

Selected Poems from “The Last Collaboration” (2012)
by Martha Deed

[The Last Collaboration](#) is a re-construction of Millie Niss's life and death in a community hospital ICU. Because Millie was intubated but alert, her side of every conversation was recorded in a series of notebooks she sent home with her mother, Martha Deed. Millie's notes, emails, the daily diary she sent home, and posts to her blog are set into frames constructed from her mother's log. Millie's medical records, clinical guidelines, and the outcomes of two New York State Department of Health investigations of Millie's care. Millie wanted her story told. She wanted an autopsy performed if she died. Because of the autopsy, we have the story. Because Millie was an artist and a poet, because her mother is also an artist and a poet, because Millie Niss and Martha Deed often made art together, and because both mother and daughter were trained patient advocates, we have this multimedia fatality review. (from Amazon)

Pathographies are broken down into three categories: quest, restitution, and chaos stories. The latter is the rarest and perhaps most important. The two former ones can be “feel-good” narratives. For more on these types of narratives see: “[From narrative wreckage to islands of clarity](#),” a fine article from Canadian Family Physician. The Last Collaboration is a true “chaos story” and a narrative we can learn much from.

Glass Unicorn

graceful
strong enough for foreign travel
if packed carefully

yet blinded by the sun
broken by a windswept drape
fated never to be old

singularly vibrant
DNA scrambled by the gods
too delicate to multiply

an inappropriate body
condemned to willful intelligence
and careless dying

—Martha Deed
The Last Collaboration, p. 140

Autopsy

I am ugly she would say
I am always the ugliest person in the room

no loving words or comforting hugs
could erase the truth she faced each day

before each performance
she would write emails to everyone
who had known her before
and who might see her there

post slideshows on her blog
I am disfigured by my illness
and the drastic means
to keep me going

Someone has to be the ugliest
person in the room – a trivial
response demeaning truth

Ugliness won't kill you
proven false

“a spinal tap could not be completed
even with fluoroscopic guidance
due to the body habitus”

“exceeds weight limits of the MRI table”
“Exam is limited due to patient body habitus”

the only way to discern
what went wrong –
your autopsy

– Martha Deed
The Last Collaboration, p. 163

Autopsy 2

Have you gotten angry? the woman from Pathology asks
when I phone to learn if the “Final Report Temporary Copy”
is really the last word on my daughter’s autopsy
my only biological child
dead at 36

Let me look she says and puts me on Hold
how difficult to be calm
how important to wait for the right moment to initiate the call
how the right moment might not outlast this Hold

Yes she says when she returns
and then she asks that question
and I say No
and she says You will get very angry
and I assume she is referring to Kubler-Ross’s Five Stages of Grief
and I don’t know where I am on that grid
I think how odd that a conversation between strangers
should suddenly turn personal
and do not hear the message behind the question

until a physician decodes the report
the anatomical descriptions
conclusions shrouded in medical terms –
he begins our conversation
loudly and I can see the twitching of his cheek
even the medical student by his side
fails to cool his words

as he tells an unsuspecting mother
that her daughter
died from a cause
easy to find
and easy to heal
but
no one
cared
to
look

she died

The newest grave

sits under a juniper bush
not much older than she was when she died
as like her ancestors three generations back
both parents visit her shaded grave
touch polished stone
the name they gave her cut deeply into it
the graves in rows like Quaker First-Day mornings
less austere than a meetinghouse
graves among trees and flowering shrubs
where Scarlet Tanagers hide and sing
and Catbirds cry
on the ground
between the graves
in Prospect Park

– Martha Deed
The Last Collaboration, p. 182

Far side of the Styx

"Soon your life will have flown like a bird from a branch!"
"A man in your fifties—and you still would be young?" – Yehuda Halevi

You can cry in heaven if someone kills you against your will
You can take time to mourn before visiting your loved ones
back on earth to tell them you're ok. It takes time
to come to terms with death even on the far side of the Styx
if it is you who has been killed. "I wouldn't have it
any other way" reserved for those whose deaths were innocent

I have a lot of company here, you say, now that I have accepted my fate
kept apart 'til then lest the other souls start remembering. . .
and couldn't leave the clouds to comfort you myself in pain
not of the bodily kind but of the soul but now I count my blessings

too and not just the mistakes and carelessness that brought me here
no more pain and I can move freely about the earth without my power chair
I don't have to hold on for the next medication or nurture false hope
It's done.

– Martha Deed
The Last Collaboration, p. 197