Lorine Niedecker's Short Fiction

Jenny Penberthy, Kate Colby,
Flora Coker & Karl Gartung

I sent the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Library a copy of T&G way back in Sept. A few days ago I wrote: Did you fail to receive? They answer they've placed it with regional materials. I should ask: What Region—London, Wisconsin, New York?

—Lorine Niedecker, in her December 7, 1969 letter to Cid Corman

Contents

Preface

Her Very Veery: Lorine Niedecker Sings Duets Even In Fiction

Karl Gartung

We are what the seas
have made us

longingly immense

the very veery
on the fence.

The veery is a thrush, about the size of a robin or a hermit thrush. It is beautiful with its speckled breast, though compared to its cousin, the robin, it has a fugitive beauty. Usually it is seen after its song is heard. It has the thrush's propensity for song, with a difference. Then its beauty is easily apprehended, both through sight (if you can find it among the brush) and beautiful song, as with other wood thrushes. But this song is different—a single Veery sings a duet.

Nathan Pieplow: ". . . the veery is a polyphonic singer; it sings simultaneously, with both sides of its syrinx. The bird literally has two voices, one from each of its lungs, and it can control them separately.

John James Audubon re the Veery: "*Voice:* An exquisitely pure fluting that sounds as though it might be made by whirling a silver ball inside a silver bell."

Douglas Crase: "A bird's *syrinx* is capable of more than one note at a time, and the veery takes advantage of its ability to produce an unusually allusive, yet one 'word,' song.

Basil Bunting: "A thrush in the *syringa* sings."

Lorine Niedecker: "The sea went over and left me dry, parched for knowledge! The feeling of being a part of all this. How?—the body, the unconscious. Let us sing, as they say in church."

Louis Zukofsky: lower limit speech, upper limit music.

This Veery poem is an expression of Niedecker's poetics, there at that upper limit, song, Niedecker does Zukofsky one better. Her writings (all of them) sing in the manner of the veery's song, across the senses, across forms, across genre. They employ that control with histories, with contemporary thinkers, with overheard conversations, with personal stories. She employs in her own song the full range of Zukofsky's and Pound's 'sight, sound and intellection.' This is well understood as regards her poetry, and by extension, her correspondences. She loved, lived by, correspondence and was completely attentive to the music she heard there. With Zukofsky of course, but before and after him, with a wide range of others, from A.O. Barton to Mary Hoard to Harriet Monroe to Gail Roub to Cid Corman to James Laughlin to Edward Dahlberg to Clayton Eshleman to Ron Ellis to Vivian Hone and many many others.

She wrote plays and fictions as well. Those need to be taken as seriously as we take her poetry and correspondence. They are too easily overlooked, though they certainly are of a piece with her poetry. This issue of 'What Region?' is meant to give the fiction the respect it deserves among her other writings. I have received, gratefully, advice on this from Jenny Penberthy and Rebecca Brown. A few years ago, we decided to dedicate a 'What Region?' number to this. After a few false starts I approached Laynie Browne (*The Poet's Novel as a Model of Defiance*). She suggested that we consider the remarkable poet Kate Colby for the project. Kate agreed, and it became a collaboration with Jenny Penberthy, the results of which are in your hands. Jenny's essay here explores the first two of the fictions 'Uncle' and 'Switchboard Girl.' Kate examines Niedecker's poetics (*apo koinu*) regarding 'The evening's automobiles.'

A few remarks of my own may serve as an introduction:

Fiction is not Lorine Niedecker's primary art form. That simple fact in no way affects my fascination with the three fictions included in LN's *Collected Works*. All three of them deal in one way or another with the balance every living person has to achieve between the practical requirement for food and shelter, personal ambition, and the need for spiritual or intellectual sustenance.

We live under the American paradigm of specialized labor. We have occupations, job descriptions, or they have us. We believe we are not owned, but unless we have a profession (and often even there), we check our rights and lives at the door when we report for work. We in some ways cease living, alienated for more than a third of each day from ourselves, our situations as human beings with families, arts, spiritual needs and ambitions. This does not demean the necessity of work. 'He who does not work shall not eat' is an almost universal fact, and bosses find it useful, threatening. Not working is a fine fantasy to enact if you can *choose* not to work. As poets and artists we seek to find and express joy, pleasure in the world, even the world of work.

Employment too often amounts to a 'deal with the devil.' Far from leaving her with freedom and energy, it exhausted her. She complained at one point that it reduced her writing to a few poems a year. Yet she made them sing. What is beauty and what, mere decoration? What sustains and what distracts? These are the questions, the very veery's notes in the two 1951 stories. Those notes are doubled again with an amazingly succinct examination of gender as it related to employment and possibility in the middle of the twentieth century. The demands for shelter and food and family and gender expectations can blind us to real, sustaining beauty.

The very veery is there in her fiction, as in her poetry. The two 1951 stories, 'Switchboard Girls' and 'The evening's automobiles' extend her very veery poetic to fiction. She sings the two notes, lower and upper limit in every sentence, body and soul. Those stories are a pair. They sing her constant struggle with and against economic necessities in a longer but still condensed song. The two stories take up only seven pages in Niedecker's *Collected Works* as published by the University of California Press. 'Brief words' indeed.

Basil Bunting expressed wonder in his estimation of her poetry: 'No one is so subtle with so few words.' We see it here, in her fiction. She is a *dichter*, an uncommonly great one. 'How can I keep from singing,' the song asks. Her writings, all of them—the poems, the correspondence, the fictions and plays—answer in the manner of the veery. You hear something beautiful immediately, and mysterious. But as she listened, we become able to hear other notes, altogether, a gathering of harmony and dissonance. The song doubles and even at times doubles again, 'whirling a silver ball inside a silver bell,' hearing it.

The Poet's Eye: "Uncle" and "Switchboard Girl"

Jenny Penberthy

Short fiction was one of the several genres Lorine Niedecker experimented with over the years of her writing life. Only three stories survive, two of them published—"Uncle" in 1937 and "Switchboard Girl" in 1951—and one left in draft form in 1951, "The evening's automobiles." Kate Colby's talk addresses the latter story and I'll talk about the other two.[1] We should keep open the possibility that she wrote more than these three. The 1930s and 40s letters that she and Louis Zukofsky exchanged suggest that there were quite a few more stories on the go.

For instance, in 1940 she sent notes to Zukofsky based on her reading about Thaddeus Pound, Ezra Pound's grandfather. Zukofsky responded that he could see scope for a story or a poem in the notes and he urged her to get to work.[2] He also sent her the letters he'd received from Pound's father, Homer Pound, and he flagged the Wisconsin content of those as further potential, again, for a story or poem. For Zukofsky, she was not only a poet but a writer of stories. In the same letter he comments on what he calls her "Madison stories." He says,

[1] This essay was written as a talk given at the Hoard Museum, Fort Atkinson, September 10, 2023, as part of "A 'Very Veery' Lorine Niedecker Week in Wisconsin" (September 10-17, 2023). I'm grateful to Karl Gartung for steering my attention towards Niedecker's fiction.

[2] Zukofsky to Niedecker, October 30, 1940. Zukofsky Collection, Harry Ransom Center, Austin, Texas. Quotations from Zukofsky letters are with permission of the Zukofsky estate.

> The other Madison stories—Miss Foster, etc—funny alright, but enough to make you want to strangle 'em too. These W.P.A. antagonists are a rotting lot. Lewis' speech sickening.[3]

In another 1940 letter written to her in Madison, Zukofsky wrote, "Your Allen Bradley IS wunnerful."[4] I'm guessing that this might have been a story. Allen-Bradley was, and perhaps still is, an electronics company in Milwaukee that manufactured, at that time, electronic parts for vehicles, radios, etc. plus the electronic controls essential to automating assembly lines—their major source of business in the war years.[5]

If there was more than one story written in the 30s and early 40s, I'm guessing that "Uncle"[6] was the first of them. A wonderfully assured piece of writing, it followed on the heels of her early "Mother Geese" poems and the surrealism-inflected plays published in 1936 in the first annual issue of *New Directions in Prose & Poetry*. For Niedecker, this was a period of flexible experiment across genres. Again, James Laughlin didn't hesitate to accept her submission for his second annual issue of *New Directions in Prose & Poetry*. He told Niedecker on October 11, 1937 that he was happy to accept the story: "it has the sprawl of life. Also patches of beauty, without working for them."[7]

Hearing from Niedecker that her story had been accepted, Zukofsky wrote to Laughlin on Oct 26, 1937, "Yr acceptance of Lorine Niedecker's story is one blessed event."[8] No doubt there'd been an exchange of suggestions and drafts between Niedecker and Zukofsky, perhaps when he visited her on Black Hawk Island in September 1936.

The contributor's note for the 1937 *New Directions* annual reads, "Lorine Niedecker, who is best known for her experiments with unconscious writing, lives in Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin."[9] There's a notable transition from her surrealism of 1931-1935 to what seems

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[3] From 1938 to 1942, Niedecker worked in Madison in a Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.) job. The New Deal agency, Works Progress Administration, was renamed Work Projects Administration in 1939. Alice Foster was her supervisor from early 1941.

[4] Zukofsky to Niedecker, August 7, 1940. Zukofsky Collection, Harry Ransom Center, Austin, Texas.

[5] Thanks to Karl Gartung for this information.

[6] "Uncle," *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 305-31. (Hereafter, *LN: CW*).

[7] Laughlin to Niedecker, New Directions Publishing Corp. papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

[8] Zukofsky to Laughlin, New Directions Publishing Corp. papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

[9] *New Directions* 2 (1937): ix.

like the comparatively conventional narrative of "Uncle." Her new focus is local. She had begun the shift with her folk poetry, a genre full of local politics and history, dream, and discontinuities, consistent with but nevertheless a departure from her intense surrealist phase. Her early Mother Goose-derived poems were located in Depression-era politics particularly as they were experienced in her immediate vicinity. Her folk poetry of 1936-1946 and "Uncle" published in 1937 were an explicit return to her home environment.

Edwin Honig, her friend and co-worker in the W.P.A. in Madison, notes that "She had a good wit . . . and a strong sense of the incongruous, which made her a good storyteller. Anecdotes she told concerned country people, her mother, father, and neighbors back home in Fort Atkinson."[10] The "good storyteller" is at work in "Uncle," a piece of auto-fiction that fuses family history and the features of identifiable family members with Wisconsin Progressive politics under congressman and senator "Fighting Bob" La Follette and his two sons who continued their father's Progressive legacy. The sons formed the Wisconsin Progressive Party in 1934, Phillip La Follette as Governor of Wisconsin, and Robert La Follette Jr "Young Bob" as senator in the US Senate up until 1946 when he was defeated by Joseph McCarthy. They introduced agricultural reforms, tried to break private monopolies, strengthened labour unions—all initiatives that we see Uncle John attempt in "Uncle."

I recently spotted a copy of *New Goose* for sale online that Niedecker had inscribed to A.O. Barton, a clerk to La Follette in Washington, D.C., and subsequently author of several books on La Follette and city editor of the *Wisconsin State Journal*. In 1946, when *New Goose* was published, she would have known Barton as a proponent of the progressive politics that shaped her own thinking and writing. Perhaps she had drawn on his books in her writing of "Uncle" and the Goose poems. It is striking that one of her few author copies of *New Goose* went to A.O. Barton.[11] Niedecker's biographer suggests that she picked up her left-leaning politics from Zukofsky. Not so. It's there in what I jokingly and I hope not disrespectfully refer to as her "pre-contact" poetry and in the Wisconsin progressivism of the time. From its earliest days, her poetry was attuned to local economic and social conditions.

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[10] "A Memory of Lorine Niedecker in the Late 30s," *Lorine Niedecker: Woman & Poet*, 44.

[11] Thanks to Peder Frank of Milwaukee I now know that Niedecker was in contact with Barton during her WPA days in Madison where he lived from 1935 until his death in 1947. Barton read her work including "Uncle" and her WPA essays, one of them focused on Madison writers.

"Uncle" is written in the first person. The narrator is a woman, a relative of Uncle John's who shares his vision and who is, of course, a fictionalized version of Niedecker herself. She's a witness to the exploitation of Uncle John's resort-hotel-keeping parents, Great Uncle Gottlieb and Great Aunt Friedericka (Rieky), and she understands Uncle John's desire for justice. The Great Uncle and Great Aunt are based on Niedecker's Grandfather and Grandmother Kunz.

The story is attentive to details of place—the marsh, the lake, etc—a place we recognize from her poems as Black Hawk Island. The landscape offers respite and regeneration to the characters who are worn down by the pressures of capitalism and modernity, a retreat to the margins from the rigours of the city. The story documents the old-world practices of rural people but not in any nostalgic manner. Niedecker's outsider/insider relation to her community gave her insight into its tensions and vulnerabilities and an appreciation of its culture but she could also detach herself and acknowledge her difference. "Uncle" is packed with nuance, with affectionate sympathy for local individuals, corrosive criticism of monied entitlement, celebration of endurance and vitality, and quiet delight in the home setting.

Turning to the early 1950s stories, it's worth considering her altered life circumstances. The years of 1932-1942 had been active years of social, political, and literary engagement for Niedecker both in her home community and in Madison and New York. Life offered promise and possibility. In June 1942, laid off from her Madison job, Niedecker returned to her parents' home on Black Hawk Island. It can't have been easy although in the two years from June 1942 to May 1944, before she started the job in Fort Atkinson, she was able to finish the *New Goose* poems and, at the start of September 1944, send the typescripts for her own book and Zukofsky's *Anew* to the James A. Decker Press for publication.[12] Then followed the six long years of working as a proofreader for *Hoard's Dairyman*, an industry publication. It was a period of profound loneliness and alienation, all of which she talked about freely and at length with Zukofsky. How poignant it is to know that during Niedecker's two years 1922-1924 at Beloit College, her career goal was "Teacher."[13] Near the end of her life in May 1970, she wrote to her friend Vivien Hone who was an editor of the University of Wisconsin News Service, "I was thinking that over the years you've probably been in just the right work, not so? . . . Must have given

[12] *Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofsky 1931-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 130. The James A. Decker Press in Prairie City, Illinois published *New Goose* and *Anew* in early 1946.

[13] Lorine Niedecker Collection, Beloit College Archives.

you all this time enjoyment and interesting moments."[14]

Her resignation from Hoard's on June 14, 1950 was necessitated by her recently diagnosed eye condition "Nystagmus" caused by six years of intensive proofreading. This precipitated an onerous job search but also freed up new expanses of time for writing. In 1949, while still at Hoard's, she had started the long poem "For Paul" that would be organized into eight groups of mostly short poems. The first group was completed by November 1949 and the second in January 1951, six months after resigning.[15] The best-known poem from her working life at Hoard's, "In the great snowfall before the bomb," was included in the manuscript of "For Paul" Group Two dated December 30, 1950. It appeared alongside two job search poems based on an interview with a personnel director: "He moved in light" and "Keen and lovely man moved as in a dance" with the latter poem originally titled "Office Blues."[16] "Job hunting," she told Jonathan Williams, "the greatest nightmare of all even when I find the job."[17] These poems were followed, in the chronology of composition, by Niedecker's two stories, "Switchboard Girl" and "The evening's automobiles," written between April and June 1951.[18] "Switchboard Girl" came first and was based on the job interview. Her encounter with the departing switchboard girl first appears in two poem drafts which are abandoned when she shifts to prose.[19] This back and forth between genres is not something we see again after 1952 although she remained engaged with the challenges of representing narrative and character in her poetry.

"Switchboard Girl" opens with a punning address to Dante and a quotation from *The Inferno*,

> I divined this comedy, Dante, before I went in. But I had to have a job.
> "Like one who has imperfect vision, we see things which are remote from us."

The auto-fictional narrator does indeed see things differently. She has distance and

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[14] Private collection.

[15] Group One was published in *New Directions* 12 (1950) and Group Two in the *New Mexico Quarterly* 21.1 (Spring 1951).

[16] *LN: CW*, 168-69 and 410-11.

[17] January 10, 1957, quoted in *Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofsky 1931-1970*, 131.

[18] "Switchboard Girl" was published in *New Directions in Prose & Poetry* 13 (1951)—her second story accepted by James Laughlin, *LN: CW*, 335-37. "The evening's automobiles" appears to be unfinished, *LN: CW*, 338-42.

[19] The abandoned drafts: "Titillated flip, switchboard girl" and "Are you high," *LN: CW*, 456-57.

perspective but, more literally, Nystagmus "('The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling')," accounts for her "imperfect vision." She applies for what appears to be a more suitable job with a company that manufactures light fixtures and pressure cookers. The illumination business is one of the story's sardonic targets. "O brother, we saw tho the eyes were shot."[20]

With compression familiar from her poetry, the narrative selects details from the interview alongside the narrator's thoughts and thought associations. She says, "I was the September dandelion—forty, female—seeking a place among the young fluorescent petunias." In fact, Niedecker was 47 when she went to inquire about a job at the Fort Atkinson company Moe Light at 710 Oak Street. In the interview, she believes that the personnel director is guessing at what she calls "her depth," her difference, just as she guesses at his. Might they discuss Renoir, Einstein; perhaps he's an artist, a political observer, an economist. She's briefly charmed by the director's courteous manner and by the "glass-walled office in the Frank Lloyd Wright setting": "All art between us. Will he help me? He is not usual. . . ." runs her anxious interior monologue.[21]

From there, "I went in" and she enters the underworld of work: the shiny surfaces of a lighting manufacturer only partially conceal a sweatshop with its veneer of tarnish-resistant gleam. "This is the lust that will never rust"—her slogan for the unageing and ruthless profit motive. "The shade by the door, the grey parchment face" recalls the "grey figure" of Francie Canoye, another casualty of a grim workplace.[22]

The condensed portrait of the switchboard girl recalls the poem, "In the great snowfall before the bomb" where there's talk of similar stratified workplace relations between the female employees and the male "higher ups"—the gifts, the sexual innuendo, the unbuttoned repartee. "Lewd sings the cuckoo" appears in both of the draft poems. The prose portrait is layered with the switchboard operator's exchanges with Moe Light male employees, their replies, and her rejoinders to the narrator, along with the narrator's own, initially-baffling, thought associations—the pickup tropes transposed to a wartime context.

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[20] *LN:CW*, 335.

[21] This interview is the source of two poems: "He moved in light" and "Keen and lovely man," *LN: CW*, 168-69.

[22] "The evening's automobiles" *LN: CW*, 341.

> Give me Europe. I'm waiting, operator, for the Paris pick-up. I'm on wartime Montparnasse, gas mask, phosphorescent heels, illuminated brooch. "What's that?" What does it look like? There they call it what it is.
>
> The Japs: We had neither hens nor eggs. We went requisitioning. A miserable village. On the way back we began to look for Chinese girls.
>
> They don't make 'em as sensitive as geiger counters.

Niedecker may be writing the piece in 1951, six years post-war and post-nuclear bomb, but the narrator's consciousness is still marked by both. Far from irrational thought association, the switchboard operator's wartime connections are grounded in facts known to any Fort Atkinson resident of the time—no doubt, a source of either pride or dismay—that during World War II, Moe Light switched from its usual product line to making wartime munitions such as "Navy projectile cones, bomb fins and crates, chemical hand grenades and bazooka rockets." After the war, they reverted to lighting and also to pressure cookers commissioned by Sears (until Sears cancelled the contract following a run of defective products.)[23] Niedecker's free-associated switchboard girl connects with ease to a fictional company called "Lethal Steel," a pickup on Montparnasse wears a gas mask, and the "phosphorescent heels" and "illuminated brooch" that are designed for black outs carry an overlay of their radioactive potential. War logic dominates, the human is obsolescing.

The draft poems that precede the prose piece condense a critique of the switchboard girl herself. Via the sexualized banter with her male "honeypots," she gathers gifts and cheapens relations between the sexes: "switchboard lust / takes love out of life."[24] But in the shift to an imagined wartime context, Niedecker anticipates the "barbarous" consequences of these apparently trivial exchanges. There the switchboard girl is the unthinking facilitator of munitions deals. The story prefigures a Cold War poem that gives similar chilling agency to a beautiful and heedless woman:

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[23] Paul V. Arnold, "This Old Plant," *Reliable Plant*. https://www.reliableplant.com/Read/254/old-plant

[24] *LN: CW*, 456-57.

Beautiful girl—
pushes food onto her fork
with her fingers—
  will throw the switches
of deadly rockets?[25]

"The evening's automobiles," in many ways the companion story, extends Niedecker's critical scrutiny of contemporary women.

"Switchboard Girl" may appear to be neatly framed by references to Dante. But in fact, the final line, "Dante? Yes, go ahead" offers no closure. Dante has been connected by the switchboard and is now free to communicate. Niedecker leaves the reader to guess at his response to this version of Hell.

Unlike "Uncle" of 1937, both of the 1951 stories are disjunctive and oblique in a manner that's familiar from her surrealist poetry that tracked the fluctuations of consciousness. Not the image itself so much as "the carry-over in the *mind*,"[26] she said to Zukofsky. Just two weeks before finishing the story, she wrote to him, "I feel I'm on the way to something, especially with the use of lines and words that look backward and forward as "he moved in light."[27] The "backward and forward" movement of the mind between words and across line-breaks operates across time too between Objectivism's "historical and contemporary particulars."

The two 1951 stories about work and escape from work, and about a balanced relation between the sexes—developed particularly in "The evening's automobiles"—can be read in the context of her concurrent "For Paul" project begun in 1949. It's important to note that the poems in this project engage with a lot more than young Paul Zukofsky. They tackle head-on the matter of making poetry out of her current life on Black Hawk Island. While many of her Goose poems of the mid-30s to the mid-40s had a local focus, they were composed as contemporary folk poems shaped by and somewhat mythologized by the Mother Goose idiom and conventions.

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[25] *LN: CW*, 185. Written in 1958.

[26] *Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofsky 1931 to 1970*, 177.

[27] Ibid., 178.

But life on post-war Black Hawk Island had changed. Yes, the landscape remained an unending solace to her, but the new local reality included dispiriting jobs, rowdy neighbours, domestic violence, crass materialism, the culture of the automobile, youth violence, litter, and loud voices, radios and televisions—all unflinchingly present in the eight groups of "For Paul" poems, 1949-1953. Before their subsequent revision, the "For Paul" poems were a compendium of detail about her actual home, a "songs of experience,"[28] an ambivalent, hard-won paean to place. Both of the 1951 stories were written out of the same post-war sensibility. Black Hawk Island as the rural idyll of "Uncle" had changed and she was reckoning with its challenges.

[28] Edwin Honig's introduction to the second group of Niedecker's "For Paul": "Poet Signature: Lorine Niedecker," *New Mexico Quarterly* 21.1 (Spring 1951): 205.

Trim Green Thought: The Poetics of "The Evening's Automobiles"

Kate Colby

Contrary to William Carlos Williams's canonical statement that "a poem is a small (or large) machine made out of words," a poem's effects can't all be controlled or determined, no matter how carefully it's engineered. If a poem is more like a fizzing test tube of complex molecular interactions, then Lorine Niedecker is one of poetry's best chemists. Her condensed verse combines drams and dashes of her physical, social, and subjective worlds, often producing profusions of semantic and philosophic implications that belie its minimal ingredients. While Niedecker's small body of short fiction largely lacks both the compositional precision and gestalt effects of her poetry, it frequently succeeds as trial of and laboratory for her poetic principles. In particular, her highly autobiographical 1952 story, "The evening's automobiles,"[1] is an allegory of her own trajectory toward particular modes of meaning. It amounts to an experiment whose results fail to demonstrate, but effectively describe its poetic premise.

At the time of Niedecker's arrival as a poet, a sanctification of things—or, more accurately, of thinginess—preoccupied the avant-garde. Riffing off the preceding Imagist platform, and making a hairsplitting distinction from Williams's other renowned dictum of "No ideas but in things," Louis Zukofsky prescribed "thinking with things as they already exist" in his famous and famously slapped-together 1931 *Poetry* magazine manifesto. But these poets' things—Williams's chickens, for instance—relied extra hard on their stripped-down contexts for meaning, demonstrating that, almost perfectly

[1] "The evening's automobiles," *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 338-342.

contrary to the Imagists' and Objectivists' stated projects, there are no things, only interactions, which is perhaps why Williams padded his small poems in *Spring and All* with billows of bubble wrap of explanation.

Avant gardes test how closely our tools of representation can and/or do adhere to things they stand for. The Imagists and the Objectivists tried to cook language down to its most basic syntactic and denotative components, bringing it as close as they could to thinginess itself without entirely boiling off meaning, as though a maximally thingified "stone" might get close enough to give a little peck to its referent. But a stone is just a string of small events—it begins with a bang, gathers in the crust, and then slowly wears to dust, atoms.

From the outset, Niedecker was skeptical, taking what she needed from the Objectivist would-be program to create something more interactive and alchemical. As she wrote to her friend Mary Hoard, ". . . Objects, objects. Why are people, artists above all, so terrifically afraid of *themselves*? Thank god for the Surrealist tendency running side by side with objectivism."[2] In spite of what would become her signature condensation, Niedecker was not so much interested in reduction for the sake of ontological precision, but for the conjoinment it allowed. Like two particles colliding in a vast hermetic tube, a formally spare poem is a stage for an earthshattering event, words' smooch on world's moue.

But while Niedecker embraced a degree of open meaning, rather than relying on ideas inherent in things (to the degree that either exists), she employed a linguistic precision in drawing out connections. In a 1951 letter to Zukofsky, she wrote, "I feel I'm on the way to something especially with the use of lines and words that look backward and forward"[3] Known as *apo koinu* in linguistics and classical Greek scholarship, this is a common device but one that Niedecker uses uncommonly well, frequently allowing a word to serve as a two-way syntactic hinge between lines or clauses. Sometimes the word swings between serving as subject and object of the sentence; other times, it functions as noun and verb. In the case of a line or phrase, it might qualify that which comes both before and after it, creating a fluid, modulating progression of impressions. For an example of all three cases, take this segment of "Traces of Living Things" from her 1968 collection, *North Central*:

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[2] *Lorine Niedecker: Woman & Poet*, ed. Jenny Penberthy (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1996), 87.

[3] Letter #44, quoted by Jenny Penberthy in the introduction to *Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofsky 1931-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 66.

Smile
to see the lake
lay
the still sky
And
out for an easy
make
the dragonfly. [4]

While the first word suggests the missing "I" that would render it a verb, it may also be a noun that the ensuing poem defines. "Lay" is clearly a verb, but is it transitive or intransitive? The lake is laying a reflection of the sky down onto the earth, which is a gorgeously tender way of putting it, but could "lay" also be read as copulation? Of course it can. The lake and sky don't just create, but together constitute the reflection.

The sexual reading is reinforced by "make" in the next stanza, where "an easy make" would be an effortless sexual conquest. But "make" is first a verb, of course, in which case the lake and sky and possibly the smile are each to some extent—or all together and entirely—creating the dragonfly. If/when "make" is a verb, then "easy" is a noun, which is unconventional usage, but aligns it with the nounified "lay" and "make," all of which are now humorously dated twentieth-century euphemisms.

The chime of the rhyme and alliterative *l*s bind the poem in an aurally pleasing way whose tidiness contradicts the porous inconclusivity of what the poem says and suggests. The sonic closure gives the poem the trappings of a ditty whose purpose is to breathe a little sigh over the beauty of the natural world, in direct contrast with the crass sexual connotations as well as the godlessness of this spontaneous and subjective form of creation wherein the poet models with her construction of a small specimen of a double reality how everything we see and think we know is made with and of words. Niedecker often uses masterful prosody to defy expectations in this way, usually at the same time as allowing for actual beautiful effects. That she can be both ironic and totally sincere in her appreciation and respectful rendering of the natural world and its phenomena is one of her poetry's definitive qualities.

[4] *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works*, 242.

While I could write pages more about this poem (which I selected nearly at random!), I will leave it with that "And," which is and does a lot of things—hinge, collapse, rupture, net—binding macro and micro and manifesting their interdependence. The "and" belongs to the respective facts and actions of the smile, the lake, the laying; connecting and dividing them at once. It is the ultimate *apo koinu* node that simultaneously contains and trumps the others; effecting both causality and juxtaposition; and, despite its role of bland conjunction in conventional syntax, is the beating heart of this small poem that does as least as much as it says. The mind moving, conjoining, collecting the associative connectives that show us where and how our minds are sutured to and inseparable from the world is as far as we can get in understanding it (yes, my demonstrative "it" is lousy with antecedents).

With regard to *apo koinu*, Jenny Penberthy writes in her introduction to *Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofsky*, ". . . the technique of 'forward and backward' looking . . . convey[s] a requisite sense of process, of shifting and evolving meaning. In itself, the technique is a metaphor for the movement of the mind."[5] In fact, the word "synapse" comes from the Greek *synaphe*, which is the note that connects one octave to the next—as, say, Middle C is the top note of one scale and the lowest of the next as you go up the keyboard—rendering every note a double hinge. In Niedecker's poems, the *synaphe* or site of semantic two-timing is where mind-as-word reaches out to touch thing-as-world and then slips, emitting a little *ting* or *mwah* or glint that renders the schism perceptible for a sec and disrupting the reader's expectation of a single thread of coherent meaning facilitated by standard syntax. As demonstrated in "Smile," an ideal (not "perfect") poem's every element at once produces and is induced by every other, manifesting a completely interactive network of phenomena that is exactly opposed to any fact or idea of objective "things." It is seething and incessant, burping from its test tube, piling up like a mind's mounds of its own matter.

Movement of mind is the very subject, albeit not quite the operative action, of "The evening's automobiles," which is the last of Niedecker's three extant short stories and remained unpublished in her lifetime. In the context of her early experimentation with genre, wherein she wrote fiction and plays, in addition to her extensive correspondence and professional copywriting work for a WPA-funded "Dictionary of Wisconsin Biography" whose regional content found its way into much of her creative work for the rest of her life, her fiction is of scholarly interest. "The evening's automobiles," in particular, evinces her poetic skill with and commitment to making language do

[5] *Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofsky 1931-1970*, 66.

rather simply say, and while it lacks the *apo koinu* tension of her poetry, it creates and demonstrates the conditions for such fully activated engagement with language.

The story's de facto title, which is simply the first three words of the story, was suggested by Zukofsky, in response to which Niedecker wrote, "—your "The evening's automobiles"—well, something like that along line of *moving*, something that has to do with the mind moving so as to unite all time etc . . ."[6]. An open and purely relative, rather than progressive, figuration of time is both the medium and product of mental movement in the story, enabling the referential and philosophical openness that aligns the story with her poetry and strongly differentiating it from her preceding two pieces of fiction. While all three of Niedecker's stories are largely autobiographical, only "The evening's automobiles" concerns and enacts the poet's trajectory toward a fully active use of language.

The first-person story begins with its unnamed male narrator, a veteran newspaper printer, on the cusp of leaving his big-city job to return to his childhood home in the country. His friend Benji expresses consternation, calling this choice to leave the vibrant social world of the city "lunacy." We then learn that the narrator is soon to marry to a woman named Norma, for whom he expresses derision: "Why is it that women about to be married need a mineralogical fulfillment—silver, diamond?" The prospect of the wedding is thus thrown into question. Benji reminds his friend that he'll only find his lowland home subsumed by the spring flood, as Niedecker's Blackhawk Island frequently was. "What *do* you expect to find?" he asks, and his friend cryptically replies, "The ancient present. In me the years are flowing together." Here is the first turn in the story, where the narrative and the language enabling it begin to open out into more fluid territory; divesting time, mind, and syntax of their manufactured linearity; and allowing the three to variously pool, eddy, break against each other, and run together.

By the next morning the narrator is home, far from the blind acquisitive drive of the city, and awakening amid the "marsh hush" and "lush wash" that signify his return to a primordially poetic existence. The peaceful euphony is quickly disrupted by a long, rude, but not entirely unsympathetic characterization of the newspaper's proofreader, Francie Canoye, which constitutes almost half of "The evening's automobiles." Francie is ridiculous, contradictory, overbearing, and in a state of mental decline that is in some part due to the deafening noise of the printing presses. Throughout, the short story

[6] Note to Zukofsky from manuscript dated June 15, 1951; per Jenny Penberthy's note to the text in *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works*, 457.

opposes the quiet of the marshes with the rattle and din of urban commercialism, the former both betokening and enabling the anti-syntactical associative thinking that the story espouses, and the latter being aligned with the specious linearity of conventional writing and reasoning that it derides. The emergent nature of truth, as opposed to the manipulative narratives manufactured by profit-driven potentates of mass media and upheld by socially fettered minds, is an attendant binary theme embodied by the narrator and Francie Canoye, respectively. Language—in the form of the story's narration, as well as the stuff of Francie's vocation—is the ring in which reason and credulity wrestle.

The character sketch of Francie trails off as the natural world by which the narrator is now surrounded gains the upper hand and overlays a last image of the proofreader's "gray figure" with an actual vision of a shoreline sandpiper through the narrator's window, resulting in a confusing composite portrait of Francie and the bird as a "clam shell on long, thin legs with nervous-nodding head." Newspaper office and river shore superimpose on one another as the narrator looks again to the window and sees simultaneously the water's edge through it and the civilized objects of his own interior reflected against it in the light of the electric bulb. The narrator's mind becomes the confluence of past and present, exterior and interior, his consciousness being what binds all things together.

A woman appears at the door. She is not the normative Norma, but Marion Dollman, whose winking puns (along with what might be the contracted "Can Annoy" of Francie's surname) may be our best clue that the story remains in draft form. Marion enters and "[w]e sat at table," Niedecker writes, the missing article evoking the active, enacting hinge—looking both back to Grandfather's advice and forward to the poet's slant adoption of it—of Niedecker's ars poetic "Poet's Work": "I learned / to sit at desk / and condense."[7] Marion and the narrator proceed to have a short conversation about their shared vision of reality and the terms of their presumed future together, which—contrary to the progress-oriented march of science; and removed from commerce, pecuniary concerns, and the materialistic need for "the sheer, literal litter that people do in our savage cities"—will be a life of and amongst the wild marsh grass. "Isn't it glorious?" Marion asks. "Let's trim green thought in one place and let it grow wild in another," figuring the nondeterministic but still deliberate praxis of poetry and of Penberthy's characterization of Objectivist poetry as ". . . not so much thought about something as

[7] *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works*, 94.

the thought itself."[8] The resonant last line of "The evening's automobiles" reads, "Let's sit here in the long afternoon and last." The open vowels and bright *l*s demonstrate that time has cracked open and all possibility for existing and meaning entered, meeting in the dual minds who will tend and honor this fecundity—the opposite of a base "mineralogical fulfillment"—together.

"The evening's automobiles" illustrates the potential for and of an endlessly associative mind—in opposition to the one-way commerce- and science-driven pursuits that corrupt it, and the respective kinds of truths that emerge from each—but doesn't quite fulfill it. The story begins with the green of mechanical traffic lights and ends with the green of marsh grass that will be cultivated or let grow wild according to the poets' intuition. In the story's second sentence the narrator stands on a city sidewalk contemplating the cars that facilitate the hustle and buzz of the city: "Encased motors give man the swift, shining precision that his mind as he drives can't give him." In the end, money and mental precision are forsworn, allowing for a non-definitive sort of knowing that works not by deduction and progression, but the non-hierarchical indication undertaken by the "And" of her "Smile" poem: a forward-and-back "this *and* this *and* this."

Niedecker twice uses the word "indicate" to characterize the kind of knowing that is along the lines of the Imagists' and Objectivists' thing-first pointing. Marion asks the narrator if the findings of science, which abstract the world into variables, are his idea of truth, to which he responds, "Not roughly. Knowing goes best with the quietest touch. Otherwise it's somebody else's stuff. Even so I can only indicate." She responds, "With all deference to what we could be together, no two persons can ever become one, each must be free to desire what the other has indicated." The story is at bottom a fantasy about the sexily creative life that two poets tucked away in a wild corner of the world, relieved of any practical and financial concerns, might be able to make and sustain together. This socially and linguistically co-creative world consists of merely indicative—rather than relative, syntactically forgone—language and relations, relieved of causality and the tyrannical arrow of time. *Look, darling: smile, lake, sky, dragonfly.*

Contained within and also fueling commerce and the urban financial perpetuum—and the wedge it drives into the kind of truth that is discovered by an unencumbered mind in an unmediated natural world—is mass media and the particular variety of untruth it creates in order to disseminate. In the story's second paragraph, the narrator dolefully reflects on his twenty years as a newspaper printer and quotes William James: "The

[8] Introduction to *Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofsky 1931-1970*, 77.

sensational press is the organ of a state of mind which means a new 'dark' ages that may last more centuries that the first one. Then illiteracy was brutal and dumb and power was rapacious without disguise. Now illiteracy has an enormous literary organization and power is sophistical." Bearing in mind that "The evening's automobiles" may remain unfinished, Niedecker sets the reader up here for an exploration of the sophistical power proposed in this relatively lengthy quote, but instead proceeds to punch down on one of its cogs.

As a proofreader, Francie Canoye is emblematic of both the large-scale informational power abuses perpetrated by profit-driven media, and, through her own low-level role, those who maintain the conditions of those abuses by blindly tending to the language in which they are committed. The last stop in a linear process of laundering language into a seemingly transparent vehicle of meaning, the lowly proofreader isn't even in on the scheme. As Bonnie Roy writes in "Niedecker Blue: Proofs and Poetics,"[9]

> A nonwriting reader, the proofreader is the fail-safe of an efficient blind-copy system . . . [Her] partial relation to text pulverizes meaning. Initialed rather than authored, abbreviated or even subalphabetical (as in the case of a dele or a bracket) . . . [a proofread text] recedes from visibility as writing even as it indexes a mastery of writing.

A proofreader is master of the mechanics of writing, with little power over its communicative function. In fact, she does her job most efficiently when all but ignoring a text's meaning. While a poet processes language to cultivate semantic multiplicity, the newspaper proofreader, by direct contrast, assists in processing it like commercial-grade food, removing its savor and nutrients in order to render it cheap and easily digestible to the masses. The perennially put-upon Francie exerts the stereotypical emotional tyranny of a low-level manager, but her seemingly self-unexamined role in the process of packaging content for corporate profit makes her a special object of the narrator's contempt. It is her gender, though, that appears to make her one of the author's.
In 1952, Niedecker had recently been forced to give up her longtime job as a proofreader at the agricultural trade journal *Hoard's Dairyman* due to her poor eyesight. Her

[9] Bonnie Roy, "Niedecker Blue: Proofs and Poetics," *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (Fall 2015, University of Wisconsin Press), 486. Thank you to Jenny Penberthy for pointing me to this paper.

correspondence with Zukofsky indicates that Francie is based on a real colleague at *Hoard's*, and Niedecker's caricature is relentless. What stands out, though, is Francie's ridiculousness *as a woman*, rather than as a run-of-the mill drone. She is described both in terms of feebleness ("weak-voiced," "slight of build," "desperate," "old maid") and militancy ("military bearing," "steel flesh," "belligerent"), rendering her simultaneously flimsily feminine and as harboring unbecoming pretensions to masculine authority. By contrast with notable male literary automatons—Melville's Bartleby and Gogol's Akaky Akakyevich, for instance—Francie doesn't resist or pointedly crumble beneath her pathetic professional lot, but goes the way of huffy self-importance that, in a story written by a woman from a male perspective, feels very much like an estimation of her gender.

Other than the shallow Norma and exceptional Marion, there are only a few glancing mentions of women in the story, one of which is a brief sketch of the narrator's mother, who, like Niedecker's mother, lived in a scrappy sort of subjugation: "My mother, not too happily married, lived on her nerves on this stream, hunted and fished, grew flowers as big as plates in the Nile-like silt and said—how often she said it—'I've got a new pain.'" Another is a woman from the newspaper office named Jackie, who swears like a man and is described with condescending admiration as "a lady, unintellectual but enlightened, one to whom diamonds held no lure." Marion Dollman, though, is no lady—she achieves her dream-girl status by being half man, exhibiting an enlightened *and* intellectual approach to apprehending the world, the latter part of which Niedecker appears to regard as masculine.

In general—in her creative work, friendships, and correspondence—Niedecker was not a traitor to her sex; she just often seems to except herself from it. She regularly upholds the myth of male genius and appears to feel she's been given a dispensation to walk among it. This confusing relationship to womanhood is evident in the 'In the great snowfall before the bomb' segment from *For Paul and Other Poems*, in which she portrays her work at *Hoard's*:

I worked the print shop
right down among em
the folk from whom all poetry flows
and dreadfully much else.

I was Blondie
I carried my bundles of hog feeder price lists
Down by Larry the Lub,
I'd never get anywhere
Because I'd never had suction,
Pull, you know, favor, drag,
Well-oiled protection.

I heard their rehashed radio barbs—
more barbarous among hirelings
as higher-ups grow more corrupt.
But what vitality! The women hold jobs—
clean house, cook, raise children, bowl
and go to church.

What would they say if they knew
I sit for two months on six lines
of poetry?[10]

After describing the sexist reductions to which she is subject (not unlike Francie Canoye), the male favoritism she'll never enjoy, and the admiration she has for the women around her who work fulltime in addition to deftly managing the rest of their lives, she then sets herself apart from them. While she does not possess the social privilege that would allow her to challenge or subvert the capitalist drive to produce, she is able to quietly resist it

[10] *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works*, 142.

in and with time itself, just as "The evening's automobiles" ends with the pair of poets courting eternity in poetry. But unlike the speaker of the poem, the story's narrator is in a position to resist the capitalist drive by just walking away. Niedecker might have made the narrator male—which she's not known to have done in any of her other work—simply because it affords him a level of agency that neither the author nor the women in her life possessed. It's the operative element of the fantasy.[11]

Toward the end of "The evening's automobiles," the narrator assures Marion that the two of them will live happily together in isolation ". . . while the flood recedes and the grass starts fast to mow me in my prime." "Prime" is enigmatic, but might be a tongue-in-cheek sense of a man's fully realized potential and use value to society—the apex of a linear trek, as opposed to the "lasting" proposed at the end. He will divest his monetized value and cede intention to the grass, which will "mow" him not to diminish, but to make one of and commensurate with the natural world. It's a lovely iambic line from a poem that I can't help but wish Niedecker had condensed the rest of the story into—employing her signature *synaphic* connectivity to not just illustrate but enact the timelessness of a true poet's mind, allowing its ingredients to fizz and proliferate.

"The evening's automobiles"' failures might be the same as its successes—it begins in the forge of warmongering, capitalist greed; zooms in on the drones who process the language upholding that closed system; and then ends by moving away from the prosaic word-as-vehicle out into the literal marshes and the metaphorical, primordial, ecologically synaptic forward-and-backwards sensibilities where poetry is born. Like the last half of a stone's existence, the narrator and the world he apprehends are walked back from false constancy into contiguity, then purely interactive atoms.

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[11] In addition to much else with regard to this paper and in our friendship, I am indebted to Jenny Penberthy for extensive conversation about Niedecker's relationship to gender in her life and work, including whether her being deemed "the Emily Dickinson of her time" by William Carlos Williams was a sexist and/or diminishing statement. I argued yes, no question!; but Penberthy has almost convinced me that this isn't the case. She points out that Williams and Zukofsky were both deep admirers of Dickinson, as was Niedecker. She believes that Niedecker would have taken the comparison as "an uncomplicated compliment." Complicating my own understanding of the matter is my personal experience with being teased as an "Emily Dickinson" by my senior family members in my youth, which was only my first taste of belittlement as a female writer. There's no male equivalent of Dickinson as stereotype of self-serious scribbling woman. In any case, my largely subjective take stands, but I acknowledge that Penberthy's opinion is much more informed.

Three Fictions Out Loud

Flora Coker

In 2023 we recorded the actor Flora Coker's readings of the three fictions, 'Uncle,' 'Switchboard Girl,' and 'The evening's automobiles' in *Lorine Niedecker's Collected Works* (University of California Press, 2003). Hearing Niedecker's work out loud always points up the incredible musicality of her language. Coker's readings here provide abundant evidence of that fact.

Paul Host engineered the recordings.

Listen to the recordings at https://lorineniedecker.org/multimedia/ or scan the QR code.

Contributors

Jenny Penberthy's research and writing have focused on the poetry of Lorine Niedecker. She edited Niedecker's poems—*New Goose* (Listening Chamber, 2003), *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works* (University of California Press, 2002), and *Harpsichord & Salt Fish* (Pig Press, 1991)—and her letters—*Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofsky 1931-1970* (Cambridge University Press, 1993)—along with a collection of essays and letters, *Lorine Niedecker: Woman & Poet* (National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1996). In 2016 she edited *Kenneth Cox: The Art of Language* for Flood Editions in Chicago. Currently, she is working on a collection of previously unpublished Niedecker letters and on a book about Fulcrum Press.

Kate Colby's nine books of poetry and essays include *Fruitlands* (Litmus Press, 2006); *Beauport* (Litmus Press, 2010); *The Return of the Native* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2011); *Blue Hole* (Furniture Press, 2015); *I Mean* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2015); *The Arrangements*, (Four Way, 2018); and most recently *Thingking* (Factory Hollow Press, 2024). She grew up in Massachusetts, where she helped found and establish the Gloucester Writers Center, and currently lives in Providence. "I have written at length about Oppen, Creeley, Stein, Olson, William Carlos Williams and other adjacent poets, so writing about Niedecker was overdue. I grew up in New England, which shapes and deeply informs my work, so I have a particular interest in other poets who write less *about* than *from* place."

In addition to Three Fictions Out Loud, Milwaukee actor and Theater X founding member **Flora Coker** has provided readings of 'Paean to Place' and 'Wintergreen Ridge.' These may be found on the Friends of Lorine Niedecker website. In 2003 she directed a presentation of 'Next Year or I Fly My Rounds Tempestuous,' Domestic and Unavoidable,' and 'The President of the Holding Company' for the Niedecker Centenary conference at the Milwaukee Public Library. She presented a staged reading of 'Paean to Place' for Kathy Kuehn's exhibition "Close Reading" at the Chazen Museum in 2016. In 2023 she read 'Wintergreen Ridge' onsite at the Ridges Sanctuary in Bailey's Harbor for our 'Very Veery' Lorine Niedecker Week in Wisconsin. Her readings are distinguished for their clarity and distinctive voice.

Karl Gartung (with Anne Kingsbury and Karl Young) was a founder of Woodland Pattern Book Center. He has counted Lorine Niedecker as a central influence since he first read her in 1976. Her writing inspired many programs at Woodland Pattern, including the Niedecker Centenary celebration and mounting her poems "Traces of Living Things" and "Black held: In reason" on the walls at the Wisconsin Center (now Baird Center) in Milwaukee. He is the author of *Now That Memory Has Become So Important* (MWPH, 2008).

What Region?

What Region? is a monograph series produced by the Friends of Lorine Niedecker and Woodland Pattern, with additonal funding from anonymous donors. Previous *What Regions?* can be read online at www.lorineniedecker.org/whatregion

Upcoming:

What Region? 5.1: Where the Arrows of the Road Signs Lead Us: Field Notes, 'Wintergreen Ridge,' City Point Press, Woodland Pattern, and the Friends of Lorine Niedecker

Previous:

What Region? 1.1: Lorine Niedecker's Century 1903–2003 by Jenny Penberthy; The text of a public lecture given at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater on 8 May 2003, a few days before the 100th anniversary of Niedecker's birth (on 12 May 1903).

What Region? 1.2: Increase Lapham and Lorine Niedecker by Martha Bergland and Paul Hayes; The text of a paper delivered at the Lorine Niedecker Wisconsin Poetry Festival on 11 October 2014 detailing the historical background of 19th century Wisconsin naturalists Increase Lapham, Asa Gray, and James Percival and contextualizing their appearance in two short Niedecker poems.

What Region? 2.1: Lorine Niedecker: The Poet In Her Place by David Wilk; Recounts the author's long engagement with the poetry of Lorine Niedecker, including the circumstances surrounding his editing of a special issue of the literary magazine Truck in the Summer of 1975 dedicated to Niedecker.

What Region? 3.1: Lorine Niedecker in Spain by Natalia Carbajosa; Discusses the author's experiences translating Niedecker's highly-compressed, exceptionally musical poetry from English to Spanish.

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