

Millie Niss: Selected Poems

The Carmelites
Burnt Toast
Email to Michael (Excerpts)

The Carmelites

sell souvenirs
near the entrance
of Auschwitz slowly
or faster if they choose

an apple tree
creates a shadow
and the crosses
are like lenses
focusing the light
conveying immanence

losing consciousness
between sleep and waking
keeping silence
cinematically
not as in a Chinese garden

random apples
pose hard questions
about the light
long since dissolved
into space

the trees are a ceiling
holding silence
and the blossoms
hide memories
of distant cries

Millie Niss. City Bird: Selected Poems (1991-2009). Blazevox, 2010. p. 7

Email to Michael

From: Millie Niss <men2@columbia.edu>

Subject: RE: hello

To: "Michael"

Date: Sunday, November 15, 2009, 3:24 PM

Thanks so much for the email!

My recovery such as it is has not been steady. I am back in ICU on a respirator but actually feel much better because they take more or less safe care of me here.

(More or less is not saying much: I don't think I will die from a medical error in the ICU but I am quite sure they broke a rib last night (it has happened to me before in the hospital), just changing the sheet. And there was nastiness & stupidity involved, it wasn't just an unavoidable osteoporosis issue.)

The unit they moved me to last week was a disaster. From the moment I got there, I was sure I would relapse but just didn't know if I would survive, an obviously uncomfortable situation. They made mistakes so bad that even the nurses admit I could have died from them.

OTOH, I think I must be the first person they have ever seen on ICU who was emailing etc. whilst on a respirator... It amuses most people but some seem to be annoyed to have to deal with a conscious patient.

. . .

I agree with you that postmodernism makes people Inarticulate. . .

Millie

Note: Twelve hours after Millie sent this email, she became paralyzed from the chest down.

City Bird, p. 157

Reflections While Reading Finnegan's Wake in the Hospital
In a Room With An Old Lady Who Ate Only Burnt Toast

Here in the holly holy hospital all they pokety poke poke the bloody bodies of the impatient patients pointedly. Pilly pill pills pushed into dry pasty throats and oats with glue re-served at breakfast not too fast after and past the waking time when they come and squeeze sphygmometers around your no longer sleeping and weeping arm so no harm can come except the times times times when they are busily ignoring the increasingly impatient patients with their painful pains and aching headaches and palpating palpitations and attacks of the heart and strokes of strokes and seizureful seizures while the nurses burn toast for a little old lady with colic who asks often often for burnt toast burnt in the microwave which can't burn toast without making it dry as dust solid hard as rock crust of fake toast which is exactly what the colicky old lady desires and so the nurses are busy burning bread and the impatient patients are dying dying and the fire alarm is bringing ringing for the burning burning toast is flaming and smoke is blowing and the nurse supervisor says don't burn toast in the wavy wavy microwave because if the BIG fire alarm blang clangily goes off there'll be boiling burning hell to pay for the burning toast and we'll have to shove push move the impatient patients who are sick sick sick and might puke puke puke if we unsettle their tummies and then we'll have to send the mopsters to mop the floor and there'll be odorous smelly stinks while they belatedly delay and the impatient patients could slip on the vomit and break their creaky hips and there would be negligy gents suits and little nasty lawyers and we'd get fired fired so please please don't burn toast in the microwave any more.

Muse Apprentice Guild, February 2003. City Bird, p. 21

Author Bio: Millie Niss (1973-2009) earned an Honors Baccalaureate in Physics and Math in Compiegne, France, her BA magna cum laude in mathematics from Columbia University and undertook graduate mathematics studies at Brown University followed by an MFA program at Emerson College before Behcet's Disease caused her to abandon her formal education. Her earliest publications consisted of innovative mathematical proofs and research sponsored by the National Science Foundation.

Niss's graphics, videos and web installations have been exhibited in galleries, including SCOPE 2006, Huffington Post, Dvblog, Iowa on the Web and many other venues. Her poetry has appeared in dozens of print and online publications.

Millie Niss died of hospital-acquired infections following a bout of Swine Flu in November 2009. She was 36 years old.