

LORINE NIEDECKER: A LIFE BY WATER

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The Wisconsin poet Lorine Niedecker (1903-1970) is easily overlooked, and usually has been overlooked. The short entry in *Contemporary Authors*, the only standard reference work in the library in which I could find her listed, seems, as I expected, quite unremarkable, especially in the sections for "Education" and "Career": "Beloit College, student for 2½ years" and "formerly employed in a library and hospital and at Radio Station WHA, Madison."¹ According to hometown sources in Fort Atkinson, Wis.,² Niedecker's mother became deaf and a virtual invalid during Lorine's stay at Beloit, and so the daughter, an only child, felt needed at home and thus left college. She was called "assistant librarian" for a few years during the late 1920's at the Dwight Foster Public Library in Fort Atkinson. Some sort of script writing job for WHA radio in Madison evidently lasted just a brief time during the early 1940's. During the period 1944-50 she worked in Fort Atkinson as a stenographer and proof reader at Hoard's where the well-known journal *Hoard's Dairyman* is published & printed. Her working life outside the home, as we now say, ended with a stint at the Fort Atkinson Memorial Hospital from 1957 to 1962, the year of her marriage (which was actually her second marriage) to Al Millen, a housepainter from Milwaukee. Her job description at the hospital was "dietary position, cleaning."

Her style of life would not have attracted much attention, except perhaps—if anyone had cared to notice—by virtue of its extreme

simplicity. The meager living conditions that were hers during most of her life are referred to quite often in the poetry. But when I looked around in the two-room cabin that she lived in alone during many years before her 1962 marriage, I was still impressed by how gaunt and cramped it seemed. The privy and hand pump close by the cabin were still there, too. I especially noticed them because the arrival of indoor plumbing is specifically mentioned in a couple of poems, including the following:

Now in one year
a book published
and plumbing—
took a lifetime
to weep
a deep
trickle

(Incidentally, that book of poems, which arrived along with the plumbing, was most likely a collection dated 1961.)

This typically short, terse poem reveals several qualities that are typical of Niedecker and that will be important for this essay. First, note how the poet's life and art are described in water imagery. Also, there are rather typical attitudes expressed of humility, and some humorous self-deprecation, combined with strict honesty, in regard to her hard life and work—with the result of reinforcing the emotional impact of that honesty. Alliteratively juxtaposed to plumbing, her poetic output, so modest in quantity, is a mere "trickle." But there is indeed real depth to it, and the price paid for it was high—a whole "lifetime" and with considerable weeping involved.

In regard to material comfort, her childhood, too, evidently fit into this pattern.

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According to some of Niedecker's own words, in *Paeon to Place*:

Seven years the one
dress
for town once a week
One for home
faded blue-striped
as she piped
her cry

In adulthood her attitude towards the material was quite firm and expressed again in water imagery:

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

Nor did this woman attract any attention by "getting around" much. She spent the great majority of her days in a few different dwellings on Blackhawk Island, which is actually a small spur of land jutting out toward Lake Koshkonong between marshland on one side and the Rock River on the other (close to where the Rock empties into the lake). The previously mentioned cabin is thirty or so yards from the river shore. Maybe a quarter mile down the single black-top road heading toward the tip of the Island is her parents' former home, where Niedecker was born and spent much of her time as a child (with some stints at relatives' homes in town which were closer to school) and, just across the road and right on the river bank, a rambling frame building which was a kind of combination tavern and bait shop operated originally by her maternal grandfather and then by her father, who was also a commercial fisherman. Finally, back on Niedecker's own cabin lot is the more comfortable ranch-style house, right on the river bank again and thus with a nice view of the Rock and Lake Koshkonong beyond, where she lived with her husband after her 1962 marriage. So she was always somewhat

removed, even in a geographical sense, from the community of Fort Atkinson a couple of miles away.

Only rarely during her life did she venture out of her native Fort Atkinson region. The chief exceptions, it seems, were those years in Beloit and Madison and then, after her marriage in 1962, some winters spent in Milwaukee. But in "Fort," today a town of about 9,000, very few people could claim to know her well. Most never heard of her. To put it mildly, Lorine Niedecker did not cut a large figure in the world.

As already mentioned, her poetry is small in volume. The "Writings" section of *Contemporary Authors* lists six different book titles, which actually turn out to be five successive new editions of the slowly growing body of poems, plus one posthumous collection called *Blue Chicory*—all from a few small presses.³ In all, her poetry fills about 200 pages. The first two books, both quite small (and, almost needless to say, almost entirely overlooked by the literary world) were published in 1946 and 1961, when the poet was, respectively, 43 and 58 years old. The next three books, larger collections of her work, were published during the last three years of her life, 1968-1970. The posthumous collection came out in 1976. As I have noted, few people in her home town knew her at all; fewer still knew of her poetry. But her poetic reputation, though not large, was international, and her acquaintance among poets, very select. Louis Zukofsky she called her mentor over the years, dating back to 1931. She also had some correspondence with William Carlos Williams, Basil Bunting, Jonathan Williams, and especially Cid Corman, her literary executor, a few of whom sought her out for a rare personal visit in Wisconsin. The striking thing is that, although to a very large degree isolated from and neglected by the literary world, she so devotedly kept at her task of writing poems that in form and style were among the more progressive—perhaps even the *avant garde*—of their day. Most

significant of all, much of her poetry is simply excellent.

The title given to the most nearly complete collection of Niedecker's poems is *My Life By Water: Collected Poems 1936-68*. The title *My Life By Water* has a perfectly obvious, literal meaning that I have already discussed: Niedecker spent almost her whole life on Blackhawk Island. (For that matter, even those few periods away from her native place were also spent by water: a few miles downstream on the Rock River in Beloit, in the so-called City of the Four Lakes, Madison, and in the Lake Michigan port of Milwaukee. As Niedecker wrote in a letter to a friend, "I love . . . all water.")⁴) But it is in perfect keeping with her style of writing that upon closer inspection, other and deeper meanings can be added to the obvious meaning of the terribly simple words of that title. Because as with Lorine Niedecker, the plain-looking and plain-living person, so her poetry, to repeat, is and has been easily overlooked; but careful study and attentiveness can reveal its true and estimable worth. So in this essay I want to explicate that title and explore its implications.

Clearly suggested by living by water is the importance of nature in Niedecker's poetry, which indeed is full of natural sights and sounds, plants and animals (especially birds), of lake and river, marsh and shore. Delving a little deeper, one notices how often and how easily—almost, it seems, automatically—the poet speaks of herself in the poems in natural and particularly in water imagery. And further exploration of that title, *My Life By Water*, will reveal, or will suggest at least, certain circumstances that exerted great influence upon this poet and certain important choices she made during her life. These circumstances and choices are reflected in key themes in the poetry, and they also bear directly upon the question of why and how this poet, with so little encouragement, and at very significant personal sacrifice, kept at her work. To clarify, I am not claiming that all the meanings that I



Fig. 1. Lorine Niedecker beside Rock River near her home. Photo taken by Gail H. Roub of Fort Atkinson in summer of 1967.

discern in the title *My Life By Water* are intended by the poet. But concentrating on that title and its implications will help us understand the poems and will also help us appreciate the high price paid for this particular life of poetry as well as the rare and precious benefits gained from it.

To preview this discussion with a bit of very colloquial figurative language, Niedecker was not "high and dry" during much of her life. Rather, the one practical everyday concern that seems most often mentioned in her poems and also in letters to her friends is the recurrent spring flooding on the Island. According to one concise autobiographical image,

My life is hung up
on the flood
a wave-blurred
portrait

Again, flooding was important enough to warrant quite a few lines in *Paeon to Place*,

the rather long poem which Niedecker referred to as her autobiography. (The *he* and *she* in these lines refer to her father and mother.)

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

Repeated flooding was hard on buildings and people on Blackhawk Island. This unreliability of nature, this business of not being able to take your next step on “buckled floors” for granted, was just one way in which Niedecker’s life was separated from the ordinary, and one form of loss that, I submit, she in her circumstances chose to incur, more or less willingly, but with self-awareness and sometimes doubt and sometimes with a real sense of loss. Why did she make this choice? Because of a deep, strong attachment to that place, is the beginning of the answer—and because of other values also implied in living by water. That is what I want to explore.

In part, then, this paper will be an exercise in how biographical knowledge can enrich our understanding of the poetry. But I do agree, incidentally, with the standard New Critical viewpoint that literary works must stand alone with regard to their *basic* meaning and worth. The excellence of Niedecker’s poems is our primary reason for being interested in her life in the first place. For these reasons, I’ll take a detailed look at some of the poems as I go along.

Niedecker valued her deep roots in her native place and also took an interest in the history of that region, an interest expounded in several early poems. The waterways of Wisconsin were of course very important to the Indians and traders and early settlers, and probably no historical figure is more closely associated with the Rock River than the famous Sauk chief Black Hawk. One of the last great Indian uprisings in the old Northwest Territory is known now as the Black Hawk War of 1832. The cause of the uprising was, predictably, property or territory, as set forth in Niedecker’s poem on the subject.

Black Hawk held: In reason
 land cannot be sold,
 only things to be carried away,
 and I am old.

Young Lincoln’s general moved,
 pawpaw in bloom,
 and to this day, Black Hawk,
 reason has small room.

It is typical of a Niedecker poem to demand a lot of the reader. In this case some knowledge of this chapter in regional history is required.⁵

In 1804 a Fox chief and an earlier Sauk chief had ceded their lands east of the Mississippi, in what is now Illinois and Wisconsin, to the United States. Black Hawk, then a rising war chief, always claimed that this treaty had been made with no tribal authority and that the two chiefs were in fact induced to sign it while drunk. In 1816 Black Hawk himself actually signed a document confirming the treaty of 1804, but afterward he claimed he was ignorant of the terms of the agreement. The Black Hawk of Niedecker’s poem explains his philosophy of property in the first three lines; perhaps it could be called a philosophy of stewardship of the earth, as maintained by a minority of Christians in European and American history. In another Niedecker poem called

“Pioneers,” a somewhat similar claim is made upon some other Indians’ behalf:

Winnebagoes knew nothing
of government purchase of their land,
agency men got chiefs drunk
then let them stand.

Historians tell us that it was after many years of brooding over the loss of Sauk and Fox lands east of the Mississippi that Black Hawk in 1831 and again in 1832 led a band of warriors and their families back across the river in a determined but ultimately futile attempt to regain their ancestral lands. His increasingly pathetic struggle to rally support from other Indians and to keep evading the white men’s armies took him as far east as “the widening of the Rock River known as Lake Koshkonong.”⁶ His band paused there but still escaped, for a while longer, the pursuing U.S. Army regulars led by General Henry Atkinson. Hence the name “Black-hawk Island.” (This historical event is now annually commemorated in the town of Fort Atkinson with a Fort Festival and Black Hawk Pageant.)

In the first line of the poem, “Black Hawk held”—with its strong, delayed stress on the third word, further emphasized through alliteration—means, primarily, that Black Hawk reasoned or argued in this manner on the question of land ownership, but with a suggestion, too, of “held” in the sense of “took a stand” and refused to be pushed around any longer. Thus, it is not surprising that this particular word is not found in Niedecker’s source for the rest of these first three lines, namely, Black Hawk’s autobiography, which he dictated a few years after his capture. The key passage follows:

My reason teaches me that *land cannot be sold*. The Great Spirit gave it to his children to live upon, and cultivate, as far as is necessary for their subsistence; and so long as they occupy and cultivate it, they have the right to the soil—but if they voluntarily leave it then any other people have a right to settle upon it.

Nothing can be sold, but such things as can be carried away.⁷

The characteristic simplicity of Niedecker’s diction does not lead us to suspect that her lines are a kind of borrowing. Of course the extreme conciseness and paring things down to their minimum essentials are also typically Niedecker. Next, Black Hawk himself does not make mention of his age at this point in his story, and we should look closely at that extremely, deceptively simple line, “and I am old.” So what? one may ask. First of all, perhaps the beliefs and arguments of an older person, and an experienced and wise leader, should be given special attention, should indeed be listened to and heeded—or such is the practice, anyway, among many so-called primitive societies. Similarly, Black Hawk might also be asking straightforwardly for a bit of sympathy, since, in the opinion of some again, the elderly deserve it. Also, I think that Black Hawk means that he has grown too old and weary to keep on fleeing the white men and their army and too old to endure further deracination, and thus he intends to “hold,” to take his stand, here and now.

Finally, there is a meaning to his words not intended by Black Hawk, most likely: he is part of and, as it turns out, one of the very last truly notable representatives in this territory of an old and dying way of life, a civilization that is steadily and irretrievably being pushed out by a new one.⁸ Thus, the youth of Lincoln and the identity of Lincoln himself as a famous representative—and, note, a sympathetic figure—of the new civilization are important in the next line, in addition to the historic fact that young Abe was among the volunteer Illinois militiamen who joined with the U.S. Army regulars to pursue Black Hawk and crush the rebellion during the spring and summer of 1832. Furthermore, the springtime of the year is associated with the advance of white civilization, again in contrast to the age of Black Hawk.

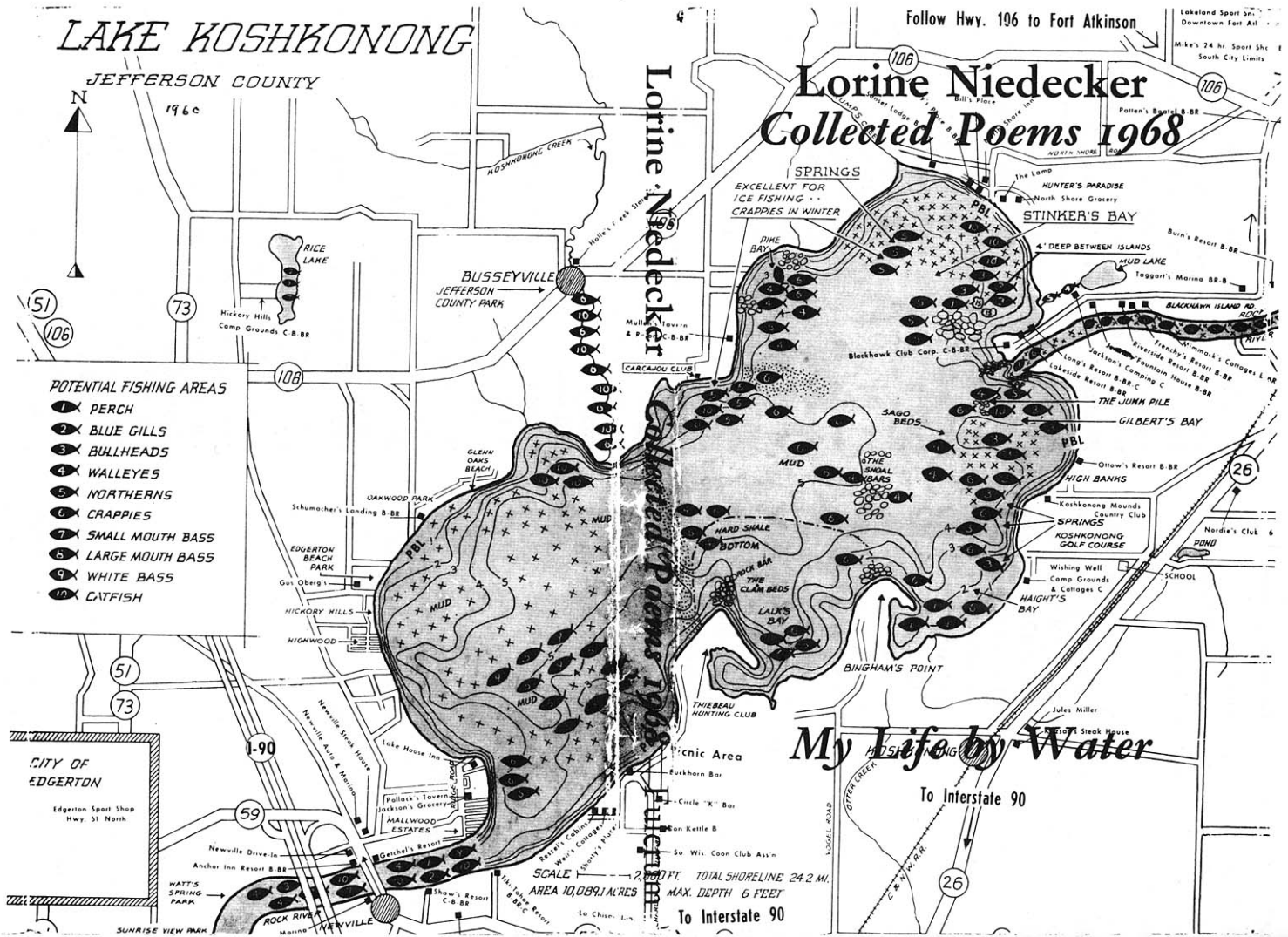


Fig. 2. Dust jacket of *My Life by Water* showing fishermen's map of Lake Koshkonong. From original loaned by Gail H. Roub.

But the way springtime is identified in the poem, in the line "pawpaw in bloom," relates to the question of title to the land. Here is one example, the tree called pawpaw, among many that could be cited, of American Indian names for plants and animals being adopted by the newcomers, the white men. Whose land, indeed, is this? Well, never mind the reasonable answer, because "to this day . . . reason has"—as Black Hawk in 1832 had—"small room."

It's not hard to understand that a person who composed lines such as these would not leave, easily or for very long, her native place. Niedecker was also concerned with maintaining the roots of her family in their life by water. Her father's occupation—or that particular occupation, among the several that he followed, which the daughter preferred to recall and which gets mentioned in one context or another many times in the poetry—was that of commercial fisherman—"he seined for carp to be sold." Notable, too, is the dust jacket of *My Life By Water* which shows a fisherman's map of Lake Koshkonong (Fig. 2), a map, one former neighbor of Niedecker told me, that used to be posted on the wall of her father's tavern on Blackhawk Island. Just listen to the opening lines of "Paeon to Place":

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

Her attachment to river and lake, marsh and shore, and the plants and animals there is hard to overestimate and simply permeates the poetry. The two closest friends of the late poet that I had a chance to talk to in Fort Atkinson could be categorized as one person interested in art and poetry and another with

whom Lorine took long walks on the Island in order to watch the birds. As with her parents, so the daughter, too—albeit in a different way—took much of her living from the water.

But what about Niedecker's life on land, which we've already previewed as to some degree out of the ordinary? What about, first of all, her place not in the natural but the local human community? A couple of her best poems directly address this subject. Here is my favorite:

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.

As with many of the nature poems, the poet finds her material in the middle of her humble surroundings and its most ordinary details, and then, as distanced observer and critic (in addition to, it's made clear, a participant), works an artistic transformation upon it. In this poem the poet's identity and roots in the local community are acknowledged—the "post is set" and the Niedeckers are definitely there as one among the other tribes—and then a bit of weekly routine is solemnly mythologized, and simultaneously of course the whole business is rather gently, playfully undercut.

In place of real tribal identity there is conformity. There is, from the highly original perspective of this poetic observer, the appearance of watery ritual and elemental sacrament in the behavior and particularly the physical movements of the villagers. And note how the terse parallel phrases and their abrupt rhythm very effectively suggest this: "worship sun; fear rain." But these are not totem poles, and in reality there is only human interaction, of the most petty and trivial kind. In a very characteristic play upon words, a little pivotal pun, the literal hanging *up* of the laundry becomes, when

juxtaposed to “fall,” the figurative maintaining of face among the neighbors, being able to hold up one’s head, thereby very quickly alluding to “ring around the collar” and all such TV commercial idiocy aimed at the contemporary housewife. The ironic undercutting is also conveyed in the same verb “hang” when it is applied to the victorious launderers—or, more likely, laundresses—almost as if to say, “Give them enough clothesline and white laundry and they will successfully hang themselves.” This compactness is indeed typical of Niedecker at her best. Note, too, how the phrase “their all” at the very end playfully alludes, I think, to the white underwear included among all the other laundry and thus, again, to the villagers’ inane washday rivalry and fear of “exposure.” Lorine Niedecker was *in* this same community, as we know, almost all her life, but she was definitely not entirely *of* it.

In another poem jobs and the workaday world form the context for exploring the poet’s place in the community, and again her distance from it. Though containing an element of admiration, the portrait of the community has grown more harsh, just as the poet’s detachment from it now seems greater. Incidentally, the poem clearly alludes to Niedecker’s job at Hoard’s during 1944-50, which is in accord with the reference to “the bomb” in the first line.

In the great snowfall before the bomb
colored yule tree lights
windows, the only glow for contemplation
along this road

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

I was Blondie
I carried my bundles of hog feeder price lists
down by Larry the Lug,
I’d never get anywhere
because I’d never had suction,
pull, you know, favor, drag,
well-oiled protection.

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

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

The “folk” of the community, as they’re called, are associated with the mundane and gauche commercialism and, in turn, with the militarism of their society, which are in such contrast to the meaning of Christmas, the holiday which these people publicly try to celebrate.

The first stanza merely alludes, it seems, to the glare or “glow” of an atomic bomb explosion because the reality of it is too awful to *contemplate*. At least there is a gesture toward peace in the observance of Christmas. Christianity—specifically the old hymn called the Doxology—is also alluded to in the second stanza: blessings, in the form of poetry, flow from the folk—“and dreadfully much else.” Note how the rhythm and stress and colloquial diction capture so simply, but so precisely, both the speech of the folk and the poet’s feelings in regard to working “right down among em.”

The rhythm and diction of the third section get rougher to convey the poet’s feeling of being defiled, it almost seems, as well as embittered by contact with that society, although some of the bitterness seems to reflect back upon the poet herself. Then, in contrast to the ordinary women’s vitality, she sits “for two months on six lines/of poetry.” So the poet does acknowledge how much of ordinary life she is missing out on for the sake of these lines of poetry, and she doesn’t seem altogether confident or pleased about her choice. And the poet knows—or definitely thinks she knows—the unfavorable kind of thing “they” would say if “they” knew, and so, it’s quite clear, she ends the poem more

resolute in her distance and even isolation from her community.

In a third poem dealing with the poet's relationship to her community, some of the earlier humor returns, for a while, but the judgement of that community and its way of life remains harsh.

I rose from marsh mud,
algae, equisetum, willows,
sweet green, noisy
birds and frogs

to see her wed in the rich
rich silence of the church,
the little white slave-girl
in her diamond fronds.

In aisle and arch
the satin secret collects
United for life to serve
silver. Possessed.

The poet starts out on a mock self-deprecating note, picturing herself almost as some kind of muddy monster rising from the deep. But the poem soon turns, in effect, into a defense of her life by water, by attacking the life of the town at one of its key points, the honorable institution of marriage. The poet is in touch, literally, with some of the most basic elements of her natural surroundings, such as the simple plants, algae and equisetum, whereas the young bride is surrounded with richness, with diamonds and satin. Vitality in the form of water, earth, greenness and noise is located this time in the poet's realm, contrasting to the silence and whiteness around the bride. Note how the simple alliterative patterns—the *d* and thick *ch* sounds of the second stanza, the *t* and hissing *s* sounds of the third stanza—reinforce a sinister and stealthy atmosphere surrounding the wedding. The suggestion of white slavery with reference to the bride actually seems, to me, more harsh and unobvious than is characteristic of Niedecker. And the "satin secret" is the unpleasant truth about marriage commonly known (especially by the women, perhaps) but not confessed. That is, the innocent bride is not

forewarned. She will *serve from* silver, maybe. But more important, she will be a lifelong *servant to* silver, she will be dominated by domestic routine and social convention and be possessed by her possessions—with maybe even a hint of madness in the forecast for her future. "Possessed."

This poem and its discussion of marriage brings us again to the subject of Niedecker's personal life—which turns out to be quite a sensitive area indeed. First let us go back to Niedecker's parents and the model of domestic life that they provided. It's her parents' lives in the out-of-doors, you'll recall, that Niedecker liked to remember and celebrate in the poems. Their life indoors was simply not very happy, not at least during those many years when the mother was an invalid, a pitiable figure, deaf and finally blind. Several poems express the sometimes nagging burden felt by the only child in caring for her mother. A couple of poems allude to the drunkenness and philandering that are known to be part of her father's reaction to the situation. In an early poem the mother, speaking of course through the poet, gives a kind of mournful summation of her own version of a life by water, and an important final line helps to define the daughter's status in this family.

Well, spring overflows the land,
floods floor, pump, wash machine
of the woman moored to this low shore by deafness.

Good-bye to lilacs by the door
and all I planted for the eye.
If I could hear—too much talk in the world,
too much wind washing, washing
good black dirt away.

Her hair is high.
Big blind ears.

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

Note that terse but unmistakable note of scorn and accusation in the last line: in the mother's opinion, the daughter doesn't really *do* much, she is not involved enough,

her calm is interpreted as cool, distant detachment. But more than this is conveyed in the brief watery metaphor for the poet's way of life—"floats." In reality, the quiet floating is a kind of victory of survival for the daughter and in sharp contrast to the mother, who is "moored to this low shore by deafness." The mother was both right and wrong about her daughter: in order to write so powerfully and yet so subtly about this relationship, she had to feel, intensely, along with the mother, as well as distance herself, deliberately, to compose delicate lines such as these.

And what of Niedecker's own experience with marriage? Her first marriage to Frank Hartwig, described as a "road contractor" in the local weekly, the *Jefferson County Union*, took place in 1928 when Lorine was twenty-five years old.⁹ After just four years they agreed to separate. According to the records in the Jefferson County courthouse, Niedecker eventually filed for divorce in 1942. Let us turn at this point to the poem called "Wild Man."

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

 You are the prickly pear
 You are the sudden violent storm
 the torrent

 to raise the river
 to float
 the wounded doe

The usual kind of subtle artistry seems lacking in this poem. Still, form follows content in a straightforward, unrestrained rush of feeling. To repeat, her life by water—or in the terms of the last section, *in water*—was not always nice. Some people seem to think that Niedecker's late marriage (from 1962 till her death in 1970) to Al Millen was the personal basis for this and a few other grim poems on marriage published posthumously in the volume called *Blue Chicory*. I strongly suspect that a basis might be found as well in the first marriage, not to mention the backdrop of the senior Nie-

deckers' marriage. In any case, following her mother's death in 1951 and her father's death in 1954 came the long period of near isolation in that gaunt, green-painted two-room cabin on Blackhawk Island.

Property, community life, marriage and family—an awful lot of the ordinary sources of satisfaction were, evidently, not very available to her. She did have her poetry.

I wish, now, to look at another deceptively simple poem, which is also the title poem of Niedecker's second collection.

My friend tree
 I sawed you down
 but I must attend
 an older friend
 the sun

I recall my reaction upon first reading this poem. It seemed a rather clear statement, incidental yet arresting, about the necessity of making choices and of suffering losses. Simple devices of rhyme, diction, and rhythm give that impression some force. But so concisely, in just sixteen words. Typically Niedecker. After studying the other poetry more and especially after learning more about her life, my impression after re-reading the poem much later I would have to describe as shock.

My friend tree
 I sawed you down
 but I must attend
 an older friend
 the sun

How much indeed did this woman have to give up—or anyway decide that she had to give up—in order to live her life by water and to practice her craft and art, so carefully and so devotedly, over those many decades? But she simply had to get down to the real *essentials* of her life, and note how the image of the sun and its associations with vision and illumination and the source of all vitality can suggest poetry, of course, among many other meanings. Further, when a bit of literary success and a bit of material comfort did come to her, they evidently did not always

seem commensurate with the personal prices that she had paid.

Now in one year
 a book published
 and plumbing—
 took a lifetime
 to weep
 a deep
 trickle

Reflecting upon her life and work, one is drawn powerfully to the conclusion that here was a life of great integrity. The spare and lean, hard yet delicate quality of her style of life that formed a simple, polished case for character of great depth is matched by the identical quality of her polished verses that release profound meaning and impact to the attentive reader.

Almost all commentators on Lorine Niedecker have drawn a comparison with Emily Dickinson. Certainly there are ample grounds for such comparisons, including the shy sensitivity of the women's personalities, their suspicion of, and relative seclusion from, their contemporary societies, some personal and family misfortunes, and, of course, the starting point of such comparisons—their concise, delicate, complex though seemingly simple, and often powerful poetry. In both cases, I think, there is a temptation to create a kind of legend of a victim-heroine poetess driven to—or forced rather reluctantly into—a higher dedication to poetry and personal release through art.¹⁰ I submit, though, that there is a strong likelihood that both of these women deliberately and knowingly chose and accepted their ways of life as the very conditions which made their poetry possible. Look at this excerpt from Niedecker's long poem called "Wintergreen Ridge":

Nobody, nothing
 ever gave me
 greater thing
 than time
 unless light
 and silence
 which if intense
 makes sound

Here we have a kind of personal commentary, I believe, on the so-called quiet life. It's not that the poet must be satisfied with just the simplest gifts in life—time, light, and silence. Rather, seclusion and quietude and alert attentiveness, raised to a high enough "intensity," become the very conditions for a precious, magical transformation into "sound." And certainly there is an implied identification of this sound with the poet's own voice speaking, her very special poetry. According to the review of her work by the critic Michael Heller, "what Miss Niedecker has achieved, and this is what makes her work distinguished, is not to become the poet-victim of her condition but its agency, singing the song of her world and herself *through* herself."¹¹

Surely, then, Lorine Niedecker did finally, confidently, realize the great benefits that she had reaped from her life by water. And surely we are now all her beneficiaries.

NOTES

¹ *Contemporary Authors, Permanent Series: A Bibliographical Guide to Current Authors and Their Works*, Vol. 2 (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1978), p. 389.

² For most of the biographical data in this paragraph I am relying on Jane Knox, "Biographical Notes: Lorine," *Origin*, 4th Series, no. 16 (July, 1981), pp. 3-23. Mrs. Knox is the wife of William D. Knox, President of W. D. Hoard and Sons Co., Niedecker's former employer.

Also in regard to hometown sources of information, this seems a good time to acknowledge my debt to Mr. Gail Roub of Fort Atkinson, former neighbor and close friend of the late poet, who generously gave me a couple days of his time in August 1980—very memorable days for me. Mr. Roub shared with me many recollections of and much information about Niedecker along with some manuscripts, letters and other material of hers, showed me Niedecker's former residences and the environs of Blackhawk Island, and introduced me to Mr. Al Millen, husband of LN, and also some of her former neighbors on the Island.

³ The following comprise the published collections of Niedecker's poetry:

New Goose (Prairie City, Ill.: Decker Press, 1946);
My Friend Tree (Edinburgh, Scotland: Wild Hawthorn Press, 1962);
North Central (London: Fulcrum Press, 1968);

T & G: The Collected Poems (1936-1968) (Penland, North Carolina: Jargon Society, 1968);
My Life By Water: Collected Poems 1936-1968 (London: Fulcrum Press, 1970);
Blue Chicory (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Elizabeth Press, 1976).

All quotations from her work in this essay are based on the text of *My Life By Water*, with the exceptions of a poem quoted from *Blue Chicory* and an excerpt quoted from the poem "Pioneers" in *New Goose*.

⁴ Quoted in Knox, p. 7.

⁵ A good, brief account of the Black Hawk War that I've relied on here is Odie B. Faulk, "Black Hawk," *The McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of World Biography*, 1973.

⁶ Alice E. Smith, *From Exploration to Statehood, The History of Wisconsin*, Vol. 1 (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1973), p. 137.

⁷ *Black Hawk: An Autobiography*, Donald Jackson, ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1955), p. 114.

⁸ It is interesting in this connection to note one authority's estimation of Black Hawk's autobiography as "a unique document, for it narrated from an Indian point of view the tale of frustration, bewilderment, and desperation of a dispossessed people, striving to retain the only way of life they knew against the oncoming rush of a different civilization." Smith, *From Exploration to Statehood*, p. 140.

⁹ *Jefferson County Union*, 7 December 1928, p. 11.

¹⁰ For a discussion of this tendency in the criticism and biography of Dickinson, see chapter 1, "Legend and Life," of Paul J. Ferlazzo, *Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976).

¹¹ Michael Heller, "I've Seen It There," *Nation*, April 13, 1970, p. 444. This review is reprinted in *truck*, no. 16 (Summer 1975), edited by David Wilk. This special issue of the little magazine is devoted in its entirety to LN: a selection of her poems and letters; reviews, reminiscences, and appreciations; and thirteen poems dedicated to LN by fellow poets.