

The Solitary Plover

The Newsletter of the Friends of Lorine Niedecker Issue #2 Summer 2005



NEWSLETTER NEWS

We are excited to announce that Robin Alfano is working on a masthead design for our newsletter. We hope to have it for the next issue in January.

THE WEB

The Web site was recently updated to include some of Lorine's poetry. We have also updated the Resources section. Please continue to send us resources you know of that should be included.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Brook Hougum, a graduate student at Capilano College in Vancouver, BC is working on updating the Niedecker bibliography. Submissions for this bibliography can be sent to her at: hougum@interchange.ubc.ca Thank you Brook!

NEWS ITEMS

The poetry journal COURT GREEN features an homage to Lorine Niedecker in its recently released 2005 issue. Each issue of COURT GREEN includes a dossier on a special topic or theme, and this year the editors chose Niedecker in recognition of the recent revived interest in her work by poets and scholars. The "Dossier: Tribute to Lorine Niedecker" includes poets such as C.D. Wright, Anne Waldman, Theodore Enslin, Elizabeth Treadwell, Lisa Fishman, Maureen Owen, Jonathan Williams, Stacy Szymaszek, Gwen Ebert, Stephanie Strickland, Eleni Sikelianos, Susan Wheeler, Dan Beachy-Quick, and others. Copies are available for \$10 each (checks payable to Columbia College Chicago) at the following address: COURT GREEN, Columbia College Chicago, English Department, 600 South Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60605. COURT GREEN is a poetry journal published annually in association with the English Department at Columbia College Chicago, and is edited by Arielle Greenberg, Tony Trigilio, and David Trinidad. The first issue, published in 2004, featured a dossier on poetry and film. The dossier for issue #3 (Spring 2006), will be a collection of bout-rimés sonnets. The journal's web site is: <http://english.colum.edu/courtgreen/>.

The Friends of Lorine Niedecker are developing a study unit on Lorine for high school students. Tiffany Shockly, a teacher from San Diego, CA has written the first draft for us. We have two teachers in Wisconsin who have agreed to test the study unit for us and provide feedback. Our hope is to be able to market and distribute this study unit to every high school in Wisconsin.

The Friends of Lorine Niedecker would like to extend their thanks to James Gollata for his assistance in researching potential funding sources for our organization. We hope to put his research to good use over the coming months.

The Friends of Lorine Niedecker, Inc. received notice of their tax-exempt status on June 28. Your contributions to our organization are now tax deductible. We would like to thank Julie Short, the attorney who handled all that IRS paperwork on our behalf. The Friends are lucky to have Julie as a "friend"!

REVIEW

America's Greatest Unknown Poet, Lorine Niedecker Reminiscences, Photographs, Letters and Her Most Memorable Poems

by John Lehman

(\$12, 104 pages, paper-back, perfect bound, Zelda Wilde Publishing, ISBN 0-9741728-0-4)

To Weep a Deep Trickle

I don't think there is a better example of a writer's home symbolizing her work than the Blackhawk Island cabin where Wisconsin poet Lorine Niedecker lived most of her life. 2003, marked the 100th anniversary of her birth. Her reputation has been steadily increasing over the years, both in America and throughout the world. Robert Creeley has said, "Lorine Niedecker proves a major poet of the twentieth-century, just as Emily Dickinson was for the nineteenth."

Fog-thick morning—
I see only
where I now walk. I carry
my clarity
with me.

Now there's a very affordable new book about Niedecker. What makes this work different is that it loosely correlates her letters, photographs, reminiscences of people who knew her and her most memorable poems. Her life and work provide a unique touchstone by which we can answer questions such as: "What can we achieve through writing?" "How are we affected by where we live?" "Who inspires us?" and "Why is a piece of writing great?"

At my own first exposure to Lorine Niedecker's work I found her poems cryptic. Seeing them within the context of her life makes me marvel at how so many layers are conveyed by so few words. As John Lehman (founder of *Rosebud*) explains in his accompanying essay, "How to Make a Poem Your Own," we like poems we can quote at a graduation, wedding or a funeral, poems that offer solace when we feel lonely or courage when we need to strengthen ourselves. Unfortunately, Lorine Niedecker's work is less entertaining for the passive reader and not as easily accessible for someone wanting to make a quick emotional connection. He concludes: "Despite its simple appearance, it isn't easy. So what advantages does her work offer instead? It forces us to slow down. To understand, rather than be understood. It reduces life to essentials in a way few things in our overwrought world do. It is demanding of us, but the result is we leave the experience with a sharpness and intensity that make our own existence more precise."

Lorine Niedecker's own letters reveal the quiet drama of her life.

A woman in Fort threw herself into the river off the bridge one night last week. "She must have been insane," they said—you can't help but feel it must have been a lucid moment among patches of ice. Was going to stay up Friday and go to the Schumann movie but it snowed so much I didn't. At home I felt if only I could read something I had once written, some prose...so I dug around and found the letter that you have re. visit to Kumlien's old homeplace (I made a copy of the letter to remember the place.) Where I am and who I am...everything else is so silly. In the midst of that ordeal two weeks ago I said to myself when I came home and saw a picture of the sora rail, "Only two or three things make the world, one of them you, sora...and those things must be made known...To you, sora...to you [Robert] Burns...to you, silence...child..."

Her relationship to the avant-garde, New York poet, Louis Zukofsky, and his ultimate rejection of her after forty years of correspondence (often more than one letter a week) is engrossing. She was shy and unworldly. He, an intense intellectual. I felt like Gwyneth Paltrow in the movie *Possession* pouring over the letters and poems of a dead poet to discover the secrets of an amorous relationship.

Club 26

Our talk, our books
riled the shore like bullheads
at the roots of the luscious
large water lily

Then we entered the lily
built white on a red carpet

the circular quiet
cool bar

glass stems to caress
We stayed till the stamens trembled

What I particularly like about this book is that it's meaningful and thorough. For example, the author presents a poem by Zukofsky and then gives Niedecker's poem in reply. There is her description in a letter of her mother's death followed by the poem she wrote incorporating her same observations. We see the creative process at work and how Niedecker's ambition to be a world-acknowledged poet ironically led to her becoming the quintessential poet of place.

July, waxwings
on the berries
have dyed red
 the dead
branch

Her marriage at sixty to a one-armed maintenance man, the publication of two of her books and the influence she had on others after her death complete a story that's as enthralling and psychologically intriguing as a novel.

All the doors have never been opened for me in my life but closing some of them has let more of something else into a few or into one or two and there'll be poetry and that's that.

Two passages I found particularly moving involve her anonymity within the hometown where she worked nights scrubbing floors at a hospital and her last words that show such an inspiring commitment to her art that even if they weren't on the cover of *America's Greatest Unknown Poet* they'd be unforgettable. This book should be in every public library, high school and on every writer's bookshelf in Wisconsin. Lorine Niedecker was a little-known poet whose real greatness may be that her struggles reflect our own.

...The business of loneliness—the mind has to be sharp to keep one from getting uselessly involved just for the sake of a moment of less loneliness. I have the Art News Annual, that large book you get from Marboro Books at one-fourth the cost when it's a year old and I carried it to work one day thinking to ask the record librarian if she'd like to borrow it—she has a daughter in Milwaukee who paints. I didn't approach her, after carrying the thing there! I think they know they have a cleaning woman who is a little different from the usual, but it wouldn't do the slightest good to show them how different.

—

"I think of lines of poetry that I might use, all day long and even in the night."

—Lorine Niedecker's last recorded words

The home where she lived (now privately owned) is marked with a modest Wisconsin State Historical

Marker, but even more poignant to the knowledgeable visitor is the small, white hand pump outside her cabin.

Now in one year
a book published
and plumbing—
took a lifetime
to weep
a deep
trickle

Lorine, herself, is buried at Union Cemetery, two and one-half miles away on Highway J, in the family plot next to her father and mother. Beside her is the much smaller headstone of Al Millen.

There's a special room in the Hoard Museum down the block from the Dwight Foster Public Library on Merchant Avenue in downtown Fort Atkinson, which is now dedicated to Lorine Niedecker. The library maintains a collection that includes Lorine's personal books along with copies of her own published works, original manuscripts, interviews, pertinent periodicals, photographs, tapes and videos. Visitors are very welcome at both the museum and the library.

—Talia Schorr

America's Greatest Unknown Poet, Lorine Niedecker Reminiscences, Photographs, Letters and Her Most Memorable Poems (\$12, *Zelda Wilde Press*) is available at amazon.com, bn.com, bookstores and directly from the publisher at 1-800-7-TO-KNOW or www.WisconsinPoet.com.

Talia Schorr is a free-lance writer currently working on a book about conscious evolution. She particularly enjoys the Fort Atkinson Public Library and has made several visits to the property on Blackhawk Island where Lorine Niedecker lived.

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ESSAY

No Things But In Ideas by Robert Rehder

The brevity, definiteness and condensation of Lorine Niedecker's lyrics makes it easy to overlook the ideas in her poems and that many of them are about ideas. That a poem is very short, names individual objects (often from the natural world) and communicates a sense of compression and an effort to use the minimum number of words does not mean it cannot be about abstractions. Emily Dickinson is a good example and Niedecker shows that Pound's three imperatives about imagism can be used for other purposes than defining images. William Carlos Williams in "A Sort of a Song" declares: "No ideas but in things." These statements by Pound and Williams have dominated recent discussions of the lyric poetry from Pound to O'Hara, however, there are a number of poems by Niedecker in which she appears to reverse Williams' dicta or ignore it altogether.

Niedecker's "Black Hawk held" is a poem of ideas, but not those "in things." Distinguished from the other poems in *My Friend Tree* (1961) by not being chosen from the casual details of her everyday life, it, nonetheless, echoes with the past of her own home ground. She lived most of her life on Black Hawk Island. Part of the Black Hawk War was fought over this area of Wisconsin. Fort Atkinson, the town in which she went to school, worked, shopped and used the public library was named after the general who commanded the American army engaged in the war. One of her densest and most condensed poems, "Black Hawk held" is one of several about ownership, a subject to which she constantly returns.

Black Hawk held: In reason
land cannot be sold,
only things to be carried away,
and I am old.

Young Lincoln's general moved,
pawpaw in bloom,
and to this day, Black Hawk,
reason has small room.

The poem is composed of two compact, carefully balanced quatrains, each consisting of a single sentence and rhyming abcb. The simplicity of the language, its terseness, understatement and apparent ordinariness make it easy to overlook Niedecker's rhymes. The two quatrains are constructed such that they are deliberately set parallel and in opposition to each other. The antithetical views of the Indian and the white man are reinforced by the syntactically similar sentences, the words chosen and by the relative independence and self-containedness of each quatrain.

Makataimeshekiakiak, or Black Hawk (1766-1838), as he is known to white Americans, was a Sauk chief, who led his people on what he considered a migration and to an alliance with the Winnebago, Potawatomi and the British in Canada that would enable them to recover their ancestral lands. They moved in April 1832 from what is now Iowa across the Mississippi, along the Rock River in Illinois and then into southern Wisconsin. They fought when attacked and a Federal army was assembled to oppose them. The army was commanded by General Atkinson and among the soldiers was Abraham Lincoln. The so-called War lasted some fifteen weeks, from mid-June to October, and ended with the defeat of the Sauk. Black Hawk was taken prisoner and later released. This summary shows the variety and complexity of the issues and, consequently, all that Niedecker rejected as extraneous to her purposes. The poem is about the near American past, but it is not historical. Niedecker has simplified the history and has suppressed the most obvious emotions. There is no doubt that her sympathies lie with Black Hawk, but in paring down the subject, she has chosen to make a statement not so much about the American past as about human nature.

"Black Hawk held" is balanced by "Young Lincoln's general moved," belief is opposed not simply to action, but to military action. Black Hawk speaks for himself, but he is opposed not by General Henry Atkinson, but by "Young Lincoln's general." Abraham Lincoln enlisted in early April in the Illinois Mounted Volunteers and was elected captain. He reenlisted as a private when the company was mustered out in late May. He served in northern Illinois along the Rock River until 10 July, but saw no action. He was twenty-three in 1832 and an unsuccessful candidate for the Illinois legislature. Zachary Taylor, Jefferson Davies, Winfield Scott, Robert Anderson who defended Ford Sumter and Albert Johnston who later commanded the confederate forces were members of the army as well. Again, Niedecker rejects unnecessary historical complications. By choosing Lincoln, she includes the future and a note of moral ambiguity: the heroic figure of Lincoln who preserved the Union and freed the slaves is here the opponent of Black Hawk. The possessive suggests his responsibility, although he was only following orders. Lincoln's involvement in the Black Hawk War is not common knowledge and known to very few people. Thus, the nuances of this reference escape most readers.

"Held" is the perfect choice, as in "to hold an opinion," because it indicates both belief and possession. If she had written: Black Hawk said or Black Hawk believed, the sharpness of the contrast would have been lost. For Black Hawk only moveable goods can be sold, not land. The implicit question is to whom does the earth belong and in suggesting it, Niedecker forces us to consider the value of "things to be carried away." The portable in this context appears temporary, the land permanent. Black Hawk was sixty-six in the year of the war and died six years later in 1838. He represents the past, *young* Lincoln the future.

"I am old" and "paw paw in bloom" go in a different direction from the rest of their quatrains. They intro-

duce new subjects and break the logic of the argument, as if their disconnectedness is a further sign of the unreasonableness of the world. Both assert present facts. They present the reality in which the ideas are tested. "I am old" seems an expression of resignation, of no longer having the strength to maintain his view, a declaration of temporariness—that human life, like property, will pass and be carried away. The transitory nature of human life is in marked contrast to the land's permanence, but "I am old" at the quatrain's close intimates that this view of things may disappear with Black Hawk, as indeed it did. The pawpaw bloom is another image of time passing, another statement of transience. The flower is set against the general's moving and in its context takes the place of the violence that usually follows when an army moves. The trial of strength between the two forces is thereby muted.

The two stanzas oppose Black Hawk and the general, two ideas of property and two definitions of reason. Each quatrain consists of three statements arranged as if they were a syllogism, although they have no necessary relation to each other. Their separateness causes the poem to jump from one idea or subject to another adding to the dynamism of: "carried away," "am old," "moved," "in bloom." "Reason has small room" is wonderfully exact as a conclusion. The metaphor integrates the idea of land and property in the poem and because it is an indirect and figurative statement, enforces a pause to allow that integration to take place. Niedecker suggests rather than asserts.

Reason like Black Hawk and his tribe is crowded out and ends with very little space and no room to manoeuvre. The "to this day" and direct address to Black Hawk bring us right up to date, setting the conclusion firmly in the present. Now as then, human behaviour is unreasonable. For the poet reason is on the side of the Indians. Even with the metaphor, the conclusion is abstract, at a remove from the action of things carried away, the general moving and the pawpaw blooming. These small touches both suggest the reality and suppress the violence of the Black Hawk War. The calm, measured, understanding tone of the poem is that of reason. Emotion is excluded. The tragedy and sadness of the irreconcilable conflict is left to speak for itself and, because we are unreasonable, we understand immediately.

Robert Rehder was born and grew up in eastern Iowa. His poems have appeared in a number of periodicals and anthologies and he has published a book of poems, The Compromises Will Be Different. He is the author of Wordsworth and the Beginnings of Modern Poetry (which has been translated into Japanese); The Poetry of Wallace Stevens; Stevens, Williams, Crane and the Motive for Metaphor and has edited A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke (1755).

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