

Green Lorine

Lorine Niedecker's poems immerse readers in the nature she knew: water, birds, rocks, and plants.

Plants, above all. Lorine's poems contain 298 references to plants or plant parts (flowers, leaves). One wonders what other poets surpassed that number in the same number of lines.

Trees and tree leaves shade the poems, with fifty-six references to trees and twenty-six to leaves. Leaves often symbolize ends: "and now I must rake leaves/with nothing blowing between your house and mine." Trees, however, stand for permanence, solidity, survival, the land legacy of her beloved grandfather, Gottfried Kunz. Trees also embody the mysteries of life: the poet has yet to learn the oak leaf's law.

Lorine planted flowers more often than food; yet her New Goose poems, written about the Great Depression, are thick with produce: potatoes, squash, cauliflower, cabbage, beets, peas, mushrooms, asparagus, corn, endive, lettuce, and rutabaga. In "The land of four o'clocks is here" a family of five look for their supper at "Half past endive, quarter to beets" but can find "nothing nourishing" (the title of another poem) but "common dealtout food."

Lorine lived with most of her poems' plants every day. Dandelions, ferns, sun-flowers, cat-tails, lilacs, thorn-apple, equisetum, violets, corn shocks, pickerel weed--these were her familiars. And above all, grass. How she must have loved discovering Asa Gray's letter to Increase Lapham: "Take special care of my pets, the grasses," for grasses were Lorine's pets as well. After she married Al Millen and began to travel, Lorine met unfamiliar plants whose names and properties she had to research. "Wintergreen Ridge" is thick with these exotics: wild orchids, lady slippers, horsetails, club moss, Linnaeus's twinflower, Andromeda, Cisandra, the deadly Drosera. Fascinating botany: yet her poems listing researched plants never have the spontaneous intimacy of lines like "schools of leaves float downstream/past lonely piers" or "From my bed I see/the wind willow the grass."

One plant particularly resonates with Lorine Niedecker, and that is the lily, which she invokes thirteen times. A lily always transcends the prosaic: what lies among the green lily pads, she asks: a dead fish--or a white lily? "Fish/fowl/flood/Water lily mud" begins perhaps her greatest poem, "Paeon to Place," vividly establishing her Blackhawk Island milieu. In "The men leave the car," Harold Hein explores a northern woods, returning to hand her barely opened "green-white lilies" which, for ever after, she associates with his words, "No marriage, no marriage, friend." In "Club 26," as in dream or hallucination, her friends' talk riles "the shore like bullheads/at the root of the luscious/large water lily," while the roadhouse itself morphs into a white lily where they drink until "the stamens tremble."

Books were Niedecker's food, nature her intoxicant: plants her intimate friends.

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Published in Solitary Plover, Summer 2016