LORINE AND DAISY

Theresa Niedecker is the mystery in Lorine Niedecker's life. At best, there exist no more than twenty hard facts about Lorine's mother. One of them is that, though she was christened Theresa Henrietta, she was always called Daisy, though it's not clear why. It's also on record that Daisy was born on March 23, 1878 to parents Louise and Gottfried Kunz. She was one of three children; married Henry Niedecker on August 28, 1901; and died on Wednesday, July 25, 1951 at age seventy-three. That's five facts already.

Because we know so little, it's useful to remind ourselves of the world into which Daisy Niedecker was born in 1878 and lived until 1951. As a female she was expected, after the comparative freedom of girlhood, to marry: "Better dead than unwed!" Her chances of being educated past high school were virtually nil, as was the probability of her working outside the home for wages. She could not vote until 1920 when she was forty-two. When she married Henry, he automatically became head of the house in every respect. Money left Daisy by her maternal grandmother, Caroline Zeasar Kunz, who had speculated lucratively in land, automatically became Henry's after their marriage, as did her portion from the sale of her parents' Blackhawk Island hotel, The Fountain House. As a result, Daisy's sister Ida had to help her out financially from time to time. Daisy would have had few if any options for birth control and no legal power over the children she might bear. Man and wife (telling phrase) performing rigid divisions of labor: the man working outside the house as economic provider; the wife bearing and raising children and performing the unpaid work of cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing, and sewing. Motherhood, a woman's preoccupation from her children's birth through their adolescence, would be Daisy's fulfillment as well as her justification for being.

Daisy Niedecker, however, did not fit the traditional role. In that age of large families, she bore only one child, inviting criticism that she was "unwomanly." Nothing we know about her suggests that bearing a daughter was her fulfillment. Since Daisy is silent on the subject, photographs assume more than ordinary importance. There are none of Daisy and Lorine in a loving pose, while Lorine perches on Henry's knee, arms around Daddy's neck. A school friend noticed that Lorine, oddly, never spoke of her mother. We have, too, Lorine's accounts of Henry giving her money to go to New York, entertaining her friends, building her a cabin. Lorine bonded more strongly with Henry than with Daisy. And all her life Lorine preferred men to women

In a photo taken when she was thirty-four, Daisy stands at the head of a group of five women. They are smiling, she scowls; they wear fancy dresses, she plain gingham. She is by far the tallest of the group, hence the line-up. In photos she is taller than her husband Henry, significant because women literally and figuratively looked up to their husbands. Yet early in her marriage Daisy was a great help to her carp-seining husband in decidedly non-traditional ways--a wife "who knew boats/ and ropes," helped him "string out nets/for tarring," could shoot a gun, chop wood, and catch more fish than Henry: a competitive woman proud of her "male" skills and in ways tougher than her husband:

> My man says the wind blows from the south,
> we go out fishing, he has no luck,
> I catch a dozen, that burns him up,
> I face the east and the wind's in my mouth,
> but my man has to have it in the south.

However unconventional Daisy could be, she could not be criticized as a housekeeper. "Daisy, she was an extremely fastidious housekeeper," remembered Lorine's high school friend Ernest Hartwig. "She kept the wood floors of their house polished and never let anybody into the house."1 Important to her daughter, living on treacherous Blackhawk Island, Daisy "knew how to clean up/after floods." But Lorine fought Daisy's obsession. "BP [BP for Bean Pole] the ole worker. "What a drudge she'd like to have made of her daughter! A clean drudge."

Another fact. Shortly after giving birth to Lorine when she was 25, Daisy began to lose her hearing, then quickly became stone deaf. Her doctor, Frank Brewer, told her that childbirth caused her deafness. If only subconsciously, how could Daisy not have blamed Lorine in some way for her loss of hearing? Her "big, blind

ears”2 ached, she stuffed them with cotton lint to keep out the cold. She became withdrawn and bitter. Henry “Saw his wife turn/deaf/and away,”3 Lorine would write in Paean to Place. Although her cousins Adeline and Arvella believed that “At times it seemed as though she could lip-read,”4 night after night her mother and Lorine sat in silence together. Lorine mourned that her mother could not hear ducks blast off the water or the sora rail’s musical descending scale. “Did she giggle as a girl?”5 wondered Lorine, unable to imagine a cheerful mother. Daisy no longer helped Henry tar his nets, withdrew from friends and family, refused to join relatives at card playing. “Her hearing was a sad thing and difficult for both Uncle Henry and Lorine,” said a cousin, Edna Niedecker. She stopped going off the Island, even out of the house except to walk her red dog. In Lorine’s words, her mother became “moored to this low shore by deafness.”

By the time Lorine entered high school, Henry had turned for sex and companionship to Gertrude Runke, a neighbor only three years older than Lorine. An easy-going man, Henry took few pains to hide his infidelity from Daisy, sleeping most nights in the quonset hut near their house, where he stored gear and where Daisy served his seining crew noon dinner. With Henry’s infidelity, the conventional family myth totally self-destructed. If Daisy had turned away in deafness, she now turned further away in anger and contempt.
Henry bought a fancy new car instead of a truck (Daisy would never learn to drive: women did not drive family cars in those days). “A hummingbird/ can’t haul,” scoffed Daisy, the double entendre stabbing Gertrude as well. Henry liked to go around Blackhawk Island after floods helping people. Daisy, scornful: “He’s out soothing everybody today--an old soothe-see--er. I suppose they’ll all decide to live on a little just because he’s been to see ‘em . . . He’s got one eye on one neighbor and the other eye on the other one so of course there’s none for home.”6 Jealous of Henry’s popularity, sociability and, overwhelming, of his sexual relationship with Gertrude Runke, Daisy became even more obsessive about keeping an immaculate house. Housework became her sanity, a way to control something Henry’s infidelity had fouled.

Daisy could also be critical of her daughter, who had none of her skills with boats, nets, wood-chopping, cooking and baking. Who was, in fact, a dreamy young woman with terrible eyesight, buried in books or scribbling in a notebook, off in her own world. “Good-bye to lilacs by the door,” writes Lorine quoting Daisy’s complaint during a spring flood

> and all I planted for the eye.
> If I could hear--too much talk in the world,
> too much wind washing, washing
> good black dirt away. . . .
>
> I’ve waster my whole life in water.
> My man’s got nothing but leaky boats,
> My daughter, writer, sits and floats.7

No wonder then that Lorine left home at twenty-five to marry the Blackhawk Island farmer Frank Hartwig. The escape was temporary. When the marriage failed, Lorine had no option but to return home. What saved her sanity was the discovery, in 1931, of the poet Louis Zukofsky’s work in Poetry magazine. She wrote to him, he replied: they struck up a correspondence. When he realized his daughter was serious, Henry gave Lorine money to travel to New York to stay with Zukofsky, trips Daisy strongly disapproved. In 1936, Zukofsky and his friend Jerry Reisman visited Blackhawk Island. Daisy was so upset that her daughter was living in sin with Louis that she could hardly speak to the New Yorker who, during his stay, kept his distance at all costs. Lorine also “avoided her mother as much a possible,” said Reisman, “because of the tension between them which apparently had existed for years.”8 Naturally Henry was welcoming and genial and showed the New Yorkers how to shoot his guns.
On another occasion, working in Madison for the Federal Writer’s Project, Lorine invited her colleagues Edwin Honig and Vivien Hone to Blackhawk Island. Their impression of her parents was identical to Zukofsky’s and Reisman’s. “Lorine’s mother was awesomely gaunt, tall and silent,” said Honig; “her father, an easy-going

hunter-fisher-farmer, not regularly employed, was a good story-teller." Vivien Hone was more perceptive: Henry "lived in a modest house on the banks [of the Rock River]. Lorine's mother lived in an adjoining house and never spoke to her husband. The cause of that silent civil war was never made known to me, but what a hostile environment for [Lorine] the child."

Finally Lorine could not bear to live with her unhappy mother any longer. In 1946 Henry built her a cabin, and though she had to hike to her former house to draw water and had no indoor toilet, she escaped Daisy's silent daily war with life--though not the financial consequences of Henry freely handing over property and money to Gertrude Runke in exchange for sex, an arrangement Gert's husband thoroughly approved. Daisy did drop in unexpectedly on Lorine from time to time, once looking like a bandit with a kerchief over her face to keep out the cold, once to tell Lorine she'd seen a mirage of a brown house, though when she'd looked closer it was only dry canes by the roadside. A haunted, desperate woman.

About this time, Lorine confided to AEneas McAllister, a young Blackhawk Island neighbor with whom she was not a little in love, that Daisy "had gone off her rocker" and that "Gert Runke helped." At the same time she made it clear she considered her mother's madness no excuse for Henry's infidelity. Their conversation seems to have happened after Daisy burned down the house:

> She grew where every spring
> water overflows the land,
> married mild Henry
> and then her life was sand.
>
> Tall, thin, took cold on her nerves,
> chopped wood, kept the fire,
> burned the house, helped build it again,
> advance, attack, retire.
>
> Gave birth, frail warrior--gave boat
> for it was mid-spring--
> to Henry's daughter who stayed
> on the stream listening
>
> to Daisy: "Hatch, patch and scratch,
> that's all a woman's for
> but I didn't sink, I sewed and saved
> and now I'm on second floor." 9

Henry built a new two-story house in 1947 and husband and wife moved in--on separate floors. Daisy hasn't "struck anywhere normal since," Lorine told AEneas. 10

Increasingly, Daisy was also suffering from mitral valve decomposition, a heart problem for which she'd been treated since 1943. Still, she tried to keep an immaculate house, though now Lorine was forced to help. "BP, Henry and I washed yesterday. I could do it alone if I could get the others out of the way. [BP] shook so, said 'I always get excited when we wash. It's a skunk, tho, this bad weather. These rots will have to hang in the house all day.'"11 More her mother's daughter than she cared to admit, Lorine then walked back to her cabin to lacquer her own linoleum and varnish her mopboards.

By 1951 Henry believed he'd have to commit Daisy to the County Home for the insane. She was finally admitted to the Jefferson Hospital when doctors decided that her confusion was due as much to morphine and digitalis as to mental breakdown. "Don't you omit these visits," Daisy told Henry and Lorine when they came to see her. On July 25, they rose to go at the end of visiting hours. "Wash the floors, Lorine," Daisy cried frantically, "wash the clothes and pull weeds." Shortly afterward she ate her supper and fell back dead. She

was seventy-three.
Writing Zukofsky about the funeral, Lorine's tone was matter-of-fact, even cheerful. "[I]t wasn't hard to go through it because I kept thinking how music and church meant nothing to BP, she couldn't hear and she never went out. . . . As it was, she lay there looking not too much like herself, far from it all, noble at last, as unique as she was when she lived. Christian burial for a barbaric genius." Henry hinted that Lorine would get $3,000 Daisy had left, and she planned, with a little of the money, to buy a new fur coat. (Nothing more, however, was heard about the $3,000 and fur coats.)
Far more moved than she let on to Zukofsky, Lorine turned Daisy's last words into a poem:

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!

Daisy mourned that she had spent her life on and in nothing. What would have made Daisy's life something? Being able to hear, certainly. A faithful husband, yes. Most important, one feels, equal partnership in Henry's various businesses: her own space, right to her own money. A daughter who did not sit and float. No daughter at all?
That daughter, however, gave Daisy immortality. If not for Lorine, Theresa Niedecker would be a statistic buried in the archives of the Jefferson County Union. Besides talking about Daisy in her published letters, Lorine wrote more than twenty poems either about, quoting, or including her mother. Thirteen of these she wrote after Daisy's death, far more than she would write about her father, who died three years later. "I hear the weather/through the house/or is it my breathing mother."14 Walking Wintergreen Ridge in Door County with her second husband Al Millen years later, she stops abruptly: "I suddenly heard/the cry/my mother's." A year later she wrote her finest poem, Paean to Place, a hymn of praise to her parents and to her to life on Blackhawk Island; and an admission of her bond with Daisy: "My mother and I/born/in swale and swamp and sworn/to water."15 A year before her death Lorine still could not forget Daisy. In Subliminal she mourns "Night/the sag of day/My mother/all the years/no day."
Lorine grieved far less for her father. After all, Henry had led a pleasant life pretty much on his own terms. Daisy's tormented spirit, however, tormented Lorine. Describing her mother as "tall, tormented/dark infested," Lorine plumbs the depths of Daisy's unhappiness in a poem written two months after her death.

What horror to awake at night
and in the dimness see the light.
Time is white
mosquitos 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.

I'm pillowed and padded, pale and puffing

lifting household stuffing--
carpets, dishes
benches, fishes
I've spent my life in nothing.

But Daisy did not spend her life in nothing. Though Lorine thanks her father for "a weedy speech, a marshy retainer,"16 she found a deeper source of poetry in her mother's colorful, uninhibited, colloquial speech. Daisy, who "spoke whole chunks of down-to-earth (o very earthy) magic," gave her daughter poetry. Zukofsky envied the gold mine Lorine had close at hand, told her she was right to spend half her time copying and editing her mother's conversation. "Time for BP to write me a poem," says Lorine, when having difficulty with "Horse, Hello." We hear Daisy's voice in New Goose poems like "Mr. Van Ess bought 14 washcloths? /Fourteen washrags, Mr. Van Ess?/Must be going to give em/to the church, I guess" or "The museum man!" written down just as her mother spoke it:

The museum man!
I wish he'd taken Pa's spitbox!
I'm going to take that spitbox out
and bury it in the ground
and put a stone on top
Because without that stone on top
it would come back.

There are few examples of a cheerful Daisy, but in March 1946 when the Rock River rose eight inches over the driveways, Lorine got a lift to town where she bought a pair of man-size hip boots. Back home, Daisy insisted on trying them on, so Lorine pulled on Henry's boots to see if they were even heavier. Suddenly some Swiss music sprang from the radio. Lorine began to dance and suddenly there was Daisy, laughing and capering, and clapping her hands.
I think she must have giggled as a girl.

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