

MIRIAM WADDINGTON

NIGHT ON SKID ROW

Miriam Waddington (1917-2004) was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba. She earned a bachelor's degree and a diploma in social work from the University of Toronto in 1939 and 1942. After working at the Jewish Family Service in Toronto for two years, she also earned a master's degree in social work from the University of Pennsylvania in 1945. She then moved to Montreal, Quebec, where she published the poetry collections *Green World* (1945), *The Second Silence* (1955), and *The Season's Lovers* (1958). In 1960 she returned to Toronto and worked at the North York Family and Child Service, and in 1962 she became a lecturer at York University, where she remained for the rest of her career. The following poem was published in the winter 1960 issue and included in the collection *The Glass Trumpet* (1966).

My blood shudders but I dream
of a bad country overcome,
of torn flags and murmuring
in burnt-out cities; what is as cold
as the anticlimax of return,
the soldier with his missing limb?
There aren't a dozen burning words
to give or take or smoke in chains,
and hardly a curse to knock about
in the fogged arena of the brain.

The clever thief of forty-odd
wakes sober in the boiler room,
he feels his cancer sharp as God,
but doesn't think this is the time
to pen a *billet-doux* to Christ

(the lying poet's bleeding heart),
instead, he knots his shirt and goes
across the valley's bridge to find
the village where his father died.

And the Irish pickpocket
alias barker-out-of-work,
resumes his habit, *ave, evoe*,
the heroin is organized
with rich disaster in his veins;
stork-like he reels and teeters,
and blind with love he dreams
he's king of the rainbow carnival
and the city is his vassal.

Doris with her crooked bones
locked in a child's haunted world
is glad to be the scissors' wife,
to trim the thread from uniforms.
Her friend, a hotel chambermaid,
from eight to six on *Sherbrooke-strasse*
stumps the unemployment clerk
who reads her face and shakes his head:
she'll never shape into the work.

I met them all in their defeat;
their words, of narrow local colour,
fell in wider provinces
than their travels would allow.
A crowd of accents was dispersed
through all the shabby streets I know,
where night, erect with violence,
disgorged police from limousines;
I heard the whistle on the air
and hung; and splintered from the blow.