

LORINE NIEDECKER'S CENTURY
1903-2003

JENNY PENBERTHY

*I sent University of Wisconsin
Milwaukee 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?*

–LN in her December 7, 1969
letter to Cid Corman

WHAT REGION?

1.1 *Lorine Niedecker's Century 1903-2013*

1.2 *Increase Lapham & Lorine Niedecker*

LORINE NIEDECKER'S CENTURY 1903-2003

JENNY PENBERTHY

*The text of a public lecture given at the
University of Wisconsin-Whitewater
8 May 2003*

When I first proposed the title for this talk, “Niedecker’s Century 1903-2003,”¹ I had in mind Niedecker’s centennial. Certainly a reason to celebrate. Since then the meaning has shifted in my mind towards sovereignty: Niedecker’s Century, hers, the century *defined* by Niedecker. It’s a wonderfully large assertion, one that among other things confronts the miniature scale in which she has often been viewed. I imagine “Niedecker’s Century” as the slogan for city banners lining the streets of the state capital. According to British composer Sir Harrison Birtwistle, Lorine Niedecker “is officially recognized by the State of Wisconsin as its greatest poet.”² Given this internationally acknowledged status, street banners are certainly in order.

I've spoken before about the tendency for Niedecker's work to be read in miniaturizing terms.³ It is certainly true that most of her poems are short; that she herself was slightly built and modest; that she lived her life within a circumscribed geography. Here are two among many recollections: the first by Mary Oppen who met Niedecker in New York in the 1930s, "New York was overwhelming, and [Niedecker] was alone, a tiny, timid, small-town girl. She escaped the city and returned to Wisconsin [H]er poetry emerged from a tiny life. From Wisconsin came perfect small gems of poetry ... from the crevices of her life"⁴ Then George Oppen writing to a friend in 1963: "[Niedecker] ... must be 60 now; a tiny little person, very, very near sighted always. She had graduated from Wisconsin but was too timid to face almost any job. She took a job scrubbing floors in a hospital near the run-down farm she inherited, and is still living in that crumbling farmhouse and scrubbing floors. Someone in Scotland printed a tiny little book of her poems, which are little barely audible poems, not without loveliness"⁵ These ill-considered and inaccurate comments parallel the minimizing early commentary about Emily Dickinson: "a plain, shy little person" (Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 1891), "a little home-keeping person" (John Crowe Ransom, 1956), etc. The Oppens' portraits need to be set alongside Niedecker's statements that suggest the far-from-miniature scale of her literary ambitions. She told Bob Nero in 1967 that she dreamed "of an ease of speech that takes in the universe" and Ezra Pound in 1934 that as a reader of poetry "one seeks an extension of one's own wit to comprehend the head ... has no business to do anything but reel." She wrote to Jonathan Williams in 1965, "A good winter anyhow—in one word: Melville. Benito Cereno, The Encantadas, Moby Dick, followed by DH Lawrence and Charles Olson on that vastness. I feel nothing less than a reforming of my elements." In the era of moon-landings, she wrote to

Bob Nero, "How's my fellow astronaut of inner space?" She had no mythologizing illusions about space travel; citing Einstein, she said: "... space / is what it's made up of".⁶

Romantic transcendence held no appeal for Niedecker. Her exploratory gaze is more typically turned towards the ground.

A student
my head always down
of the grass as I mow
I missed the cranes.

"These crayons fly
in a circle ahead"
said a tall fellow.

(Collected Works, 220-21)

She is a student of the grass at the expense of witnessing the soaring cranes overhead, but the short-sighted speaker can delight in the alternative experience of the cranes' flight framed in quirky language.

Yes, she's a student of grass, of the micro—and much of it would literally be viewed through a magnifying glass—but the close focus of her work is by no means an accommodation to short-sightedness, a shrinking of scale. Collapsing and expanding perspectives—often to the point of incongruity—held great appeal for Niedecker. Here's a letter she wrote to Edward Dahlberg in 1956: "I wish I could do the birds, worms, plants of my little plot of earth here in the manner of the first explorers landing in Virginia and with my own human setting, mental furnishing, etc. ... all the Greeks, your Bible people, everyone and all ideas strained, pointed to this. I might get 8 lines!"

True to Objectivist theory, she would want to present the particulars of her place while evoking a large and rich history.

I want to address more specifically Niedecker's relation to her part of the world, what she called "North Central." "The Brontes had their moors, I have my marshes," is a strong statement of literary belonging. On my first visit to Blackhawk Island with Gail Roub and Milo Jones in 1996, I learned from the proprietor of the Fountain House Inn (at one time owned and run by Lorine's parents, Henry and Daisy) that Niedecker had been a "river rat." Those able to endure the rigours of life on Blackhawk Island earned the unflattering label of "river rats." Niedecker's attachments to the place ran deep despite the routine flooding and submersion that brought water and dirt into her home. For all the challenges, she clearly revered the place. "I am what I am because of all this—I am what is around me," she told Gail Roub in 1967. Her extended "Paeon to Place," a poem of praise to the god of poetry, is located in "swale and swamp," "sworn to water," saturated rather than soaring. A letter to Zukofsky in 1950 gives a strong sense of the contradictory appeal:

The flood is subsiding and maybe the monsoon has passed. The birds and animals came close, practically inside the house because on two sides I had only a couple of feet of land. A flood in the summer here is like a tropical jungle. The Amazon flowed through just in front of my thick growth of dogwood. Here a large (very fat) muskrat swam—they seem to swim with their noses as that's what you notice first—and came out on the shore to sun himself. What's more wet looking when it's wet than a rat? My family of king rails worked for food, whacking at little crab-like things sailing along but rails are really very shy.

Once a rabbit and a rail were eating away both absorbed, looking down—suddenly they came face to face and both jumped back. Rabbits not having bills are quite peaceful creatures—and always nibbling—it's a wonder there's any grass left in this world. I seem to have planted my gladioli for them. Living in the teeming tropics under jungle law I wasn't surprised to find two blood spots on my cement steps and not far away a decapitated young rabbit. I had turtles too of course in my mud flat—I can't be sure of the difference between their noises and bull frogs' but I think it's turtles that have that deep thing, always three times, from evening to two in the morning. I'd wake up in my sleep and wonder what all those dogs were doing barking around my house. One day there was a water spaniel (rhinoceros) plowing through—! soon got him out of there with my cannon-like voice and clapping of hands (bring-em-back-alive-Niedecker) as every time a dog gets excited over a bird and jumps on the soft lawn he leaves a hole. Lots of snakes of course, one disporting himself on a young willow like Spanish moss. I notice frogs get eaten in quantities by almost everything. Mozart's Air and Chopin much too delicate for this country but beautiful moonlight nights.⁷

Her life on Blackhawk Island could not have been further removed from the avant-garde terrain where she also set up home. The avant-garde attended closely to developments in the world's metropolises. For many years her connection to these developments was Louis Zukofsky (along with his friends in and around New York—Jerry Reisman, Charles Reznikoff, William Carlos Williams, Edward Dahlberg); later she added Cid Corman in Kyoto, Japan; Bob Nero in Milwaukee; Clayton Eshleman in New York; Ian Hamilton Finlay in Edinburgh, Scotland; Kenneth Cox in London; the

peripatetic Jonathan Williams; and a few others. With them she had intense conversations about emerging currents in poetry.

She began her writing career in a self-styled surrealist mode, documenting layers of consciousness and unconsciousness, juxtaposing fragments of language drawn from a variety of sources: her dreams, politics, literary biography, etc. She slept with a pencil under her pillow so as not to miss any dreams. The writing from this period in the 1930s was fearlessly experimental. There is some indication that she was engaged in conversation locally with Mary Hoard on the subject of abstract art and its implications for poetry. These were the days of her early and intense friendship with Louis Zukofsky, whom she met through the mail after reading his 1931 Objectivist issue of *Poetry* magazine. She later told Kenneth Cox that when she read Zukofsky's issue she "knew here was the center of literature in this country and in the world." In 1935, having made several trips to New York, having weathered the complexities of a romantic attachment to Zukofsky, and having experienced mostly disappointments in the search for magazine editors willing to publish her venture-some writing—she was especially disheartened to be turned down by Eugene Jolas of *transition* magazine in Paris—one sees a shift in her style of writing toward Mother Goose-inflected forms and more local content.

This change was likely a response to the conditions in 1930s America and the turn towards overt social and political art that documented the lives of the "folk." In 1936, she told Harriet Monroe that she was "looking around in America, working ... with a more direct consciousness than in the past."⁸ Further new possibilities for poetry would have occurred to her as she began a writing and research job in Madison in 1938 with the Work Progress

Administration (renamed the Work *Projects* Administration in 1939). Her research for *Wisconsin: A Guide to the Badger State* and a series of biographies of prominent Wisconsinites for an anticipated dictionary of biography would have brought her into close contact with details of the local history, topography, botany, architecture, linguistic culture, etc. The *Guide*, for instance, records examples of folk speech in the Wisconsin town of Pepin: "Their speech draws many images from the great river. Seeing a drunken man staggering up the street in early spring, an idler remarks, 'He's sure goin' up the river' and his crony replies, 'Yep, he's gonna burn all the ice out of Lake Pepin'".⁹ Peter Middleton, the British scholar and critic, notes that the WPA research offered her invaluable training for the writing of a local folk-based poetry; he refers to the WPA as Niedecker's "department of anthropology."¹⁰ The WPA turned Niedecker into an observer of her own culture, an anthropologist on home ground.

Mr. Van Ess bought 14 washcloths?
Fourteen washrags, Ed Van Ess?
Must be going to give em
to the church, I guess.

He drinks, you know. The day we moved
he came into the kitchen stewed,
mixed things up for my sister Grace—
put the spices in the wrong place.

(*Collected Works*, 95)

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.

(*Collected Works*, 99)

Niedecker had by no means abandoned the avant-garde. Instead, she had found a new site for poetry.

What is striking about the folk poems is their refusal to universalize. They stop one in one's tracks and offer no help in pointing the reader towards their meaning. They have the quality of unresolved fragments and yet the Mother Goose rhythms suggest tidy closure. They practice restraint to the point where they almost lose even the most practiced reader of avant-garde poetry. Her strategies were risky, but she wouldn't settle for anything less than daring: in the early 1930s she wrote to her Fort Atkinson friend Mary Hoard saying "this would be of course what no one else has written—else why write." Elsewhere, she referred to a statement by T.S. Eliot: "It is as wasteful for a poet to do what has been done already as for a biologist to rediscover Mendel's discoveries."

Peter Middleton argues for Niedecker's familiarity with the anthropological use of the term "folk" in studies of folklore at that time. Many statements made by contemporary folklorists resonate

with Niedecker's poetics, e.g. T.M. Pearce's claims that "individuality as a poet is submerged in the stream of group or community feeling which animates all ... compositions." "The poet is one of them: [her] words are their words and their thoughts are [hers]" (qtd. in Middleton, 179). Where Niedecker differs from the theoretical construction of the folk poet immersed in the community is that she has been away and returned. She knows what her community looks like from the outside. She is both immersed in it *and* detached from it.

A British reviewer of *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works*, while discussing Niedecker's modernism, asks the reader to "Imagine an Ezra Pound who never left Hailey, Idaho." It's a dazzling thought. Perhaps an even more dazzling analogy would be to imagine an Ezra Pound who went abroad and then settled for good in Hailey, Idaho.

Peter Middleton's extended reading of Niedecker's "The museum man!" shows how her outsider and insider perspectives operate in the poem. The text of the poem is Daisy's folk speech, her complaint about the persistent grubby spitbox.

The museum man!
I wish he'd taken Pa's spitbox!
I'm going to take that spitbox out
and bury it in the ground
and put a stone on top.
Because without that stone on top
it would come back.

(*Collected Works*, 101)

The tone of the opening line is difficult to fathom—it can be read as a curse or an answer to the speaker's problem. There appear to be

two alternatives to the problem of the spitbox: one is to remove the box from its local context and place it in a museum and the other is to bury it at home. Middleton sees this as a parable of the dilemma faced by Niedecker and her poetry.

To protect her insider status, she was adamant that no one in her community should know about her writing; her audience was still far away in the metropolis. And she clearly had no interest in being perceived as *the poet*, no interest in a local public identity. Nor did she romanticize her outsider status. A life lived on Blackhawk Island was her personal and practical choice. She wrote to Ron Ellis in *White-water* in 1966: “Would like to ask: not too much publicity please. Not local publicity. I’ve tried to stay away from it all these years. I came close to being written up in the *Union* a couple of times but begged it not to be done. I live among the folk who couldn’t understand and it’s where I want to live.”

The choice wasn’t always easy for her. She was inside her “Home/World”¹¹ despite her own differences and distances from it. She loved the place but she had no illusions about it either. In a May 1946 letter to Zukofsky, she refers to receiving a letter from William Carlos Williams praising her just published book *New Goose*: “Ten years ago such a letter would have sent me higher than the great blue heron. Guess I’ve got my feet on bombed ground” (140). The statement refers, of course, to the still reverberating psychological impact of the bombs in Europe and Asia. It is as a poet that she has her feet on the ground—compromised ground with a shared history that forbids transcendence. “In the great snowfall before the bomb,” her reference to fellow workers at the *Hoard’s Dairyman* print shop as “the folk from whom all poetry flows / and dreadfully much else,” boldly confronts both her immersion in the local community and her alienation from it.

Niedecker is often referred to as a working class poet, but as with her relation to local and metropolitan cultures, she is not easily positioned in one class or another. Here’s a quick account of her background. Many of these details I owe to Marilla Fuge’s careful research. When Lorine was born on 12 May 1903 to Theresa (Daisy) Kunz and Henry Niedecker, the Kunz family owned much of Blackhawk Island including the Fountain House Inn. As a wedding gift in 1901, Daisy and Henry were given several large properties on the island including the Inn, which they ran until 1910 when they sold it on account of Daisy’s illness. In the course of Lorine’s birth, her mother had lost her hearing and had gradually declined into isolation and depression over the following years. The wonderful photograph collection now housed in the Hoard Museum is full of images of Lorine’s very social childhood. There are many images of large family gatherings beside the river at the Inn, everyone dressed in turn-of-the-century finery. After the sale of the Fountain House Inn, Henry divided up the Niedecker property into lots, sold some of them, and built and rented on others. He turned the Inn’s pleasure launches into fishing boats and with a partner operated a very successful carp-fishing business. When Lorine was ready to start school, Henry built a large and grand home on Germany Street (renamed Riverside Drive) in Fort Atkinson where the family lived until she entered high school. Her parents then moved back to Blackhawk Island and Lorine billeted with Fort Atkinson friends during the school week. After graduating from high school in 1922, she enrolled at Beloit College to pursue a degree in literature, but was called home in her second year to tend to her mother’s deteriorating health. Intermittent jobs drew on her reading and writing skills—she was assistant librarian at the Fort Atkinson Public Library from 1928 to 1930 and author of a regular book column in the local paper the *Jefferson County Union*, and she was a WPA writer and researcher

in Madison from 1938 to 1942 including a brief period as a script-writer for the Madison radio station WIBA. Then, in 1944 she began work in Fort Atkinson as a stenographer and proofreader for the local journal *Hoard's Dairyman*. Eye problems would force her to give up the job in 1950.

While she had known material comforts, her circumstances had become increasingly straitened. Her earnings were minimal and intermittent, and her parents' resources were dwindling. Her father's carp fishing business failed in the 1930s, and his property management was notoriously reckless, so that by the time of her parents' deaths in the early 1950s, Niedecker inherited no more than two cabins on the island. These brought in little income and proved a great headache to manage. Between 1957 and 1963, she worked as a cleaner at the Fort Atkinson Hospital. When she married Al Millen in 1963 she identified herself on her marriage license as a "laborer." According to Zukofsky, Al Millen was "a man of the people." We can safely say that in the course of her life, Niedecker shared in the experience of both the middle class and the working class. Acutely conscious of the identities of both, she hovered between the two.

A recent review of *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works* in the *Guardian* newspaper in the UK referred with amusement to the prospectus for the University of Wisconsin's Oceanography Department, which, according to the review, claims that "The location of the University of Wisconsin is surprisingly ideal for modern oceanographic studies. It lies midway between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans." The review goes on to talk about Niedecker's reputation inhabiting an in-between zone, somewhere between Modernist practitioner and local poet, each in conversation with the other. What the review also reminded me was that in all her 67 years Lorine Niedecker didn't ever see the ocean. She came close in New York but didn't get beyond the Hudson.

Among its multiple meanings, "Home/World" carries a sense of the narrow confinements of her situation. To Jonathan Williams, one of her publishers, she wrote in 1961, "I'd be glad to see you if you think you could find me in this limbo" and in 1969, "Sometimes I feel so without access—your travelling about must get a bit tiresome but lord it opens up so much to you." To Zukofsky, "I'd like to go to Florida ..." and to Kenneth Cox, "I'd very much like to go to Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's home, in Virginia."

Even so, the geographical limits within which she lived didn't keep her from writing about the ocean or the sea, literal seas crossed by Darwin, Jefferson, William Morris, and as one might expect, metaphorical seas: "You with sea-water running / in your veins", "In us sea-air rhythm / 'we live by the urgent wave of the verse'", "We are what the seas have made us / Longingly immense", "All things move toward the light / except those / that freely work down / to the ocean's black depths / In us an impulse tests / the unknown." Reading extended her access to the world. Out of her reading, she wrote poems about Florida and Monticello and a great number of places she didn't visit in person. She knew William Morris's home Kelmescott in Hammersmith, London intimately. Thoreau said, "I have travelled much in Concord." Niedecker might have said, "I have travelled much on Blackhawk Island."

For all the poems that use local folk speech, there are dozens more that address national and global concerns. Within the folk project of *New Goose* written between 1935 and 1944, there are poems about the Depression, the growth of Fascism, the Spanish Civil War, the Vichy government in France, the American involvement in World War II, plus poems that explore American history. Like all of her books, it is a blend of local and farther flung concerns, contemporary and historic.

It's difficult to locate her work in one place. When her collected poems *T&G* was published in 1969, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Rare Books Department told her that they had placed the book in amongst regional materials. She told her friends, "I shd have asked what region, London, Wisconsin or New York?"

She wrote a concentrated, place-attuned poetry that was aware of a larger context.

We are what the seas
have made us

longingly immense

the very veery
on the fence

(*Collected Works*, 240)

Characteristically, she plays the literal against the metaphorical, the palpably regional against the global, the fence against the immense.

Despite her "reverse immigration"¹² from the city to the small town, her audience and her ambitions went far beyond local boundaries. A line from her long 1934 poem "Progression" reads, "From here, it takes so many stamps, / to post the most modern researches"—a delightful dramatizing of her isolation, a moment of teasing self-pity, and one of the first of many complaints about the cost of postage. "Stay Close. Go Far"—University of Wisconsin-Whitewater's slogan—was Niedecker's poetic strategy.

The balance or, more often, the tension between the small and large is present throughout her work, "Little landscapes and wide ones," she said. Her attention to the minimal within a broad context is paralleled by one of her ongoing struggles centred on the choice between a tightly condensed poetry and a more expansive style. She adopted the aesthetic of condensation in the course of her debates about poetics with Zukofsky—he championed his belief that "Condensation is more than half of composition." But among Niedecker's papers are a number of references to her ambivalent acceptance of a condensed mode: very early she wrote, "I'm going back to the Imagists, to the wordy ones and the strange rhythms, I have suppressed myself too long." She argued with Zukofsky during the writing of the "For Paul" poems: "I've put back say and said – you can't condense this kind of thing—it's either this or nothing." Zukofsky's suggested revisions are always condensations. Despite her bristling, she continually returned to the discipline of condensation. She told Cid Corman in the 1960s, "You and Jonathan have thrown off the shackles of the sentence and the wide melody. For me the sentence lies in wait—all those prepositions and connectives—like an early spring flood. A good thing my follow-up feeling has always been condense, condense."

"I've been going thru a bad time," she told Corman, "in one moment ... I'd have thrown over all my ... years of clean-cut, concise short poem manner for 'something else (still don't know what to call it)'" and "I went to school to Objectivism," she said, "but now I often say, *There is something more.*" She was looking for a looser alternative to her tight condensed style and she talked to Cid Corman and Clayton Eshleman about her predicament. (Eshleman recommended that she try LSD!) One of the immediate results of her struggle was the unimpeded movement of "Wintergreen Ridge," the longer poem that tracks her local journey to and from the Ridges Sanctuary on Lake Michigan.

Some measure of her struggle is preserved in the form of composition notes for the poem “Lake Superior”: close to 300 pages of notes (mostly typed) for a poem that in the *Collected Works* covers five and a half generously spaced pages. She was hard at work in the “condensery.” The notes include several long stretches of encyclopaedic note-taking, a prose travelogue account of her journey around Lake Superior with Al Millen, hand-written charts of geological facts, then pages and pages of selected quotations and observations, assembled and re-assembled alongside each other. Among the notes are half a dozen handmade booklets of cross-referenced names and terms—a fascinating and inscrutable mnemonics, books of experimental poems. Only a small fraction of these 300 pages is preserved for the poem.

From the years between 1928 and 1970, roughly 350 poems have survived—42 years of writing, some longer poems but mostly short. My math arrives at an average of eight poems per year. “What would they say,” she wrote of her co-workers at *Hoard’s Dairyman*, “if they knew / I sit for two months on six lines / of poetry?” This estimate of eight poems per year based on surviving manuscripts and publications is almost certainly too low, but to double the number would still say a great deal about the “senseless activity” of her post-1942 jobs and also about her painstaking writing practice. She was a relentless perfectionist and reviser. Thanks to Louis Zukofsky’s archival instincts, we have a full record of the process of revision to which she subjected her poems between the years of 1949-1953.

In addition, she spent much time working at successive groupings of her short poems. This practice aligned with her desire for flux and uncertain boundaries. In a 1967 letter to Bob Nero she quotes fellow poet Robert Duncan saying that “our demand for truth is not

to reach a conclusion but to keep our exposure to what we do not know—to keep our wish coming or our need at the borderline, where impulse and novelty spring.” Here is a similar statement in Niedecker’s own words after explaining to Bob Nero how to reach her home on the island: “but all that depends on the weather and whether etc. ... however, — as I think of it that’s been my life in that floodwater area — weather, whether and however — And however, I wouldn’t have had it any other way!”

Obscurity characterized her publication history as much as her choice of a remote home. Until the 1960s, publication—even in magazines—was a rare satisfaction for Niedecker. She told Edward Dahlberg in 1955, “Creeley has now accepted 4 [for *Black Mountain Review*]. I’m almost overcome, this would make my 6th publication in 10 years!” Book publication was an immense struggle. By 1968, two and a half years before her death, still only 44 of her 350 poems had been published in book form. She wrote to Jonathan Williams in 1962 about August Derleth, her fellow Wisconsin writer: “Derleth has just celebrated the publishing of his one hundredth book. Us sluggards.” The remark is, of course, heavy with irony.

Her poem, “Who was Mary Shelley?” published first in *The Paris Review*, has unavoidable echoes of “Who was Lorine Niedecker?” It presents a series of deceptively simple questions and statements, its attention focused on the margins, on questions answered superficially, and on facts omitted. Its subject is poised on the edge of obscurity.

During her lifetime, Niedecker’s obscurity was exacerbated by her refusal to read her work in public. In the 1960s, poets went on reading tours and drew crowds in bookstores and on university campuses. She was invited to read several times but she refused insisting

that “poems are for one person to another, spoken thus or read privately.” More than most poets, she works with dense patternings of sound:

Fall

Early morning corn
shock quick river
edge ice crack duck
talk

Grasses’ dry membranous
breaks tick-tack tiny
wind strips

(*Collected Works*, 206)

As her eyesight declined, so her sense of sound sharpened and she had the rich soundscape of Blackhawk Island to draw on. Writing to Zukofsky in New York, conscious of his family’s immersion in performance and composition of music, she said: “I have my kitchen casement window open. A tree near it gives me some wonderful music sometimes” (195). She worked meticulously on the music, on the sound qualities of her poems. Surely these would have been perfect poems to read aloud? No, she was convinced that to read a poem in public would involve loss, would limit the possibilities for meaning. She wanted the silence and space of the page to allow the poem to reverberate. We can trace this thinking way back to 1934 when she wrote to Ezra Pound: “Time and areas of space are being unmercifully crowded. Words blare (Joyce) and bunch together desperately and there are no gaps, no groups of undirect and familiar words, no blurs

for sub-consciousness or for that lull which holds everything without announcement by horns. Minds today are far too active! One wonders how other persons (especially those my age—30, and under) find rest, or what they would be like if they did.” She never gave a public reading.

The modest economy of her work was and is pinched further by opportunities missed. In 1963, on her 60th birthday, she told her friends that she imagined she’d have another twenty years of writing. She lived only another seven, dying at the height of her career. Two weeks before her death she had told Cid Corman, “I think lines of poetry that I might use—all day long and even in the night.”

Then there were L.S. Dembo’s Objectivist interviews held at the University of Wisconsin, Madison in April and May 1968. He went to some effort to bring to town Zukofsky, Oppen, Reznikoff, and Rakosi. A mere half-hour’s drive away, Niedecker was not invited. Any study one reads about the Objectivist poets includes Niedecker, but recognition in her lifetime came seldom.

In 1970, a month before her death, Cid Corman visited her and made a tape recording of her reading the manuscript for *Harpsichord & Salt Fish*. Following the reading, he began to interview her. The interview lasts for a glorious 30 seconds before the tape reaches its end.

After her death, Al Millen followed her instructions and burned all of her papers—a lifetime of reading-journals, letters, and other papers, all of which would have helped to quickly establish her status as a major American poet. Al overlooked the box of photographs and the notes for the “Lake Superior” poem. This box was preserved by Gail and Bonnie Roub and the contents are now housed at the Hoard Museum in Fort Atkinson. The papers that Niedecker instructed Al to save were related to Louis Zukofsky’s work. These

he sent, according to her instructions, to the University of Texas where instead of being catalogued as the Lorine Niedecker Bequest, they were merged with the Zukofsky collection. When I visited the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Austin in Texas in 1996, I went first to the catalogue and looked up her name. It wasn't there. The extended collection of her letters plus drafts of poems numbering at least a thousand pages isn't mentioned in the catalogue. Instead it is listed under Zukofsky's name. "Throw things to the flood" she said, "... all one in the end — / water." "Think what got away in my life / Was enough to carry me through."

Despite the covering of tracks suggested above, Niedecker *was* concerned with how she would be remembered. In 1967 Gail Roub took the photographs that now appear on most publications and websites. She wanted the images to show her to good advantage and worried that they revealed her aging, "the fissures in the rock." Anticipating a lasting reputation, she wanted an image that would endure: "Let's suppose Willa Cather and Emily Dickinson's photos were anything other than those we know of them, perfectly calm and beautiful—they belong with Time, you might say."

There were instances of recognition that she did experience. She enjoyed enormously visits from fellow poets such as Jonathan Williams, Basil Bunting, Tom Pickard, Carl Rakosi, Stuart Montgomery, and a month before her death, Cid Corman and his wife Konishi Shizumi. She savored her contact with local friends Gail and Bonnie Roub and her correspondence with Clayton Eshleman, Bob Nero, Ron Ellis, and Kenneth Cox. She wrote to Jonathan Williams after the publication of *T&G* in 1969: "I must tell you a nice thing that happened to me—a man and woman appeared at my door—my house all upset by moving—turned out to be the son of the doctor who delivered me 66½ years ago and the doctor's wife for whom I was named Lorine, says he remembers my father very well.

He (the doctor's son) and his wife are 72 years old. He brought with him North Central to be autographed and I still had an extra copy of *T&G* that I could give him.... His wife's name is Annie Laurie whom I remember from girlhood days. Almost nicer than all the overseas honors!"

The overseas and domestic honours continued to flow. Six days after her death, on 5 January 1971, the *Wisconsin State Journal* published the following letter, written by Basil Bunting from his home in Wylam, UK:

Lorine Niedecker ... will be remembered long and warmly in England, a country she never visited. She was, in the estimation of many, the most interesting woman poet America has yet produced. Her work was austere, free of all ornament, relying on the fundamental rhythms of concise statement, so that to many readers it must have seemed strange and bare. She was only beginning to be appreciated when she died, but I have no doubt at all that in 10 years' time Wisconsin will know that she was its most considerable literary figure."

Substantial recognition—both international and domestic—has indeed arrived since Bunting made his prediction. Lorine Niedecker is read and studied far and wide. Writers, composers, artists, and readers across the globe continue to endorse her status as one of the major writers of the 20th century. Street banners must surely be on the state agenda.

NOTES

1. Thanks to Jonathan Ivry of the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater for his invitation to give a lecture in celebration of Niedecker's centenary year.
2. From the liner notes for Birtwistle's CD *The Woman and the Hare* (Black Box, 2002) which includes settings for soprano and solo cello of nine Niedecker poems. Since then, Harrison Birtwistle has composed settings for a further three Niedecker poems: *Chamber Music*, ECM, 2014.
3. "A little too little: Re-reading Lorine Niedecker," The George Oppen Memorial Lecture, Poetry Center, San Francisco, December 4, 1997; published in *How2* 1:1 (March 1999).
4. Mary Oppen, *Meaning a Life: An Autobiography* (Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow, 1978): 145.
5. *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*, ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1990): 93.
6. "How bright you'll find young people," *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 2002): 139-140. Thanks to the Univ. of California Press for permission to reproduce a selection of poems and to Bob Arnold, Niedecker's literary executor, for permission to quote Niedecker throughout this piece.
7. *Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofsky 1931-1970* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993): 170-171.
8. "Letters to Poetry Magazine," *Lorine Niedecker: Woman & Poet* (Orono, ME: National Poetry Foundation, 1996): 188.
9. *Wisconsin: A Guide to the Badger State*, compiled by Workers of the Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Wisconsin; sponsored by The Wisconsin Library Association (New York: Duell, Sloan, & Pearce, 1941): 436.
10. Peter Middleton, "Lorine Niedecker's 'Folk Base' and Her Challenge to the American Avant-Garde," *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics*, eds. Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1999): 160-88.
11. A section title in her two books of collected poems, *T&G* and *My Life by Water*.
12. Peter Middleton: 181.

WHAT REGION?

What Region? is a monograph pamphlet series produced by the Friends of Lorine Niedecker with additional funding from donors *Anonymous A* and *Anonymous B*.

Correspondence and inquiries can be directed to:

What Region?
c/o Tom Montag
P.O. Box 8
Fairwater, WI 53931

FRIENDS OF
LORINE NIEDECKER
EDITORIAL BOARD

Karl Gartung

Tom Montag
Managing Editor

Nancy Rafal

Chuck Stebelton
Production Editor

May 2015

Book Design by
Robert J. Baumann

Louise Nedecter

WHAT REGION? 1.2