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Knox, Jane Shaw

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Lorine Niedecker

an original biography
by
Jane Shaw Knox



Lorine Niedecker

British views:

"Lorine Niedecker is the best living poetess. No one is so subtle with so few words."

—Basil Bunting

"America's finest woman poet since Emily Dickinson."

—B. Evan Owen

An American view:

"Lorine Niedecker is one of the best poets period — living or dead, male or female."

—Jonathan Williams

This edition of Jane Knox's biographical essay on Lorine Niedecker was reviewed and annotated by Gail Roub at the request of Mrs. Knox, who wrote it sixteen years ago, shortly after Lorine's death. Roub and his wife, Bonnie, were close friends of Lorine during the last seven years of her life and have assisted several scholars in their research on Lorine's life and poetry. Except for the picture of Mrs. Knox, most of the photographs shown here are from the Roubs' collection. The two of the Niedecker houses are by Karl Gartung.

Lorine's great friend, the poet Cid Corman whom she named as literary executor, granted permission for the use of Lorine's poetry in this booklet.

May 12, 1987

(Lorine Niedecker's 84th birthday)



Jane Shaw Knox

Dedication

The Board of Trustees of the Dwight Foster Public Library, with appreciation, admiration, respect and love, dedicate this biography to Jane Shaw Knox, the author of Lorine Nie-decker's first biography.

In 1971, Jane became intrigued with the exceptional talent of Lorine Niedecker and began intensive and extensive research into the life of this now internationally-acclaimed poet. Her biography was first presented to a study group, The Tuesday Club, in Fort Atkinson in April 1971. Since then, subsequent biographers, here and abroad, have drawn on this original paper as the foundation of their expanded works.

Mrs. Knox gave of her talents to our Dwight Foster Library over a span of 19 years. As a trustee and officer of the Board, she provided leadership in the design, funding, and building of the major addition to our library in 1983. Her effective leadership was vital to the formation of the Jefferson County Planning Committee in 1978 and then the Jefferson County Library Service in 1980. Her colleagues, admiring her devotion to excellent library services, elected her chairman of each. She then led the county into the Mid-Wisconsin Federated Library System. She was elected vice-president, then president of the Federated Board. Later, in 1983, she was named to the Wisconsin Library Trustees Board.

In all these years, Jane's intelligence, diplomacy and dedication have been exemplary in quiet, but highly effective, leadership. The citizens of our city, county, region and state have been . . . are . . . and will be . . . the beneficiaries of her unselfish devotion and service.

Dwight Foster Public Library Board of Trustees

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Maxine B. Meyer, Vice-President



Poet of place . . . Lorine Niedecker beside her beloved Rock River on Blackhawk Island, summer of 1967. The lines on facing page are from the long poem "Wintergreen Ridge," which she considered her best, according to a letter to Cid Corman.

Nobody, nothing
ever gave me
greater thing

than time
unless light
and silence

which if intense
makes sound



The only child . . . of Henry and Theresa (Daisy) Kunz Niedecker, Lorine had identified this photo with "LN — Born 1903."

Lorine Niedecker

by Jane Shaw Knox

Lorine Faith Niedecker was born on May 12, 1903, to Henry and Theresa (Daisy) Kunz Niedecker.¹ Delivered by Dr. Frank Brewer in the cottage just east of the Fountain House (Blackhawk Island, Route 3, Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin), she was named Lorine for the doctor's wife. Her maternal grandparents, the G. C. Kunzes, owned and ran the Fountain House Hotel (subsequently run by her parents for a time and taken over in 1925 by Edward H. Pfafflin).

Lorine was an only child and, like her mother before her, one of the few youngsters living year round on Blackhawk Island. Tiny and blond, she would present herself at the doors of other cottages as "Weenie Koonie Niedecker." No one remembers her without thick glasses which required her to tilt her head to bring into focus anything or anybody not on eye level.

She had a lonely childhood and learned to love the outdoors. Growing up on a river where it empties into a lake (Koshkonong), "it seems" she was to write some fifty years later, "I spent my childhood outdoors — red-winged blackbirds, willows, maples, boats, fishing (the smell of tarred nets), twittering and squawking noises from the marsh." She always remembered "a happy, outdoor grandfather who

¹ Pronounced *nee-decker*. The traditional family pronunciation probably caused Lorine to change the spelling, formerly *Neidecker*, to leave no doubt about the pronunciation. It appears as *Neidecker* on all records at Jefferson County Courthouse until Lorine's first marriage in 1928, when she used the spelling *Niedecker*. The old form, *Neidecker*, appears on the grave markers of Lorine and her parents at Union Cemetery.

somehow, somewhere had got hold of nursery and folk rhymes to entrance me" and her mother "speaking whole chunks of down-to-earth magic." Since Lorine's mother was hard of hearing from the time her daughter was born, there could not have been a normal amount of communication between them. They were, nevertheless, very close — and in personality traits Lorine resembled her mother, rather than her robust, gregarious, fun-loving father who seined carp for a living.

When it came time for the little girl to go to school, the Niedeckers took a house on the corner of what was then Germany Street (now Riverside Drive) and Shirley Street in Fort Atkinson. Lorine walked a bit over a mile to Caswell School — a sweet, shy, likable, studious child with blond pigtailed and thick-lensed glasses. She was learning to play the piano rather well, had a good ear for music. In fourth grade, she sang the part of the fairy godmother in the operetta Cinderella (Harriet Westphal Vance was Cinderella — and still has the dress Lorine wore), was later to write a friend ". . . in the





Next of kin . . . Henry, Lorine, age 10, and Daisy in July 1913. Facing page, at left, Grandpa Niedecker and his first wife, Amelia, who died in California, and Grandpa Kunz, "who somehow, somewhere had got hold of nursery and folk rhymes to entrance me," wrote the poet.

early grades, a teacher told me I'd be a 'noted singer'! . . ." By the time she was in fifth and sixth grades, she was bringing bird books to school, spending recess time and walking time identifying birds and learning their songs and habits. A Campfire Girl, she earned her torchbearer rank in nature lore (particularly birds).

When Lorine was ready for seventh grade — seventh through twelfth met in the senior high school at the time — Hank and Daisy Niedecker moved back to Blackhawk Island, and Lorine stayed during the week with Charlie (blacksmith) and Barbara Bowen, also on Riverside Drive.

Fine-boned, always thin, Lorine grew to medium height. Adequately dressed and neatly pigtailed, she cultivated the intelligence which was to shine through her poetry later. While other girls were developing and practicing maidenly wiles, Lorine divided free moments at school among studying, writing, and reading in the library. A bona fide intellectual, she was naive. Shy, she was nevertheless fervent in defense of a cause she believed in. She had a delightful sense of humor, uncompromising honesty, and a curiosity which enabled her to ask questions in complete unselfconsciousness. Always, of necessity, her head was at the angle needed to peer through thick glasses.

As long as she remained in school, mathematics was her unfavorable subject. However, since she was an honor student, she must have done well enough in what math courses she was required to take. Her strongest subject was English, and, a year or so into high school, she encountered the English teacher whose understanding and encouragement



Lorine . . . at age 9?

firmed her resolve to be a poet. Indeed, if it had not been for Miss Daisy Lieberman, she might have considered a career challenging enough to keep her from "scribblin," as she termed her literary efforts. As she was later to write:

Grandfather
advised me:
Learn a trade

I learned
to sit at a desk
and condense

No layoff
from this
condensery

and, as for her father:

To bankers on high land
he opened his wine tank
He wished his only daughter
to work in the bank

But he'd given her a source
to sustain her—
a weedy speech
a marshy retainer

Toward the end of her life, Lorine was to write a friend: ". . . I wonder if Miss Lieberman who must have married is still alive and would want a copy of the book (*North Central*). Funny how I think now of the old days — what influences in a person's life — not only the Place [Blackhawk Island] in mine but somebody like Daisy Lieberman . . ." Unfortunately, Miss Lieberman (Mrs. Arnold Maxwell) had died before the publication of *North Central*.

With sixty-nine others, Lorine Niedecker graduated from the Fort Atkinson high school in the class of 1922. By all accounts — and especially according to fellow members of that group — that was quite a class. The 1922 yearbook *Tchogeerah* featured on page 98 what was probably her first break in-

to print, a longish poem entitled "Wasted Energy."

For two years after high school, Lorine attended Beloit College, in the Wisconsin city of that name, where she still exchanged help in English for assistance in math. During this time, her mother became totally deaf, and Lorine felt needed at home — so she went back to her life by water.

In order to in any way understand this remarkable woman, one has to appreciate life on the Island: buildings old before their time because each spring the water rose and came in, people old before *their* time because spring housecleaning meant salvaging and reconditioning and redoing or redecorating, not because they wanted to, but because they had to. Wildlife abounded, though even the rabbits moved to higher ground while humans, if at all possible, sat out the floods. Each front door, during this season, had a boat tied to it for emergency. Snakes were plentiful, too, taken for granted among the myriad swamp life.

River rising — flood
Now melt and leave home
Return — broom wet
naturally wet
Under

soak-heavy rug
water bugs hatched—
no snake in the house
Where were they?—
she

who knew how to clean up
after floods
he who bailed boats, houses
water endows us
with buckled floors

The "he" in this verse, Henry Niedecker, made a good living with his launch and two scows. The carp he seined were shipped to New York, and one year he made such a fantastic haul that, when his nets froze to shore, it appeared as if the entire riverbank were made of the big yellow fish.

"Paean to Place," from which those and the following stan-



“he seined for carp . . . to be sold that their daughter might go high on land to learn.” Henry Niedecker is remembered by Lorine in several poems, notably “Paeon to Place.”



Lorine and Henry Niedecker, 1912.

zas are quoted, Lorine described in a letter to Florence Dollase (postmarked August 4, 1969), as a “longish poem which is a kind of *In Memoriam* of my father and mother and the place I’ve never seemed really to get away from. Reviewers esp. in England,” she continued, “confuse Lake Superior with L. Koshkonong-Rock River, but I love both and all waters (except when they come into my house). . .

“Wd. like to see it [*Paeon*] in print in a little book all by itself — a Japanese publisher wants to do it, but it is ‘owned’ by the London man. All my poems are copyrighted by me, but I sometimes don’t know what good it does — the publishers seem to be able to ‘give permission’ or refuse.”

The autobiographical "Paeon to Place" begins as follows:

Paeon to Place

*and the place
was water*

Fish
 fowl
 flood

 Water lily mud
My life

in the leaves and on water
My mother and I
 born
in swale and swamp and sworn
to water

My father
thru marsh fog
 sculled down
 from high ground
saw her face

at the organ
bore the weight of lake water
 and the cold—
he seined for carp to be sold
that their daughter

might go high
on land
 to learn
Saw his wife turn
deaf

and away
She
 who knew boats
 and ropes
no longer played

His wife's deafness may or may not have caused the rift, but, in their daughter's mind, this was the turning point in her parents' life together, and Henry's subsequent philandering is seen in several of the poems — most of them compassionate, as if he had a blind spot, but the one below showing the bitterness of the wife.

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.

The thought that stings. How are you, Nothing,
sitting around with Something's wife.
 Buzz and burn
 is all I learn
I've spent my life on nothing.

I'm pillowed and padded, pale and puffing
lifting household stuffing—
 carpets, dishes
 benches, fishes
I've spent my life in nothing.

From May 1928 through August 1930, Lorine Niedecker worked at the Dwight Foster Public Library, Fort Atkinson, as library assistant. During the week, until after Thanksgiving, she stayed in town with the Roland Hartel family, Roland being the son of her mother's sister. Weekends were spent at home on the island.

On Thanksgiving Day, 1928, Lorine's first marriage took place — and shortly dissolved. Since both parties are gone, we can know for sure only that they were incompatible. She may have taken for granted that, since he had been raised on a farm not far from her beloved swamp and was perhaps similar to her father in outward characteristics, he was the one for her. And the young man, no doubt, expected his bride to place complete emphasis on domesticity, neglecting the

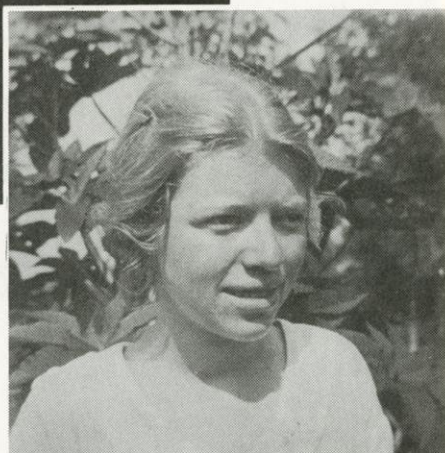


Lorine's mother, Daisy . . . is the subject of poem on facing page. Though deaf, mother was close to Lorine, who told Bonnie Roub that they communicated by writing notes.

poetry he may not even have known about and related intellectual pursuits.²



Lorine Niedecker
at Beloit College, 1924,
above; at right, Lorine
about 1918.



² According to Frank Hartwig's brother, Ernest, Frank was a gentle person who had met Lorine when he worked for her father, Henry, on his carp-seining operation. As newlyweds, Frank and Lorine lived in a small house on Garfield Street in Fort Atkinson and were unable to meet the payments when Frank lost his construction job in 1929. In 1930, they broke up housekeeping and returned to their separate parental homes. They remained friendly and saw each other occasionally, but Lorine did not file for divorce until 1942. Ernest described Frank as "easy-going" and believed Frank would "not have interfered with Lorine and her poetry."

In 1931, she was profoundly influenced by the February issue of *Poetry* (Chicago), edited by Louis Zukofsky, who became the major poetic influence of her life.

In 1936, *New Directions* first published her work, five short verses, including

For sun and moon and radio
farmers pay dearly
their natural resource: turn
the world off early.

and, in the summer of 1939, *Furioso* published:

We know him — Law and Order League —
fishing from our dock,
testified against the pickets
at the plant — owns stock.

There he sits and fishes
stiff as if a stork
brought him, never sprang from work—
a sport.

In 1942, she was writing radio scripts for WHA in Madison. (WHA has no record confirming this, although H. B. McCarty remembers the name.)

On May 8, 1944, she went to work for Hoard's Dairyman, working for some time on their Junior Club and then becoming a proofreader.

I worked the print shop
right down among 'em
the folk from whom all poetry flows . . .

I was Blondie . . .

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?

In 1946, her first book, *New Goose*, was published in Illinois. It sold for two dollars. Most would be proud to see themselves in print, but the little note stuck in the copy given to Florence Dollase reads:

Dear Florence:

A little book herewith. Since you are one of three to receive it in Fort, I don't know if you should be puffed up or suspicious about something. I have to ask that it be kept mum — folks might put up a wall if they knew ("she writes poetry, queer bird, etc. . . .") and I have to be among 'em to hear 'em talk so I can write some more! Believin' as I do that poetry comes from the folk if it's to be vital and original.

Yours,
Lorine

The *New Goose* on the library shelf is not autographed; nor is it as worn as one might expect after twenty to twenty-five years. Whether or not the library was counted as one of the three recipients, the inside of the wrapper notes:

"She speaks and sings
against all that's
predatory in 'Mother Goose'.
Whatever in it is still to
be touched or felt she
recreates for people today
to feel and touch in her—
their — own way.
Lorine Niedecker is a young
Wisconsin poet whose work
has appeared in *New
Directions*, *Furioso*, and such
discriminating publications. This
is her first book."

And, locally, our poet continued to hide her light in her "swamp" as long as she lived. Only a few were aware of her poetry — and fewer still really appreciated it. Lifelong friends and confidants (several have concurred that no one got really close to her unless he or she had known her for years) did not

necessarily understand her verse, perhaps because she was ahead of her time in the use of new forms and rhythms. Even Albert Millen, whom she married in 1963, did not realize she wrote poetry until the day some time after the wedding that she said, "Look, there's something I ought to tell you. I'm a poet." His reply: "You're . . . a what?"

One word everyone who knew her uses in reference to Lorine Niedecker. That word is "independent." While she worked at Hoard's, she floated a loan and built herself a tiny cottage up on blocks in the swamp just off the road through Blackhawk Island. At this time of year, the little house is in plain sight, as are all of them — but when the leaves are out, the cottages in the Niedecker-Millen enclave are secluded from view. This is expressed so succinctly in

Fall

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

The work at Hoard's held Lorine until June 14, 1950. Toward the end of that time, she remarked that her eyesight was so poor that glasses could no longer completely correct it, but she did not say this complainingly. Along with the reading glass she now used in addition to glasses, it was a fact of life, like her mother's "Big blind ears . . ." and the statement that she herself rose from marsh mud,
algae, equisetum, willows,
sweet green, noisy
birds and frogs . . .

In 1951, Daisy Niedecker died. She had once been happy and loving, quietly hard working — but time and again in the poetry Lorine dwelled on the unhappiness of her mother, trapped by deafness which cut her off from all she loved: her husband, their friends, songs of the birds and other sounds of the outdoors.

I've wasted my whole life in water.
My man's got nothing but leaky boots.
My daughter, writer, sits and floats.

In 1954, Henry Niedecker died. He was 75. He, too, had worked hard, had tried to fill the loneliness caused by the failure of his marriage, probably could not in the least understand his daughter's penchant for poetry.

Anchored here
in the rise and sink
of life—
middle years' nights
he sat

beside his shoes
rocking his chair
Roped not 'looped
in the loop
of her hair'

Had he not been so generous to "friends" and relatives, he should have accumulated quite an estate to leave his daughter. Yet, he left a legacy:

I walked
on New Year's Day

beside the trees
my father now gone planted

evenly following
the road

Each
spoke

Following the death of her father, rumor has it that Lorine had a sort of breakdown. Things outside of her environment and poetry meant absolutely nothing to her, and people had let her down. Her marriage had not worked out, and the family who had loved her, even if they had not completely understood her, was gone. She had one small volume of poetry on the library shelf, but her peers were not impressed.

The following verse reveals how undistinguished she felt:

The clothesline post is set
yet no totem-carvings distinguish the Niedecker tribe
from the rest; every seventh day they wash:
worship sun; fear rain, their neighbors' eyes;
raise their hands from ground to sky,
and hang or fall by the whiteness of their all.

On February 1, 1957, we find her starting work at the Fort Atkinson Memorial Hospital — work classification: dietary position, cleaning. To Lorine, a job was a job — qualifying her eventually for social security, and paying for food and taxes and the purchase of books on Leonardo, Chief Blackhawk, Audubon, Van Gogh, Thomas Jefferson, Charles Darwin — or whomever or whatever she was researching at the time with future poetry in mind. She was frail, yet tough — and determined to conserve what vision she had left. We have to realize, too, that she had never shown particular interest in job advancement — perhaps because a position commensurate with her intelligence and ability might have drawn too heavily on the creative energy she needed for her writing. She wrote more about labor than management, and living as she did — practically a hermit — only her work afforded her the opportunity to be among the people she wrote about.

In 1961, her second book, *My Friend Tree*, was put out by the Wild Hawthorne Press in Edinburgh, Scotland.

The hospital job lasted until she remarried in 1963.

Not far into that year, Albert Millen came to the door of her snug little cottage set high and near the road. He wanted to buy a cabin belonging to her father's cousin, Lawrence Niedecker.

Albert Millen's early life had been spent off the beaten path, a red I.W.W. membership card his pass in "riding the freights"; his middle life he lived in Milwaukee raising a family; and now, alone again and close to retiring, he was seeking a retirement spot away from the city. He was a big, bluff, gregarious outdoor man who had the highest recommendation possible as far as Lorine was concerned: he wanted a

place on her beloved island. Since he was, by trade, a building painter, he saw nothing unusual about her scrubbing floors at the hospital. Minus his right hand, he could understand the handicap she felt with her restricted vision. Her love of books he shared, though not in kind. He still gets lost in science fiction, while she pored over informative and historically significant volumes. She had no car — and he took her places in a luxurious automobile. He offered companionship — and he could share with her something she had thought beyond her reach: a family. He had four grown children and, at that time, a half dozen grandchildren.

They were married May 26, 1963, by Rev. Alban G. Tippins, at St. John's Community Church, and she subsequently wrote:

I knew a clean man
but he was not for me.
Now I sew green aprons
over covered seats. He

wades the muddy water fishing,
falls in, dries his last pay-check
in the sun, smooths it out
in *Leaves of Grass*. He's
the one for me.

The change in Lorine after the wedding gladdened the hearts of all who knew her. Fifty-nine years old, the lifetime loner became gay and light-hearted as Al's "little Lorrie." Hand in hand, they shyly and delightedly called on Lorine's good friends and invited them in return. Al was a good cook and taught Lorine (who, her father's friends agree, "couldn't cook for sour apples"). She took an interest in clothes: Sewing a dress

The need
these closed-in days

to move before you
smooth-draped
and color-elated

in a favorable wind

She amused her friends with tales of her newly-acquired grandchildren, endeared herself to her new family. The Millens lived in a Milwaukee apartment to be close to Al's work. He worked nights, and on many weekends they drove out to Blackhawk Island Saturday morning, returning to the apartment Monday afternoon. They stayed in Al's cabin, learning the vicissitudes of being landlords renting out the two places owned by Lorine.

The Millens made several trips, a new and delightful experience for Lorine, who stuffed the glove compartment with notepads — and was always scribbling as they drove along. Each morning, they left the motel early to see the wildlife, and her husband got a bit exasperated with her at times. He would spot a moose pulling up lily roots — and, by the time



Mrs. Albert Millen . . . Lorine after her second marriage in 1963. Child could be a neighbor or one of her husband's grandchildren.

she looked up, it was gone. And the deer near Grand Marais vanished by the time she got through writing whatever she was jotting down. She pokes wry fun at herself:

I'm sorry to have missed
Sand Lake
My dear one tells me
we did not
We watched a gopher there.

By nine o'clock in the morning, the traffic would have scared away all roadside wildlife, and Lorine would be asleep on the back seat of the car. She might awaken to find a horse tied next to the parked Buick somewhere in South Dakota, her husband and the range rider deep in conversation.

At night, she always arranged a flashlight and pencil and paper on the motel bedstand just in case.

Together they planned and built their retirement home not far off the river, between it and the little cottage of Lorine's. Lorine, says Al, kept insisting the house be built high — and he respected her wishes — and now he wishes he had put it one block higher still.

In 1968, the third book, *North Central*, was published in London. It featured the long poem "Lake Superior," written as the result of one of the Millen trips. The long "Wintergreen Ridge" which concludes the volume should brighten any ecologist's day.

Also, in 1968, Al retired, and they moved out to their home on Blackhawk Island. It was comfortable and convenient, and, when Lorine had a windfall from the sale to the University of Texas of her letters from her mentor Louis Zukofsky (not to be published until after his death), they added a garage which they named the University of Texas.

The two gardened together, he doing most of the vegetable growing and she finding a great outlet in raising flowers, shrubs, and trees. Together they watched the carp swim about them when the water was high, tying up a sturdy wooden boat at their front door to provide emergency high-water transportation. They cooked their meals in partnership, although she was enjoying it and taking over the kitchen more and more. Evenings they often sat watching television, Al with a science fiction book at hand, Lorine with a

hospital-type table across her lap. On the left, her latest interest in books lay open and, at her right, paper and pencil so that she could take notes. She who had earlier written

O my floating life
Do not save love
for things
Throw *things*
to the flood

ruined
by the flood

Leave the new unbought—
all one in the end—

even began to accumulate a few "things." A horn and shell clipper ship, a few mementos of the trips she and Al had made, some paintings (two by Gail Roub), and a growing collection of beautiful books.

When the Millens came to town, they did their errands together; then Al deposited his "little Lorrie" at the library. She would browse among the stacks, examine new books, check out any that particularly appealed to her. Next stop was Gruner's (book store) window. Then she would go in to pick up a volume she had ordered. Marion Gruner remembered her as a "honey," the best customer she had ever had. The last book ordered, according to Miss Gruner, was a beautiful one on Beethoven . . . Ready to go home, Lorine would walk to the tavern on the corner of Sherman and North Main where Al was waiting. She would slip up on a stool for a few minutes, although the only alcoholic like she had was a very occasional late-night "grasshopper."

In 1969, her fourth book came out: *T & G*, published by the Jargon Society, Penland School, Penland, North Carolina, beautifully accompanied by the plant prints of A. Doyle Moore. A grant from the National Council of Arts made this publication possible, and the University of Wisconsin library classifies it under "rare books." Jonathan Williams, director of the Jargon Society, wrote:

"Lorine Niedecker is the most absolute poetess since Emily Dickinson. She shuns the public world, lives, reads, and

writes, very quietly, near the town of Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin, by the Rock River on its way to Lake Koshkonong . . .

"Miss Niedecker is as faithful and recurrent, as beautiful and homely as my favorite peony bush. Every year for over thirty years she has been putting out these blossoms. Perhaps other eyes are ripe for them now?"

Lorine tried painting, writing Frank Brewer (son and namesake of the doctor who had delivered her and for whose mother she had been named) in November of 1969 concerning two small watercolors she was sending him:

" . . . The boats — I don't see the man o'war on Rock River. The other boats were fished up out of subconscious — Milwaukee. For a moment one year I thought I might become an artist. Better stick to my poem-knitting . . ."

Another letter, dated January 19, 1970, gives us an idea of the way she worked, as well as the warm concern bestowed on her friends:

Dear Frank and Annie Laurie:

The winter has had a good cold start. How are you? Drop me a note as to how you are.

Just thought I'd let you know (the enclosed) how I spend the hours from 5:00 to 11:00 mornings (though a poet carries it all around in his head pretty much all the time, such a queer critter he is!).

We are both sticking indoors pretty much — going up to the mailbox today (15 below at 6:00 a.m.) will be my only fresh air.

Keep warm and take care
on sidewalks—
Lorine

Enclosed was her "Thomas Jefferson."

In 1970, her fifth, and last volume in her lifetime, was brought out by a London publishing house. In this 126-page book is her life's work up until 1968. Called *My Life by Water*, it features her "Paeon to Place" which has been quoted so many times in this biography.

During the winter of 1968, Lorine Niedecker Millen was having dizzy spells and headaches and spent ten days in a hospital. Her blood pressure down, she was released and — except for brief periods of illness which caused no alarm — was apparently in, for her, good health. She seldom missed her long morning walk, and, after they retired to the Island, Bonnie Roub once accompanied her during the time when she was waiting for the birth of Roubs' first child.

On December 1, 1970, however, she suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and was unable to communicate vocally after one last, "Al, I don't know what's the matter." When the Campfire Girls carolled at Fort Atkinson's Memorial Hospital just before Christmas, they left her a small tree. Juanita Schreiner, a classmate and longtime friend, had decorated the tree all in natural-looking birds, with a squirrel at its foot. She was certain that Lorine, former Campfire Girl herself, could hear the carolling and see the little tree — though, of course, she could not tell anyone directly.

On December 30, the critically ill patient was ambulated from the local hospital to Madison General Hospital, where she died the next day — her condition complicated by lobar pneumonia.

Lorine Niedecker Millen was buried in a blizzard January 3, 1971, in the Niedecker lot of the Union Cemetery, town of Sumner, by the same Reverend Tippins who had married her and Albert Millen. She lies in the family plot beside her father and mother.

Albert Millen, unable to face visitors at the Hayes Funeral Home and too grief-stricken to attend the burial service, was represented by his son and family. Because of the weather, none of his three daughters could get there, although even the one in Australia wanted to come. All would miss Lorine.

In the box of Niedecker memorabilia loaned by Gail Roub are two manuscripts, one the final version of the long poem "Thomas Jefferson" not included in her five books, but appearing in *Origin* 19, 1970 (Cid Corman, editor), published in Tokyo, Japan. The other manuscript is "Darwin," another long piece which grows on the reader with each rereading.

How many other unpublished works she left I do not know.

She did leave little slips of paper in a chest of her things, instructions for disposal in case of her death.³ Her journals were to be burned immediately — and her husband, respecting her wishes, did so. Gail and Bonnie Roub were to choose any books they wanted, and the remaining ones were bequeathed to the Dwight Foster Public Library in Fort Atkinson. Unpublished manuscripts go to the University of Texas. It was almost, her husband feels, as if she knew her time was short — and a quote from her letter to Florence Dollase bears out this feeling:

(postmarked August 4, 1969)

. . . I suppose we're getting old — thoughts of the past in your mind, too? — but we've both had pretty good lives.

Lorine Niedecker was a poet's poetess. This was, of course, largely her own doing. Like Emily Dickinson, who had an unfortunate love affair at 23 or 24 and spent the remainder of her life as the family recluse, Lorine was — much of her life — a loner. She, no doubt, learned early that writing poetry leaves one open to ridicule from the thoughtless among those who do not understand it. She had few hometown friends not of long standing — and the new ones were arts-oriented people like Gail and Bonnie Roub, the Ron Ellises, Fred Hobe, and Aeneas McAllister — the "boy" (almost thirty years

³ The rest of Lorine Niedecker's poetry first appeared in bookform in *Blue Chicory*, edited by Cid Corman, Elizabeth Press (New Rochelle, N.Y.), 1976. Significantly, this book included two poems that revealed the unhappiness she experienced with Al Millen's sullen alcoholism, a side of him not everyone saw. While it is true that Al brought a kind of security to Lorine's advancing age (her poor eyesight and inability to drive), he also brought her anxieties that may have raised her already threatening blood pressure. She was actually "involved romantically" with two older men — a widowed dentist name Howard Hein (see poem on page 24 that begins "I knew a clean man/but he was not for me") and Al Millen. Whether she actually chose Al is not clear, but, in any case, she did not know of Al's drinking problem until after they were married, and it caused her considerable distress. Al gave her the direct experience of travel, which led to some of her finest poems like "Wintergreen Ridge," and some believe they had a good enough marriage. It is hard to know the truth about this, but the notion that Al Millen was some kind of "diamond in the rough" should be measured against Lorine's own words: "Why can't I be happy / in my sorrow/ my drinking man / today / my quiet / tomorrow."

younger than she) who used to play an old piano in their garage. On winter nights, he'd play with gloves on, just the tips of his fingers out.

Over the years, she acknowledged as teachers primarily William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky. Zukofsky she had "the good fortune to call friend and mentor": without the February 1931 issue of *Poetry* (Chicago), which Zukofsky edited, she felt she'd "never have developed as a poet." A whole section of *My Life by Water* is titled, "For Paul," Zukofsky's son, now a well-known concert violinist.⁴

Basil Bunting's cataract operations she mentioned in correspondence, noting that the first had been a success, and he was going back to England for the second. Cid Corman, editor of *Origin* (Kyoto), and his wife stayed two nights at the Blackhawk Hotel, Fort Atkinson, in November of 1970 and spent the day in between out at Millens on the Island. She had entertained Jonathan Williams at lunch in Milwaukee when he came on a poetry-reading engagement at UW-Milwaukee and Madison.

I do not understand all of her poetry, and I have lived with it for about three months now. Whole chunks of her life are still undocumented — and perhaps always will be. Bantam Books, according to the Wisconsin State Journal, will be bringing out a book of her poetry next year. I have written Blackwells in Oxford, England, to see if there are any copies of *My Life by Water* available — but they have been having another postal strike, and no answer has come to date.

⁴ Lorine Niedecker lived in New York City for several months in 1934. During that time, she formed a lifelong relationship with Louis Zukofsky, the chief poet of the Objectivist school and the person who most profoundly affected her life and work. Although she tested most of her poetry against Zukofsky's critical judgment (her heavily edited letters to LZ are at the University of Texas), there is reason to believe that she later eased away from the strong influence of Zukofsky and departed to some extent from "holding to the hard line" of his style. She always held him in the highest regard and was depressed when he first gave his consent, then resisted her wish, to place their correspondence at Texas. Whatever may have happened to their relationship, she seemed in the final years of her life to move into a more liberated beauty of language and was deeply involved in celebrating the lives of such great people as Thomas Jefferson and Charles Darwin. As the influence of Zukofsky may have waned, her friendship and correspondence with Cid Corman took flight and provided the delight of her last ten years. Her letters to Corman may be found in *Between Your House and Mine*, edited by Lisa Pater Faranda (see Bibliography, page 38).

Before closing, let me quote a few short statements by authorities on verse concerning the work of Lorine Niedecker:

These beautiful poems can only have come from the gift and certainties of a beautiful mind . . .

In a day when a goodly portion of poetry runs the gamut of tastelessness, one comes to Miss Niedecker's poems with special delight. Wisconsin can be proud of her.

—Sister Therese Lentfochr (Poet and
Assoc. Prof. of English — St. Paul
College, Waukesha)

Lorine Niedecker is the best living poetess. No one is so subtle with so few words.

—Basil Bunting

The prevailing mood of the poems is alert calm . . . It is . . . as if one were in the presence of a close relative from whom little is hid and to whom little needs to be explained . . . The poems of Lorine Niedecker leave the reader in peace.

—Kenneth Cox
Cambridge Quarterly, Spring 1969

Lorine Niedecker is the most absolute poetess since Emily Dickinson . . . She is in the best realist tradition and uses a plain, rustic line . . .

—Jonathan Williams

Verbal economy and absolute rightness of every word in its place . . . her poems say more in two or three lines than many poets achieve in the same number of stanzas . . . America's finest woman poet since Emily Dickinson.

—B. Evan Owen (Oxford Mail)

And a word from Lorine herself after she had experimented with poetry reading, recording the session and playing it back:

. . . I like planting poems in deep silence; each person gets at the poems for himself. He has to come to the poems with an ear for all the music they can give, and he'll hear that as Beethoven heard tho deaf . . .

Forty poets have been invited to contribute a verse apiece to an epitaph booklet for their fellow poet. This will not be

available for some time, but let me close with the one Jonathan Williams himself has offered:

An Epitaph for Lorine Niedecker (1903-1970)

she seined words
as other stars
or carp

laconic as
a pebble
in the Rock River

along the bank
where the peony flowers
fall

her tall friend
the pine tree
is still there
to see



Photo of least bittern . . . taken by Naturalist Merl Deusing on Blackhawk Island and given to Lorine.

Acknowledgments

Jane Knox gave special thanks to the following at the time she first presented her biographical essay on Lorine Niedecker:

Florence Abernethy, a childhood friend of Lorine's. Florence even wrote her sister to try to get more information.

Frank Brewer, who loaned two letters, two small paintings, and a manuscript, "Thomas Jefferson."

Florence Dollase, classmate and lifelong friend of Lorine, who loaned me *New Goose*, handwritten "Paeon to Place," and a letter.

Marion Gruner, who ordered books for Lorine.

Maude Hartel, wife of Lorine's first cousin, longtime close family friend of Lorine and her mother.

Katherine Kunz, who told me about Maude Hartel.

Albert Millen, who was kind enough to talk with me, despite his obvious distress at having lost his wife.

Gail Roub, who got me started thinking about this subject years ago and loaned me books, quarterlies, clippings, manuscripts and letters.

Stanley Schafer, Henry Niedecker's banker.

Juanita Schreiner, lifelong friend of Lorine.

Harriet Vance, who went through school here and at Beloit with Lorine.

Allan Vosburg, nephew of Anna Ramsey, Lorine's best friend in high school.

And particularly my family, but also friends, who have tolerated my preoccupation and rejoiced (or been polite enough to pretend to) when I got an unexpected "breakthrough."

And thanks to the Daily Jefferson County Union, the Dwight Foster Public Library, the Hoard Historical Museum, Fort Atkinson Memorial Hospital records department, Radio Station WHA and Claire Kentzler, the Alumni Office of Beloit College, and the Records Room of UW-Madison and the UW Extension Dept.

Chronology

—Permission of Lisa Pater Faranda—

- 12 May 1903 Lorine Faith Niedecker born to Henry (Hank) and Theresa (Daisy) Kunz, Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin.
- June 1922 Is graduated from Fort Atkinson High School.
- Sept. 1922-23 Attends Beloit College, Beloit, Wisconsin.
- May 1928 Works as librarian's assistant at the Dwight
-August 1930 Foster Public Library in Fort Atkinson.
- 29 Nov. 1928 Marries Frank Hartwig. By 1930, they have permanently separated; Niedecker returns to her parents' home.
- 1931 Niedecker reads Zukofsky's Objectivist issue of *Poetry* and, six months later, writes him, initiating their long-term correspondence.
- 1934 Niedecker goes to New York to meet Louis Zukofsky.
- 1938-1942 Lives in Madison, Wisconsin, and works as writer, then research editor for the Federal Writers' Project, producing the *Wisconsin Guide*. Works briefly as a radio scriptwriter for WHA.
- 1942 Returns to Blackhawk Island; files for a divorce from Frank Hartwig.
- 1946 *New Goose* published.
- 8 May 1944- Proofreader at Hoard's, publisher of *Hoard's*
14 June 1950 *Dairyman*. Has her own house built on the banks of the Rock River.
- 1947 Visits the Zukofskys in New York.
- July 1951 Daisy Niedecker dies.
- Xmas 1953 Visits the Zukofskys in New York
- 1954 Henry Niedecker dies.
- 1 Feb. 1957- Works at Fort Atkinson Memorial Hospital
late 1963 cleaning kitchens.

- 1961 *My Friend Tree* published.
- 26 May 1963 Marries Albert Millen, moves to Milwaukee by March 1964.
- Summer 1965 Trip to South Dakota.
- April 1966 *Origin*, ser. 3, no. 2 (July 1966), features Niedecker.
- 8 Feb. 1967 Jonathan Williams visits.
- July 1967 Basil Bunting visits.
- Summer 1967 Trip to Copper Harbor.
- May 1968 Meets the Zukofskys in Madison, Wisconsin.
- July 1968 Trip to Minnesota and North Dakota.
- Dec. 1968 *North Central* published.
- Aug. 1968 Retires permanently to Blackhawk Island.
- 1969 *T&G* published.
My Life by Water published.
- 15 Nov. 1970 Cid and Shizumi Corman visit.
- 31 Dec. 1970 Lorine (Faith) Niedecker dies.
- 1981 *Origin*, ser. 4 no. 16 (July 1981), features Niedecker.
- 1983 *Selected Letters of Lorine Niedecker to Cid Corman* published, edited by Lisa Pater Faranda.
- Oct. 1985 *The Granite Pail* published, edited by Cid Corman.
- Nov. 1985 *From This Condensery* published, edited by Robert Bertholf.
- 1986 *Between Your House and Mine* published, letters of Lorine Niedecker to Cid Corman, edited by Lisa Pater Faranda.
- Feb. 1987 Received Banta Award for *From This Condensery*, Wisconsin Library Association.

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Compiled by Lisa Pater Faranda, Assistant Professor of English,
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Papers:

Niedecker's letters to Cid Corman are in the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library; the manuscripts for the unpublished collection "Harpichord and Salt Fish" are in the Mugar Memorial Library at Boston University; the correspondence between Niedecker and Zukofsky and miscellaneous materials are at the Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas at Austin.



Tiny cottage . . . where Lorine lived for about twenty years before her marriage to Albert Millen in 1963. Photo by Karl Gartung.

'Niedecker' is also a play

Kristine Thatcher, an actress with the Milwaukee Repertory Theater, has written a play about the last years of Lorine Niedecker, when she was creating some of her most important poetry and when she met and married Albert Millen.

Thatcher was assigned to write the play after the artistic director of the Milwaukee "Rep" heard about Niedecker from Karl Gartung, a Milwaukee poet and bookseller who has been one of Niedecker's greatest promoters in Wisconsin (two of Gartung's photographs of the Niedecker-Millen houses are shown on pages 40 and 43).

The play, a charming combination of Niedecker's poetry and events in her later life — "in a handful of beautifully crafted scenes," wrote Edward Hayman in *The Detroit News* — is flawed in two important ways, both due to the playwright's inability to find all the facts before she wrote the play. She telephoned the Roubs but did not connect, and they tried to return her call, so Thatcher and the Roubs did not actually meet until after the play was written.

The first error, considered serious by Gartung, portrays Lorine as so modest that she did not really attempt to find publishers for her poetry. The truth: She always recognized her great gifts, feared being overlooked, and actually maintained a correspondence with important poets and publishers on three continents. Gartung feels this flaw emphasizes a widespread public notion that artists are childish about business affairs — certainly not true of Lorine.

The second flaw, less serious and more open to interpretation, is the portrayal of Al Millen as a kind of diamond in the rough. For another opinion, see footnote 3, page 30.

By the time Thatcher learned of these "wrong turns," the play had been written and would have required so much re-

writing that she concluded she would have to write a new play. She has since revised some of the lines, but the original play remains essentially unchanged.

After several public readings, *Niedecker* had its first full-scale production at the Boars Head Theater in Lansing, Mich., in January 1986. Coincidentally, the play was first heard in Fort Atkinson, February 2, 1986, at a Hoard Museum reading performed by the Fort Atkinson Arts Council. The four parts were read by Carolyn Bodensteiner (Lorine), Bob Fixmer (Al), Jean Sundt (Ginny) and Mary Jane Drews (Mary).

The play ran for three weeks in March 1987 as a full production of the Milwaukee Repertory Theater at the Court Street Theater in Milwaukee. Barbara Simpson, Ruth Schudson, Edgar Meyer and Sara Chasen played the parts of Lorine, Ginny, Al and Mary. Ginny and Mary are fictional inventions of the playwright.

Barbara Simpson became so involved with Lorine's work and personality that she drove out to Fort Atkinson with her husband on the last day of the play's run, toured Blackhawk Island, and visited Lorine's grave before returning to Milwaukee for the final performance that night.

—GR



Setting of the play . . . All scenes in play 'Niedecker' take place in this cottage built by Albert Millen and Lorine after their marriage. Cottage is about fifty feet closer to river than one shown on page 40. Photo by Karl Gartung.

Excerpts from letters by Lorine Niedecker . . .

On the material simplicity of her life . . .

A winter evening in Wisconsin — I arrived home against a 50-mile icy west wind with a scarf tied over my face to find my oil barrel almost dry and my cistern pump in the kitchen frozen. I looked in my drinking water pail and hardly a drop there, so I turned around and went to the folks with two pails, one for soft water and one for hard. Coming back, the water splashed out, and it was like standing up on the deck of a ship in a storm. My house was 46, and I turned up the heat. I went out to tip the barrel and turn on the faucet and hold the oil can under all three things with two hands in the wind and squeezed out enough oil for the night. Supper was partaken with boots and scarf on. When it got up to 60 . . . I started to clean house . . . I kept warm working.

—from a letter to Louis Zukofsky,
March 6, 1950

On her awareness of nature around her . . .

Rainy day with yellow warblers and wild canaries glinting about. All my bushes are in bloom now, honeysuckle, dogwood and Japanese Quince, to say nothing of a lawn full of dandelions . . . I have my kitchen casement window open. A tree near it gives me some wonderful music sometimes — right now it's a Baltimore Oriole, and the sounds seems tunneled in. You'd swear the bird was in the kitchen. Singularly pure, as Henry James would say . . . Fireflies at night, brilliant flash this year, atomic, I guess.

—from two letters to Louis Zukofsky,
May and June, 1952

Glenna Breslin, official biographer of Lorine Niedercker, believes the following paragraph by Lorine may be the most significant comment she made about her own work:

Much taken up with how to define a way of writing poetry which is not Imagist nor Objectivist fundamentally nor Surrealism alone — Stella Leonardos of Brazil senses something when I loosely called it “reflections” or as I think it over now, reflective, maybe. The basis is direct and clear — what has been seen or heard, etc. . . . — but something gets in, overlays all that to make a state of consciousness . . . 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. Not surprising, since modern poetry and old poetry, if it’s good, proceeds not from one point to the next linearly but in a circle. The tone of the thing. And awareness of everything influencing everything. Early in life I looked back of our buildings to the lake and said, “I am what I am because of all this — I am what is around me — those woods have made me . . .” I used to feel that I was goofing off unless I held only to the hard, clear image, the thing you could put your hand on, but now I dare do this reflection. For instance, *Origin* will have a narrow, longish poem, sensuous, begins “My life/in water” and ends “of the soft/and serious—/Water” . . .

—from a letter to Gail Roub,
June 20, 1967

Cid Corman remembers Lorine

Her voice had a brittleness, largely of age, I think; it would've been sweeter altogether in earlier years. Even so, her gentleness and concern come through in the short recording I made of her, fortunately, so soon before her death.

She was small and slight, but taller than Shizumi — of course.* There was an accent betraying a non-urban existence — though Fort Atkinson is not a farming community — nor is the Blackhawk Island region she lived in — right on the lake. It almost seems like summer resort country — for those who might like inland fishing — and quiet.

Her style was neat, unaggressive without being timid or diffident. She knew what she felt and what she wanted, but she would not impose either feeling or desire on others.

Her poems are often "literary"; that is, related to her reading — but they never are merely intellectual or abstract. You can feel her delight in the experiences of others and especially the language in which experiences have been touched and realized. She has an exquisite ear for detail. Every word is *lived*. You can feel her in them. She culls them. This is provender.

She had ample cause to be selfpitying and bitter, but her letters to me show no trace of either qualification. Her complaints, when they occur, and only rarely do they occur, are clearly hard wrung and never in excess of provocation. She is unusually well-balanced in her judgments and perspicacious and particular. She is both unpredictable and characteristic. She has learned from others, but projects her own music and her own realizations. There is no sense of complacency.

She is utterly without moralizing. She is never petty. Her warmth of relation to living and dead is pervasive. It is impossible not to love her. I never saw her handwriting — with its immaculate clear modest script — without at once feeling a twinge of pleasure — at whatever she was to say. I always anticipated some shared delight, or pain — which is never unalloyed. She didn't oversimplify, but she never merely decorated. Her haiku-like brief poems are as fine as any short poems of our or any time.

Though there are inevitable preferences for each reader, there are no poems in her *Collected Poems* (Fulcrum) that

* Cid Corman, an American poet, lives in Kyoto, Japan, with his wife, Shizumi.



'Before goodbye of all we know' . . . This photo of Lorine was taken in Gail Roub's living room on Blackhawk Island three years before her death.

don't provide more than a modicum of spiritual nourishment.

She is never mystical, and yet one feels a certain awe at times, a profound givenness to the mysteries. Most often she reverts to some natural relation, to water or work or plans or animals or acquaintances, books and news, the sense of locality.

It aches me yet — her absence. When a new book of mine appears, I keep wanting to send her a copy — for no one seems ever to have drawn so much from them — though she never was given to flattery or exaggeration. Poetry was her life, and her life remains for us as poetry — thanks to her magnanimous gift.

Kyoto, Japan
17 May 1974

Notes



Dwight Foster Public Library, Fort Atkinson, Wis. 53538

