

City Bird : Selected Poems 1991-2009

Millie Niss

Edited by Martha Deed

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City Bird is a collection of poems, notes, letters and drawings by a brilliant woman who died two years ago at age 36. Ironically, she didn't die from the systemic disease that haunted her for many years, but from "hospital-acquired infections following a bout of Swine Flu."
(www.blazevox.org/index.php/Shop/Poetry/city-bird-selected-poems-1991-2009-by-millie-niss-edited-by-martha-deed-192.)

The disease that had become a daily struggle to Millie Niss was Behcet's Syndrome, named after Turkish dermatologist, professor and writer, Hulusi Behçet (1889–1948). A systemic inflammation of the blood vessels that can be fatal, Niss lived with it during years of writing, teaching, and creating works of digital art, sometimes in collaboration with her psychologist mother.

After Niss's death, in 2009, Martha Deed put together the plethora manuscripts of poems, drawings, emails, and even a few letters into a book which seems to inhabit the ghost of her daughter. In turn, even though she had attended school in France, and traveled in England, the body of work in City Bird seems to be inhabited by the spirit of New York, the city in which Niss's life was centered. I suggest that all good poetry is in some sense regional, as you have to know where you are, what's around you and beneath your feet, before setting out on the journey on which the poem takes both writer and reader.

As I read City Bird, I was reminded of the New York School of Poetry of the late 1950s and the 1960s, its urban reportage, flat and gray as that city's streets. An epitome of Modernism, one of its most celebrated writers, Frank O'Hara, said about his own poems, "I don't think my experiences are clarified or made beautiful for myself or anyone else, they are just there in whatever form I can find them." (The New American Poetry. Donald M. Allen, Editor. Grove Press, New York, 1960. 419).

City Bird is modeled into highly literate, sometimes political, humorous, and in some instances surrealistic observations. For example, "The Epidemic" begins:

It was the peak days of the Acquired Verbal Deficiency Syndrome
And the semiotician's waiting room was full of patients
With rapidly falling signifier counts
Soon they would be ostracized
Intimate verbal contact was required to pass the virus but rumor had it
That mere sexual intercourse was enough...(89).

Here we can see Niss's wicked imagination coping with her devastating illness. In the touching coming-of-age poem, "Do You Remember," Niss presents a portrait of a young woman who, searching for romance, is ruefully disappointed---

Do you remember how you turned away from me
Each time you undressed in a bed-and-breakfast

That summer we spent together in England?

In retrospect, she sees that
What seemed the charming modesty of youth
Turned out to be the first sprouting of your gay identity
Which could not look at me and see both
A lover and a woman. (“Do You Remember.” 82).

Taking another, less personal more political and didactic course is “An Ecological Dilemma,” which begins in Bangladesh, where “honey hunting is a lucrative trade” that “consists in wandering / barefoot / through the jungle / in search of honeycombs.” However, it’s a dangerous business, because of wild tigers who “eat half a dozen honey hunters every year.” In consequence, this prompts “calls to limit the tiger population / one of the few healthy groups of wild tigers / in the world.

As with wolves in the Western United States, who, when the winter is hard and wild game scarce, may attack domestic animals; or bears whose habitat is invaded by campers who leave easily-snatched food around---Niss neatly concludes with environmentalism’s human/wildlife dilemma:

people or tigers:
a hard choice
shaking the basis
of environmentalism. (“An Ecological Dilemma.” 87).

It is only a hard choice because most humans have lost sight that they are a member of one species in the vast network of the living world, and that understanding—e.g., science and philosophy—confers more responsibility toward it, not just more opportunity to exploit it. This seems to me the shaky basis of our present environmentalism at its self-destructive anthropocentric core.

Even as Bangladesh (and Indian) tigers await their Final Solution, a poem titled “The Snail” reminds me of Kafka’s humorously nightmarish short stories. Here Niss describes a snail, “curled in / With no antennae to observe the world,” awaiting, “(t)he SS men who are coming to take you away / To a death camp.”
We are all suspect and you do not know
Which one of us will give the whispered word
Which seals your fate.

With Niss’ chillingly accurate, highly-functional dark humor afoot, we learn we are at a gathering “of the sick and their supporters,” where “(y)ou feel cornered as you are surrounded / By women who liken you to their schizophrenic sons.”

Stony-faced you are persuaded to try a canape
It is after all a cocktail reception
But you see uniforms everywhere

And the Gestapo hide behind the cash bar. (“The Snail.” 96).

The snail has metamorphosed into the poet, revealing herself to us in the way she has of covering her tracks in order to open a larger, non-ego-oriented terrain.

For those giving us easy answers to complex problems, and who legislate policies that ask no sacrifice from themselves, at the end of her poem, “Medical Exam,” Niss challenges:

heaven charges rent
hell is still free
make your choice now (102).

Millie Niss was an urban poet who knew she contained the ancient genes of wild creatures. Thus, the title, “City Bird,” was well-chosen, as it signifies someone, who even in a life tragically shortened by illness, flew free.

-Joel Weishaus

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