

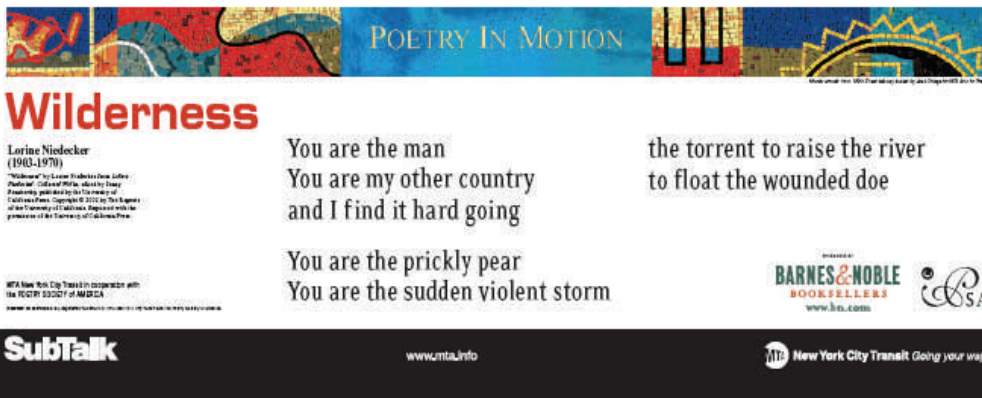


*The Solitary Plover*

*Issue #6  
Summer 2007*

# *I was the solitary plover*

## Niedecker Inspired Art



*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"*



Lorine Niedecker's poem "Wilderness" rode the New York City buses and subways earlier this year. The New York Municipal Transit Authority's project "Poetry In Motion" in partnership with The Poetry Society of America has chosen the poem for bus and subway cards. "We got a call from someone who saw the poem on an MTA bus in New York and wanted more information about Lorine," said Dwight Foster Librarian Amy Lutzke. "We weren't quite sure what it meant."

Ann Engelman, President of Friends of Lorine Niedecker began to make some calls and discovered that "Wilderness" is part of "Poetry in Motion." Representatives from the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and the Poetry Society of America

collaborate on the selection of poems for the program. A complete poem or excerpt by an established poet must be short enough to be readable on one of the subway or bus cards. Poets who have participated in "Poetry In Motion" project include Rita Dove, Fanny Howe, Stanley Kunitz, Sharon Olds and Sonia Sanchez.

"We think Lorine would be delighted," said Engelman. "I spoke to Alice Quinn the Director of the Poetry Society of America and she said they could not have been more thrilled with the reaction to Lorine's poem." For more information on "Poetry In Motion," Alice Quinn, Director, 212-254-9628

### 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:

- |                     |               |
|---------------------|---------------|
| Sylvia Sippel       | Greg Misfeldt |
| Joan Hyer           | Shoshauna Shy |
| Marilla Fuge        | Jean Elvekrog |
| Faith Miracle       | Joan Jones    |
| N. Jean Tyler       | Phyllis Walsh |
| Liz & Walt Diedrick | Nikki Hausen  |

### THANK YOU

The Friends of Lorine Niedecker would like to thank Andy and Sally Koehler for their donation of time and materials to frame our copy of the Poetry in Motion poster pictured above. Since the poster is double-sided it is framed with glass on both sides of the poster and will be displayed in the Dwight Foster Public Library for the foreseeable future.

We appreciate Andy & Sally's generosity and skill in framing the poster. It looks beautiful!

# a pencil for a wing-bone

## NIEDECKER NEWS

### No Such thing as bad publicity?

On April 18, 2007 the Wisconsin State Journal highlighted Niedecker in its "Odd Wisconsin - An offbeat look at the state's history" feature with the headline "Renowned poet also cleaned hospital kitchen." I was not sure if I was offended or not. I think Lorine might have enjoyed the moniker "Odd Wisconsin" but the flavor of the article came across as a dusty old factoid. Since her poem "Wilderness" had just appeared on the New York City buses and subways I wrote a letter to the editor, which they published, noting the recent appearance of her poem in New York City.

Ann Engelman

For those interested in all things Niedecker, Longhouse, Publishers and Booksellers have printed some delightful small publications and letters. The Niedecker Archive at the Dwight Foster Public Library has just acquired the following for the collection:

- A Folder for Lorine by Theodore Enslin (An edition of 150 handmade books)
- Dear Charles Reznikoff (A letter from Lorine to Charles Reznikoff. An edition of 200 for the Autumnal Equinox 1998)
- Lorine Niedecker letter to Mary Hoard (Edition of 100, December 1995)
- A Lorine Niedecker bookmark (Includes three poems: Something in the water; We are what the seas; Remember my little granite pail?)

Some of these limited edition folios are still available at [www.longhousepoetry.com](http://www.longhousepoetry.com) or by email [poetry@sover.net](mailto:poetry@sover.net). Thanks to Bob and Susan Arnold, from their Guilford, Vermont home, for their continued devotion to Lorine Niedecker.

## VOLUNTEER THANKS

The Friends of Lorine Niedecker are grateful for the assistance of Deb Millar, a UW-Whitewater student working on a library practicum at the Dwight Foster Public Library this summer. One of the projects she is working on is entering the materials in the library's Niedecker archive into a database. Hopefully this will help us respond to inquires about materials much

faster. In addition, we hope to make this database available on the Web site. Thanks Deb!

In April we received a huge gift from Brook Houglum, at the University of British Columbia. She had taken the original Niedecker bibliography, compiled by Tandy Sturgeon and published in "Lorine Niedecker: Woman and Poet" in 1996, and updated it. She provided the Friends of Lorine Niedecker with this bibliography for posting on the Web site. This was a huge undertaking and we are sincerely grateful that Brook was willing to work on this project. You can view the complete bibliography at:

<http://www.lorineniedecker.org/bib.html>

Here is her note on the project:

### **Bibliography of Scholarship on Lorine Niedecker, 1947-2006**

A Note:

This bibliographic list of writing published 1947-2006 on Lorine Niedecker's work is arranged in several sections. In order to highlight the primary orientation and genre of the pieces, there are separate lists for articles and book chapters, reviews, and dissertations that include work on Niedecker. The "articles and book chapters" section is duplicated in two formats: one is arranged chronologically and one alphabetically to accommodate multiple kinds of searches. Materials in this bibliography published before 1995 are drawn from Tandy Sturgeon's "An Annotated Secondary Bibliography of Lorine Niedecker, 1947-1995" published in *Lorine Niedecker: Woman and Poet* (ed. Jenny Penberthy. Orono: National Poetry Foundation, 1996: 393-424). Any bibliographic project on Niedecker is indebted to Sturgeon's work. Thanks also to Jenny Penberthy for the loan of a stack of reviews, and for her generous and sustained support of Niedecker scholarship. Any errors or omissions are my own, and any bibliographic additions would be most welcome. These can be submitted to Amy Lutzke at [contact@lorineniedecker.org](mailto:contact@lorineniedecker.org).

Brook Houglum, March 2007, Vancouver BC



# From the secret notes

## POETRY

To Lorine Niedecker

"in every part of every living thing  
is stuff that once was rock"

Your elemental garden: rock and weed.  
You worked it over, planting late and sparse  
with mother, father, flowering granite seed.

In thickish air, you, booted to the knees,  
caretaking to your father's speechless marsh,  
your elemental garden: rock and weed.

And water always. Your paean place: the seas  
that made us -- mud where water grinds down  
quartz,  
mother, father, flowering granite seed.

Such singular unearthing, such release  
of power from the stone, the stem, the splash.  
No ornamental garden: rock and weed.

Suggest my stone bare elements to me.  
Where do I muck for my refrain, what harsh  
mother, father, flowering granite seed?

Rooting where the backwater meets the deep  
(that shifty place with barely room to perch),  
your elemental garden: rock and weed,  
mother, father. Flowering granite seed.

Susan Cohen

Susan writes "I'm a journalist who spent a year at Stanford on a mid-career fellowship, much of it studying poetry. That's where I first encountered the poems of Lorine Niedecker, when I was assigned to read in "The Granite Pail." The beauty and profundity of her work inspired me, as did her life. And she brought me luck! This poem was my first villanelle, as well as my first published poem. Since then, my poems have appeared in many places, including Poet Lore, Poetry International, Puerto del Sol, Seattle Review, and Verse Daily."

## THE BEST WAY TO READ LORINE NIEDECKER'S POEMS

First wander through Emerald Grove's antique store  
amongst fishing nets and rusty kerosene lamps  
for a spitbox in which to plant Queen Anne's lace.  
Unpin dishtowels from a clothesline  
and notice how the leaves  
of the neighboring poplar  
shimmy in the wind.  
Enter a cabin that has been sitting empty  
while its owners take a cross-country train  
to New York.  
With her book on your lap, cup the chin  
of a cat as it sprawls beside you  
on a windowsill, the breeze thick  
with cherry blossoms.  
Remember how your husband's former fiancée  
whose pregnancy was terminated  
asked to come visit, couldn't take her eyes  
off your little boy.

Shoshauna Shy  
Previously published in Wisconsin Academy Review  
(2003)



(untitled)

here I dwell in a low place  
in a mist thick with willows  
mysterious intimates  
you will never see  
I tell you here  
the creeks have flooded  
surfacing small things  
winter's dry reeds drift  
into the fish roe  
abandoned shell of caddis fly  
empty exquisite  
rolls in the current  
here, tiny turbulence

Here I live immersed  
in the small  
inundated  
solvent

# I must tilt

eye level  
with the edge of the world  
even this snail  
upended  
suspended on the surface  
of the stream  
does not have  
my view.

*Janessa Maria-Diego is a volunteer health worker in Chiapas, Mexico. This poem was written on a visit to Washington Island, Wisconsin.*



## Embracing the Pine Tree Energy

Wrap myself with splendor  
Wrap myself with vigor  
Embrace nature's essence  
Embrace green evanescence

Put down roots that nourish  
Put down seeds to flourish  
Learn your perseverance  
Learn noninterference  
Grow reach the sun, sedate  
Grow tall, stand still, so straight  
Bend with winds that blow  
Bend fresh needles, branch, then grow

I stand straight, reach new height  
I stand, bend beneath sky's light

## The Sea Gull

A white dot against the sky,  
the sky that blends, like blues  
and greens on an artist's palette, into Lake Michigan,  
becomes one with Lake Michigan.  
Sun light shimmers off the surface,  
a crinkled aluminum foil plane  
that smoothes itself out as it nears the horizon. A  
white dot  
that disappears as it nears, gliding past whiskery  
wisps of clouds that stretches across the bright blue.  
Clouds

or winged vehicles emissions? The white dot reappears as closer to land it nears. Across Michigan Avenue, over Grant Park, its wings slice the sky, then dart diagonal through the Agora Sculpture Park. There, the headless, armless figures stretch there towering legs moving nowhere. Hollow hulls that leave a trail oxidized rust footprints that leak pea brown onto the granite platforms, which set upon lush green landscaped landfill. A basketball bounced by a boy plays pong between the same similar shapes that alternate directions in a hurry to go where? A man on a Hovearound Scooter rolls around, between the legs of iron irony, enjoying the blue sky dotted with wisps of white bird shaped clouds, watching while a small white dot of freedom flies far away. An elevator goes to the eighth floor.

A window like a door opens eyes to surrounding tall towers framing Lake Michigan, blue sky and white wispy clouds that looks no farther nor any nearer than below. A white dot dips and draws attention down, where there is Michigan Avenue, a ribbon dotted with moving Mattel mini die cast Hot Wheels. There are small rust red brown dots like fire ants, that don't move, between checkerboard sod, that tops the landfill park. No pawns, no knights, no kings, or queens seen by a white dot, passing by a white wisp of cloud, or winged vehicle emissions, embossed on a blue sky that meets a blue lake.

Donna Pecore

Donna says "Here are 2 poems from a collection I did inspired by Chi Gung exercises. I chose them with Lorine's reputation of being a poet of place and nature, yet still saying more."



# upon the pressure

The following "exchange" between (poems by) Ed Baker and Lorine Niedecker appeared in this order as published in Laura Winter's TAKE OUT 5.

LN

Some float off on chocolate bars  
and some on drink

Harmless, happy, soft of heart

This bottle may breed  
a new race

no war  
and let birds live

Myself, I gripped my melting container  
the night I heard the wild  
wet rat, muskrat  
grind his frogs and mice  
the other side of a thin door  
in the flood

\*

LN

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.

\*

EB

The Edge

on the sill  
peering

head tilted

to sun

so close  
I can smell  
your hair

hanging down

green eyes  
hidden  
in the black

a contradiction  
embraced

briefly

confused

to get a better  
sense of  
I

turned

\*

LN

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

# *execute and adjust*

he drank

too much.

I say

I married  
and lived unburied.

I thought---

\*

EB

The Sea Around Us

Tongues  
to frozen

lake

"on swept pond  
snow sets  
out"

you said

breasts define

a wet  
dress  
towards

erotic

who walks

speaks care  
ful of

demeanor ---

political  
in nature

not to be

confused with: Love,

Always.

It is correspondent

congress

A wave is after all  
only  
one wave

\*

EB

The Shade

she moves on.  
waves.

a woman in the open.  
window.

walks away (down.  
puzzles. Actually.

goes into shadow.  
declares shade.  
is demarcation.

movement. Her thin-  
ness.  
all so reveals.

then one alone by me

EB

before  
the rise of sun  
of mist

the wind moved me  
to the trees  
whose hearts are  
red

;in this park of  
the cedar of  
the thuja

it was quiet.

# *In us sea-air rhythm*

i heard many things  
&  
thought of nothing

of no land

i came to the true  
home

/ the  
blank walls of the  
city

Ed Baker

The LN pieces w/permission (to LW) by Cid Cor-  
man. Cid and Ed were also friends and correspon-  
dents (1971-2004).



Lunar Eclipse, March 3, 2007

Oh lunar light illuminating night  
double halo encapsulates thou  
fullness brighter than a halogen  
flashlight. As if you are winking

at me with holographic insight. Do  
you laugh as I howl? Oh hunger  
moon, moon of ice and snow; you  
winked warm rust red earlier tonight,

now, bright white cold as the eclipse  
time becomes old. Me thinks we  
have more in common than ye may  
acknowledge, oh sister moon. You

yearn life obscured by sun. You  
strive to be the one on center stage,  
then slip away, patiently wait for yet  
another day. Earth shadow brought

upon your ruby blush, as in times of  
yore, the phases of your life also  
past, at last, a silver sickle showed  
before the shade ensconced you in its

inevitable advance. Earthy elliptic  
path of my life cross lunar notes  
entering an umbra of darkness  
periodically speaking of cycles

crisscrossed. Confusion again  
illuminated, deciphered, interpreted  
or is it all a joke. Stop winking at  
me, shed steady glow, useless bright,

decide friend or foe.

This poem was in my pile of Solitary Plover submis-  
sions. However, I have been unable to determine  
who sent it to me. If anyone out there is the author of  
this lovely homage to Grandmother Moon, please let  
me know - Amy



## ESSAY

Lorine Niedecker: Subliminal Reflections

Kelvin Rodrigues  
The Flinders University of South Australia

When reading Lorine Niedecker's poetry, one is immedi-  
ately drawn into a sense of stricture which she imposes on  
her poetics. Yet this discipline in writing that favors reti-  
cence over emotionalism works from an acute awareness  
of interrelated unities which she called her "reflections." I  
want to suggest some ways in which the five-poem se-  
quence "Subliminal" (Penberthy 2002: 287) presents it-  
self, as experimental writing and as an elaborate move-  
ment of consciousness. I hope to show that what is signifi-  
cant about this poem is the manner in which it takes  
shape. I am suggesting that we pay attention to the poem  
as process, to its fluidity of form and to how the poem  
might move in order to create or instigate a new form.

Many of Niedecker's poems seem aimed at conveying the  
unmediated impact of her experiences. Her poetry, as has  
been noted, often demonstrates Surrealist tendencies. Pe-  
ter Nicholls, for example, has dealt with Niedecker's  
"rather complicated relation to Surrealism" in his article  
"Lorine Niedecker: Rural Surreal" (Penberthy 1996: 193-  
217). However, her application of Surrealist thought to  
language aims at configuring some latent experience  
grasped by the linguistic flow of patterns that are dictated

# "We live by the urgent wave"

by sound and rhythm and *not* by dream imagery favored by the Surrealist writers. The Surrealists paid more attention to dream rather than to memory and reflections since the latter experiences are organized around the collective process of ordering based on reason. The mind behind the composition of "Subliminal," however, demonstrates a method by which events are transmuted into poetic form aided by an Objectivist concentration based on the principles of "sincerity," "objectification" and "rested totality."

In Niedecker's essay on Louis Zukofsky's poetry, we find direct evidence of how her thinking uses the poem as a forum for "transmuting events into poetry...[t]he thing as it happens...[t]he how of it happening [as it] becomes the poem's form" (Bertholf 1985: 298). The comment Niedecker makes when reviewing Zukofsky's poetry suggests how Objectivist concentration on the poem's shape in terms of the principles of "sincerity," "objectification" and "rested totality" clarifies, in one sense, a version of the "objectified psyche," to borrow Michael Heller's phrase (Heller 2005: 86). But this comment also reveals something else altogether. It shows the limits of this form if the artist intends to initiate a movement away from objectifying the psyche (showing *what* connections the psyche makes) to objectifying the poetics involved in capturing the behavioral mechanics of that psyche (showing *how* the psyche operates to make these connections viable). While the former is concerned with the poetics of the inner life, the latter is more interested in *the mode of expression* <sup>¾</sup> in Niedecker's case, the *practice* of writing <sup>¾</sup> that makes these connections possible. Thus in attempting to relate the essence of Zukofsky's poetry, Niedecker unveils the method of how her own poetry explores the open-text. By the "the open-text" I mean how a text invites participation and rejects the authority of the writer over the reader. In Lyn Hejinian's words, "[i]t speaks for a writing that is generative rather than directive" (Hejinian 1984: 134). This somewhat conflicts with the tendency of the Objectivist poem to center poetic activity on the formal construct of the poem as object which inadvertently establishes it [the poem] as the centre of dominance, and its form somewhat non-negotiable. In "Subliminal," form enters into a negotiation with meaning through a language that is never in a state of rest.

## *Form as activity*

In 1967, Niedecker wrote to Gail Roub that she was preoccupied with trying to "define a way of writing poetry which is not Imagist nor Objectivist fundamentally nor Surrealism alone" (Faranda 1986: 9). What distinguishes "Subliminal" from the strictly defined Imagist poem is its search for connections within the desire to communicate. Many of the Imagists felt that the Imagist poem was a value unto itself. To put it another way, they felt that the

image in a poem was self-sustaining. What they called image was similar to what an earlier generation called symbol. Both groups tended to feel that the mere presence of image or symbol gave the poem the necessary energy. However, by having little regard for the audience, they ignored the need to communicate. Even a symbol must give a sense of what it symbolizes. As Stephen Dobyns has previously noted, the Imagists often erased the comparative role of the image, but it is this comparison that makes the image important (Dobyns 2003: 16). We approach art in part to learn about the world. In a metaphor, that world is represented by the object, while the comparison with the image gives us a new sense of that world. When the object is removed and the comparison destroyed, only the image is presented. When this occurs, the reader's interest is reduced and restrictions are placed on the communicative act.

A similar criticism of a poetry that is self-sustaining is also made by Graham Hough. Hough writes:

In all of them we find a host of examples where immediate communication between poet and reader fails on two planes; both on the plane of reference, all that is ordinarily called 'the sense' of the poem; and on the plane of feeling, the emotional attitude toward the situation presented. Whatever tradition Imagist poetry may have recalled to us, the most important tradition of all, that of a natural community of understanding between poet and reader, has been lost (Hough 1960: 44).

The Objectivist poem that behaves as if it were a self-sustaining form conveying the intricate workings of the mind in the end risks calling attention to itself. In turn, it displaces other poetic possibilities in the process. In other words, it stands the risk of establishing a version of formal closure by arguing that self-sufficiency is testimony to the poem's having achieved the status of object. This self-sufficiency establishes the object (poem) as the controlling center for the parameters that dictate where meaning should reside.

In "Sincerity and Objectification," Zukofsky argues for the poem's self-sufficiency in no uncertain terms:

This rested totality may be called objectification – the apprehension *satisfied completely* as to the appearance of the art form as an object (Zukofsky 1931: 274; my emphasis).

When Niedecker writes in the mode of her poem "Subliminal," however, she argues for a rejection of the



# of the verse "

very idea of formal closure, of the poem's disguised self-sufficiency. She suggests, in terms Hejninian uses to discuss the aesthetics of the closed and open-text, that form is not a "fixture" but an "activity" (Hejninian 1984: 137).

In "Subliminal," Niedecker suggests a movement towards a more open form that the poem might take. In other words, by incorporating elements of what she calls "reflections," she allows for a relocation of power to take place. She challenges the authority of the poem's closed form as a controlling principle and, in this process, relinquishes control as a motive. What is emphasized in "Subliminal" is the poem's potential as a generative experience rather than a directive one.

Displacing the poem as object allows Niedecker to relocate the poem's activity in the subjective injunctions of a language more common to the sublime. In other words, she usurps the power and the potential of language towards fluidity and uses these to override the injunctions that might constrict the Objectivist poem's form.<sup>1</sup>

The notion of form preoccupied Niedecker throughout her writing life. In a letter to Morgan Gibson on February 27 1967, she wrote that "a poem convinces not by argument but by the form it uses to carry the content" (Penberthy 1996: 92). "Subliminal" contains elements of Objectivist philosophy, using as a basis the method of "condensation" and the principle of sincerity. However, it is more than an Objectivist poem for it also contains Surrealist elements. But its form follows the shape of sounds that a language is capable of producing rather than the interpretive capabilities of a particular style of language to which the dimension of dreams appeals.

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<sup>1</sup>This is where Niedecker's poetics becomes rather difficult to place. Her eagerness to experiment with Surrealist styles never distracted her from the one method that continues to define her work. This method is "condensation." Right to the very end, while her poetry argues for a resistance to the label "Objectivist," the technique of "condensation" that first drew her to Objectivist poetry can still be seen to be at work. She wrote to Cid Corman in February 1962:

For me the sentence lies in wait — all those prepositions and connectives — like an early spring flood. A good thing my follow-up feeling has always been, condense, condense (Faranda 1986: 33).

"Subliminal" demonstrates how this technique of "condensation" is applied to poetic form, influencing sound patterns so as to heighten their intensity and displacement.

In choosing to relocate the poem's activity in the sounds and silences of language instead of in dream imagery, the Surrealist elements in Niedecker's poetry already become bracketed by implication rather than by association. It is an implied Surrealist style that we are dealing with in her poetry, and not a direct appropriation of Surrealist principles. Hence, her experiments with poetic form suggest a radical digression from Objectivist principles as well as a reformulation of Surrealist notions of the unconscious.

## *Language communicates communicability*

In Surrealist philosophy, the practice of automatic writing guided by intention is a major factor (Matthews 1991: 34). But the vital characteristic of Surrealist automatic writing is that it remains investigative, an exploratory experiment with language. In reference to Niedecker's poetics, the lines between Surrealism and Objectivism intersect at this point. In a letter to Cid Corman (Dec. 15, 1966) she expressed feelings that were beginning to stir within her, "something like subliminals coming on...":

- dream, mind at rest, automatic writing etc....reverting to my youth (my interest in the 1930's) so I let it come! I loved it but the spring is not quite so fresh and jet-fast as it was back then and you keep wondering if this pristine stuff is complete — funny thing, tho, when you get used to it, it does seem to be enough. (Faranda 1896: 108-109).

The Objectivist regards intention as an ally to concentration. In Objectivist terminology, this aspect of exploratory writing is referred to as "sincerity." When we review what Zukofsky means by "sincerity," we may begin to see how Niedecker could have applied this theory of language to her Surrealist interests. In "Sincerity and Objectification," Zukofsky writes:

In sincerity shapes appear concomitants of word combinations, precursors of (if there is continuance) completed sound or structure, melody or form...Shapes suggest themselves, and the mind senses and receives awareness (Zukofsky 1931: 273).

This passage could have possibly guided Niedecker's ideas on linguistic sound-structures. The precursory shape of sounds, as Zukofsky outlines here, requires no supplement from any other activity of the mind. It is, in itself, a mode of concentration and self-contained value.

This outlines Niedecker's own basic formulation of Surrealist "reflections," that the form or shape of the poem "as it happens" (Bertholf 1985: 298) suggests itself through

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the variable dynamics of sound. The Surrealist preoccupation with the dialectics of dream is, thus, irrelevant to Niedecker's Surrealist "reflections." Her tendency towards "disordered" revelation is not through the uncontrolled idiom of dream language but through the combination of sound patterns as they occur in "Subliminal."

For Niedecker, meaning is communicated *in* the medium of linguistic sound patterns itself. In "Subliminal," language communicates communicability; it expresses itself by marking difference and displacement through the suggestion that it is the process of writing that enlightens. In suggesting that the open format of the poem is dictated by the dynamics of unfolding and connecting sound patterns, Niedecker exposes the object-status of the poem as fundamentally limiting to her preoccupation in the later stages of her writing life. What becomes objectified is language's ability to communicate the process of communication.

*"Subliminal": The poem as process and the shape of sound*

According to Matthews, one fascinating thing about automatic writing is that it seems to invest those practicing it "with special powers":

Automatism did not appear to open up a source of images on which they might draw at will. Instead, it made them excitingly available to that source, which now transformed their writings into vehicles of a richness they found quite astonishing (Matthews 1991: 51).

If we place Matthew's comment next to Niedecker's own excited revelation to Zukofsky in 1964, we are presented with the poet's enthusiasm about what the open form of the poem might offer her by way of imaginative strategy:

I'm trembling on the verge of something, a form of poetic thinking that depends maybe too much on readers' imagination, but we'll see. I don't know if it's called metaphysical or not, not necessarily, I guess, but anyhow this has been in me from the beginning and somehow it's got to come out (Penberthy 1993: 343).

Niedecker insists that this new "form of poetic thinking" has "got to come out." Her insistence dictates the tone of the letter, redefining, in turn, her relationship with Zukofsky. This excerpt incidentally reveals that she is no longer the poet who sought to gain approval from a mentor.

This experience of "trembling" Niedecker writes about is perhaps the feeling of that "special power" which Matthews mentions. It is, in "Subliminal," "[t]he sense / of what's seen," an experience the speaker in the poem cannot help but reveal once she abandons herself to "the nerve-flash in the blood," the "something [that] gets in, overlays all that to make a state of consciousness" (Faranda 1986: 9).

In "Subliminal," the speaker desires to reveal an experience that is not known, or cannot be known. We are immediately placed in the context of a mind in Surrealist mode, as it were, in search of the unknown. The important facet the poem attempts to procure is not the unknown experience, but the *desire* to reveal that experience. It is the *desire* in language that frames the quest and motivates and sustains the form of the poem.

The poem records the speaker's attempts at capturing this "sense / of what's seen." In the second sequence of "Subliminal" the reader is brought to the edge of suggestion with phrases like "[i]f I could float my tentacles / through the deep" and "pulsate an invisible glow." The ellipsis that follows the first phrase raises suggestions but does not fulfill expectations. What would the outcome be "[i]f" the speaker could "float [her] tentacles / through the deep..."? These lines, while they create a sense of uncertainty in the reader, also raise excitement. The concrete image of "tentacles" searching "through the deep" hints at a movement towards probing the subconscious. It also aids as an invaluable trope for an Objectivist investigation into Surrealist practice.

But the hypothetical "[i]f" that begins the second stanza of the second sequence gives nothing away. It sets up expectations in the reader but fulfills no desires that might lend coherence to the poem's meaning. By counterbalancing the hypothetical "[i]f" with the seemingly oxymoronic phrase of "invisible glow," the speaker suggests that what might be "seen" is only a "sense" that is still, in the end, "invisible." The revelation, in other words, so bright with possibilities, offers no clear views of what might emerge were the speaker able to "float [her] tentacles / through the deep..."

The emphasis, it seems, is placed on the experience of probing the depths of consciousness rather than on the outcome of this probing. The inability of the reader to make a coherent sense of these lines is one consequence of the automatic mode of thinking that the poem adopts. But the speaker's refusal to assist in making meaningful connections affirms the search and not its possible result.

The poem then does not follow a thought process that is logical in semantic terms. Instead it sets up a tension be-

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tween the speaker's attempts at forming possible thoughts and her tendency to carry that process through towards the more open-ended realm of imaginative reconstruction. Here Niedecker respects one mode of Surrealist doctrine, where the dual capacities of thinking and imagining are seen as being neither contradictory nor mutually destructive. They are, instead, viewed as complementary expressions of the Surrealist mind in fruitful operation (Matthews 1991: 18). This tension that "pulsate[s]" between thinking and imagining is what keeps the poem within the boundaries of Surrealist practice, where the searching tendencies of the speaker reach out towards infinite possibilities that belong to the domain of the sublime.

This sequence alone could serve as the poem's epigraph, suggesting its intended agenda. The tension that "pulsate[s]," while felt "deep" in the lines, remains "invisible" to meaning. The voiceless bilabial plosive that ends the word "deep" is conjoined to the same phoneme in the first syllable of "pulsate" in the following line. This connection carries on the phonemic effects through the suggestion of three dots that break the line of thought before the third line can begin its process of reflection. The ellipsis also suspends the thought process for a moment, allowing that all important pause before which a startling revelation might take place.

*"Honest / Solid": A collaboration between Objectivist and Surrealist thought*

The trope that suggests an Objectivist collaboration with Surrealist interests in the second poem in the sequence leaps into the fourth poem but in a different form. "Honest / Solid" suggests this collaboration between two differing philosophies. While "[s]olid" hints at the concrete and scientific manner of Objectivist investigation, "[h]onest" links this investigation to suggest Surrealist possibilities.

When André Breton wrote that "surrealism is what will be" (Matthews 1991: 49), he was suggesting that automatic writing records poetic intuition, communicating a perception that does not need the support of rationalism in order for it to be authentic. The *honesty* of the Surrealist discipline is suggested by their belief in the integrity that comes out of the practice of automatism.

But in Objectivist terminology the principle of "sincerity" also affirms the practice of honesty. For Niedecker, the merging of these two thought processes is almost a *mora* principle, an experience she could not simply deny. As we have just seen, this "form of poetic thinking" had to "come out" in order for her to preserve the authenticity of her poetic conscience (Penberthy 1993: 343). She wrote

to Gail Roub in 1967 that "I used to feel that I was goofing off unless I kept to the hard, clear image, the thing you could put your hand on but now I dare do this reflection" (Faranda 1986: 9-10). However, "to do this reflection" requires honesty and daring because it entails coming to grips with an experience of the intangible. But it also means reconsidering poetic strategies since the Objectivist mindset would have regarded this new imaginative exploration as a kind of "goofing off."

The difficult relationship that Surrealism has had with the tangible and referential would have encouraged exactly this sort of displacement. But for Niedecker, it seems to have inspired some form of its rejuvenation. The "Honest / Solid" trope in "Subliminal" finds its configuration in Niedecker's appreciation of Jean Daive's work as she mentioned it in a letter to Cid Corman on March 7 1969, some nine months before her death. In a conspicuously unusual echo of her own early letter of February 12 1934 to Harriet Monroe, she writes:

Not so much the imagery (not many objects here) as a feeling for abstract words - can't put your hands on 'em but we do have them floating around in our subconscious....This is the kind that's been pushed out, down, in me all these years, but always there, dormant...I think a mixture of this kind of writing and of objectification [suitable] for myself - (Faranda 1986: 185-186).

"[F]loating around in our subconscious..." immediately places the revelation from this letter in the context of "Subliminal" by its association with "float my tentacles / through the deep." The "mixture" of two kinds of writing is captured in the fusion stipulated in the fourth sequence of "Subliminal." If we are supposed to draw meaning from this fourth sequence, we are not given any guides.

However, a different kind of "sense" pervades this sequence, and this "sense" has everything to do with sound. The trope "Honest / Solid" that was suggested earlier carries on the speaker's attempted proclamation of offering "flicks" in the third sequence. These "flicks" recall the "nerve-flash in the blood" of the first sequence.

The continuity from "flash" to "flicks" is sustained by the movement of vowels, from the more open long vowel in "flash" to the more constricted and, thus, shorter vowel compressed in "flicks". This continuity is also suggested by a transference of consonantal shape and sound. Both words begin with the voiceless bilabial fricative "f"; however, the first word "flash" ends with the shape of a sibilant "sh," while the word "flicks" is given a sudden halt through the voiceless glottal stop "k" in plural form,

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suggesting as well a halt in momentary revelation. This pause is important if we are to savor the trope about to be offered to us in the fourth sequence. The important connection between these two words, among others, is the fact that they are informed by *voiceless* phonemic properties.

The sound mechanics of these two words then inform the poem of the fourth sequence by providing a context for it. The voiceless articulations of “flash” and “flicks” make up the “quiet flock / of words” that the speaker suggests, as opposed to “the hound- / howl / holed.” Here again, the contrast is suggested not through symbolic language favored by the Surrealists but through sound structures.

All three words, “hound,” “howl” and “holed,” that contrast with the “quiet flock / of words” belonging to “flash” and “flicks,” begin with the voiceless consonantal “h” sound, for a moment, disguising their intended betrayal. But the velocity and weight of air that articulate these sounds increase as these words end in the voiced consonants “-nd,” “-l” and “-d” respectively. But perhaps contrast is the last thing on Niedecker’s mind. The two opposing sound structures suggest a counterbalancing effect where the forces are held together by the symbol of the water lily.

In “Subliminal,” the “simple” and “perfect” water lily returns as part of that “quiet flock / of words.” More significantly, it symbolizes for the speaker a new “order” suggested by the attempt to hold opposing sound structures in collaborative tension. In the five lines that read

Honest  
Solid  
The lip  
of tipped  
lily

we are placed before this very tension. The lateral flow of air in articulating the voiced lateral “l” sounds struggles against the voiceless bilabial stops of “p” sounds. Aside from the contrast in voicing between these two consonants, the periodic ‘stop’ and ‘flow’ motion determined by the articulated shape of these same consonants accentuates the tension. But the balance, once again, is achieved not by symbol but by rhyming sounds in the final syllables of “[s]olid,” “lip,” “tipped” and “lily.” The instrument of this new “order” is then “[t]he lip / of tipped / lily” on which the trope “Honest / Solid” rests. The “lily,” in other words, becomes the mouth-piece for this new trope.

As a cohesive force, then, the poem of this fourth sequence of “Subliminal” carries metapoetic intent. It at-

tempts to portray Niedecker’s own reordering of her poetics through phonemic exploration. The trope at the beginning suggests the attempted collaboration between Objectivist and Surrealist ideas. The merging of two opposing sound structures, determined by voiced and voiceless phonemes, as well as the shapes of both vowel and consonantal sounds, recall Surrealist interest in the phenomenon of contradiction.

Furthermore, this fourth sequence’s agenda towards making sense, while failing semantically, succeeds through the Surrealist mode of “jumbled thinking” or automatic writing. However, it achieves this not through image but, again, through sound. But what raises our awareness of it as a poem of the new “order” is Niedecker’s reshuffling of sound patterns and her suggested use of an instrument to articulate that seemingly opposing sound-structure, the symbol that is “the perfect // order” of the “water lily.”<sup>2</sup>

## *A poem within a poem*

I have suggested that “Subliminal” behaves as a meta-poem since it comments on Niedecker’s poetics in regard to her experiments with sound structures. But “Subliminal” is a poem as much about itself as it is about the poet’s craft. It allegorizes the controlled flow of meaning, even if that meaning is not always clear. What the poem emphasizes is a certain flow, a movement from a potentially closed reading of the speaker’s experience of life with her mother to a more subliminal and, therefore, openly imaginative exploration of that same experience. The poem is thus written in the mode of what Surrealists would treat as automatic writing.

In “Subliminal” we do not get a development of theme through an established and connected web of ideas. We are presented instead with the details of an unexpected nexus of sounds that affirms the poem’s presence through the speaker’s recollective memory and her present imaginative reconfiguration of a past experience.

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<sup>2</sup>Incidentally, the Surrealists showed hostility towards excessive symbolism. “Symbolist” poetry was considered a process of dressing reality with extra trappings. The Surrealists favored more the denuding of poetry which they believed led to “surreality” (Balakian 1967: 3). This is not to suggest that “Subliminal” carries excessive symbolism. But it is important to note that Niedecker structures the poem around certain significant symbols, one of which is the “water lily.”

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Memory is a faculty that Surrealists never trust since it is, to their thinking, a form of reordering past experiences. In “Subliminal” we have, as it were, a poem within another poem that provides a context for its existence in writing. This other poem is brought into the web of relations that belong to “Subliminal” through the two lines “I took cold / on my nerves.” These lines point us to an early poem Niedecker wrote titled “She grew where every spring” (Penberthy 2002: 166).

In this poem, the speaker reflects on the life of her mother as a “frail warrior” who lived her life with the attitude of “advance, attack, retire” (stanza 2). The mother’s life as portrayed in this poem is stereotypical as it is predictable. Her life is depicted as going through the motions of time (“her life was sand”), perhaps also disintegrating into obscurity, as the mindset during the time would have expected of a housewife.

Her childhood was as consistent as “every spring”; like many women during her day, she “grew,” got married to “mild Henry,” “gave birth,” worked the home as a housewife, chopped wood and kept the fire going. In the event of a crisis, the lines of the poem suggest that she took every predicament in her stride: “burned the house, helped build it again” (stanza 3). The matter-of-fact tone in this line is in keeping with the almost monotone effect of the lines throughout the poem, stressed unmistakably by the consistent but somewhat artificial second and fourth line rhymes. This artificiality acts as a mockery of the stereotyping. Unlike in “Subliminal,” we can remove any line from this poem and it would read as a perfectly logical and coherent sentence. The purpose is obvious; the speaker wants to draw us into the life of this one woman who might also represent “everywoman” in her day. In doing so, she obviously dates the stereotype.

The routine and purposeful rhythm and sentence structure sustain the poem’s intent right through to the final stanza. Here the poem suddenly turns its attention to the “daughter who stayed / on the stream listening // to Daisy.” The final stanza is what the daughter hears:

“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.”

“Subliminal” is what Daisy’s daughter hears between this early poem and its later ‘revision.’ The mother in “Subliminal,” who “took cold / on [her] nerves,” remains “tall” as in the earlier poem, though “tormented” and “darkinfested.” The focus in this subliminal poem returns to the mother and the hardships in her life, but it does so through the daughter’s perception. This becomes clear when we note that, in an earlier version of

“Subliminal,” two additional lines attached to the end of the first sequence written for the father do not appear in this final version: “and my sometimes / happy father-phosphor” (Penberthy 2002: 453n).

Here is an example of how Objectivist concentration omits any detail that might interfere with “[t]he lens bringing the rays from an object to a focus” (Zukofsky 1981: 12). But this adherence to an Objectivist principle is immediately counteracted by the poet’s insistence that we do not really see objectively, that what we think we understand of the mother’s situation in the earlier poem is only a “sense / of what’s seen” (first sequence).

In Zukofsky’s exposition of Objectivist technique, he postulates that

[w]riting occurs which is the detail,  
not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with  
things as they exist, and of directing  
them along a line of melody  
(Zukofsky 1981: 12).

In “Subliminal” we are presented with the details of that “mirage,” in the form of a writing that is inevitably the simultaneous action of reflective “thinking” generated by the memory of a past experience. But then, we soon realise that the fluid nature of the poem blurs the details into a sublime mirage. Just when we think we have received an insight into the speaker’s mind, we are reminded that it is only a “sense” and not a fact. It is a process embedded within “[s]leep’s dream,” a “nerve-flash” and not exactly “what’s seen.”

The woman is “tall, tormented,” but she is also “darkinfested,” almost a shadow of what we think we see. Being “darkinfested,” she is also layered with multiple meanings, and thus presented to us as an amorphous being instead of an objective personality reclaimed from memory.

But the poem is not only addressed to us; it is also addressed to the speaker. She is forced, due to the present unfolding of subliminal experiences, to revise her previous perception as depicted in “She grew where every spring.” From the almost matter-of-fact portrayal of a perception of the stereotypical housewife in the earlier poem, we are presented with a mother in “Subliminal” who is *not* like “every spring.” In fact, the speaker weighs her achievement in the final stanza and measures it against the perception of the earlier poem.

*“Waded, watched, warbled”*: *The struggle to articulate*  
In “She grew where every spring,” the mother “[g]ave birth...gave boat.” There is a suggestion of springtime and fertility, where new birth (in this case, of the daugh-

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ter) is counterbalanced by “water overflow[ing] the land” (stanza one). The hint of a flood in this context is not dangerous. Instead it is an opportunity at rebirth, of staying afloat despite the hardship of one’s life.

The sense of staying afloat is achieved through the balance suggested by the parallels in the verb and noun constructions, with similar consonantal shape (“g” and “b”) but varying vowel articulations (from the diphthong in “gave” to the monophthong in “birth” and, again, the diphthong in “boat”). The mother’s sense of staying afloat (“but I didn’t sink;” stanza four) is then accentuated by a movement of perception, or a reflective leap, into the present context of “Subliminal.” Here a balance is achieved in the final stanza:

Night  
the sag  
of day

My mother  
all the years  
no day

The balance has a two-fold tension. Firstly, it might be read as a continuing comment on Daisy Niedecker’s fate as was seen in the earlier poem. The bitter theme of her mother’s anguish in Niedecker’s life runs like a thread through the earlier poem and right through “Subliminal.” It begins and ends with her.

Gail Roub mentions how Niedecker had shared some facts of personal history with his wife Bonnie around 1968. It is in the facts gleaned from this conversation that we are able to understand more about Lorine’s father Henry. He not only seined carp for a living but also foolishly lost his money to a woman who flattered and seduced him (Penberthy 1996: 84).

Despite the struggle and torment throughout her life, Daisy Niedecker did not have her “day.” The message revealed to the speaker by her mother through a dream in “Subliminal” heightens the tension since she is unable to take comfort in an understanding that everything makes sense. There is no sense here. All we have is the thought. If “night” is seen as the downside of “day,” so is the mother’s message that comes to the speaker at night in a dream. Statements like these become interconnected by being grammatically congruent. But this is only one-half of the perception.

The poem sets up another kind of tension that might be seen as an attempt to demolish this half of the perception. The seemingly definite and closed conclusion of the first possible reading as outlined above is made doubtful by the speaker’s assertion and constant reminder that this perception is only a “sense of what’s seen” (sequence

one). The doubt invites implication that another alternative perception is at hand “[i]f [she] could float [her] tentacles / through the deep...” and “pulsate an invisible glow” (sequence two).

While the closed perception of the first reading might be “the booming / star-ticks” that are as predictable as the “[i]llustrated night clock’s / constellations” (sequence three), the speaker will soon “rise” to render to the “universe” the version of her “flicks” (sequence three) to suggest an alternative perception. By addressing the “universe,” the speaker suggests that this tension is larger than the personal.

Furthermore, if the perceived closed reading of the final sequence in “Subliminal” carries the staccato effects of the earlier poem by sounding words that are “hound- / howl / holed,” then the new revelation would be in the vein of “[a] quiet flock / of words” (sequence four), that is in keeping with the more subdued “sense” of a new perception belonging to the sublime.

But this new perception is never given to us. It is only suggested, as we have seen, through linguistic and phonetic possibilities. This suggestion comes to us through the poem’s struggle to articulate what it “senses” it sees. Struggling in its instability, the poem “[w]ade[s], watche[s], warble[s]” (sequence two) in uncertainty in an effort to scribble some “sense” of a coherent meaning by drawing its sustenance from memory (“chalk from an ancient sea;” sequence two).<sup>3</sup>

Thus, a significant part of reading “Subliminal” occurs as the recovery of past information (looking behind, as it were, into “She grew where every spring”) and the discovery of newly perceived ideas (stepping forward into “Subliminal”).<sup>4</sup> The reading process — as would be the writing process for the speaker in the poem — inevitably calls into juxtaposition the two poems that are interconnected by way of reflective imagination and perception.

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<sup>3</sup>The reference to “an ancient sea” suggests a Sargasso sea of unknown origins. The poem, in a sense, reveals its outcome by suggesting that the struggle will ultimately lead to an undetermined end. Once again, the unpredictability of the exploration reminds us of the purpose of automatic writing, that its end is really to destroy any idea of closure through “poetic intuition.” Its aim is to “communicate a perception that does not need reason’s support before it can command attention and inspire confidence.” The Surrealists prized poetic intuition as “prescience” (Matthews 1991: 49).

<sup>4</sup>This is how Lyn Hejinian describes the process of moving into the open-text (Hejinian 1984: 136).

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## LITERARY NEWS

The Sterling North Society has several events happening between now and the end of the year.

### August 11 - Antiques Appraisal Fair

10:00 am to 2:00 pm at the Masonic Temple 312 W. Fulton St. in Edgerton, WI. Professional appraisers Bill Wartman, Phil Schauer, Jeff Chandler and the Beloit Auction Service will share their expertise as they answer your questions about antiques (please, no large furniture, coins, or jewelry). Admission will be \$10.00 for one item and \$15.00 for two. Concessions available.

### October 4 - Annual meeting of the Society

North Barn - 7:00 pm Election of board members, yearend reports, adoption of the budget, & business meeting.

### October 13th and 14th - The Edgerton Book and Film Festival

The Edgerton Chamber of Commerce along with the Sterling North Society, Edgerton Public Schools and many citizen volunteers will host this second annual city-wide event. This year's theme is "Peace and the Environment." The Keynote Speaker will be Jacqueline Mitchard, Wisconsin author of "Deep End of the Ocean." For further information about the festival, please call 608-884-4408 or write edgerton-chamber@verizon.net

### November 29 - Holiday party, co-hosted with The Friends of the Edgerton Public Library

6:00 pm at the Edgerton Public Library. Make ornaments to decorate the Children's Library tree. Fabulous entertainment & scrumptious refreshments.



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

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