



SECRET ARMY

selected poetry of
Marie Woodland

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Marie Woodland
lovingly remembered
1920–1995

These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

—William Shakespeare,
from *The Tempest* (IV, I, 156–157)

Contents

About the author	ix
Secret army	3
i— <i>When night falls upon the woods</i>	4
New Years day	5
ii— <i>You resign, the days</i>	6
Honey bee swarming	7
iii— <i>As a shiny new axe</i>	8
iv— <i>When at night a brightness comes</i>	9
Door	10
Nouns	11
Tongue in cheek	12
Web of silence	13
v— <i>Minutes have been grabbed from me</i>	14
vi— <i>We are waiting, all of us</i>	15
Night song	16
Poem	17
Pursuit	18
Overlaps of time	19
vii— <i>The daily search for the lyric</i>	20
Therapeutic poultice	21
There are no medals for loneliness	23
Inferno	24
viii— <i>I have come to hear</i>	25
ix— <i>Am I this?</i>	26

About the author

Marie Woodland (née Guenther) was born in Alexandria, Ukraine on 23 January 1920. When she was five years old her family immigrated to Canada to escape the persecution that followed the Russian Revolution. Like many of their compatriots, they settled in Saskatchewan, where they farmed.

When a young woman, Marie moved to Nelson, BC where she trained as a nurse. Not long after, she met Eric Woodland, who had recently returned from serving in the Royal Canadian Air Force during World War II; they married in 1946 and in 1954 they moved, with their two children, Janice and Pamela, to Cloverdale, BC, south of Vancouver, where Eric practiced dentistry.

By the late sixties the marriage had broken down, and in 1969 they separated informally. Marie subsequently returned to nursing. She was in her mid-fifties when she secured a position at Woodland's Institute for mentally handicapped children where she worked until her retirement at age sixty-five.

Marie wrote these poems during the difficult period of adjustment back into the work force and single life following the breakdown of her marriage. After a long period of illness Marie died on 11 March 1985, in Vancouver, BC.

SECRET ARMY

Secret Army

Behind drapes and venetian blinds
with slats pursed tight, even at noon,
secret armies of women wait,
listening for the exciting foreplay
of a finger on a door bell,
for the quiet entry through the pantry,
the click of the milk box lid.
In every city they lean on their
wing chairs all afternoon, with all
their skin showing — dim patches
and moles the sun never sees —
caged and longing for the canvasser,
the random candidate with his little
slick brochure. They loll on couches,
houses unmarked, fuses through
the suburbs, skin prickling for the blush
of pressure marks, lips swelling
as their time runs out, the tension
of their nipples stretching boundaries
of neighbourhoods, the whole country
filling like a balloon with their short
breaths. But what regiment
of delivery boys can deliver them
from this? The need that burns them
nude in houses locked hard
against daylight. Though maybe they
parade only for their homely paramours —
washer and tall straight freezer —
wanting no handyman's hot receipt
but day after day asking only to be
touched by those cool enamel hands
behind their blinds thick as stone.

When night falls upon the woods
and even words like “snout” or
“writhe” take on a strange kind of
loveliness and power

look

how the moon scrabbles over the clouds
with the simpleness
of a clown who has never
found what he sings of in what
he loves

the perishable

rubble of the flesh the lustful
water of eyes muggy warmth
sweet in the wrinkly skin seems
all there is and enough too
joy commands the natural
obscene places in dim light
and pain is only music
song of long satisfied grunts
and snapping twigs

when a man

and a girl like you and me
humping under these trees in
the must and sweat of our bodies
fall apart and remember
gladness in the voice of larks
and grief in the knife of flesh
you can tell morning has come
with his washbowl and his piece
of soap and his long prayers.

New Year's Day

This is it;
The night they've always selected.
Who annually,
Mindlessly,
Fatally,
From your lonely window,
Each of them is happier than he is.
Who?
They who must forever go nameless.
And that is their virtue.
They are the athletes.
The athletes will always survive.
A constant stream of listening
extends from their ears.
An evening landscape is their contagious decor.
And you can even see them:
An accidental sheen hides their faces,
So that only their grins remain.
But,
You know they are there,
The quiet told you.
They are carrying the quiet in their arms,
Like a God.
Is it heavy?

You resign. The days
turn on their sides
like old cattle —
first one, then
another. You give my name
away, each day,
a dime store trinket.
Great clouds roam overhead,
no shape
at all only dust.
Soon my voice will fade,
I'll only whisper
in corners to tricycles
and rubber plants.
We talk of touching,
fingerprints will go.
You stiffen and you
watch me die again
and again whenever you speak.
From now on
you'll only turn up now
and then as a waiter,
burning my opinions
in flaming desserts.
I die harder each time
your voice
grows softer — only because so many deaths
exhaust me. Soon
you won't even whisper.
I die.
You walk away.
Over and over.

Honeybee swarming

I am the ruined queen:
Imperious I go down.
I cling to trees till the black
clotted bodies open me,
and one thick circle, swarm in the air.
The rich round honey jar
is empty now. The husk sloughs off.
I go where no bees are.
Sting one last time! They say
stabbed swans disguise their throats
with song. How ill-advised
to choke on the first note,
buzzing in misery, to vibrate
in the throng like any fly.

Remind me I am queen
and warm me while I die.
Wrapped in my stiffened wings:
I should have had the globe!
Vein in the rigid wrist instead;
I harden like a scab.

As a shiny new axe,
 Taking a swing at
Someone's next years
 Split-level pinewood pad,
Bites all the way
 To the last world war,
Proposed highways break
 Through
 The stacked
Strata of centuries.

When at night a brightness comes
and our two-backed ghost appears
writhing in the forbidden
place behind the glass make me
easy, tell me this is not
the last night in the last night.
All the rooms of our bodies are entered,
and no mirrors
can make obstruction.

When I
strain to see your face in your
shadow shape but feel
my own eyes roll in my skull
make me a sign and tell me
this is the last night the dark behind
our eyes marries with the dark
we look out on.

When something
about the chill in the room
makes me in my skeleton
shiver, reach to touch you while
all the trumpets of the blood
breathe

“Now the dawn comes!

The dawn comes now!”

Tell me it is not now
in the last night our souls
hang discarded in their frames
silent air in flutes of bone.
And there can be no morning.

Door

Why should I care
which way you go through me?
I am responsible only
for dividing the furniture
from the changeful weather,
the past from the future,
the dream from the waker.
Inside, outside,
it's all one to me.
Who passes through one way,
may come back the other way.
If what's promised on one side
is denied on the other,
you work it out then.
Being neutral,
I choose to stay just here.

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Marie Woodland always had the heart of a poet. These poems, written between 1974 and 1984, were created during a difficult period of adjustment back into the work force and single life following the breakdown of her marriage. More than anything else they are a tribute to her strength, endurance, and poetic vision.

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