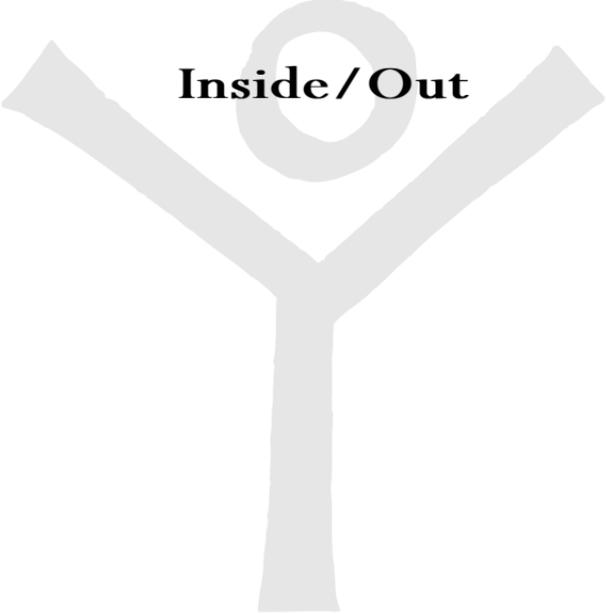


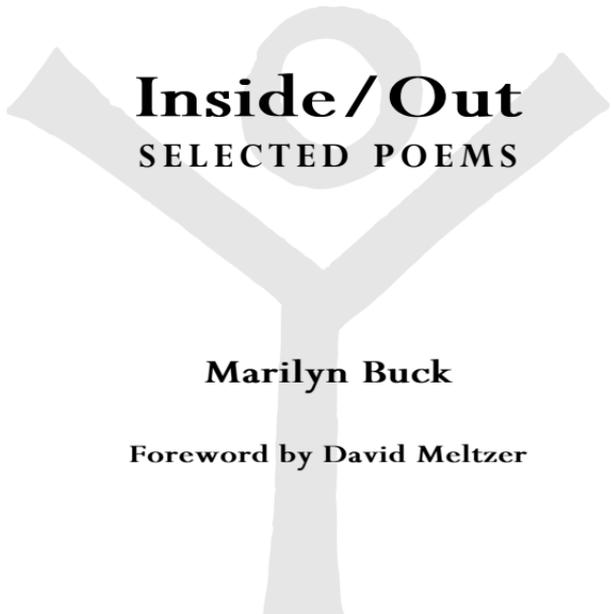
Inside / Out
SELECTED POEMS

Marilyn Buck



Inside/Out

**City
Lights**



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SELECTED POEMS

Marilyn Buck

Foreword by David Meltzer

City
Lights



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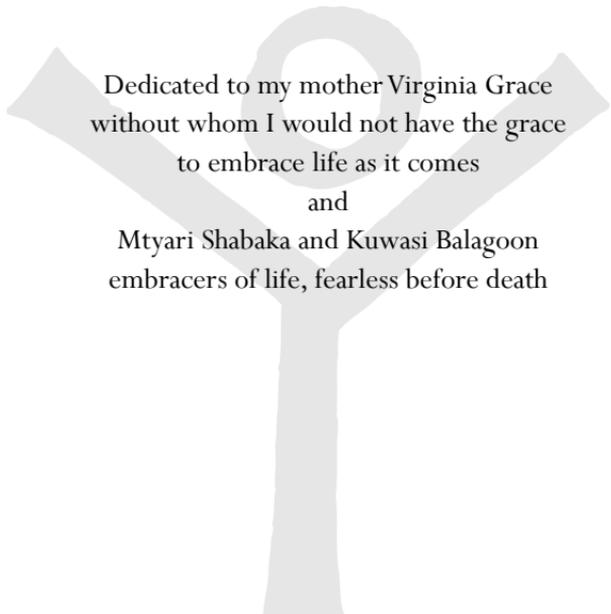
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City
Lights



Dedicated to my mother Virginia Grace
without whom I would not have the grace
to embrace life as it comes

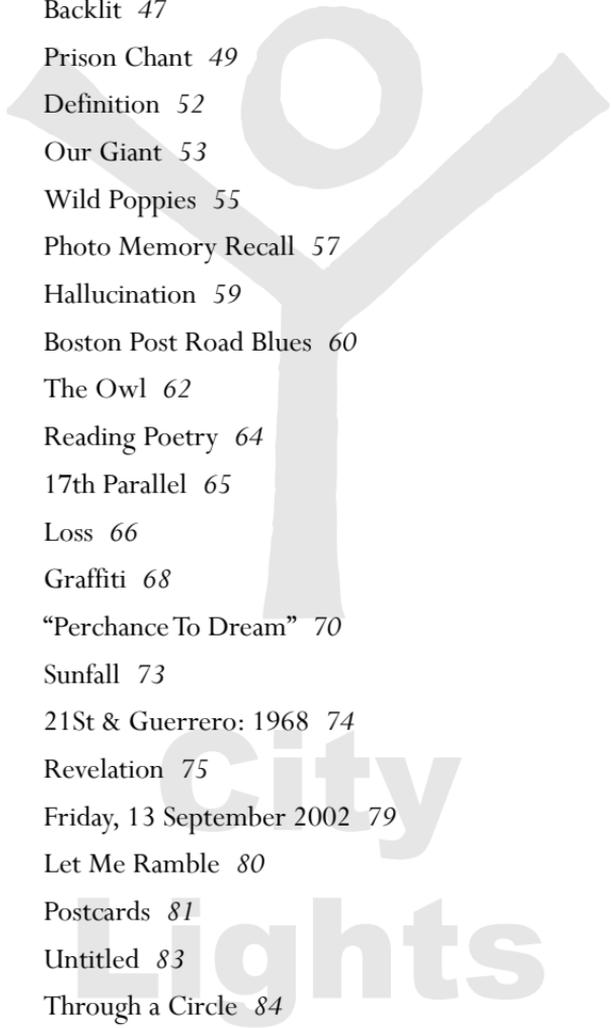
and

Mtyari Shabaka and Kuwasi Balagoon
embracers of life, fearless before death

City Lights

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FOREWORD

by David Meltzer

*This is a time when the world seeks revelation.
Too many seek that which is not but illusion or reassurance;
those who thirst for visions drink hallucinations.*

Marilyn Buck — revolutionary, poet, artist, translator, teacher — died of uterine cancer in August 2010 at the age of 62. Marilyn had been a political prisoner in the U.S. federal prison system for nearly half of her life, and she died just twenty days after being released on medical parole. I'll forgo the history behind her extended imprisonment since it's available on friendsofmarilynuck.com, along with a deeply felt tribute by her comrade Felix Shafer. Suffice to say, she put her radical consciousness into action.

I was Marilyn's teacher as she worked toward a masters degree in poetics at San Francisco's New College of California. It was a process that shaped itself with the inestimable help of New College administrator Tom Parsons who, once the paper logistics were worked out and the funds ascertained, constructed the plan to give Marilyn a long-distance education. All of her required classes were recorded on audio cassettes that Tom either mailed directly to the prison or delivered to her in person. Course readers and handouts were mailed to her, and we hoped they would arrive in a timely fashion and not be withheld by the prison officials.

I taught the “context” courses, i.e., if a semester was focusing on the Romantics, my course would address the social, political, and technological impact on shaping human experience. Even in difficult circumstances, Marilyn always got her assignments done. She was a superb and exemplary student. Despite her isolation, Marilyn was an omnivorous and discerning reader. She was a clear thinker, with an ability to process my free-form lectures into lucid questions and answers. It must have frustrated her not to be able to fully participate in classroom discussion.

We began corresponding — her letters were written in a spidery cursive — and then we added occasional phone calls, which were limited for Marilyn and could last only five minutes. The first group of poems she sent were varied — ranging from occasional jots to current event politics — with some poems reflecting a deeper tone and voice — that which emerges in the works collected here.

Finally, I made my first visit to the Dublin Federal Correctional Institution with Felix Shafer and his partner, muralist Miranda Bergman. Until then, Marilyn Buck had been more of an abstraction than a real presence as a student. And even though I had worked in the prison system, I had had no idea how difficult it was for Marilyn to create within her situation.

I feel the pain of every single day here. I regret and miss the simple things — family, children, a lover, comrades, and involvement in political struggle. But after each nightmare of a day passes, it is history and I look forward to what is to come.

Miranda's driving. I'm in the front seat and Felix sits in back. We're on the freeway headed to Dublin, the federal correctional facility located on a military base. They've been visiting Marilyn for as long as she's been there. I have no idea of what to expect, but as soon as we enter the base we're checked by armed men, our ID's peered at stonily, and finally we're allowed to drive into the parking lot. We enter a waiting room with glass cases selling correction employee gear: T-shirts, hats. Rows of benches are filled with other people hoping to visit inmates. A racially and ethnically diverse group of men and women and an assortment of kids from babies to teenagers sit or stand, waiting to be processed by a husky woman officer behind a high desk. Felix brings me a paper to sign that's to be brought to the officer who sits before a computer screen. Groups of people talking, some people silent, kids awkward in the large room, except for one little girl unhinged and resisting her grandmother's embarrassed, ineffective whispers. When we get to the desk, our paper is taken, ID's turned over to the impassive officer. Everyone empties their pockets into a tray, belts are removed, keys, money, and we walk through a metal-detecting frame. Some people are also selectively rubbed by a special pad to detect traces of narcotics or explosive powders. Since I walk on crutches and have metals inside my body, I'm pulled aside, patted down and wanded by a male guard who looks like Buster Keaton. One woman is asked to leave because she's wearing beige pants — their color too close to the uniforms worn by inmates. Another is told she's wearing the wrong

kind of shoes and she's not allowed entry. Once we pass the various tests and are cleared for entry, the top side of our right hands are stamped with a Chinese ideogram. The little frustrated girl is suddenly quiet for the moment. We're on line with 10 people being led through a clanking, electrically operated door. I'm told by a guard in a room with desks and other officers behind a thick glass window to put my right hand under a small black light to see if my ideogram lights up right.

Finally we're led by another guard through another thick door to a path that leads to the prison meeting area. It's a cafeteria-sized space with an outside section closed in by glass where smokers can be with their visitors, and inside, up a small flight of stairs, a glass enclosed area for kids and parents to play in. Against one wall is a bank of vending machines and a microwave. In the main room are tables and white plastic chairs. Facing everything is a raised desk overseen by three female corrections officers. Not exactly the panopticon, but it attempts to be all-seeing.

As we enter, many of the tables are filled with families, boyfriends, friends.

Most of the inmates are in for drug charges. It's clear that many of the women are doing time for their drug-dealer boyfriends or husbands. Marilyn's a minority — a political prisoner.

She enters the room in a tan uniform hobbling very slightly from a gunshot wound from the '60s. Marilyn's tall, well coiffed, wearing horn-rim glasses. Despite almost two

decades of imprisonment, she is radiant and open-faced. Felix, Miranda and I start talking excitedly about current events, then switch to updates on their many comrades released and still confined. There's a direct forthrightness to Marilyn's speech; also a circumspection. Felix goes off to the vending machines, bringing back nuked popcorn and assorted goodies to our round formica-topped table. Marilyn and I begin what will become an ongoing discussion of our classes, literature, poetry, and creative resistance. While Felix and Miranda talk with Marilyn, I watch the other tables: inmates holding their children, mothers and grandmothers talking with their daughters and granddaughters. Guys talking with their imprisoned girlfriends, sometimes tentatively touching each other, holding hands, or nervously avoiding eye contact.

When the allotted three hours is over, after hurried hugs and kisses, all the people get in line on one side of the room while the inmates move together to the other side. We are let out, as we entered, in groups of 10 supervised by one of the women guards. Those moments of leaving were the saddest moments of any visit. Prisoners waving to their visitors, some blowing kisses, others trying not to cry.

Through tenacity and the reclamation of desire — our life force — the poet, and the reader, may survive — super survive — both great horrors and not-so-great traumas to truly live in this world as human beings.

On my last last visit to Marilyn, she was excited by a possible early parole date, though she knew she was already quite sick with what would be diagnosed as a rare form of uterine cancer. We talked about this book. During some earlier visits she had said she wanted to be judged not as a political prisoner poet, but simply as a poet. After her death, Felix, Miranda and I went through several stages of editing from her various manuscripts with that criterion in mind. Later, poet Jack Hirschman and publisher Elaine Katzenberger of City Lights also selected from the range of her work and helped shape the collection you see here.

Marilyn's sympathy and kinship with the oppressed and alienated was real, not merely ideological. She was constantly evolving in her political thinking, which is reflected in many of her poems. She also loved music, and music as subject appears in many of the poems, as do the lives of many of the women prisoners she taught and befriended. Her poetic inspirations were many and varied, ranging from Milton and Blake to Fanny Howe and Deborah Major, and including many of the Latin American poets, such as Vallejo, Neruda and Cristina Peri-Rossi. (Marilyn's translation of Peri-Rossi's *State of Exile* was published by City Lights in 2008.) She was also intrigued by haiku.

The work you are about to explore represents a wide range of Marilyn's output, written over the course of her imprisonment. From within a repressive and often cruel environment, she not only found her poetic voice, but resisted the self-negation demanded by the constant

torments of a system that aims to dehumanize its subjects. She was a brave and forthright woman who spent a major portion of her life behind bars, surviving punitively repressive treatment because of her political and moral courage. She found added strength and resiliency by writing, as well as teaching her fellow prisoners: creative writing, art, yoga, counseling those who turned to her for support and guidance. Marilyn died with grace and dignity, with that clarity she always worked from. All of her work reflects this — a clarity that was enhanced, not destroyed, by decades of imprisonment.

Teaching is learning and learning is teaching. It's a circular ongoing process.

Marilyn was as much my teacher, even more so, than I was hers.

*Seek not revelations, all is revealed.
Listen to each word, a world in orbit;
each phrase, a nova: essay the beach,
each grain of sand, a poem*

*do not sit idle, your path streams before you.
bank the raging fires and light laurel branches against the cold.*

Lights



Inside/Out

**City
Lights**

PRISON

no grass
no trees
no children throwing stones
into puddles
no laughter
no tears

no peace
no silence
no world of colors
no sun
no moon
no weather at all

Living without
blowing winds
gentle rains
day or night
my internal clock
is deprived of nature's power

There is only the beat of my heart

CLANDESTINE KISSES

for Linda and her love

kisses
bloom on lips
which have already spoken
stolen clandestine kisses

a prisoner kisses
she is defiant
she breaks the rules
she traffics in contraband women's kisses

a crime wave of kisses
bitter sweet sensuality
flouting women-hating satraps
in their prison fiefdoms
furious
that love
can not be arrested

FEB. 11, 1990

we walk inside the walls
3 pairs of feet
whisper softly against cruel pavement
a cold crisp morning
the sun promises to touch us
if we stay longer

time's up
one hour
we must go
9:16 A.M.

across the sea
another continent
4:16 P.M.
the sun touches
Nelson Mandela's last footsteps
they echo off prison walls
as he passes through steel gates
into the radiance of African voices
raised in jubilation
"Mandela is free"
"Free South Africa"
the sun breaks through
inside these bars

where we too
stand in sweet company



City Lights