



The Solitary Plover

*Issue #4
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I was the solitary plover

Niedecker Inspired Art



Book Arts are an old but newly discovered art form. Rob Appell of Newfoundland, Canada sent this handmade book. The simple cover gives only a hint of what's in it. The surprise is in the "fragments" of Lorine's work that are on its pages. Torn paper and found pictures are paired together. The "leftovers" are in a pocket on the last page. It's a tactile delight.

Tract, a pamphlet dedicated to imagist poetics was published for a short time to a dedicated list of subscribers by M. Robert Appell of Canada. Recently I received that last issue. Mr. Appell is going on to pursue work with old barns. I sent a thank you note to him for his good efforts and including Lorine Niedecker's

work in some of his publications. I got back this remarkable piece of book art that will eventually be placed into the Lorine Niedecker collection at the Dwight Foster Library. . . .as soon as I can decide to part with it. I share this exchange because I have seen several instances of art inspired by Lorine's poetry but nothing quite like this. I think Lorine would have been thrilled with this small book. She created several small books herself. "The Cooking Book" and other personal small books as gifts with poetry and some drawings to friends and family. Thanks and best wishes to Mr. Appell.

Ann Engelman, Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin

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"



WANT TO HELP?

The Friends of Lorine Niedecker are interested in volunteers to help with tasks of our organization. If you are interested in assisting in any of the following please call Amy at (920) 563-7790 or send an email to alutzke@mwfls.org.

- Newsletter mailing
- Data entry
- Library organization
- Archive organization
- Study guide promotion
- Grant research & writing
- Web site redesign

MEMBERSHIPS

Our thanks to the following individuals who became members of the Friends of Lorine Niedecker:

- Greg Misfeldt
- Walter & Elizabeth Diedrick, Jr.
- Sylvia Sippel
- Nancy Rafal & Michael Farmer
- Marilla Fuge
- Paul Hayes
- Elena Rivera
- Faith Miracle
- Susan Long
- Nikki Hausen
- Mary Gates
- Carol Keleny
- Beverly Dahlen



a pencil for a wing-bone

Niedecker

1.

Wisconsin
beautifyingly vast—
she came across
local stocks of talk

each word's
crashworthiness

and took up arms
against the surplus.

2.

The insects' amplitude
announcing the solitude

of billions
along the flood-prone

stretch of Black River
that cradled Niedecker's cabin

was her reservoir,
the repertoire
of a weather writer.

3.

Writing
on a rogue chrysanthemum:

"I've gummed
my garden plans

with preemptive accolades."

4.

He was hers in sprouts
and made most meals
the kind of man
gratuitous with a garlic press—
the two of them

with arms enough
without a child to worry on
hit Blackhawk Island,
hit the Lake,

hey swamped it out
in Copper Harbor
one morning
mosquitos drew

blood from a butternut
squash.

5.

Fort Atkinson
decades since
her death in '71
traffic where once
rock and flower

now oblivious
lanes of famous
shoppers
shipwrecked in traffic,

heroes of factual
erosion

mysteriously
engage in spontaneous
thesaurus construction.

Bryan Voell * 606 W. Park #15 Champaign, IL 61820 *
voellbryan@hotmail.com



Writers Workshop # 46 – Niedecker's Words

By Henry C. Timm, April 2006

This is National Poetry Month and so I'm going to take the opportunity to meditate a little on the work of Lorine Niedecker. Niedecker is a Wisconsin poet who wrote in the middle decades of the last century. As noted elsewhere in this issue, she died December 31, 1970 at the age of 67, much too soon, judging from the small but rich lode of poetry she left behind. One is hard pressed to find much about her in the standard print references such as my favorite, the *Merriam Webster Encyclopedia of Literature*. She does not appear there at all, so this is one instance in which the internet has trumped my writers bookshelf! Niedecker, however, is beginning to command strong critical attention so a number of fine dedicated books have recently appeared including reprints of her collected poems, biographies and a fine collection of material pulled together by John Lehman under the title **America's Greatest Unknown Poet: Lorine Niedecker – reminiscences, photo-**

From the secret notes

graphs, letters, and her most memorable poems. (This little book contains words on the writing of poems and a useful bibliography. At this point I should also mention Kristine Thatcher's superb play about Lorine Niedecker, called, oddly enough, **Niedecker**. It is being produced this very weekend at the Third Avenue Playhouse. Call TAP at 743-1760 for more info.)

So what can we learn about poetry from Lorine Niedecker? For Lorine Niedecker, poetry was fundamentally about words. What an odd thing to say! No, really, think about it. Most poetry is about something other than words. The words are the means to something else – feelings, stories, myths, impressions of the world, all the things that painting used to be about until the abstract expressionists maintained that painting could be – indeed should be primarily about paint on canvass. So, in her own way, a good part of Niedecker's discipline was to insist that poetry is about words on paper – what they looked like, how they were placed, what they added up to when seen next to each other. The words themselves were the poetic experience, not the things they seemed to conjure. The things conjured and the poem were to become one and the same thing. (The closest poetics to compare this to is Haiku but we'll come back to that in a moment.) When she wrote in this mode, she was responding to a poetic theory proposed by William Carlos Williams and furthered by her life-long friend, Louis Zukovsky. It is called "objectivism." Here is an example of how it works as Kristine Thatcher presents the process in her play. Here we find Lorine working with her student.

Lorine: Here's an example of what I'm talking about. Look how this one began: The white sea gulls soar against gray skies, but spring will soon bring daffodils

Mary: Mm-hmm.

Lorine: Now look at the finished form:

How white the gulls
in grey weather
 Soon April
 the little
yellows

[. . .] With poetry, it's fun to throw off the shackles of the sentence once in a while, and the wide melody; to just get rid of all those prepositions and connectives.

As mentioned above, Niedecker's method in this kind of poem has been compared to Haiku. But Haiku is a phenomenon of a language which presents itself in pictographs so the element of visual presentation is already there. In the words of R. Virgil Ellis, writing in the Forward to America's Greatest Unknown Poet, "There can never be genuine haiku in English because word-order,

syntax is intrinsic to the language and carries its own energy." Niedecker described what she was doing as "condensing." She even referred to her cabin on Blackhawk Island as "the condensery."

In my own work, I most frequently respond to the "wide melody." This is my inclination towards story telling. Turning to her from my own work is like looking at figurative paintings in a great museum, only to turn a corner to face a Jackson Pollack, which amounts to a cold shower to the eyes. Niedecker's poetry has that same kind of astringent vigor. And through all of her condensing, she could still tell a good story in very few words.

Wilderness

You are the man
You are my other country
and I find it hard going

You are the prickly pear
You are the sudden violent storm

the torrent to raise the river
to float the wounded doe

Fall

We must pull
the curtains—
we haven't any
leaves

Finally, and I think this is my favorite thing about her, she could look at the world without flinching. Here is a poem she wrote about a neighbor who evidently had her own ideas about virtue.

What a woman! Hooks men like rugs,
clips as she hooks, prefers old wool, but all
childlike, lost, houseowning or pensioned men
her prey. She covets the gold in her husband's teeth.
She'd sell dirt, she'd sell your eyes fried in deep grief.



But It's Whether You Can Keep Me Warm: Lorine Niedecker's Marriage Poetics

Mark Fuller and Janet LaBrie

Part I: Formal Aspects of Niedecker's Poetry, including the niedecku: Mark Fuller

Sometimes associated with Marianne Moore or Emily

I must tilt

Dickinson, Lorine Niedecker (1903-1970) lived for most of her life on Black Hawk Island, a low, marshy peninsula on Lake Koshkonong in Wisconsin. Her tiny cottage was on a section of low land, often flooded, along which the Rock River empties into the lake.

Let me begin with a poem I love, published in some collections with the title ‘Poet’s Work’ and composed around 1962: “ **Grandfather/ advised me/ Learn a trade/ I learned/ to sit at desk/ and condense/ No layoff/ from this/ condensery**” (Niedecker 194). Along with demonstrating the wry humor that pervades some of her poetry, this poem already illustrates several aspects of her developing poetics.

Several important threads led to Niedecker’s own unique style. She was already a published poet when, she claimed, she was galvanized by the 1931 Objectivist issue of *Poetry*, edited by Louis Zukofsky. Her interaction and correspondence with Zukofsky was a great influence on both poets. Niedecker took from the schools of Imagism, Objectivism, and Surrealism the tools she needed to create a poetry that was minimal in its artistry, thus hiding a multi-layered structure of meaning below its deceptively simple surface. These tools included neologisms (e.g., ‘weed-drift’, ‘wingdrip’), startling juxtapositions of words and phrases, transcriptions of folk speech recorded by her keen ear, unobtrusive musical phrasing (resonances with nursery rhymes), and, her wry and ironic humor. In referring to a previous sequence of poems (“For Paul” Group II), the *New Mexico Quarterly Review* quotes Niedecker as viewing those poems as the “outcome of experimentation with subconscious and with folk – **all good poetry must contain elements of both or stems from them** [boldface mine] – plus the rational, organizational force” (Penberthy Niedecker 61). Jenny Penberthy adds: “Her use of “folk” refers, I suspect, to folk *speech*, the common currency of routine interactions” (61). Niedecker also made use of the non-visual dimensions of Surrealism—her ‘subliminals’. As Peter Nicholls argues convincingly, by 1966 “she is edging towards her new ‘reflexive’ poetics, the old Surrealist influence seems to reassert itself—‘I felt something like subliminals coming on—dream, mind at rest, automatic writing etc. . . reverting to my youth’ (Letter to Cid Corman, December 15, 1966)” (Nicholls, “Lorine Niedecker: Rural Surreal”, as qtd in Penberthy Lorine Niedecker 197). In a letter to Gail Roub, Niedecker explains, “The visual form is there in the background, and the words convey what the visual form gives off after it’s felt in the mind. A heat that is generated and takes in the whole world of the poem. A light, a motion, inherent in the whole.” There is an “awareness of everything influencing everything” (Lehman 46).

This is a non-image based poetics with a focus on the very **process** of creating poetry. And this process-oriented poetics created a bridge between a formalism of her own creation and her personal life. Niedecker’s titles of books

and sequences of poems (e.g., “New Goose” and “Harpichord and Salt Fish”) trace this evolution of her poetic language. It sometimes seems as if an unassuming collage of unconscious musings develops into a consciousness of its own, which then exposes the unmediated world as sublime in its ordinariness.

One last important tool is a poetic form which Niedecker developed. The form included stanzas as elegant and simple as haiku, yet with awkwardness enough to start work at some deeper level in the reader. This stanzaic form—we wish to call it a “niedecku” – has 5 lines with 2 of them rhyming; for example:

I grew in green	a
slide and slant	b
of shore and shade	c
Child-time—wade	c
thru weeds	d

(Niedecker *Paeon to Place* 264)

Lines 3 and 4 are rhymed (or near-rhymed) and indented, typically shorter than the other lines. The number of feet in the longer lines varies from 3 to 5. There is frequent enjambment from one stanza to the next. The form seems in some way apt: simple, but less simple than haiku, and it reflects the reality that nearly every year the poet looked out across the Rock River to see the flooded tree line. I’ll close my portion of this essay by presenting a wonderful poem containing 4 niedeckus strung together with some surrealistic images imbued with the dark mood of a folk tale (“**we lay leg/ in the cupboard, head/ in closet**”), composed around 1967.

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
he drank

too much.
I say

upon the pressure

**I married
and lived unburied.**

I thought—
(Niedecker 228)

With her focus on poetics and her intense listening within, Niedecker overcame a hard life and a less-than-appreciative environment. Her intensity was the “flood that floated the wounded doe.” By 1951, poems and lines were coming to her nearly complete from the middle of the night:

**What horror to awake at night
and in the dimness see the light
Time is white
mosquitoes bite
I've spent my life on nothing.**
(Niedecker 147)

Thus, with these three stanzas begins a poem that came to her, one might say, effortlessly. Her intense conviction and belief in herself can be seen in this excerpt of a letter to Zukofsky: “My own mind is like a star that got to be one through no great effort of its own, just part of the world stuff, and the light from it hasn’t fallen on *me* yet. But I feel sumpn –oh yes, they can’t take *that* away from me!” (Penberthy 213).

Working both against and with the minimalism, the introduction of the personal in the later years of Niedecker’s writing creates a tension and requires reader participation to establish a satisfactory subjective understanding. “If [her poems are] autobiographical, it is also her poetic: a poetic of rumination, meditation, circling around and [what she herself described as ‘reflection’ or ‘reflective’“] (DuPlessis qtd in Lehman 45).

Having examined the formal aspects, Janet will approach some of Niedecker’s poetry in this later period from the following angle: Niedecker’s formalism can be entered from a more subjective position.

Part II: Subjective Reading of the Marriage Poems’ Ambivalence: Janet LaBrie

Although Niedecker has developed a highly formalistic poetics, I perceive a willingness on her part to occasionally insert personal, although often oblique commentary on her life. Thus, some of her poetry yields an intense meaning to the reader who brings a shared experience to this poetry.

I was fascinated as I read the later Niedecker poems so obviously about her marriage and discovered that they had an intense, deeply personal meaning for me. As opposed to Mark’s more formalist approach, I related to them subjectively, even painfully, because of my Aunt Edith. I believe that, looking at the poetry from her final courtship

and marriage years, Niedecker wryly expresses a deep level of ambivalence about her marriage and demonstrates a valiant effort to balance her choice with her desire to continue with her poetry. More importantly, her expressions about her choice, her need to go for that ‘warmth’ shook me as I remembered my sweet, gentle aunt who made the same kind of ambivalent bargain.

Like Lorine, Aunt Edith married later in life when it might have seemed that she must chose this particular man or lose her last chance for traditional companionship through marriage. Aunt Edith was a life-long grade school teacher, well-educated, and in her late 40s when she married Francis McConnell, who had barely completed the 4th grade when he quit school to work on the family farm after his father died. She was a stylish woman, with an ever-present sense of humor, financially successful, with money saved and a generous pension when she finally retired from teaching in her mid-60s.

Like Niedecker, Aunt E married to avoid what Niedecker described to Zukofsky as ‘the business of loneliness’ (Lehman 50). Aunt Edith, unlike Niedecker, had many friends and an active social life; she, also unlike Niedecker, probably didn’t fear an inevitable loss of independence, unrealistically thinking that she was extending her possibilities for happiness within that unequal marriage. “What an adjustment for me,” Lorine wrote to Zukofsky about her upcoming marriage to Millen; “- too bad for me to become used to daily companionship, to deep affection, to human (!) happiness” (Lehman 55). Aunt Edith, too, wanted companionship, coupleness; she had only her independence to lose (but later, although she may never have realized it, her self-esteem). Niedecker understood that her life had a significantly stronger focus that might be compromised when she added “I fear it [marriage], upsetting to the other thing I’ve built up that, give me another couple of years, would withstand the world, would never need any other life but itself and things like money, people’s follies, and hatreds and all the silly coming and going wouldn’t even be here” (qtd in Lehman 55). Although her life had been somewhat solitary and isolated, Niedecker was developing a level of emotional and social independence that would have kept her safe from the travails of unequal and sometimes unfriendly companionship.

I don’t know about Aunt Edith’s equivocations before her marriage, but I do know that her parents and siblings were appalled at her choice – Francis McConnell, although a generous neighbor, was an uneducated ne’er-do-well in their eyes. However, both of them, I believe, thought that the trade-off might be significantly other (loss of independence; loss of time and space for poetry) than the actual consequence of living with men who were not suited for them emotionally and intellectually. As I read Niedecker’s poetry about her marriage and its consequences, I believe that she states fairly clearly the conse-

execute and adjust

quences of searching for human warmth in a colder heart than her own. On the other hand, Aunt Edith had not the poetry nor the moral strength to admit to the ambiguities of her situation. She came from a traditional background. She had made her bed; she must lie in it – furthermore, she must not only put a good face on it; she must believe it herself. She had no outlet; rather, she chose acceptance. Unfortunately, she had not the consolation nor the ability to wryly comment through poetry on the bargain and its relative merits.

“Ah your face/but it’s whether/you can keep me warm,” wonders Niedecker in a poem that could be applied in any number of situations, but certainly is apt in the one moment in her life when she stands between two powerful needs and chooses them both. “At sixty,” she says to Cid Corman in 1963, “one does foolish things. I hope I’m happy. He’s my connection with life” (qtd in Lehman 56).

Both having chosen to marry at a later time of life, were either of them kept warm in the alliance? Paul Hayes has written that Niedecker’s late-in-life marriage was “good for both of them, full of affection, good will and productivity.” He argues, as well, that it provided Niedecker with time and space to produce “much of her finest work.” His evidence for the success of the marriage comes from Julie Schoessow (Millen’s youngest child by his first wife) in the form of interviews, letters, Christmas booklets, and journal entries in which Lorine describes in her pert, self-effacing way evidence of their positive, mildly endearing life through their interchanges. In them she depicts Millen as succinctly and literally humorous, a person fairly easy to live with, a companion at least to the outer edges of her own experiencing of the world.

I have no doubt that acquiring a somewhat extensive and welcoming family at that stage in her life was a positive for Niedecker. I believe that she would, therefore, make every effort to present their marriage in a positive light, which, I think, reflects her efforts to see it in such a way. I would argue, however, that, although these chirpy accounts of their life together may be reflective of some aspects of it, her own poetry provides evidence of a darker side to that late-in-life liaison that Niedecker chose “in the world’s black night/for warmth/if not repose” (Niedecker 228).

At an early point in their courtship, Niedecker describes Millen as gentle, tender, a man who reads and has a sense of humor (Lehman 53). Initially, she reflects a sense of happiness or at least peaceful acceptance of the wisdom of her choice at having decided to marry this man, the best man, all things considered. **“You are my friend – /you bring me peaches/and the high bush/cranberry/ you carry/my fishpole/ You water my worms / you patch /my boot/ with your mending kit / nothing in it/but my hand”** (Niedecker 189). (Unfortunately, repositioning her poetry on the page in this fashion reduces her formalism and one’s awareness of the niedecku within her work).

Here her wry self-effacement seems to imply that (s)he is getting the best part of the bargain, but, of course, in true Niedecker style she is also playing with the ‘hand in marriage’ cliché on multiple levels. She identifies a level of domestic helpfulness that, perhaps, seemed almost courtly to a woman used to doing for herself on a basic survival level for so many years. The positives of such daily actions are undoubtedly incalculable in context with her own subsistence level of existence before Millen entered her life.

Thus she can, with all sincerity, argue, **“I knew a clean man/but he was not for me,”** in explaining why she might prefer the less cultivated and intellectual working class husband whom she married on May 26, 1963. In contrast, she whimsically delineates the value of her choice of Millen. **“Now I sew green aprons/ over covered seats. He/ wades the muddy water fishing, / falls in, dries his last pay-check/in the sun, smoothing it out/ in Leaves of Grass. He’s/the one for me”** (Niedecker “I knew a clean man” 208). Similarly, my aunt did her best to appreciate and to urge us all to appreciate her poorly educated, working class husband who, unlike Millen, had no interest in reading or any of the other interests of my aunt. To give him his due, he was kind and patient, although gruff, with us nieces and nephews, and later grandnieces and nephews. I remember fishing expeditions down to the local creek after which he grumblingly but jokingly complained that my brother John and I had caught so many fish that all he’d had time for was baiting our hooks or unhooking our fish. In similar spirit, he took my son fishing, complaining good –humouredly that he was going to talk the fish right up into the trees. And he let my five year old daughter cheat him at many lively games of Old Maid, an activity which my little girl enjoyed a great deal. That sense of the neighborly, good-natured man reflected his external persona, hiding, or at least overlaying, an abusive, emotionally controlling domestic nature from most people. Not to say that Millen was as domestically demonic in his marriage to Niedecker, but it is to say Niedecker’s married life was not as domestically comfy as Hayes would have us believe. He acknowledges that “marriage is not a perfect institution,” but argues that, taking the negatives into consideration, their marriage was “a success in the traditional manner as it brought both of its members intimacy, companionship, comfort and new adventures.”

Too soon, I think, both Niedecker and Aunt E began to realize that it was, if not quite a devil’s bargain that they had made, at least a serious compromise of their own happiness and integrity. When they lived in the shot-gun style house on 12th Street, Aunt Edith and Uncle Francis seemed to get along nicely (but I was too young then to pick up on the nuances of marriage angst), but when she bought the largish piece of land on the west edge of town to build there and to sell lots, things changed. That was

In us sea-air rhythm

when I began to hear him tell her that she was stupid and ignorant; “you don’t know what the hell you’re talking about,” he would say to her comments and suggestions. “Just keep your mouth shut if you’re going to say stupid things like that.” And the worst of it was, she began to agree with him – and to cover her mouth with her hand when she spoke, a mannerism that spoke of her need to screen her words, to hide her thoughts. That is when I began to hate him – as I saw my beloved aunt being crushed in spirit and soul, having learned to accept such crushing.

Niedecker explains the slippage in her marriage to this unpolished, hard-drinking man who referred to her work as ‘scribbles’ in one of her most important marriage poems, incorporating her use of common language, surrealism, dark folklore, and so on. **“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 /he drank /too much./ I say/ I married /and lived unburied./I thought** – “ (Niedecker 228). Written in the 1965- 67 period, several years after her marriage, Niedecker expresses her ambivalence about her marriage bargain.

Niedecker also reflects ambivalence about her desire for human warmth in her life. Having made the bargain, having come to realize the extent of its limits, she ruefully comments, **“Why can’t I be happy / in my sorrow /my drinking man /today/ my quiet /tomorrow”** (Niedecker 230). The ambiguity of her marriage is in full force here as we ponder what will be quiet tomorrow and why. Is she paying the price for tolerating his drinking so that she will then have a repentant or hung-over husband the next day, or perhaps one who disappears for a bit out of shame or a sense of disgrace? Whichever applies, I believe it means that she will have a day in which to work on her poetry even though she must put up with his previous drunkenness to achieve that day. We subjective readers need not ponder too long to understand the ambivalence she expresses in “why can’t I be happy – in my sorrow.” At some point, she explained to Gail Roub, a younger male friend for whom Millen expressed intense hostility to the point of actually threatening him with a gun, that she found out early enough about his excessive drinking – he got drunk on their wedding night, but then offered to let her divorce him the next day. “. . . it isn’t so bad,” she explained to Roub. “You know, he’s the only man who ever told me that he loved me” (qtd in Lehman 59). The trade-off is clear: in exchange for the man who at least once said he loved her, her tolerance of his inappropriate and sometimes distressing/unsettling behavior. Here Paul Hayes’ title (“an enabling arrangement”) takes on an ironic twist.

In her need to be accepting, Niedecker attempts to understand Millen’s behavior. **“Alcoholic dream/ that**

ran him/out from home/ to return/ leaning/like the house/ in this old part/ of town leaves him/ grieving: /why/ do I hurt you/ whom I love? Your ear/ is cold! – here, /drink (Niedecker 200). Mark thinks the last lines, **“/why/ do I hurt you/ whom I love? Your ear/ is cold! – here, /drink”** might be Millen’s voice cajoling her into tolerance of his ‘alcoholic dream’. I think it is her voice on the last lines, **“Your ear/ is cold! – here, /drink”**, relenting because of his protestations of love – **“/why/ do I hurt you/ whom I love?”** although the ‘whom I love’ sounds false to me and might be understood as her expressed hope of his ongoing love for her. In the end, is she making up to him for his bad behavior – **“Your ear/ is cold! – here, /drink”**, thus again enabling him, but also buying his cooperation for a good tomorrow of poetry?

One of the companionable things both couples did together was to take car trips to places they had never been before, thus providing Niedecker, at least, with what Hayes ‘Wintergreen Ridge’” and ‘Lake Superior’. Similarly, Aunt E and Uncle Francis traveled by car (he was never willing to fly anywhere), especially their yearly journeys to and from their winter sojourns in Florida. I picture them still as I have seen them many times preparing to leave – he has the car ready; she has done the packing for their four month stay and is still fussing in her school teacherly way over the car trip necessities: two shoe boxes that will sit between them on the front seat to hold those small items that will make their daily journey smoother - maps and AAA guide books, bird books, toll change, napkins and Kleenex, dried raisins and peanut butter crackers, instant coffee and artificial sugar packets - the minutiae of travel life that will occupy that otherwise empty space between them – no hand-holding across this fully occupied area. He scolds her for not being ready, for not being organized; she, flustered, makes mistakes that disorganize her careful planning and laughs apologetically at her obvious stupidity to us waiting to see them off. Although he died 20 years ago, I am still pained at the thought of them traveling thousands of miles together, trapped with each other in that too-confining car.

I imagine the car trips of Niedecker and Millen along the same lines. Among her last written poetry, Niedecker defines what the marriage meant to her in *“Wilderness.”* **You are the man/You are my other country/ and I find it hard going/You are the prickly pear/You are the sudden violent storm/the torrent to raise the river/to float the wounded doe”** (Niedecker 283). Here Niedecker’s juxtaposition of destroyer and savior in the same person surely and painfully reflect her deepening ambivalence toward her marriage. She is all too familiar with the destructiveness and “tedious, messy salvaging and housecleaning” (Lehman 85) that went with the almost yearly floods on Black Hawk Island. As well, note the poem’s title – “Wilderness.”

I understand too well the effects of living with “the

"We live by the urgent wave"

sudden violent storm[s]" of a bullying, self-focused individual. Uncle Francis didn't drink; he just drove Aunt Edith, still an active and much loved teacher, into the ground. At one point, his bullying, badgering behavior had brought her to the edge of what was then described as a certain breakdown, to the point where her relatives feared she would need institutionalization. A brother-in-law was appointed to do a kind of intervention, pointing out the seriousness of Aunt E's situation and that even the most conservative relatives would encourage her to divorce him. He did let up after that, and Aunt Edith returned slowly to some sense of mental stability and competence, but her unwillingness to acknowledge the insidiously devastating effects of her 'good marriage' remained her habit of thinking for the rest of her life. At his funeral, she pointed out to me several times how very many people had come to the wake as an acknowledgement of his constant and steady goodness. My mother and I were indignant, both believing that it was her own lifelong habit of kindness that brought so very many people to the funeral home.

His death did not free her from the destructiveness of her tradeoff of companionship for self-respect. I was horrified to receive a letter from Aunt E several years later in which she praised Uncle Francis' goodliness and proclaimed that he was a saint for having put up with and loved her in spite of her numerous, silly human weaknesses. Even with his death she was not free from the message that he had psychologically beaten into her – that she was a foolish, babbling, wrong-headed woman.

In the end, my aunt lost her mind while Niedecker had her poetry. Lorine, in fact, was able to make the compromise work because she remained so fiercely committed to it. She always understood that she was meant to examine words, to glean language, for meaning beyond its everydayness, whatever the struggle: **"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"** (Niedecker "Paeon to Place" 265).

The marriage, however troublesome, did give her some financial security so that she was able to quit her menial job at the Fort Atkinson hospital. Thus, she gained time for her writing. Al's devotion to TV and fishing gave her the space to keep working at what she loved the best. And, in fact, she was the most prolific in these last years of her life. And maybe she has the best laugh, after all, the best sense of balance when she writes wryly of coupleness in her poem "Watching dan-cers on skates." **"Ten thousand women/and I / the only one/ in boots/ Life's dance: / they meet /he holds her leg /up"** (Niedecker 205).

It may also be that she was able to displace the personal discomforts of her married life in her need to write poetry, in her possession of a sharp and intense gift, a kind of 'minimal lapidary'. **"I possessed the high word,"** she

says in "Paeon to Place," . . . **red Mars/ rising/rides the sloughs and sluices/of my mind/with the persons/on the edge"** (Niedecker 269). Aunt Edith had no such comfort in her life. She had no similar talent and no such faith in herself to fall back on.

So who was warm and who was not? Lorine Niedecker possessed a tough-mindedness and drive that surely warmed her to the end of her life. As a subjective reader of Niedecker's poetry, however abstract, however condensed to the basics of language, I discovered a woman writing intensely about a situation like my dear aunt's, full of the ambivalence of a problematic marriage, but, also, thanks to her words and her refusal to be silenced or to silence herself, she remained full of constant hope. Niedecker had her poetry to keep her warm and to allow her distance and fruitful survival.

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Sterling North 100th Birthday Events

The Sterling North Society invites everyone to join them for these special events:

Saturday, August 5, 1 - 4 p.m., Race Track Park, rain or shine, free

* An Afternoon In the Park -- sulkie and horse exhibit, music from the 1918 era, blueberry pie eating contest, Rubecks Raccoon Rescue Exhibit, games of the era.

Sunday, September 10, 1 - 4 p.m., Begin at North Home, rain or shine

* Annual Tour of Homes. Tickets \$5, which includes dessert and beverage in the Sterling North Barn.

of the verse "

Saturday, September 30, 1 p.m., Race Track Park, (inclement weather, Edgerton Performing Arts Center)

- * Frank Farrell, artistic director of Theatre-Hikes based in the Chicago area, and his play cast will take the audience on a hike as they perform scenes from
- * Sterling North's *Rascal*. Admission \$5 children, \$10 adults.

Saturday, October 21, 9 a.m. free. Held at Edgerton Performing Arts Center, Sterling North Boyhood Home, Edgerton Public Library, and Tri-County Community Center.

- * Edgerton's Book Festival. To celebrate this historic year, The Sterling North Society, Edgerton Schools, Chamber of Commerce, and community are hosting-prominent authors/speakers to provide informative sessions about books they or others have written and to promote reading. This is a family event with book and author sessions for people of all ages. Refreshments and lunch available for purchase.

Saturday, November 4, 1 p.m. Sterling North Home, rain or shine, free

- * Celebrate Sterling's 100th Birthday with bell ringing at the Methodist Church, birthday cake, and stamp cancellation.

The late Sterling North was born in 1906 in a small farmhouse on the shores of Lake Koshkonong and grew up in nearby Edgerton, the "Brailsford Junction" of several of his books.

After graduating from Edgerton High School and attending the University of Chicago, North began writing for many newspapers and magazines. [So Dear to My Heart](#), the best seller, established him as one of America's favorite novelists. It was translated into 26 languages, filmed by Walt Disney, and enchanted motion picture audiences. [Rascal](#), his autobiographical story about raising a raccoon, immediately captured the hearts of young and old. This story was translated into many languages and was also made into a film by Disney. North's final book, [The Wolfing](#), tells the story of Robbie (North's father and neighbor of naturalist Thure Kumlien) and the wolf pup he raised in the 1870's near Busseyville, Wisconsin.

Organized in 1989 as a non-profit, tax-exempt corporation with 501(c)(3) status, the Society is committed to preserving and promoting the heritage of Sterling North as it relates to the Edgerton area.

In 1992, the Society purchased the Sterling North childhood home, restoring the property to its 1917 setting. Today, the home serves as a literary center and museum with programs available to schools and the general pub-

lic. The Sterling North Home and Museum in Edgerton is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The home is the setting of North's best-selling book, [Rascal, A Memoir of a Better Era](#).

For more information, visit the Society's website, www.sterlingnorth.com



NEWS

Rachel Blau DuPlessis published an article about Niedecker in *Contemporary Literature*. It's called "Lorine Niedecker's 'Paean to Place' and its Fusion Poetics." The issue is Vol 46, number 3 (Fall 2005), and it's the article she gave at the Milwaukee conference.

Congratulations to the 2005 Winners of the Lorine Niedecker Poetry Award given by the Council for Wisconsin Writers:

Alison Townsend - Stoughton
Group of five poems - various literary journals

Honorable Mention:
Susan Elbe - Madison
Group of five poems - various literary journals

Susan Firer - Milwaukee
Group of five poems - various literary journals

Early in June Tom Montag made two presentations of his essay "Lorine's Toolbox: A Working Poet Examines Niedecker's Poetics" at the Wisconsin Writers Conference at UW-Baraboo/Sauk County. It is available here: http://middlewesterner.typepad.com/middlewesterner/2006/06/lorines_toolbox_4.html



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

Amy Lutzke, Dwight Foster Public Library and
Ann Engelman, Hoard Historical Museum

Contact us at:

Friends of Lorine Niedecker
102 E. Milwaukee Avenue
Fort Atkinson, WI 53538
(920) 563-7790

contact@lorineniedecker.org
www.lorineniedecker.org

Friends of Lorine Niedecker
102 E. Milwaukee Avenue
Fort Atkinson, WI 53538

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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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102 E. Milwaukee Avenue
Fort Atkinson, WI 53538

