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THE OLSON SISTERS: FIELD NOTES OF A DESCENDENT

1

They looked alike back then, as any pair  
of sisters can, and spoke in our clan voice.  
Yet there all semblance ends—there the trail branches,  
and daughters, nieces, grands and greats, must choose  
a fork or stray down one with little heed  
for the consequence of family mimicry.  
A botanist without regard for *genus*,  
I mist our orchid genera and log  
the scentless *differentia* that all  
the petals, sepals, lips conspire to hide.

2

Like the ornate jewelry boxes she collects,  
indifferent to the trinkets within, the younger  
loves surface quelling form, the high baroque  
of Cellini's salt and pepper bowls concealed  
amid enamel, gold, and ebony,  
with Nymph and Neptune huge above the spice,  
his facial cast more petulant than godly.  
Nymph's thumb and fingers idly cup her nipple—  
perhaps he pouts at her impertinent pose?  
Perhaps he knows he's just a bantam knock-off  
of Michelangelo's huge "Day" and so  
turns glum as any junk-bondsman now sunk  
to schlepping ketchup packets to fast-food

condiment bins. There! See how such excess  
distracts us from the task of salting meat?

3

The older sister? No collections there.  
Shelves kept spare and free of clutter, dust.  
If a box, then she was made of unvarnished wood,  
joints trim. Apart from function, no décor.  
Hold to the ear – do you hear the whir of watchworks?  
Inside, a mechanism plain with purpose,  
gears ticking close in tolerance, a thrift  
of sufficiency, a shift to just enough.

4

Make no apologies, both the old sisters  
would agree, the elder gone the way  
of the wild native orchid, “Lady’s Slipper.”  
The younger losing hold on that tree bark  
where the mind shelters from the clutter of soil.