

Tally of Contemporaries

A reading of Lorine Niedecker's "If I Were a Bird" and
a study of the poets who inspired it.

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The poem, "*If I Were a Bird*" is a poem inspired by poets. It was sent by Lorine Niedecker as part of a manuscript in about 1951 to Louis Zukofsky who recommended changing the title to *Tally of Contemporaries*. He also recommended some other minor changes to the stanza devoted to him. Lorine's response to these recommendations is documented in her March 15, 1951 letter: "*I have the feeling you don't quiet get me these days [] I'm writing you too much and you are too busy. Yes, I'll use If I were a bird sometime in FOR PAUL*". (Penberthy, ed. *Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofsky, 1931-170*. Pg. 178)

Yes, he does not get her! The whole point of the title is to hold the image which she gracefully moves throughout the seven stanzas. Without the title we would not understand how she folds time in each stanza and places herself, or her object bird, at the inception of each poets writing. In this manner she becomes not only the poet inspired but the humble inspiration for each poet she is honoring in the poem.

The poets Lorine is honoring are poets she read, studied, corresponded with or knew intimately. In her choice of words Lorine seems to be giving us clues pointing to a specific poem or works of poetry by each of the poets. So, perhaps it is not only a poem about poets but a poem about specific poems by these poets.

She starts the poem with a stanza devoted to H.D. Hilda Doolittle was born in Pennsylvania in 1886. She attended Bryn Mawr for one year and was a classmate to Marianne Moore. She later attended the University of Pennsylvania where she became friends with Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. She was considered to be one of the founders of the imagist movement. H.D. is known for her use of classical Greek Mythology and her early feminist principals. Hilda Doolittle was a poet Lorine was likely to have studied and likely an early influence on her work. *Heliodora and other poems* (H. D., 1924) is one of Lorine Niedecker's personal books held at the Dwight Foster Public Library in Fort Atkinson, WI. In this book, Lorine may have left us some clues about her choice of words in the first stanza of her poem; *dainty contained cool/Greek figurette*. The poem "*Wash of Cold River*" (pg. 11) has a star at the top of the page and handwritten marks beside the last seven lines of this poem.

*that I would take
to mould a clear
and frigid statue;*

*rare, of pure texture,
beautiful space and line,
marble to grace
your inaccessible shrine.*

Jenny Penberthy found several pages of hand written notes in Niedecker's book collection. These included Lorine's statement; "(I am drawn) *to the Imagists, to the wordy ones and the*

strange rhythms" (Niedecker; ed. Penberthy. Pg 3). Hilda Doolittle was the first woman granted the American Academy of Arts and Letters medal (1960). She died in 1961.

The next stanza is devoted to William Carlos Williams. He was born in 1883 in New Jersey. He started writing poetry in high school and decided at this time he wanted to be both a writer and a doctor. Williams attended the University of Pennsylvania where he met and befriended Ezra Pound. After completing his MD he moved back to New Jersey where he maintained his medical practice. He continued to be a prolific writer. In his poetry he moved away from the early imagist movement driven by a desire to develop what he considered a *more American poetic* with subject matter focused on common people and circumstances. In 1915 Williams became associated with a group of poets identified as "The Others", which included Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens. Williams is strongly associated with the modern poetry movement and invented writing concepts of "the variable foot" and "the triadic line break". Lorine met Williams when she traveled to New York to stay with Zukofsky. Lorine was instructed by Zukofsky to study the poems of William Carlos Williams. She mentions him and his writings frequently in her letters. He has won many awards for his works including The National Book Award for Poetry, and after his death, a Pulitzer Prize (1963). The words that seemed to stand out in the Niedecker stanza were: *house, delouse, kind eyes*. Many of his poems include images of home and are thick with compassionate observation which made this selection difficult. Karl Gattung, in consultation with Jenny Penberthy pointed toward the choice of "*The Nightingales*" in which Williams reflects an earlier poem by John Keats, "*Ode to a nightingale*". When asked by a Blackhawk Island neighbor, Gail Roub, who she was, Lorine answered, "William Carlos Williams said that I am the Emily Dickinson of my time." (Penberthy, ed. *Lorine Niedecker: Women and Poet*. Pg. 79)

In the poem, we next encounter Marianne Moore. It was with this stanza that I first started to suspect a specific poem is being cited. The image of *never-museumed tinted glass* is very specific. I was very excited when I found the poem "*An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish*", and discovered that it was written by Moore after seeing an artifact at the British Museum. This poem is mentioned in the essay "Objectivists" by Louis Zukofsky (pg. 268) published in POERTY. Marianne Moore was widely recognized for her work. She was the winner of the National Book Award and a Pulitzer Prize. She was known for her succinct use of imagery drawn from the natural world. Lorine writes in a letter to Cid Corman, "I'm a weak sister of Marianne Moore, I appreciate, I don't criticize, and I quote like she does but all without her acumen" (Faranda, ed., 1986, pg 75). Moore was born in Missouri in 1887 and during her childhood lived in the home of her grandfather who was a Presbyterian pastor. She attended Bryn Mawr College where she met Hilda Doolittle. In 1921 Moore and her mother moved to New York City and she worked as an assistant at the New York Public Library. During this time

she started meeting other poets such as William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens. She is known for doing readings in her tricorne hat and black cape. She died in New York City in 1972.

Wallace Stevens is the next poet honored. Again this stanza seems to point to a specific poem in use of the words; *fictive, sibilant hibiscus flower*. His first published book of poems, *Harmonium* (Stevens, 1923) is in the Niedecker collection held at the Dwight Foster Public Library and contains the poem "*Hibiscus on the Sleeping Shores*" (pg.39). Wallace Stevens is said to be concerned with the transformative power of imagination. He developed the concept of "*Supreme fiction*"; thus Niedecker's use of the word, *fictive*, and perhaps why she has created the fictive bird, *a cuckoo, flamingo-pink*. Wallace Stevens was a lawyer and a poet. He was born in Pennsylvania in 1879. He was friends of William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore and E.E. Cummings. He continued to work in law and business, serving as a vice president of an insurance company for many years. He wrote poems on his way to and from the office. His awards include The National Book Award (1951, and 1955) and the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry (1955). He died in 1955. Lorine later wrote another poem honoring Stevens:

Wallace Stevens
What you say about the early
yellow springtime is also something
worth sticking to
(Niedecker; ed. Penberthy. pg. 287).

We next plunge the depths with Zukofsky. This stanza seems to have the most energy in it, likely demonstrating the intimacy of their relationship. Zukofsky wrote the 1931 essay on Objectivism published in *POETRY* which started a long term correspondence and literary partnership between the two of them. Many of the poets represented in "*If I were a bird*" are poets whose works are listed in this essay as "absolutely necessary to students of poetry". (*POETRY*, pg. 268). (MM, WCW, WS, EEC). Louis Zukofsky was born in 1904 in New York City. He attended Columbia University where he studied both English and philosophy. While in school, Zukofsky singled out Ezra Pound as the only living poet who mattered. He sent his poems to Pound and it was Pound who persuaded Harriet Monroe to allow Zukofsky to edit a special issue of *POETRY*. Lorine's affair with Zukofsky is well documented in Margot Peters biography; *Lorine Niedecker: A Poet's Life* (Peters, 2011). In the essay, *The Poetry of Louis Zukofsky*, Lorine writes; "*Anew* (1946) contains the lovely, minutely in-wreathed flowering of Zukofsky's poetic genius. The poems are at once objective and intimate..." (Niedecker, 1956, pg.198-210). In turn, Zukofsky later describes Lorine Niedecker as the best American women poet after Marianne Moore (Terrell, 1979). Zukofsky died in 1978. He had published 49 books of poetry, short fiction and critical essays. He won National Endowment for the Arts Grants in 1967 and 1968, and the National Institute of Arts and Letters Grants in 1976, as well as an honorary Doctorate from Bard College in 1977.

The next stanza finds us on the beach with E.E. Cummings. Earnest Estlin Cummings received a Bachelors of Art and a Masters both from Harvard. He wanted to be a poet since childhood and wrote on a daily basis from ages 8-22. He was also an artist and painter in the cubist movement. He is known for his experimental use of form, punctuation, spelling and syntax. His poems are known as well for their visual placement on the page. He is identified as an eminent poet of the 20th century and won numerous awards. His body of work encompasses approximately 2,900 poems, two autobiographical novels, four plays and several essays, as well as numerous drawings and paintings. He was one of circle of poets associated with Zukofsky, Stevens, Williams and Moore. His poetry was being published in the same literary journals as Niedecker and she mentions him and his poetry in her letters. To Zukofsky she wonders what he has to say or if he has written an essay about punctuation (Penberthy, ed. 1993, Pg 165). The clues in this stanza seem to be; the setting of a beach, and *a little drunk dead sober*. The poem *maggie and milly and molly and may* fits the bill.

The final poet mentioned is Charles Reznikoff. Reznikoff was born in 1894. He graduated from grammar school at age 11 and was attending the University of Missouri at age 16. He returned to New York after a year to pursue a study of Law. He obtained his degree in 1915 and was admitted to the bar in 1916. He practiced law only briefly in order to direct his energy toward his writing. His work was primarily self-published, and he worked to support himself through editing jobs. Louis Zukofsky included a separate essay in the 1931 POETRY edition titled, "*Sincerity and Objectification: With Special Reference to the work of Charles Reznikoff*" (pg. 272-285). In this article a few lines of the Reznikoff poem later used in "*LV (55)*" stand as a separate poem. *The Traveler/ whom a bird's notes surprise--/his eyes/search the trees* (pg.279). Lorine met Reznikoff when she traveled to New York in the 1930's and they continued correspondence. He sent her all of his books many of which are still held in the Niedecker collection at the library. Lorine also writes about him in letters to Zukofsky and Cid Corman. In 1959 she writes to Zukofsky; "*You get the idea he leads a lonelier life than I do but freer to trash?*" And: "*I have always felt he was writing my poems for me only better*" (*Niedecker Correspondence with Zukofsky*, pg 257).

Each of these poets has very interesting literary and life histories and I encourage the curious reader to explore their works, biographies and autobiographies. There is also a good body of literary work documenting and analyzing the influences or connection with Niedecker and these poets. To further these studies, I refer the reader to the selected bibliography.

By the way, "*If I Were a Bird*" remained unpublished until Jenny Penberthy edited *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works* in 2002. Since this time "*If I Were a Bird*" is one of thirteen Niedecker poems appearing in *The Oxford Book of American Poetry* (Lehman, ed., 2006). This collection also includes poems from all the contemporaries mentioned in "*If I Were a Bird*". Margot Peters included "*If I Were a Bird*" in her Niedecker biography.

While researching these poets and poems, I had the idea of doing a reading in which we weave Lorine's poem, "*If I were a Bird*" with poems that may have inspired this poem (keeping in mind

this is all speculation). I presented this idea to the other members of the Solitary Plover group who were very excited and supportive. So sit back and let the words fly.

(See attached poems including publication information)

If I Were a Bird by Lorine Niedecker

Wash of Cold River by H.D.

The Nightingales by William Carlos Williams

An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish by Marianne Moore

Hibiscus on the Sleeping Shores by Wallace Stevens

Anew—6 by Louis Zukofsky

maggie and milly and molly and may by E.E. Cummings

LV (55) by Charles Reznikoff

Thank you to the solitary plover members for support of and participation in my idea. Thank you to all the readers who gave this project and these poems a voice this morning. Thank you Ann Engelman who agreed that this project was worthy of inclusion in the poetry festival. Amy Lutzke and Ann Engelman gave me access to the Niedecker book collection for this project and I am grateful to be able to look through and read Lorine's personal books of poetry by some of these poets. Thank you also to the *Friends of Lorine Niedecker* group for organizing this festival and other poetry events.

If I Were a Bird

by Lorine Niedecker

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.

Niedecker, Lorine. *Collected Works*. Ed. Jenny Penberthy. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, pp. 130-131.

Wash of Cold River

by Hilda Doolittle

Wash of cold river
in a glacial land,
Ionian water,
chill, snow-ribbed sand,
drift of rare flowers,
clear, with delicate shell-
like leaf enclosing
frozen lily-leaf,
camellia texture,
colder than a rose;

wind-flower
that keeps the breath
of the north-wind --
these and none other;

intimate thoughts and kind
reach out to share
the treasure of my mind,
intimate hands and dear
drawn garden-ward and sea-ward
all the sheer rapture
that I would take
to mould a clear
and frigid statue;

rare, of pure texture,
beautiful space and line,
marble to grace
your inaccessible shrine.

H.D. *Heliodora and other poems*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1924. pg 11

Book is held in the collection of the Lorine Niedecker books at the Dwight Foster Public Library,
Fort Atkinson, WI 53538

The Nightingales

by William Carlos Williams

My shoes as I lean
unlacing them
stand out upon
flat worsted flowers
under my feet.
Nimbly the shadows
of my fingers play
unlacing
over shoes and flowers.

Williams, William Carlos. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume 1. 1909-1939*. Ed. A. Walton & Christopher MacGowan. New York: New Direction Publishing, 1986. Pg. 169.

An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish

By Marianne Moore

Here we have thirst
and patience, from the first,
and art, as in a wave held up for us to see
in its essential perpendicularity;

not brittle but
intense—the spectrum, that
spectacular and nimble animal the fish,
whose scales turn aside the sun's sword by their polish.

Moore, Marianne. *Observations*. New York: Dial Press, 1924.

Hibiscus on the Sleeping Shores

By Wallace Stevens

I say now, Fernando, that on that day
The mind roamed as a moth roams,
Among the blooms beyond the open sand;

And that whatever noise the motion of the waves
Made on the seaweeds and the covered stones
Disturbed not even the most idle ear.

Then it was that that monstered moth
Which had lain folded against the blue
And the colored purple of the lazy sea,

And which had drowsed along the bony shores,
Shut to the blather that the water made,
Rose up besprent and sought the flaming red

Dabbled with yellow pollen --- red as red
As the flag above the old cafe---
And roamed there all the stupid afternoon.

Stevens, Wallace. *Harmonium*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc, 1923. pg 39.

Book held in the Niedecker book collection held at Dwight Foster Public Library, Fort Atkinson,
WI 53538

Anew

6

by Louis Zukofsky

Anew, sun, to fire summer
leaves move toward the air
from the stems of the branches

fire summer fire summer

but for the people cheated
from the birds heard singing
thru four months on shore
toward the people in the waves

the green leaves that fill up the day
and those eaten away
--point-lace worked over a stem—
blow up on the trees of the cliff

on the top
the mill with the clock-tower
fires summer
over a midsummer shore.

Zukofsky, Louis. *Anew*. New York: Press of J. A. Decker, 1946. pg. 12.

Book held in the Niedecker book collection at the Dwight Foster Public Library, Fort Atkinson, WI 53538

maggie and milly and molly and may

by E. E. Cummings

maggie and milly and molly and may
went down to the beach(to play one day)

and maggie discovered a shell that sang
so sweetly she couldn't remember her trouble , and

milly befriended a stranded star
whose rays five languid fingers were;

and molly was chased by a horrible thing
which raced sideways while blowing bubbles: and

may came home with a smooth round stone
as small as a world and as large as alone.

For whatever we lose (like a you or a me)
it's always ourselves we find in the sea

Cummings, E. E. *95 poems*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publisher, 1958.

LV (55)

by Charles Reznikoff

You tell me that you write only a little now.
I wrote this a year or two ago
about a girl whose stories I have read and wished to meet:
The traveler
whom a bird's notes surprise—
his eyes
search the trees.
And when I met her she was plain enough.
So is the nightingale, they say—
and I am glad that you do not belong
to those whose beauty is all song.

Reznikoff, Charles. *Jerusalem The Golden*. New York: The Objectivist Press, 1934.

Book held in the Niedecker collection at the Dwight Foster Public Library, Fort Atkinson, WI
53538

If I Were a Bird by **Lorine Niedecker**

Read by Margot Peters

Wash of Cold River by **Hilda Doolittle**

Read by Kathryn Irvine

The Nightingales by **William Carlos Williams**

Read by Chuck Stebelton

An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish by **Marianne Moore**

Read by Carol Keleny

Hibiscus on the Sleeping Shores by **Wallace Stevens**

Read by Vicky Daniels

A new-6 by **Louis Zukofsky**

Read by Karl Gartung

maggie and milly and molly and may

by **E.E. Cummings**

Read by Dot Kent

LV (55) by **Charles Reznikoff**

Read by Paul Smyth

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_____. "Sincerity and Objectification." *Poetry* 37.5, 1931; 272-285. on-line archive: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org>



Nancy Shea has been a reader and writer of poetry for many years. She grew up in Janesville, WI. Her mother had visited the Hoard Historical Museum one day and told her that an internationally known poet had lived on Black Hawk Island. This bit of news lay silent for over twenty-five years until Nancy moved to the area. Now she is a member of the Solitary Plovers, a Lorine Niedecker study group, where she shares her appreciation of Lorine Niedecker poetry with a scholarly crew.