rifle shots.
Long into the day Fay's flaky biscuits warmed me
as I walked the lines--the ridges and the hollows--
to try to ken this land that would become our own.

Making a new owner's mark, I nailed some rusty tin
back on the barn roof the first sunny day.
Then I scythed big blackberry canes around the house
in what became our yard. Back then we told
our friends we'd stay just two growing
seasons. But now ten times that time we've carved
a way of life into these hills.

Three dogs,
including one who stayed with us from Alaska,
lie buried in the brow of the field below the house.
A fourth I hatcheted to death just after I found
our black goat dying, her throat slashed open
to a warm April rain.

And now, while stacking
wood for winter fires, in this quiet
summer moment in the barn I hear a soft
cacophony--shrinking, crackling oak that sings
this place to me as I never thought it could.

Shoelaces

I couldn't throw away the flat, black shoelaces I found after my father died in California. So I took them home and strung them into a mobile of birds--painted birds on driftwood that soar suspended above my desk.

Why were there so many laces, each pair tightly wrapped in its own soft paper tube? All black, the only shoes my dad would wear to work. Growing up I learned to tie bows with those laces in his huge shoes. They seemed to order my father's world: a law office where I was a stranger among the stale Saturday smells of paper, typewriter grease, client's cigarettes and the yellow pencils I was allowed to sharpen.

I felt cold as the stone grey safe I learned to open, and weak growing up in his world. My father was teaching me exile. Now the shoestrings remind how I have built my place in this horizon-narrowing hollow of Kentucky and learned myself to lace my life.

Westward

By chasing the afternoon sun, my flight
slows dusk by half. Over the shining
ribbon of the Mississippi,
then slicing southeast flowing rivers

my eyes mount the windswept outlines
of the Rockies, and then gaze back at peaks ablaze
in alpenglow. After the high desert
and the High Sierra, the plane spirals

downward to the dusk-cloaked coast.
She who was my mother lies in bed
alert. Resting on her weakened
humped back, she holds out her hand

as I bend awkwardly over her walker
to kiss her bony cheek. Two weeks
later I say goodbye just
in this same way. But then I hesitate

outside the door and go back in
to say goodbye again, her radiant
and grey sparkling eyes
meeting mine for one last time.

Later, on the eastbound flight I watch
the land turn dark and white beneath my gaze.

Spring Storm

It looked as if the darkest clouds, the worst, had passed me to the north, so I kept limbing and cutting the hickory tree for next winter's wood. But the wind picked up again and blew gusty gales up the hollow from the south. The bare trees whipped, whistled and broke. When lightning struck close on the ridge, I tossed the tools in the trailer, tied in the chain saw and leapt on the tractor as sheets of rain drove sideways through my clothes. I raced full speed across the field, slalomed down the clay bank to the bridge as pea-sized hail clattered on the hood. Stung and drenched, I could no longer see to drive. So I grabbed the tools and ran up hill. In the barn I dropped them and gasped a breath then sprinted to the house. I shucked my clothes on the covered porch and unfolded in the house, leaning naked, dripping, chilled against the counter. Within the hour I cut up a tree that had blown down across our road. No wind blew, and warmed by work, I saw the clearing sky between the west horizon and the golden bottom of the clouds.

Nightsounds

Your small feet slipped toward the hall. I heard
the light tapping on our door. It opened.
This time you said you were out of juice.
Last night it was the neighbor's coon hound baying
in the hollow that drove you from your bed.
I told you to go downstairs and get your juice.

But back you came, had overpoured
the cup and wanted me to help clean up.
I rolled on out, already wide awake
and mad, and made my way downstairs. "You don't
need a light!" I said as you reached for the switch.
But you knew you did.

Then, both afraid to turn it on and not to,
you hesitated. I realized the hurt of my words
and went to hug you. Together in the light
we mopped the spill. Afterwards, juice in hand,
my hand in your other, you went back up to bed.

The Visit

I drove to visit Norberto at the Ashland Federal Prison. The road rose and fell through the early morning fog. Through the mist I saw what must have been a sunspot. Black and steady, it reappeared in the upper left quadrant each time the dense fog would thin.

By the time I arrived at the prison, the fog had burned off and the sunspot was gone. When I mentioned the morning's drive, in English precise but slow Norberto asked about the sunspot. But our visit was almost over. My Spanish and his English had worn us out. Since then he's turned down each visit. And though I go every month to be with other prisoners, I've not seen another sunspot.

Against the Deep Purple

No moose, but two canoes drifted slowly
silver in the dusk of the dark Fraser
River as it wore through the Canadian Rockies.
She had come for the summer art institute at Banff.
I was driving an old Volkswagen camper on my way
to work on a ranch and had stopped to see the northern
sights. Our talk between canoes crushed
the silence so we spoke only haltingly
before the darkness drew us to the dock
and separate ways. In those pre-zipcode days
she sent a letter, "c/o Lazy E4
Cattle Company, Grant, Montana." It came
when haying was over in September, the day
I was leaving for home.

So I followed her directions
to San Ardo, a bend in the El Camino Real
along the Salinas River. There a plywood
cutout of a California Highway Patrolman
standing by a cruiser slowed traffic
at the north turn out of town. The sun scorched
us as we walked by the cop, and the road
dust of the coastal mountains dried on our skin
in sweat-blotched patterns. One morning her father flew
us in his Beechcraft Bonanza, taking off
from the grass strip behind their house. Climbing north,
the V tail matched the valley. The lettuce and tomato
rows stretched beyond each wing to the mountains.
The road and river lay like silver ribbons,
flashing, centered. After landing
I remembered to ask about her brother. Flying

to his construction site a few years earlier, her father circled and saw the machinery stopped. He landed and ran to a group of men, pushed through to see his only son beneath a bulldozer, crushed.

In October she came to my home in the south, surprised to see the green of Pasadena in the fall, trees in what she thought was desert. I felt anxious with her on my turf, partly because she went to Cal. And I knew my mother was sizing her up for my wife. When she left, my mother said, "Even though he might not invite you back, you're always welcome in our home." Hurt, I never understood why mother spoke those words. Fact is, she never did return.

We both wrote. I looked forward to her letters, some as big as posters, covered with drawings and stamps. Each one different, they all gave the postman problems. She painted and cut, drew pictures and pasted tissue paper through the rolling script to frame the quotes that gave her life its heart. In ordinary envelopes I'd send mine back to her. Then in winter she invited me to Berkeley, and I drove the eight hours north for the weekend. A play, her friends, an urban view through a steamed up bathroom window--backyards

framed by many coats of glossy white enamel, and the fog. We kept in touch.

A couple of years afterward I began to study law at Cal. Once again we saw each other, but in a different way. Her apartment floor, the back seat of my two door Ford, and her Murphy bed became the focus of our time, those places where we scraped to find just what it was we'd saved. But there was nothing left to wear away. I saw her only once again, much later. I had joined the Coast Guard to stay out of the draft and went to say good-bye. Climbing three flights of sagging outside stairs, I found her place. Not anything like I'd expected--just a room, no longer her classy art student's apartment. Dark drapes sucked up the only light which came from candles stuck in bottles standing about the floor. Thick waves of incense and the acrid, smell of marijuana made the landing where we stood into a pier engulfed by storm. I fled south to Pasadena. Confounded by life's turns, I focused on my dropping out of school and looked ahead.

Loud, in the Walnut

We really did it to that cardinal:
built our living room right
into his private apple trees,
so the big windows reflected the sky.
For three years his song woke us too early,

loud, in the walnut outside our bedroom.
Days when we worked at our desks,
he flung himself at himself in the glass,
perhaps to pay us back
for feeding him through the winters.

Until yesterday.
When I overkilled him with a .22
caliber hollowpoint bullet
that splattered him to a dull pink
against loud, red feathers.

Endings

A groundhog scurried flat along the roadside grass,
and the dog's short fur spiked down her back.

Imagine, a small terrier's teeth sinking
into that thin, winter-ravaged neck

and shaking death into a body.

This death now a memory, like the last
great, body surfed wave of August marking
the end of each summer. I would throw keys, watch,

sunscreen, towel and T-shirt into the blue-
meshed Tijuana bag and walked,
exhausted, back across hot sidewalks
spotted from spilled beer and spit gum.

My feet shed sand best in the lush grass of pricey
condos after a rinse in a warm puddle
of runoff from a sprinkler. The sun still
burned my neck.

The dog trotted back
through the woods to the house, narrowly missed
the careering ten wheels of an overloaded log
truck as she crossed the road. Up on the trail
we walked together, the wind reminding me
of surf while her nose scoured the ground.

Redbud's Purplish Pink

Redbud's purplish pink,
dogwood's white,
the new leaves' varied

soft pastels
float like quilts
low on the hills.
These colors pull the switch
holding back fast forward
in my mind. Thus pierced, my body

shoots from winter's depth--
airborne, wrapped in blazing
heat and summer

light. Dark greens--
leaves, grass, needles
conceal the earliest bursts

when rushing water
mutes those shrill
mating cries of hawks.

But I should know
the first vulture circling,
soaring high

above the fields and woods
breaks winter's grasp.
Bloom drops mount

uncounted in the rush
to solstice. Rains
wash the colored bits downstream.

Seized up in pools,
spring vanishes before
we know it's here.

The Last Trick

Blackened, twisted metal
and the charred smell are all
that remain of his mobile home,

Stuarti's, the itinerant magician.
Late last night, wildly out of control, the fire
drove back the too-late, volunteer firecrew.

We told them the family was gone.
And so they searched for no one,
but worked only to keep the flames from spreading.

Today, in the still smoking ash,
a kicked bone gave the lie to our news.
Returning with State Police, coroner

and body bags, the firemen and
the questions were more careful this time.
They bagged and tagged five bodies

and took them to the morgue. At dusk
"The Stuarti" returned home alone in his van --
a transformed, tired Rainbo Bread truck.

He seemed to know what we'd seen. He said
he'd been in Tennessee trying to sell off his tricks.
Last week he'd hinted he was leaving the trade.

But now without family or buyers,
he became the magician again. Back in his truck
he drove away from his best, last trick.

Carma

Grease and dirt to his elbows, he takes a swipe
across his brow, begins to fix the engine.
It's gone beyond "let well enough alone."
Now the car's soul needs attention. Words fail.
Unspoken prayers vanish upward, sifting
through the pines. With heathen ignorance
he applies brute force that drives the gravel
into his back. Suddenly the obvious comes clear.
Order restored, the engine starts. Eternal
balance is in place. Reason, he thinks,
has won out. But he knows too well that souls
have touched. He is a tool, different from those
he owns only in animation. Under his nails
the stubborn grease remains, reminds
him of transfiguration, and he'll forget too soon.

Newspacker

From the farmhouse near the hollow's bottom
she wore a path north, east and west
carrying eggs and milk to sell to neighbors.
But her real mission was to hear, tell and embellish.
Everyone called her "newspacker," always keeping
things stirred up. She'd come home to do
the family work, and go over in her mind
all that she had heard. Then off again
she'd walk, a perpetual motion, grown up show and tell.
When she wasn't going or working, she'd sit
on the porch corner and with keen eye
watch all those who passed up on the road.
She made her family cut the trees that grew
to block her view. She knew the news. She knew.

Polishing

Granville has tumbled the choices and their chances around in his mind until they are as polished and familiar as the knife in his overalls pocket, and just as hard. He'll take the medicine but not the "coboll" treatments that ravaged Fay, his wife. They destroyed her hair, her skin, her face. She never spoke again. So the chemicals are all he considers. He'd rather have his mind as it is for six months and be killed by the tumor than be punished and bruised by a treatment and be pushed without a thought from his home to a hospital bed. Today is the day to decide. His house on the ridge is alight like a ship at anchor in the night. I turn on our lights before the dawn to give him company. Last night he said, "If it wasn't for the children, I wouldn't care at all to be taken," and he snapped his fingers, "just like that!" Polishing some more, "If there's a chance that I can keep my mind, and the chemicals just bruise me a little, then when it warms up, can browse around outside and make a pastime here." He spoke of a garden, of watching the grandchildren grow. Today while he waits at the clinic, he'll get the stitches out of his head that make it look like a baseball. That will take the prickly feeling off his stretched scalp and let him concentrate on polishing the choice he's made.

Commencement

A head high hole in an outside brick of the high school gym was home through the years to nests of sparrows, yellow jackets or wasps--whichever staked a first claim in the spring. By June a rush of wings or a single sting attacked anyone walking too close on their way to the lunchroom. At graduation the senior class in caps and gowns marches along that walk. The defense of the hole pushes a bend in the otherwise straight purple line. Once I saw a lighter spark then singe a sparrow attacking a golden honors tassel. The bird caught its claws in the blonde, nest-like hair around the cap. Then it fell and died as the head of the line climbed the stairs to the stage.

Hide and Seek

I.

The girls rush down the gravel road, bright
pastel jackets flashing among the trees--
a baker's dozen of eleven year olds.
Behind them the cars carry the birthday gifts.
This first October Saturday brings clear skies
again, and a warm wind. The party room
is all outdoors. At the house these bundles
tumble down the hill to the swing set
and start a non-stop climb and slide machine
that halts just once for the annual photo. Sun washed
smiling faces in birth order jam the slide.

II.

In time the presents lie open among a flurry of wrapping and thank-yous that may mute a minor disappointment. More play outside works off the cake and ice cream high. And then the cry: "Hide and seek in the woods!" We are drawn down the creek path where the forest absorbs, covers, holds us in its lushness as we assemble in the clearing. Two dads who play each year help to make a shy girl brave. She's never liked the woods or outdoor play. So she's "Not it!" at first. One dad begins the count. Behind downed trunks or standing trees, in old blow-down root pits the kids call Indian graves, or under leaf piles the hiding hold their breath and then sprint out to run to base, shout "Free!" The dad who's "It" has missed them all.

III.

Another year the rain drowned out the play.
Dressed to keep dry, we walked along the creek.
At the falls our faces felt coolly moist
from the waterfall smashing into mist on the rocks.
In the fog of our breaths we climbed back up the old
logging road, crossed above another waterfall
to huddle by a fire in the cave.
Roasting marshmallows we made a celebration.
As the rain poured down outside, the girls explored
the cave and found some broken arrowheads.
These hinted of Indians seeking
refuge from a storm or moonshiners
making a run of their brew.

IV.

But now the shy girl was "It." Distracted as she always is she counted partly out loud and gazed at the ground at base, lost the count that no one could hear, and made out a group of bones among the leavings on the forest floor.

Ribs, jawbone and a skull

with dog's teeth, vertebrae, hips and legs--

all stained oak leaf brown and dark moss green.

Reluctantly she finished out her turn and showed the bones to hidiers running free. The game ended as a gathering and carrying of bones.

V.

I knew what dog it was and told them so.
I had shot him there where now was base. "Look,
see this hole between his eyes?" I had led
him there away from the life of the farm where he chased
chickens into the tree and goats back to the barn,
their backbone hair bristling at the sight of him.
He was a stray. Beguiling eyes--one blue,
the other alabaster--and a collar made us wait.
But no one came around or called to claim him.
He looked mistreated: starved and dull and cringing.
We didn't feed him much in hopes that he would leave.
Those eyes, one light white as clouds of snow. The blue
as crystal as a crisp fall day when the sky presses
colors from the trees. Those eyes saw

VI.

through me as I drew the lines from his ears
crisscross to his eyes. I pulled the trigger
once at the intersect. And as I said a word
to him he dropped, crumpled on the ground.
Vulture food I thought, yet stayed there
through his dying. I took his collar off
and hung it in the barn. Before
the week was out, I heard the rising
vulture wings, saw their tight circles in the sky.
It all comes back as the tired girls walk home.
The shy one fills a plastic pail with bones
and fills her party favor cup with ribs.

Disconnect

Because her life ended, the bicycle wheels
on the wheelchair she stole stay inside, protected
from the rain that pours ceaselessly through the hole
the tree made when the wind blew it down.

Her soured clothing hangs from an orange wire
that tripped the breaker. She had tried to cut
it with her nail clippers, but they were too dull
to clip it cleanly. She slumps, now stiff

in her chair full of rage. Blue arcs crack.
I work to clear the wires. My fiberglass pole
carefully maneuvers them over the cab
and the brilliant blue tarpaulin that covered the load.

There, in the bed, under one of the bright shining
aluminum ingots, are her hands.
They clasp the control box tightly while the two
big black wheels spin in the wind.

A Penny's Worth

"If he says he didn't steal the gum,
I believe him," you told Eddie, the clerk
at the Lamanda Park Market. He wore his short blue
grocer's coat, with black grease pencil stains.
His eyes looked down at me through reading glasses
perched on the tip of his nose. After we
drove home you never said another word
about it, acted as if it hadn't happened.
That trust seared the sweetness from the gum.

This recollection drips through my middle
years like snow falling through the sunny
side of the stunted fir tree across the parking lot.
But it sticks on the needles of the darker side, gives
the look of winter like the lies you told
to keep up appearances. These were the larger
lessons that you lived and through them stole my trust.

Now a weakened woman, you know
me only rarely, even when I sit
and listen to your current litany of lies
during my week-long visits
that I can hardly stand to make.

Release

"I did away with them," I tell the judge.
I wait beneath her gaze, but that is all
I say. I had walked the four of them
to the low train trestle abandoned
by the railroad. We used to go there often,
sit by the river, get away from home.
This last time, a dark and cold
November night, the children didn't mind--
they thought it was a winter walk. We sat
and talked and ate some chips before
they fell asleep. Then, one by one, the oldest
first, I carried them each to the lowest place
and held them under water. When they were loose-
limbed as the river, I let the water take
them off. I prayed and went back for the next.
When anybody asks about the kids,
I say, "I did away with them."

Inside Passage, Alaska

A piling of a salmon-cannery pier stood
tied in with timbers--stringers, braces
and decking made fast by huge spikes and long bolts.
A century's tides, winter storms and tsunamis
have ravaged the pier. Still upright now,
white-topped and gray streaked from gull droppings,
drenched black by the ceaseless rain,
the piling stands alone, deep in the bottom's
muck, strong to the tide's ebb and flow.
Now and then the clouded weather breaks
to reveal the deep green, spruce-cloaked mountains
sloping steeply into the bay
and a fishing boat moored to the piling.

Solstice

Midnight comes in half an hour.
A swan in flight against the brilliant sky
catches the attention of a sailor
leaning against the ship's smooth railing.
Silence all around, bright sun,
a glassy sea, and crystal
silouettes of arctic mountains.

Cold Coast

The winter cold lives year round
in the walls of my sister's house on the Southern
California coast. Indoors I wear
a woolen khaki baseball cap and gloves
with cut off fingers when I write. The cold moves in
and comes alive each dusk just as the sun
disappears behind the western bank of fog
invading the city for the night. I go to bed
as soon as it's polite and lie in late
next day for warmth. I shape my days
likewise--in the mornings sitting at
my mother's bedside, at midday walking
back along the bay, and in late afternoons
driving with the windows rolled up.
On sunless days I'm at my mother's bedside
several times.

There is an indoor-outdoor
thermometer in the room where I sleep. A clock,
I take its measure carefully to know
when to open windows and the outside door,
allowing ten degrees of heat to fill
the room. I dare not open the inside door.
The warmth will be lost, tumbling down the cold
red tile stairs. I escaped such a spiral
of descent into this, my birthplace, a quarter-
century ago. And when my mother dies, I doubt
I'll ever go back in winter. I'll just stay east
close by wood heat I cut and split and stacked.

Splintered

I wonder when he knew he wasn't going
to make it--not the curve above my house,
but the way to his own house that night.
The kid could see the trees his car cut off
head high, launching them straight up

to land flat where they'd stood. The car flew through
in a roll that would look soft and gentle in slow motion,
splintering trunks as thick as his head and skinning
the bark from a yellow locust in a shiny strip
right to the dirt. As he was thrown

with his cassettes down across the pipeline
to the pines, his heavy-metal music muted
every sound. But now he wouldn't even hear
himself. He was dead when he landed--
face down, by chance. Later I stared at him

lying brightly lit in an ambulance.
His shattered right leg loosed that foot to turn
unnaturally as in an Egyptian painting.
The next day an upright, unburnt flare
cast a shadow on the trampled ground
and marked the place his head had known.

After Dark at Danville Cemetery

I ease myself carefully over the gold painted
iron spikes of the shiny iron gates
held closed by lock and heavy chain. Inside
only fireflies and the odd streetlamp
glimmer through the trees. Katydids,
bullbats and killdeer calls echo against
long rows of tall, old tombstones.

In the northwest corner of the National
Cemetery lie the neat, dim rows of dead
from South and North killed in the Battle
of Perryville. A crumbling asphalt path
divides the sides. White marble headstones
show the winning dead. Sandstone tablets mark
the losers though their homes were local places.

All afternoon I sipped tea from a bone china cup
at the old Elmwood Inn. After the Perryville
Battle its floors soaked up wounded and dying,
and years of wear and sunlight didn't abrade
the blood from the wood. Then these new owners
sanded the floors, transfigured the blood to motes
floating in the afternoon sun. Through them I watched
four generations of a family's women sip and chat.

In the dark I run along the graves. Trespassing,
I am afraid. Yet I taste the teacakes,
and I see the dust as fireflies among the trees.