



The Solitary Plover

*Issue #5
Winter 2007*

I was the solitary plover

Niedecker Inspired Art



Doug Hambly



Derek Hatch

Doug Hatch and Derek Hambly are professional artists. They each have unique styles and both have galleries representing their work. Their studio work is how they are best known but for two summers in a row they have spent weekends together painting side by side, in plien air.

“Plein Air” painters work on location to quickly capture the fleeting light effects that occur in nature. Typically the initial painting is completed on location in two to three hours before the quality of the light changes. Painting in this manner gives the artwork a quality of being truthful to nature and conveys an atmosphere and feeling of a place. When viewing a

a Plein Air painting, you can almost imagine yourself in the scene.

This summer Hatch and Hambly spent a day at the Lorine Niedecker cabin along side the Rock River. Each painting is very different in style but each captures a different spirit of the cabin environs and the sense of its place on Blackhawk Island. "After a day you feel the influence of this place and why it effected Lorine Niedecker's poetry." said Doug Hatch after a day at his easel. The paintings are now privately owned by two Fort Atkinson residents, used here with permission, and will be exhibited together from time to time.

I was the solitary plover

a pencil

for a wing-bone

From the secret notes

I must tilt

upon the pressure

execute and adjust

In us sea-air rhythm

“We live by the urgent wave

of the verse”



WEB SITE

Lorineniedecker.org has a new design. We hope you find the organization more understandable and that you can find what you are looking for on the site. Please send feedback to contact@lorineniedecker.org.

THANK YOU!

A big thank-you goes out to Sylvia Sippel for her assistance in preparing the printed newsletters for mailing.

If you would like to volunteer with the Friends contact Amy at (920) 563-7790 or send an email to alutzke@mwfls.org.

MEMBERSHIPS

Membership renewals will take place each January. Friends can join at any time but the notice will go out with each winter issue.

Thanks to the following Friends for their contributions:

- Rebecca Pirtle
- Tiffany Shockley-Jackson
- Pati Scobey
- Helen MacGregor
- Jeffrey Beam
- Ginny Moore Kruse
- Ann Engelman & Andy Yocom
- Marge Engelman
- Amy Lutzke
- Mary Gates
- John Lehman



a pencil for a wing-bone

NIEDECKER NEWS

On Thursday, May 17 in the Gunderson Stiles Concert Hall at the Monroe Arts Center, 1315 11th Street, Monroe, Wisconsin at 7:00 p.m. Patrick Moran will speak on the life and work of Lorine Niedecker. This presentation is a part of a series on Wisconsin Biographies.

Patrick Moran is an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. He received his M.F.A. in creative writing from the University of Iowa. His poems, essays, and translations have been widely published in magazines and journals including *The New Republic*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Quarterly West*, *The Tampa Review*, and *The Writer*.

He has published extensively on Niedecker and regularly lectures on her poetry. He lives in Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin.



The Neenah Public Library
240 East Washington, Neenah, WI
Sunday, April 15th, 2pm

The Prairie Fire Poetry Quartet presents Lorine Niedecker in her own words, those of acquaintances and in her most memorable poems. The public is welcome and there is no admission charge.

The Prairie Fire Poetry Quartet consists of four poets (Robin Chapman, John Lehman, Shoshauna Shy, Richard Roe) who perform programs of their own work or the work of others (such as Lorine Niedecker and Robert Frost) organized around various themes. Each member is well published and is recognized as a seasoned performer.



Did you know that the Electronic Poetry Center at the University at Buffalo in New York has made the sound recording of Lorine reading her own poetry available on their Web site? You can hear it here:

<http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/niedecker/> .

Spread the word!

POETRY

Down

This afternoon sways—
descending its heaving way
down toward a place I once knew
and now find unfamiliar.

The afternoon comes downward
like your voice, still playing
in my set ear—
an eager, persistent sound.
The movement of the day
descends, while I hold still, clinging
to the earth beneath me, clawing at
some persistent light to crawl into.

The afternoon
is rolling toward
a not-so-distant dusk.
I'm going too—
fright-eyed
and gasping.

Hue

What déjà vu is this? I have been
here before—
this same hue
lying fractured on the ground.
This same numbing brilliance,
made so much
bolder by the distance between here
and the place I came from.

Where has the burden gone—
that weight
I carried with me to this earth?
Where is that fear that burrowed
here—in that dark place
behind my heart?

There is now an all-embracing
warmth that hid itself then.
It works at me like a persistent ache.
Like an ache, it moves
upward.

The day aches. Oh ache!
I say, Settle and be still!

From the secret notes

Red! Yellow!

That burrowing color
was a toothless thing.
We lived with it as we would another child.
Our faces, white as consumptives,
mirrored it, even its wallowing shadows.

We were never the same.
Our complexion changed—
dulled to a darker reflection.
Everything from then on
was filled with excess and loss.
Our fingers, white like umbilical cords,
worked for nothing.
The cuticles tasted of pollen.
We fumbled every little thing.

Red! we said.
Yellow! I'm burned!
right through by you!

Jamie Parsley

Jaime Parsley is the author of seven books of poems, including *Paper Doves*, *Falling* (1992), *The Loneliness of Blizzards* (1995), *Cloud* (1997), *The Wounded Table* (1999), *no stars, no moon: new and collected haiku* (2004), *Ikon* (2005) and *Just Once*, which will be published by Loonfeather Press in January, 2007. She received my MFA from Vermont College.

In 2004, she was named Associate Poet Laureate of North Dakota by current Poet Laureate Larry Woiwode.



STRUMMING CASH-MONEY FERVOR
FOR THE MULLET'S OF MY WRIST:
SAPPY PSALMS AND RAGMAN BURNS
I COULD HANDLE WHEN I WAS YOUNGER

1.

A high bully
punched my
ticket.

It was
so hot
until they
heard :

she checks
prime time
news for

fog alerts.

2.

Herd the tack
board where
agents

mark one's tracks
with push
pins &

string. Upstairs
I veil terrain
with eyes as
giving
as muskrat

gnawing
at the pier
piping.

3.

One
missile
pierces

the clean
rabbit to

get off
my lettuce.

4.

A duo
in a boat

I must tilt

talk on the way
to my short cabin
thump.

Birdstart
wingdrip

a slim chance
of water. It
might be
my tendency
to think fondly on
rubber checks
and quote songs
I learned from
the radio.

5.

Since I
withdrew from
curved lines
and tasty squash
I met him
at the notch-post
in a cloud
of secret
potatoes

we hid with
his mustache until
wind sucked
the sail & I
could feel my
hair growth.

6.

Smart people will
tell you to
read novels but
year by
year the day
time soaps
have become
my parent

Now on leave

a slow tense
insuring that
the street defend
at intervals
of speakers.

Nicholas Michael Ravnikar

Nicholas Ravnikar is currently an MFA candidate. He says, "I've been a fan of Lorine Niedecker's work since first reading her some four years ago – her economy, precision, and flexible register are hallmarks of a consciousness in tangible growth."



ESSAYS

Old Sunflower, You Bowed to No One Jeffery Beam

Nobody, nothing
ever gave me
greater thing
than time
unless light
and silence
which if intense
makes sound

Lorine Niedecker (kneedecker), in these lines from "Wintergreen Ridge" one of her last and best poems, condenses the meaning of her whole life. The poem, long and speculative, walks the ridge and brings into one orbit evolution, family and human relationship, and the natural world's fierce and elegant movement from urge-to-be to urge-to-die: "It rained / mud squash / willow leaves // in the eaves / Old sunflower / you bowed // to no one / but Great Storm / of Equinox."

Niedecker's life was reclusive, but not separate. Colored by a shy and cautious personality, she enforced her seclusion with great care. Although not gregarious, she was hospitable, generous, and friendly. What to some might seem exile from living seems in her to have blossomed into a full life and work in which the silence she grounded herself in made for a

upon the pressure

rich openness to the unsayable. In a letter to Cid Corman, her friend, publisher, and literary executor, she explained, "I don't mourn the lone-ness of it for poetry. In fact, I couldn't do it any other way and I have the presumption to feel that others writing should retire unto themselves deeper than they do."

In another letter to Cid she spoke of her reluctance to read poems aloud, saying, "If your ear is acute you sound your poem in silence." Her ear's fine acoustics prove the dictum. Despite her unwillingness to read her poems aloud herself, readers will find the poems, when read aloud, carry more music and more understanding of the fertility of silence in a poem than seems possible in such minimalist work. *Village Voice* critic Geoffrey O'Brien commented that her "truly idiosyncratic voice . . . would need some space around it, some silence in which to nurture its distinctive branchings and coilings." Her silences, the unsayable so present in the poems, reveal Niedecker's native, unselfconscious, transcendentalism. She reticently admired the growth in her and Cid's poems of what she called a "conversational—metaphysical," and elaborated thusly: "all our lives we steer away from it but when we do attain it we know there's nothing like it." It is not as if the soul did not exist for her, but the particular revealed the soul in such a way that to speak of it was unnecessary. She observed, and described, without having to announce spiritual relation in the material: "In every part of every living thing / is stuff that once was rock // In blood the minerals / of the rock" ("Lake Superior").

An Asian aesthetic permeates her work, enriched further by her friendship with Corman, who has lived in Japan since the early 60s, but her milieu is not a place of Zen emptiness/fullness, but of "the weather / thru the house / or is it my mother / breathing." In many of her poems, particularly of her last decade (which I'll discuss later), her poems recreate the lively minds of scientists, philosophers, and explorers such as Darwin, Jefferson, William Morris, Marquette, Radisson, and Joliet: "Well he saw man created according / to the motion of the elements. He located / the soul: in the blood" ("Swedenborg").

Niedecker's biography reads as the ideal outsider poet's should. Born May 12, 1903, she lived, except for three short breaks, all of her life in the flood country of Black Hawk Island where the Rock River empties into Lake Koshkonong, near Fort Atkinson,

Wisconsin:

I grew in green
slide and slant
of shore and shade . . .

I was the solitary plover
a pencil
for a wing-bone
From the secret notes
I must tilt
("Paeon to Place")

The marshy landscape weathered her poetry into a rigorous clarity. In "Poet's Work" her grandfather advises her "learn a trade" and she "learned to sit at desk / and condense," using the frugality, economies, and sufferings of her life to make something whole and unique.

Lorine's father Henry seined carp and tended a failing summer rental business inherited from his father. Her attendance at Beloit College (1922-24) lasted for only two years. She returned home to nurse her mother Daisy whose progressive deafness deepened into a reclusive bitter silence because of Henry's relationship with a married neighbor. He gave away much of the property to his mistress's husband in payment for silence. In a number of poems, Lorine grieves the empty silence that enveloped her mother:

I mourn her not hearing canvasbacks
their blast-off rise
from the water
Not hearing sora
rail's sweet
spoon-tapped waterglass-
descending scale-
tear-drop-tittle
Did she giggle
as a girl?
("Paeon to Place")

In 1928, Lorine married a local boy. Within two years they had separated and, once again, she returned home. She held a job as a library assistant from 1928-30, then in 1938 went to Madison to work as a writer/researcher for the Federal Writer's Project, a job which lasted until 1942. From 1944 to 1950, she worked as a stenographer and proofreader at the regionally renowned *Hoard's Dairyman*. After

execute and adjust

Daisy died, deaf and blind, in 1951, she quit work.

Old Mother turns blue and from us,
"Don't let my head drop to the earth.
I'm blind and deaf." Death from the heart,
a thimble in her purse.
"It's a long day since last night.
Give me space. I need
floors. Wash the floors, Lorine!—
wash clothes! Weed!"
("Old Mother Turns Blue")

Three years later, Henry died, leaving Lorine very little money and two houses (in addition to the house she had built herself on the property). After a period of collapse, she took up work in 1957 as a cleaning woman in the Fort Atkinson Memorial Hospital, sterilizing kitchen utensils, and scrubbing cafeteria floors.

Her two room cabin had neither plumbing nor heat and frequently flooded: "O my floating life / Do not save love / for things / Throw *things* / to the flood" ("Paeon to Place"). In 1963, at the age of 60, after the end of another short-lived promising but finally disappointing relationship, she married Albert Millen—a hard drinking man who clearly loved her. She wrote to Cid days before the wedding, "No flood this spring, very unnatural. Unnatural also, my immanent (sic) marriage. At sixty one does foolish things. I hope I'm happy. He's my connection with life." They moved to Milwaukee in 1964 and back to Black Hawk Island in 1968 when Al retired. The marriage allowed her to quit work and the years with Al were her most productive and happiest. The marriage was not without its difficulties. Al's moods changed with the amount of alcohol consumed; and the entry of television, for example, into her life as well as another person in the house, meant sacrifices in privacy and silence:

I married
in the world's black night
for warmth
 if not repose
 At the close—
someone.

I hid with him
from the long range guns.
 We lay leg
 in the cupboard, head

in closet.

A slit of light
at no bird dawn—
 Untaught
 I thought
he drank
too much.
I say
 I married
 and lived unburied.
I thought—
 ("I Married")

Al took Lorine to Minnesota and North Dakota. Except for her trips to New York to visit poet Louis Zukofsky, her mentor, friend, and brief lover, she had never been anywhere and reveled in what she saw. Her long reflective, geological and environmental poems, "Wintergreen Ridge" and "Lake Superior" resulted. During these last years she began to weave together her loosely formed sequences of condensed small poems into serial poems focused on historical figures and evolutionary/scientific themes. She began to formalize verbally what she had spent her whole life evolving. In the summer of 1967, she wrote Gail Roub, a local history teacher and along with his wife, Bonnie, one of her few friends:

Much taken up with how to define a way of writing poetry which is not Imagist nor Objectivist fundamentally nor Surrealism alone . . . I loosely called it "reflections" or as I think now, reflective, maybe. The basis is direct and clear—what has been seen or heard—but something gets in, overlays all that to make a state of consciousness . . . The visual form is there in the background and the words convey what the visual form gives off after it's felt in the mind. A heat that is generated and takes in the whole world of the poem. A light, a motion, inherent in the whole. Not surprising since modern poetry and old poetry if it's good, proceeds not from one point to the next linearly but in a circle. The tone of the thing. And awareness of everything influencing everything. Early in life I looked back of our buildings to the lake and said, "I am what I am because of all this—I am what is around me—those woods have made me . . ." I used to feel that I was goofing off unless I held only to the hard, clear image, the thing you could put your hand on but now I dare do this reflection. For instance, *Origin* will have a narrow, longish poem,

In us sea-air rhythm

sensuous, begins "My life / in water" and ends "of the soft / and serious— / Water."

The poems born of this awareness represent Niedecker's major contribution to twentieth-century poetics. Lisa Pater Faranda, editor of the Corman/Niedecker letters observes, "Although she had already written long poems, most notably the long, unpublished version of 'For Paul,' the seriality of 'Lake Superior' satisfied her need for a form free of the constraints of the continuous poems and the limits of the short poems. This poem and others in *North Central* mark a major development in Niedecker's art as it pushes beyond modernism . . . The poems in *North Central* are 'fields' of experience into which the reader who enters must participate."

I've quoted generously from "Paeon to Place" already. It and the other serialized poems of *North Central* and the posthumously published *Harpsichord and Salt Fish*, "Lake Superior," "Wintergreen Ridge," "Thomas Jefferson," "His Carpets Flowered," and "Darwin," represent Lorine's most ambitious attempts to create an "awareness of everything influencing everything." Kenneth Cox described "Wintergreen Ridge" as "one of the poems that show what poetry might be." A hymn to the feminine and creative evolutionary force it carries the reader along as Lorine and Al explore and discover the ridge, praising the women who saved the ridge for posterity, hearing her dead mother's cry, awed by the "Unaffected // by man / thin to nothing lichens" grinding "with their acid // granite to sand," and naming the plant life—feeling the life force surrounding them:

Where the arrows
of the road signs
lead us:

Life is natural
in the evolution
of matter

"Lake Superior," Lorine's first attempt at a long poem, struggles to find the balance "Wintergreen Ridge" achieves. The poem's geologic and historical images work to manifest a sense of dominion, not by the explorers whose lives she celebrates in the poem, but by the rock which rests eternal and marks the living land. She creates a terrifyingly beautiful sustained poem of transgression and commonwealth. Whereas

"Wintergreen Ridge" moves us on foot and asks up to participate fully in discovery, "Lake Superior" requires the reader to embrace larger paradoxes, to suffer our dominion's sins, and be redeemed. Through its focus on Wisconsin, it tells of America's achievements and loss:

Did not man
maimed by no
stone-fall
mash the cobalt
and carnelian
of that bird
("Wild Pigeon")

Throughout her work, Lorine used her wide-ranging reading in history and science to create poems. In "Thomas Jefferson," "Darwin," and "His Carpets Flowered" she reveals the inner life of her subjects through details from writings and historical facts:

He bowed to everyone he met
and talked with arms folded

He could be trimmed
by a two-month migraine

and yet
stand up
("Thomas Jefferson")

Perhaps less successful than the other longer poems, nevertheless, they impart the abiding presence of others' biographies in her own self-discovery:

Darwin
sailed out
of Good Success Bay
to carcass-
conclusions—

the universe
not built by brute force
but designed by laws
The details left

to the working of chance
"Let each man hope
and believe
what he can"
("Darwin")

Despite the poverty and dysfunctional family situation in which she grew, she still, in a number of ele-

"We live by the urgent wave"

giac poems such as "Paeon to Place," celebrates her mother, father, grandfather, and their stark life along the river. In letters and poems she paid homage to her "Happy outdoor grandfather who somehow somewhere had got hold of nursery and folk rhymes to enchant me," a mother "speaking whole chunks of down-to-earth magic," and in the poem "He lived—childhood summers" praises her father who gave "her a source / to sustain her— / a weedy speech, / a marshy retainer."

The annual floods saturate her poems, "born / in swale and swamp and sworn / to water" ("Paeon to Place"). Nevertheless, despite the inconvenience and annoyance, water appears over and over as friend, as teacher, and as guide into the self:

Along the river
 wild sunflowers
over my head
 the dead
who gave me life
 give me this
our relative the air
 floods
our rich friend
 silt

("Along the river")

Counterpoint, such as this, figures prominently in Niedecker's poetics. The poems refuse narrative impulse—their goals are larger and purer—to evoke life experience as much as to reveal it, and to use reflected particulars to be a life rather than to tell one. Although it was only in Lorine's later life that she was able to verbalize her intents, it's apparent, even in her early work, that her talent as a poet, her native intelligence, was to write a poetry in which the movement between seemingly unrelated objects reveals oneness and verity. Her "condensary" demanded the excision of anything superfluous that got in the way of the "human immediacy" she sought. No symbols. No ornament. Juxtaposition, sincerity, circular rather than linear movement, intersection, sound, rhythm, playful use of language, and precise description enabling song—these were her tools.

Niedecker's modes owe much to Objectivist principles, but she never forsook her early experiments with socialist-inspired surrealism. In a 1967 letter to Clayton Eshleman, she declared, "I went to school to Objectivism, but now I often say *There is something*

more." Her own life lived close to the bone, and the people among which she lived and worked, nourished her concern for the peripheral and neglected. Her early poems engage a deeply felt literary impulse with a fascination for the "folk." Here's an excerpt from a poem about her job at *Hoard's Dairyman*:

I worked the print shop
right down among em
the folk from whom all poetry flows
and dreadfully much else.

I was Blondie
I carried my bundles of hog feeder price lists
down by Larry the Lug,
I'd never get anywhere
because I'd never had suction,
pull, you know, favor, drag,
well-oiled protection.

I heard their rehashed radio barbs—
more barbarous among hirelings
as higher-ups grow more corrupt.
But what vitality! The women hold jobs—
clean house, cook, raise children, bowl
and go to church.

What would they say if they knew
I sit for two months on six lines
of poetry?

("In the great snowfall before the bomb")

Throughout her life, Lorine kept her writing secret from the locals, and when she died many were surprised to hear she was a well-known poet. In a letter to a friend during her time at *Hoard's* she declared: "folks might put up a wall if they knew . . . and I have to be among 'em to hear 'em talk so I can write some more!" Her letters oftentimes contain colloquialisms as if testing her ability to use folk speech convincingly. Niedecker viewed folk speech and folk mentality as springing from an unconscious response to the world—her mother's "down-to-earth magic." She once described poetry as "the folk tales of the mind and us creating our own remembering." Her resistance to pure Objectivism was necessitated by her belief in folk energies, including Mother Goose. These streams revealed psychological and emotional states not allowed in Objectivism's more male and scientific approach to the poem. One of her major achievements is this blending of Objectivism, folk,

of the verse "

and surrealism.

Lorine claimed she "literally went to school to William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky." The Zukofsky/Niedecker story is complicated and central to her life. In February 1931, Zukofsky edited what was to become known as the Objectivist issue of *Poetry*. Encouraged by Ezra Pound, Harriet Monroe's invitation constellated a group of poets around Zukofsky. At her behest Zukofsky coined the term "Objectivist" and wrote its "manifesto." Objectivism moved beyond Imagism, to which it owed much, to the object itself. Its character was of multiple focus, demanding fidelity to the object or idea viewed, precision, music, and sincerity in its drawing. By nature, Objectivist poetics placed itself "outside"—refusing traditional methods of symbol and ornament in exchange for a poem rich in intellectual, psychological, and descriptive collage using seriality, disjunction, history, sound, and silences. Objectivism, a destabilizing poetics, itself never stabilized. Its poets disagreed on and ignored its principles as much as they followed them. Nevertheless Objectivism, more than any other American twentieth-century poetics, even the poetry of the Beats, has influenced post-modernist poetics.

Lorine's early surrealist experiments were not entirely satisfying. She found in Zukofsky's *Poetry* issue the focus and purpose she lacked. It took her six months to get up the courage to write Zukofsky, but the correspondence continued for 40 years, with letters oftentimes more frequent than once a week. Their meeting in New York in late 1933 quickly led to romance. From 1933 to 1939 she visited often and for lengthy periods of time. Zukofsky visited her on Black Hawk Island in 1936. An accidental pregnancy, and the abortion of twins, complicated the relationship, and must have contributed to Lorine's eventual permanent return to Wisconsin. The depth of their mutual feeling, despite the heavy editing of the extant letters, is apparent. They remained close. She visited the Zukofskys (he married Celia Thaew in 1939; son Paul was born in 1943) in 1953. The Zukofskys visited her in 1954. Ultimately both of them benefited from the friendship—criticizing each other's poems, borrowing frequently from letters and playing poems off of each other. A woman weaker or more restrained by social conventions would have kept her place, but Niedecker's formidable talents and intelligence could not, would

not, play second fiddle, despite her public protestations to the contrary. In her letters to Zukofsky, Corman, and others, she boldly asserts her own opinions and makes her own way.

Lorine invokes her own difficult life of the woman-writer in this poem:

Who was Mary Shelley?
What was her name
before she married?

She eloped with this Shelley
she rode a donkey
till the donkey had to be carried.

Mary was Frankenstein's creator
his yellow eye
before her husband was to drown

Created the monster nights
after Byron, Shelley
talked the candle down.

Who was Mary Shelley?
She read Greek, Italian
She bore a child

Who died
and yet another child
who died

("Who was Mary Shelley?")

and creates a fairy-tale of her own of the sacrificial female in this one:

I rose from marsh mud,
algae, equisetum, willows,
sweet green, noisy
birds and frogs

to see her wed in the rich
rich silence of the church,
the little white slave-girl
in her diamond fronds.

In aisle and arch
the satin secret collects.
United for life to serve
silver. Possessed.

("I rose from marsh mud")

Gender plays a strong role in this work, even as she refuses linear polemics for condensation. She plays with syntax, she puns, she poses with childlike Mother Gooseness to subterfuge and subvert. On the

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surface cool, folksy, light with quiet simplicities, these poems reveal a darker vision and deep song—intensely questioning, observant, critical, articulate, and self-defining. She does not write what Rae Armantrout has described as "the conventional or mainstream poem . . . a univocal, more or less plain-spoken, short narrative often culminating in a sort of epiphany," but rather "another kind of clarity which doesn't have to do with control, but with attention, one in which the sensorium of the world can enter as it presents itself," poems that are "dynamic, contrapuntal systems in which conflicting forces and voices (inner and outer) are allowed to work."

It seems clear that she never got over her affair with Zukofsky. She always deferred to his genius as a poet and perhaps sublimated her intense feelings for him (heightened by her awe of his poetic skills) toward the whole Zukofsky family. One of her finest and subtlest poems comes from a loosely sequenced group of poems called "For Paul," for Zukofsky's son. The poem entitled "Paul" is a good example of how elliptical, musical, witty, and plangent her poems can be—rooted in an utter silence that carries grief, bliss, and reticent unresolved questionings:

Paul
 when the leaves
 fall
from their stems
 that lie thick
 on the walk
in the light
 of the full note
 the moon
playing
 to leaves
 when they leave
the little
 thin things
 Paul
 ("Paul")

Like many of Lorine's best poems, "Paul" rejects explanation, and yet centers itself insistently in the reader. Its stillness seems impertinently moving. It is elegant, yet plain—ecstatic, yet melancholy. It grows organically. Rich and multi-layered in its economies, Niedecker's poetry is the work of a

woman—not woman's work—meaning work well aware of, and willfully contradicting expected limitations, with sureties brought to fruition. Critic Michael Heller states the case thusly, "What Miss Niedecker has achieved . . . is not to become the poet-victim of her condition, but its agency, singing the song of her world and herself *through* herself." Her work accepts the evolutionary rise and fall of the earth and of a human life with ease and even splendor:

Something in the water
like a flower
will devour

water

flower

("Something in the water")

I'm hard pressed to call Niedecker a neglected poet. A review of the literature reveals scores of articles in major publications, many by notable modernist and post-modernist scholars such as Michael Heller, Kenneth Cox, and Marjorie Perloff. Her books were well reviewed during her life, and even more since the publication in 1985 of *The Granite Pail* (North Point Press) a selected poems edited by Cid Corman, and the flawed complete works *From This Condensary* (The Jargon Society) edited by Robert Bertholf. Five books were published by small, but mostly notable, presses while she was alive, among them a British (1969) and an American (1969) selected poems. Another book appeared six years after her death. Since the 1985 collections, two volumes of letters have been published; a play has been produced about her life; in 1991 a major critical volume and another unpublished volume of poems was published; and she has figured importantly in a number of critical volumes on Objectivism. Rumor has it that the University of California Press will publish a corrected complete works and a full-length biography soon. [Author's note: Since this writing in 2000, this complete works edited by Jenny Penberthy has been published, as well as new editions of *New Goose*, *Paeon to Place*, and other works about Niedecker and her work, testimony to her intensifying influence in contemporary poetry.] Niedecker is now considered a central poet in the lately more studied Objectivist tradition. Since the fourth edition of the longer Norton Anthology of American Poetry, Niedecker

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has been included. I suspect within ten years we will see a journal dedicated to Niedecker studies. Neglected? Hardly. We don't know who the neglected poets are. They write in utter obscurity, possibly never to be known, despite the quality of their work.

But we need our Niedeckers. In a way, she's our poster-woman of neglected women poets (note she's only one of two female poets included in this issue). It's a sad commentary on the state of literature for poets working in unorthodox forms, particularly if they are female, queer, or otherwise alternative. But celebrating her work is something and it's well deserved. Her life and work struggle to assert themselves beyond the romanticized stereotypes of the reclusive, shy, spurned lover of Louis Zukofsky writing simple eastern-inspired minimalist poems—our "20th century Emily Dickinson" as William Carlos Williams called her.

The marginal, but important, attention Lorine's work received during her life is owed to some powerful men in the forefront of the modernist avant-garde. Louis Zukofsky's actions on her behalf are legion. In the early years he guided her as she sought her way as a poet. Then, and later, he promoted her tirelessly. Jonathan Williams, Stuart Montgomery, Ian Hamilton Finlay, and in the last decade of her life, Cid Corman, made sure Lorine's work was printed, and after she died, that she was not forgotten. Marianne Moore, through Zukofsky's attention, gave important assistance. In addition to the books that these men helped in one way or another to publish, she published well, though relatively little, during her life in notable magazines such as *Poetry*, *Origin*, *New Directions*, *Quarterly Review of Literature*, and *Poor. Old. Tired. Horse*. In letters to Cid she even complained of not being able to produce poems fast enough for all the solicitations she received from literary journals.

On December 1, 1970, Lorine suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and died on December 31. Why should we remember Lorine Niedecker, and why declare her one of the century's great poets? She wrote some of the most singular work of our time—perhaps Basho reborn, but with the fascinating proclivities of a woman chastened and then enlarged by her experience. Her poems' tender accessibilities and enviable music; their folk roots and rhythms and universal themes; their striking experiments in form rooted in

an honest conservatism and inquiring avant-gardism; their wide-ranging themes prefiguring feminism, ecology, and social commentary; the fascination of Lorine's personal myths; the scholarship, hard work, and compassion revealed in her historical and scientific works; all frame a literary achievement constructed with the same graceful care as a Shaker chair. Such metonymic poetics, which communicates through enlightened, yet restless, associations, rarely makes for accessibility. I can promise you—spend a day reading her work and you will find yourself repeating lines to yourself afterwards over and over. They settle in the mind and float up when you least expect it:

My friend tree
I sawed you down
but I must attend
an older friend
the sun

("My friend tree")

...

First published in Asheville Poetry Review's Special Millennium issue, "Ten Great Neglected Poets of the 20th Century" [7.1 (Spring/Summer 2000): 72-83], this slightly revised version reprinted in the print and online literary magazine Oyster Boy Review, no. 17[Fall 2003: 12 pages].

Jeffery Beam's works include *Visions of Dame Kind* (Jargon Society), *An Elizabethan Bestiary Retold* (Horse & Buggy), and *The Fountain* (NC Wesleyan College Press). His new and selected spoken word CD collection, *What We Have Lost*, was a 2003 Audio Publishers Association Award finalist. His art song collaboration "The Life of the Bee", with composer Lee Hoiby, continues to be performed on the national and international stage and can be heard on Albany Record's *New Growth*. The Jargon Society has featured a little anthology of his work, *Poems Small and Not So Small*, in its *Musings for the Season*: http://jargonbooks.com/jeffery_beam.html. Two online books are available: *Gospel Earth* by Longhouse: <http://www.longhousepoetry.com/>, and *Listen* by tel-let: <http://www.ux1.eiu.edu/~jpmartone/>. Beam is poetry editor of the print and online journal, *Oyster Boy Review* and a botanical librarian at UNC-Chapel Hill. Beam lives in Hillsborough, North Carolina. His Web site: www.unc.edu/~jeffbeam/index.html



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Cid Corman's Visit

Nancy Rafal

Early in 2003 I learned that Woodland Pattern Book Center in Milwaukee was involved in organizing the Niedecker Centenary Celebration. I'd known Ann Kingsbury for a couple of years so I called to ask if Cid Corman was going to be a part of the event. Ann said he probably couldn't come unless there was financial help. I offered to write letters to see if we could gather support to bring Corman to the conference.

Life has a way of circling round but before I can tell you what came to pass, a little background. Years earlier I'd read a Wisconsin Trails article about Lorine Niedecker and was smitten. I hunted down her works, her letters, and when I found Cid Corman's Kyoto address in *The Journey Home*, I wrote the man to express my gratitude for his efforts on behalf of Niedecker. Corman responded with his usual microscopic penmanship on a post card and a correspondence was begun. Later Cid and I would exchange e-mail messages in addition to the post cards.

With that as background, I began pounding the email and snail-mail trail to see if funds could be raised for Cid to come to the Niedecker Celebration. When only a fraction of the money required was raised I decided that Cid was coming if I had to cover his costs myself. Cid also asked that two other people be paid to attend the conference, John Philips from England and Bob Arnold from Vermont. I had reservations but concluded if it meant so much to Cid we'd do it. I'm not a wealthy woman but how could there be a Lorine Niedecker celebration if Cid wasn't there. He was pivotal in keeping her spark going after her death in 1970.

So that's how I came to be standing in General Mitchell International Airport on October 8, 2003. I was with my friend, Michael Farmer. Michael had been my support and backer in this project. He chauffeured, carried bags, handled awkward moments, and enjoyed himself during the whole conference and beyond. We recognized Cid and his wife Shizumi immediately. We also ran into Jonathan Greene and paused while Greene and Cid chatted for a few moments before we and the Cormans

drove back to downtown Milwaukee and our hotel.

The hotel was within several blocks of the central public library where many of the conference events were to take place. It was an older building with a tiny lobby but it was jammed with poets when we arrived. We met John and Jasna Philips, Ed Baker, John Martone, and the Arnolds, Bob and Susan with son Carson. The whole building teemed with word-smiths, great and small.

For Michael and me the conference, both in Milwaukee and in Fort Atkinson, was a marvelous adventure. We met so many people whose work we'd read and admired. Laura Winter from Seattle, Phyllis Walsh, editor of *Hummingbird*, from Richland Center, Tom Montag . . . and the list goes on. Ann Waldman knocked my socks off.

The most poignant moment of the whole conference, for me, was when the Cormans visit the cemetery and stood in front of Lorine's grave. I have a photograph of Cid pointing his finger while animatedly telling Shizumi something about Lorine. She looks contemplatively toward the gravestone. Another moment that stands out was the playing of Cid's audio tape interview with Lorine. What a thrill to hear her voice.

But the conference was prelude to a couple of exciting days in Door County. Michael and I live within four miles of The Ridges Sanctuary and the Wintergreen Ridge Lorine had written about. The Cormans and the Arnolds rode with us to relax a while before returning to plane and, for the Arnolds, train travels. The Philips' had rented a car and followed us up Highway 43 and then 57. The house next door to us in Baileys Harbor is a vacation rental so the Arnolds and Philips were going to spend the night there while Cid and Shizumi would stay with us.

After dinner at a local restaurant we returned to our home and sat and talked for a while. The air was thick with friendship and poetry. I had to keep pinching myself. Yes, in my living room, Cid Corman was reading his work. Michael and I listened, Shizumi listened, Bob and Susan listened, John and Jasna listened, our three cats sat quietly and listened. I wanted to make a plaque: "Cid Corman read here - October 12, 2003."

At about nine in the evening we could tell that the Cormans had had a full day so the Arnolds, Phillips,

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and Michael and I walked thru the woods to the rental house where we sat and read more poetry and got serious and silly. I think we called it a night about one o'clock.

The next day it rained so nobody got to walk Wintergreen Ridge. But the visitors got to see the kind of landscape that had inspired Lorine those years before. We drove to Green Bay and circled Lambeau Field at Bob Arnold's request. Then back to Milwaukee to say goodbye to Ann Kingsbury and her husband Karl Gartung. Ann and I handed Cid his fee and wished the Cormans a safe journey.

The last time I saw the Cormans was after our dinner at their hotel near the airport. I remember the warm embraces exchanged and the glow of friendship with this amazing couple. I remember hoping Michael and I could travel to Kyoto in 2004 or 2005 to visit the Cormans but in December of 2003 Cid Corman became gravely ill. He died early in 2004.

I feel humbled to have played the part I did in assisting Cid Corman in participating in the Niedecker Centenary Celebration. I felt he had to be there and that we could make it happen. I think Cid enjoyed himself and the many reunions with old friends and meeting people he'd corresponded with thru' the years. I know Michael and I have enjoyed our continued friendships with Shizumi, the Arnolds, and the Phillips. You just never know, in this life, whose life you will touch and who will touch yours.



Cid & Shizumi at Lorine's gravesite, September 2003.

Nancy Rafal writes in the boreal forest of Baileys Harbor. She is a member of Wisconsin Regional Writers Association and is the treasurer for the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets. Marsh River Press published *Slightly Off Q*, a poetry chapbook she co-authored with June Nirschl and Judy Roy. An essay of Nancy's was recently published in the Door County Land Trust book, *The Nature of Door*.

Besides the many helpers and contributors named within, this issue of *The Solitary Plover* is brought to you by:

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