



The Solitary Plover

*Issue #3
Winter 2006*

I was the solitary plover...



**New Lorine Niedecker
Picture Found!**

It is an on-going project at the Hoard Historical Museum to organize, catalogue and scan photos in the archives. Every once in awhile there is an "Ah ha!" moment and in mid-December one of those moments came. The museum possesses a large file of class pictures from Fort Atkinson schools. An intern was working with the curator, Karen O'Connor. The photo was about to be put into a sleeve when one of the faces in the photo caught Karen's attention. Her discerning eye noticed the soulful gaze and shy smile of Lorine Niedecker as a high school freshman. Thank you to the Hoard Historical Museum for allowing us to use this picture.

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"



NEWS

The Friends of Lorine Niedecker would like to thank Robin Alfano for her design of our newsletter masthead. Robin works as a marketing program specialist at Spacesaver Corporation in Fort Atkinson. We would also like to thank JoAnna Poehlmann for allowing us to use her lovely feather in the design. In addition, we would like to thank Faith Miracle for her assistance with editing this issue of the newsletter.

Niedecker Study Unit

The Friends of Lorine Niedecker, Inc. has been working over the past year to ensure that students graduating from a Wisconsin high school have been exposed to Lorine's poetry. Tiffany Shockley was contracted to write lesson plans for a 2 – 3 day unit that looks at Lorine's writing in the context of her contribution to the Objectivist poetry movement of the mid-twentieth century. Along with the lesson plans, the study unit includes the seven minute video of the reading of *My Life By Water*, a bibliography of other sources for information, a list of potential classroom speakers and a copy of the Jane Shaw Knox biography of Lorine. The University of Wisconsin – Extension has posted the text of the study unit on their Web site at: <http://ideas.wisconsin.edu>. Using the search feature, type in Niedecker to go to the study unit. They have also closed captioned the video and made it available from the Web site. The Fort Atkinson School District has assisted in this project. Amy Oakley, Curriculum and Academic Programming coordinator, has consulted with the initial development. Matt Noll, high school English teacher, tested the study unit with his classes.

In October John Lehman and Pat Moran presented and distributed this study unit at the Wisconsin Teachers of English and Language Arts (WCTELA) conference in Madison. In March, the study unit will be presented at the Wisconsin Educational Media Association (WEMA) conference in Wisconsin Dells.

a pencil for a wing-bone...



In October, Tom Clark and his wife Laurie stopped by Fort Atkinson while visiting from Scotland. Karl Gartung served as host and tour guide and they all enjoyed lunch at the Café Carpe.



POETRY

Crack of old ice
under new snow

The moon has come back
into my poems

--David Trinidad--
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David Trinidad's last two books, *Phoebe 2002: An Essay in Verse* and *Plasticville*, were published by Turtle Point Press. He teaches poetry at Columbia College in Chicago where he directs the graduate poetry program and co-edits the journal *Court Green*.

ESSAYS

The Prosody of Lorine Niedecker: Poet of Water, Earth & Sound

According to Pound's footnote in his literary essay on T.S. Eliot, prosody is defined as "the articulation of the total sound of a poem" (421). To discuss the sound of Niedecker's poetry, in its totality or in an individual poem, it is important to look at what she does and does not do as a poet. She begins with Pound as a foundation, taking his ideas from "A Few Don't's" printed in the March 1913 edition of *Poetry* and incorporates them into her own practice. He set up three rules for poets:

- direct treatment of the 'thing'
- to use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation
- as regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome.

Niedecker's poetry is open and frank, to the point and clear, not only fulfilling Pound's decree of "direct treatment" but in turn demanding the same of the reader – demanding direct treatment of the poem as a visceral thing, not an image, and here she goes beyond Pound.

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

The sheer mastery of not only the economical use of words, but the skill of word choice to create reflective sound, including multiple meanings, the folk speech of her "island," and the sounds of her environment all add to her unique prosody. In this poem the line "over my head" refers to the position of both the flowers and her dead relatives. The dual sources of her life come from her progenitors and also from her environment, which she utilizes to write poetry. The visible form of the poem reflects the duality with the two-

From the secret notes...

column approach and the centering of the lines that introduce the word play. This acts as a visible game of matching.

While adding depth and complexity to her poems and condensing her language she did not infuse abstractions through similes and metaphors, therefore always maintaining the integrity of the object. In doing this she also meets Pound's caveat of: "Don't be viewy. Don't be descriptive. Present." And so she does, with a skill few others compare to.

Remember my little granite pail?
The handle of it was blue.
Think what's got away in my life –
Was enough to carry me thru.

In response to the simple presentation of the pail, easy to visualize, she jumps off from there, as memories do, to merge her past with her present troubles of floods, playing on the multiple meanings of the word "carry."

Pound also said to "consider the way of the scientists," meaning move on from what has already been learned and avoid just reiterating what has already been proven. Niedecker does this through sound, using the known and challenging us with new combinations and orders.

A student
my head always down
of the grass as I mow
I missed the cranes.
"These crayons fly
in a circle ahead"
said a tall fellow.

Like the scientist she reclassifies and redefines, creating her own taxonomic language. The act of writing condensed poetry, akin to mowing, cutting, and edging, she contains growth within borders without losing integrity of meaning or aesthetic. "Crayons" reflects how the tall man pronounced the word cranes. Niedecker calls herself a "student" of poetry, condensation, and sound, and spells just as she hears words, as students do when they learn to spell in school.

Lastly, Pound decrees that a poet should "behave as

a musician." Niedecker's construction mirrors that of a musician, ensuring that the natural sounds and rhythms of the words are amplified by the poetic structure.

WARBLER

St. Francis' image
—no grimace—
looks down
past the nest in the niche
and the yellow green
sound

It is right
to delight
in this ringing
bird-light
from the emerald
ground

The words spill across the page at various depths and levels, like written music and scores. Sound is connected to nature through description, a "yellow green sound" and to a religious experience through St. Francis. Niedecker does not question the importance of and need for music, she states, "It is right to delight" in the sounds and the light.

She explores these rules of Pound and also went outside of them. Her poetry is more than mere description; it uses language as a new way of carving out her environment, her understanding of her place while defining and visualizing and sounding her world as she moved through it.

What horror to awake at night
and in the dimness in the light.
Time is white
mosquitoes bite
I've spent my life on nothing.

The thought that stings. How are you, Nothing,
sitting around with Something's wife.
Buzz and burn
is all I learn.
I've spent my life on nothing.

—cont'd next page

I must tilt...

I'm pillowed and padded, pale and puffing
lifting household stuffing—
carpets, dishes
benches, fishes
I've spent my life in nothing.

This is a poet who realizes her marginalized position amongst her neighbors and even America as a greater whole. Her life as a writer means something, not nothing. She learns to live around the light that she referred to so many times in her poems. Niedecker sees her home and all of its contents, weathering floods every year, as easily disposable.

She took suggestions from her contemporaries and from her readings and molded them in her own voice. To create her unique sound and voice she methodically and painstakingly educated herself. She extended her writing beyond those who preceded her and maintained a difference from her peers by developing her own language directly from her world creating her own grammar and sounds and patterns.

If I were a bird

I'd be a dainty contained cool
Greek figurette
on a morning shore—
H.D.

I'd flutter and feed and delouse myself
close to Williams' house
and his kind eyes

I'd be a never-museumed tinted glass
breakable from the shelves of Marianne Moore.

On Stevens' fictive sibilant hibiscus flower
I'd poise myself, a cuckoo, flamingo-pink.

I'd plunge the depths with Zukofsky
and all that means—stirred earth,
cut sky, organ-sounding, resounding
anew, anew.

I'd prick the sand in cunning, lean,
Cummings irony, a little drunk dead sober.
Man, that walk down the beach!

I'd sit on a quiet fence
and sing a quiet thing: sincere, sincere.
And that would be Reznikoff.

Her sound is neither male nor female, and is a unique folk language of technicality that sets Niedecker apart as a unique American poet. She was a strident frontier woman instead of a madwoman poet hidden away from the “real” world, who used her ears to strip nature down to its bare naked senses. She used the materials around her as her own. She was pilgrim on her own path. This stripped nature, the people around her and those she corresponded with became her literary world. She studied the plants and animals and water and people for sounds with which to complete her craft. She was an instinctive master at this sound perception, and her memory and poetic ability kept time with every poet's mind from Pound to Zukofsky to W.C. Williams. She created a subversive prosody through her chosen lifestyle, a stubborn refusal to leave her “island,” the fuel for her craft.

Tiffany Shockley-Jackson – Presented at the National Poetry Foundation



Gratitude: Accessing Niedecker, Twenty Years Later

The first time I attempted to read and think about Lorine Niedecker's work, I felt inadequate to the task. I'd been deprived of any knowledge of her poetry for the formative period of my reading/writing life. Some fifteen years into it, a few examples surfaced in the mid-seventies anthology *Rising Tides*. The modesty of those poems required a rearrangement of whatever priorities had begun to settle in as “my sort of poetry.” There were a couple of us—including Frances Jaffer and Bev Dahlen—who often met to share our work, and we began making an effort to track down more of Niedecker's poetry. George and Mary Oppen may have helped, but in any case we were eventually able to come up with *Blue Chicory, North Central, and T & G: The Collected Poems*; and these small-press collections were handed around like precious old family photographs. Sometimes the texts were shared through reading the words aloud to one another, as our increasing attune-

upon the pressure...

ment to Niedecker's "ear" began to take on more pleasure and awe.

A kind of mutual stunned regardfulness—bordering on reverence—prompted us to give over the first issue of our journal *HOW(ever)*, dated May 1983, to a focus on the puzzlingly undervalued work of Lorine Niedecker. Beverly Dahlen volunteered to write a brief, personal comment for the *alerts* section and began her Niedecker inquiry with the question: "What's here?" Her response: "Economies undertaken for the joy of seeing how much a few words will bear." That answer still perfectly describes for me the work we are celebrating tonight.

In the autumn of 1984—four issues later—Glenna Breslin, the only contemporary woman scholar we knew of to be writing about Niedecker's work, agreed to let *HOW(ever)* publish an excerpt from a book she was working on that looked at the correspondence between Niedecker and Zukofsky, noting, among other things, the way their writing was stimulated by one another's letters. In Niedecker's case, the directing of her perceptions and notations to Zuk encouraged an often witty perspective and a particular attention to the natural elements of her wet and boggy island life, as well as to the local vernacular renderings that he seemed particularly attached to—a "folksy" language that sometimes got recycled into her poems, after coming under his persuasive influence.

Three years later, when the first number of *HOW(ever)*, Vol. IV (April 1987) was being hatched, the scholarship of Jenny Penberthy had come into view. A number of us had been quietly boiling over the recent, error-laden gathering of Niedecker's collected works, published under the title *From This Condensary: The Complete Writing of Lorine Niedecker*. We felt it was urgent to register our objections in print, but we didn't really have the sort of wide-ranging mental scanners, nor did we possess the training and scope of detail developed by a fiercely committed scholar. I don't remember how I first learned of Penberthy's early Niedecker scholarship, but I do remember a vivid exchange between us in which she agreed to write a brief review of the book in question. I must say that from her opening sentence she placed the scholarly ethic of rigorous factual accountability as the cornerstone of a serious and

regardful history. She left no margin for halfway measures. The opening sentence of her *HOW(ever)* review read this way: "The long-awaited collected Niedecker is a work of breathtaking editorial sloppiness."

She noted, then, her unfinished checklist of the book's "misattributions, omissions, transcription and documentation errors," running to over thirty-five typed pages, and she continued: "The editor's haste and defective acquaintance with Niedecker's poetry and archive are signals, I fear, of his low regard for her work." She quotes a patronizing statement from Bertholf's introduction as offering little reassurance when he writes: "The early letters to Zukofsky are those of a daughter writing to a father, a fledgling poet to a mentor." Pointing out that Niedecker's earliest surviving letter to Zukofsky is dated May 18, 1941, Penberthy notes that their friendship had been intact for ten years at that point and that Niedecker was "by no means a dependent, fledgling poet."

She continues: "When one has in mind a fledgling and a naif, then responsible scholarship begins to seem superfluous. Guesswork and hearsay will do. Niedecker's poetics of tact, deference, and authorial effacement has led more than one of her commentators to dismiss her work as slight... Since it could take many years before the collection is replaced," she cautions, "Niedecker's scholars are warned to view its version of her work with skepticism." That was written in 1987, fifteen years ago.*

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By the time I faced the prospect of writing an invitational talk about Niedecker for Poets House (NYC), eight years later, Penberthy's edited correspondence between Niedecker and Zukofsky had been published, as well as her critical essay "The Revolutionary Word," in the Canadian publication *West Coast Line*. Penberthy's view, by now, was both acute and comprehensive—composed from the deep layers of reading and piecing together from so many sources, providing unprepared-for suggestive links and potential answers to still-remaining questions regarding the critical diminishment and neglect of Niedecker's oeuvre and bringing into serious question the doubtful and conflicting critical interpretations and stewardship of her work among competing editors and

execute and adjust...

archivists.

Readers, Niedecker lovers, scholars, poets: we are the fortunate ones, for we have “the replacement” version, not formerly available to our imagination, but worried about at least fifteen years ago by Penberthy. For one who struggled to make sense of the only available versions until now, it has been a thrilling and clarifying experience to read through the “complete writings” once again, and to know that we can now trust it as the record of Niedecker’s development as a poet. No preferential deletions or private judgment calls, no confusions that end up as erasures. Instead, there is the rich evidence of the young Niedecker’s early work, bubbling up with its immense connection to the cinema of her mind and the range of her linguistic pleasures, before the influence of Zukofsky (and Pound before him) had engaged her with their defining preoccupations; and there is fascinating evidence, in comprehensible order and presentation, of Niedecker’s ambivalence, her tendency to continuously revise, and her persistent attempts to rearrange her work and publish it in ever more understandable versions.

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In over one-hundred pages of notes, clearly available for quick reference, are filed endless interesting factual comments by Penberthy that shift the reader’s single-focus reception of a particular work. I’ll give you one example:

Sorrow moves in wide waves,
it passes, lets us be.
It uses us, we use it,
it’s blind while we see.

Consciousness is illimitable,
too good to forsake
Tho what we feel be misery
and we know will break.

[from “For Paul” sequence, probably 1951]

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Penberthy’s notes include these observations: “after Henry James” is acknowledged on LN’s manuscript as the poem’s source; Zukofsky’s recommended cut

of the word “illimitable” ignored by LN.

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We hear Niedecker’s voice now, in its multiples:

- American
- researched
- profoundly political in its porous class alliances
- profoundly private in its codes and hidden sound-links
- a selective modesty
- grief-stricken
- sudden broad hilarities, reined in by wit’s lens
- a sensuous overflowing embraced by line’s containment
- sly
- resistant
- Lyric-driven, in the grip of music’s obsessive turn and return
- enduring.

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—remarks by Kathleen Fraser, 9.12.02, on the occasion of the San Francisco Poetry Center’s celebration of The Collected Works of Lorine Niedecker, edited by Jenny Penberthy for U.C. Press, Berkeley.

*The full text of Penberthy’s comments may be found in the recently redesigned *HOW(ever)* and *HOW2* electronic archives at:
www.how2journal.com.




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

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You can now support the work of the Friends of Lorine Niedecker by becoming a member. Memberships will help us host and update the Web site (the least expensive way we have found to share our wealth of information), mail materials to those who don't have access to the Web and support research and archive initiatives. Your contribution is tax-deductible and membership will cover the calendar year of 2006.

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