

"Remembering Willmar Olson"

by Michael Finley
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I knew the poet Willmar Olson and worked as his secretary , answering mail and helping him with paperwork, in the late 1970s when he was at the height of his powers and reputation.

Today Olsons's work is unjustly ignored, yet before he withdrew his works from circulation in 1983 and buried them in a copse of conifer trees in northern Minnesota, he was America's best-known dog poet, winning the Birch Award for his song cycle *Weimariner Pause* in 1979.

While many suppose The Birch Award takes its name from a famous writer named Birch, it is actually an industry award given to an book of verse that sells more than 750 copies. *Weimariner Pause* "went birch" in only twelve years, selling an astonishing 1,250 copies before Olson withdrew it from circulation, as his misanthropism and appetite for seclusion slowly enveloped him.

Olson died in 1983, and his bones, those that could be located, are interred in the Manfred Firs of the northlands. As the executor of his estate, and one of the few humans with whom he would associate, I was fortunate to come into possession of several unpublished dog poems, which I include in this eulogy.

Those who remember Olson remember, as I do, a giant of a man who lived and wrote in the forest with a pack of dogs. Those who don't remember him, and are vulgar enough to suggest that he was merely a figment in hip-waders -- well, you just don't know. As one of the few humans he would tolerate, I can shed much light on this powerful but reclusive poet.

Willmar Olson was big in every sense of the word. Six foot nine in his bare feet, which was how we usually saw him, but big also in spirit and in heart. In the creature he loved best he found a totem of perfect pride and perfect purpose. Consider "The Dance of the Dog," his portrait of an ordinary farm dog, happily allying himself with the work of the thresher:

The knees bend like spurs
Spun round from the
Rattling steps, shake off
The wood-stove fever
Stored from the
Floorboards through the
Night, race past the pump
To the edge of the
Cleanshorn field where
Only the day before an
Army of corn held sway.
Now on tiptoe, now



Trotting gingerly row to
Row, the pink tongue
Flagging, the keen eye
Swerves to the suggestion
Of movement, surveys the
Swath of harvest slack-
Jawed. The creatures of
The plain are dazed in a
Changed world, but he who
Sleeps on a burlap sack
Where the cinders spit is
Proud to the tooth: I am
I, he thinks, dog, and
This is my country, and
This the might of my
Accomplices.

He took great pride in growing his own soybeans and baking his own kibble by the sweat of his brow. Following bean drying season, the wood fires from the oven in the main barn burned around the clock. The recipe contained every nutrient dogs are known to need, Olson claimed. He went extra easy on the salt and fat. "What need hath salt for salt?" he asks, in his roguish short poem, "A Matter of Deference."



The diet resulted in the healthiest dogs I have ever seen One time, returning from town, about eight of the dogs knocked me down and wrested a pair of Tootsie Roll candy bars from my jacket pocket, that I had been saving for the long train ride home. After ripping the candy bars to bits, the dogs took turns licking the wrapper for residue, and sniffing my terrified person for more.

Some critics felt there was a vague misogyny in the man's makeup, and there may be something to that. He once told me that once you had run with the dogs, the love of a woman would never be enough:

Alfalfa is a good dog and I am but a man.
And when a man throws and the dog fetches
And all is good and clean and pure,
The light catches us a certain way
And I say yes, you may share my bed
You hairy son of a bitch.

Though educated in New Hampshire and supported by air rights revenues from family holdings in the Grand Tetons, Olson downplayed his stentorian origins, creating instead a kind of mythic life focusing his books, his cabin, and his fifty or sixty of dogs, all rescued from area animal shelters.

"I Speak for the Dog," published in 1963, was the collection of poems that made Olson a household name. It contained the much-anthologized "Three Dogs," exquisitely capturing the bathos of postindustrial culture:

The dog marooned on the expressway island
is trying to make the most of
his one remaining advantage,
being alive.
No way to an exit ramp,
it's rush hour, dusk,
he's tired of standing still.

Three-legged dog
hops from the
gate to the
door then back
to the gate.

The dog on the carpet is twitching her way
through the usual dream.
She's running through cattails and thickets
and swamp,
and the fox she is almost on top of escapes.
She circles her own scent,
aware that somewhere behind her
and watching and laughing
the two brown beads.

Critics compared him to Melville, Kipling, and Cleveland Amory. Publishers bid his books to unbelievable heights. The press hung on his every word. And readers responded, deluging him with dog pictures and proposals of marriage. Tired of the madding crowd, Olson withdrew ever deeper into a private world. He built his north woods estate The Briary with his own hands, and for twenty-six years he made a life there, the most reclusive author this country has ever known.

It was to The Briary that Olson summoned me, to attend to the painful chores of correspondence and, as his trust in me grew, contract negotiation. What I discovered was a man at once shy and proud, who had tendered his immense genius to the care of a pack of dogs. His own manner with his pets was that of lord and master. A dog pleasing to him would earn a scratch behind an ear. A dog who spoke without being spoken to could earn a thump of the man's pipe on the cranium.

THE DOGS OF MADISON SQUARE

The leaves blow across the old park,
the hickory and ginkgo, linden and oak,
next to the monument
of eternal light, for the fallen soldiers
of the first world war, and beside that,
a sign on a tree saying, caution, a rat poison called Mak1
has been placed in this area;
its antidote, if you are resourceful about these things,
is Vitamin K-1, you probably have some in your house,
if you can get there in time.
But the dogs roaming the sixteenth
of an acre of fenced-in grass
by the Flatiron Building can't read.
A big-chested pointer, a Doberman and an old teat-dragging
Labrador, plus a Scottie, cocker spaniel,
and some kind of greyhound all gather about as she defecates,
and it is entirely fascinating to these dogs about town.
She bows, cowed by their attention as she squeezes it out
and they are delighted with the whole business and beat
their tails against themselves, no,
their eyes never really seem to lock
onto one another, because their joy is somehow
outside what they are,
it is in the rich aromas in the air,
the unleashed freedom they feel
behind their heads, and their
damp maws open wide
like smiles.

What was it about dogs that moved Willmar Olson so? People say it was a vision of moral perfection so stringent that it brooked no compromise. "Our friend the wolf takes what he gets," he said in his poem, "The Wolf." In his eerily theological conceit, "The Dog of God," a disappointed Olson sees all nature as the long-suffering victim of a cruel master:

The dog of God has no free will.
He lives by the master's convenience.
Left alone for long periods to fend for himself,
Nothing to drink, not a scrap in the bowl.
Parasites, ear mites, worms in the flesh.

The rapier teeth of a hundred invaders
Have left their marks, and the old whiskered maw
Is white with the years. A cataract clouds
The left brown eye, the malformed other perpetually weeps.
His loping gait is long since gone, he limps
And hobbles from gate to gate.
But when the Master returns from his business
The hound of heaven staggers down the path to meet him,
Manged tail clapping with joy.

Working conditions at The Briary were never ideal. Olson did not provide me with an actual desk, but had me work from a card table he set up in the pumphouse. Outside, the dogs milled and fought with one another. In time they came to accept me, although I was never able to keep food on my person. I would spend mornings proofreading the poet's work from the night before, and afternoons with the shovel in the dogyard.

What child has not committed to memory Willmar Olson's classic poem, "Dog in the Manger":

Hard years after I first hear
the expression
I understand its meaning:
The dog is in the manger,
Napping in the hay.
When cow comes near to eat,

Sharp teeth warn her away.
But you know dogs, sooner
Or later they always repent.
Watch one as he trots out
To pasture, drops a shank-
Bone at your hooves.

In his beloved poem, "Running with Dogs," Olson describes the wild feeling that he got in the company of the animals he loved. It was clear that, while he craved to be accepted by them, they could be cruel. Reading, one feels the hair on the back of one's neck stand on end:

Yanked off the porch, I follow the pack
to the high fields,
leaping over fallen trees,
splashing through ditches,

fur catching brambles.
Four feet times six dogs spin across gravel,
and me on two legs behind.

Razor, the sloe-eyed coyote,
falls back from the others to counsel me:
Speed it up, dammit, you'll make us all late.

Up hills, down hills, vaulting gullies,
alongside rims of cottonwood groves,
brown ribs flare open, then close.
The air frosts up,
pink gums flail the cornstalk rows.

We come to a resting place atop a dry terrace,
chins on our forearms.
First the wind paws our hairs, then sleep.
Except Razor doesn't sleep,
and neither does Snakeface.
Snarling, insults, teeth.

I stand with a stick, I say, "Stop!"
Only Razor looks in my face and says
No, you stop.
Everyone agrees, takes off downhill,
leaving me standing
upright.

His rustic paradise came to a sad end. Wanting to have his home made into a permanent residence for strays, he bequeathed the buildings and land to the local humane society in an irrevocable trust. His only condition, which the humane society board agreed to, was that he be allowed to live there until he died.

When a new board, headed by a man named Stone, was installed, however, it refused to honor the previous agreement, and took possession of his compound, rudely evicting the reclusive poet. What was once a sanctuary was converted into an incineration center, where dogs from the city were taken to be destroyed. On cold days the smoke of the burning carcasses darkened the forest canopy.

He thanked me for my work and dispatched me back to the city. Willmar Olson then bought land on the opposite hilltop, and built a new home, this time facing away from the old property, so that he would never have to behold the scene of his betrayal. At nights, you can still hear Olson's dogs howling at the moon, rebuking society for its shabby treatment of a great poet.

Before he died, Olson took his own measure of revenge. He resurrected a piece of local oral history involving the executive director's grandfather, a hard drinking man who had no love of dogs. This last hateful poem was the final feather in the cap of a brilliant career:

OLD STONE ENTERS INTO HEAVEN
The Master Calls Him to His Reward

Old Stone was a mean man, whole
Town of Kinbrae knew that for
Entertainment he used to take pot
Shots at his dog, a good old girl
Deserving better. One day Stone was
Said to have got bad news from
Montevideo, folks saw him stride
Past the post master's kicking dust,
Spitting on the side walk and
Cussing out the Goose Town Savings &
Loan. Mr. Miller said he purchased
A package of Illinois whiskey and
That was what they found later on, a
Broken bottle by the pump house well
That'd just gone dry. Must have
Hauled his rifle down where it hung
By the stove and stomped out to the
Yard with a box of fresh shells,
Loaded and reloaded, pumped lead
Into the milk shed wall and cackled
And gnashed his nasty teeth. His
Yellow tears skittered down his dry
Cheeks as the dark deed formed in
His mind, the notion occurring to
Complete the thing for once and for
All, and he whistled Betty to heel
At his feet. And she sidled,
Shivering, up and imploringly searched
For the better nature behind his red
Eyes as he pulled two sticks of
Dynamite from a tool bin and tied
Them to the poor bitch's tail, lit
The long fuse, smacked her hind end
And sat down on the hole and watched
Through the open out house door as
The dog took off yelping straight
Through the kitchen doorway and dove
Under the master's brass post bed
With the eider down comforter pulled
Down in after her. No no no no,
Cried Stone, and he screamed with
All his saw toothed might with the

Indignation of a man so wronged by
Creation perverted by willful beasts
Like a dog so dumb she couldn't even
Get blown up right, and he screeched
Her name and called her forth and
Condemned her disloyalty as the
Least best friend a most cursed man
Might have, a churlish cur who
Fought his dominion from the day she
Was whelped, who missed regular naps
Thinking up ways to undo him, him,
Him who now wailed like a ghost to
Get out, get out, get out, get out
Of my pine board, tar paper, china
Platter house God damn your four
Legged soul. And Betty, hearing his
Break down with out and imagining
Herself the object of some grand
Reprieve at the hands of this
Passionate and lovable if you really
Undertook to know him but until then
Deeply misunderstood failure of a
Man and imagining moreover her life
Long ordeal at those knotted hands
To be miraculously over and herself
Forgiven of the loathsome crime of
Having been his, dashed happily down
The rock porch steps and full tilt
And with her master's heartfelt
Cries of No no no no no echoing
Across the wooded glade leapt gladly
Into his awe crossed arms and the
Two best friends saw eye to eye,
Each bade good bye, and left Kinbrae
Forever.

Mike Finley writes a weekly essay that he sends by e-mail to a list of friends.