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Featured Poet

Marge Piercy

To the Tomato Goddess

No middle ground in your largess.
Either you're stingy, giving us a few
almost ripe goliaths, then dozens
of green pebbles at the end; or

you avalanche all over us, red,
orange, yellow, pink, purple
gorgeous and fat, even the scent
delicious, summer in the mouth.

Some are perfect balls, others
scowl from faces, have fleshy
pricks, baby's grooved asses,
some are lobed and lumpy.

I have become your servant: pick
wash, cook into Italian sauce, then
can; can plum tomatoes whole, hot
sauce, simple, paste, Greek basil.

In our storeroom, shelves bow under
all those red glass jars. Now chutney.
Dehydrate. How does it happen?
Chipmunks work down the line

most years, a bite out of each when
ever fruit ripens. Hornworms munch
their way. Thunderstorms throw you
to the ground. You demonstrate

displeasure with the weather by tossing
your blossoms, dropping green fruit,
browning your lower leaves like dirty
petticoats. Too much heat, you stop.

Too much chill, you stop. Too wet,
too dry, too windy. So hard to please
and yet a year comes when you pelt
us with too much, too many, yet

all too precious to waste.

The equinox delights her

The red fox runs on light feet
through the development that sticks
into the marsh, knowing most
houses are empty now, summer
people gone where they are stored

only sporadically appearing until
sun bakes the world green again.
The air offers scents of prey not
obscured by exhaust. She can hear
mice, voles, chipmunks scuttling.

She will eat. Those summer roars
and drones are gone. Oaks speak
to each other in whispers. Fat
squirrels run above her, leaping
bough to bough. All is right

and clean. Grapes are rotting
sweet for her supper. She knows
which houses are still peopled
but mostly they see her and smile.
They too are taking back the land.

October builds a fire

How the fire of fall sides down the map.
Here the sugar maple is only tinted
on occasional branches with gold.
The weeping beech is entirely green.

But the tomato plants are ghastly
brown wretches of stiff lace, only
a green pebble here and there.
Daily more birds crowd the feeders.

Crimson poison ivy and Virginia
creeper twine round pines and oak.
Nothing has yet gone to sleep.
Acorns plop on the grass,

attack the roof like musket balls.
Don't be fooled by the wilting green.
A killer frost is advancing south
from the mountains. Get going.

Whatever you must do to prepare,
squirrel, chipmunk, caterpillar,
bear, human, time is running fast
as the glacier of winter grinds closer.

Sins of the gardener

When I go into the garden
a dozen hornets of guilt sting
my arms, for all that I haven't
done, the dill choking in weeds,

the Chinese cabbage made green
lace by slugs, the broken hollyhocks
I didn't tie up before the wind
came thrashing through the trees.

The roses lean from their trellises
demanding more water, more

food. Marigolds I haven't thinned
bang their yellow heads together.

A garden is a plot full of shoulds
and why didn't you and please
now! Shut up, I say, or I'll eat you
all, and I do, every edible one

and then I pick the flowers and stuff
them in vases. Next year I swear
I will do better, but probably
I won't.

Weather of monotony

How dark brown and quiet
the earth is, not even worms
are threading their way through,

Nothing flies but birds at the feeders
and a pair of hawks circling far up
in pale blue sky diluted with milk.

The only moths are inside chewing
sweaters. The sun is too weak
to melt patches of dirty ice.

We seem stuck in winter, snow
a couple of feet away on the weather
man's map. Boredom is the real

weekend report. In spring things
burst out and grow. In fall they fall.
Here we just wait for a storm.

Marge Piercy

Knopf brought out Piercy's 18th poetry book *The Hunger Moon: New & Selected Poems 1980-2010* in paperback. Her new collection *Made in Detroit* comes out in March 2015. Piercy has published 17 novels, most recently *Sex Wars*. PM Press recently published her first collection of short stories *The Cost of Lunch, Etc.* Her work has been translated into nineteen languages, and she's given readings, workshops, or lectures at over 450 venues here and abroad.

from Poet's Bookshelf II: Contemporary Poets on Books That Shaped Their Art

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

Emily Dickenson, *Collected Poems*

Allen Ginsberg, *Howl*

William Carlos Williams

Muriel Rukyser

Pablo Neruda

Guillaume Apollinaire

William Wordsworth, "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*

Wisława Szymborska

Nelly Sachs

I would list Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* together, because they had similar effects on me, even though I began to read Walt Whitman when I was a sophomore in high school, and Allen Ginsberg when I was a graduate student.

When I read Whitman, I did not so much produce wan imitations but my first real poems. It was like what happened many years later when I was working as a secretary in Chicago and went to hear Allen Ginsberg. It wasn't that I began to imitate Ginsberg or that I began in high school to produce little pastiches of Whitman. Rather each of them seemed to say to me by their practice, if you write out of who you really are, if you deal genuinely with your own experiences, if you go into yourself honestly, you can write something worth reading.

Whitman gave me a way to try to grapple with an early mystical experience, which nothing in my family or my background prepared me for. Whitman's long flowing line and American idiom was so different from the other poets I had read, and his exuberance matched my own overabundant energy. His sense of being rooted in his own body and this landscape liberated me to deal with my feelings and my experiences.

I link the influence that hearing Ginsberg had on me in 1959 with reading Whitman in 1951 or so, because the sense I derived from both was that to write authentically out of your experience, no matter how outside the mainstream society seemed to regard you, was inherently valuable if you wrote well. Whitman offered support for the strange notion that what happened to me could interest other people. I could immediately tell the difference between what I began writing, crude, often inchoate but clanging with Detroit and Michigan sounds, sights, smells, lives, and the Pepto Bismol that I had dribbled out before that time.

I found in Whitman and then in Ginsberg a confirmation of earlier rhythms from Jewish liturgy and the Torah and the Psalms, rhythms that were not those of most poetry I had been taught in school, but rhythms that came naturally to me. Later I would learn many other line lengths and work steadfastly on what I wanted to do with line length and line breaks and sound qualities, but early in my apprenticeship, Whitman directed my attention to the oral power of poetry. His poetry was written as a notation for reciting it, I felt. He made use of many devices familiar to me from liturgy, used them for creating structure, expectation. His devices were useful to me and I studied them.

But beyond training in incremental repetition and anaphora, what I derived from Whitman was permission to be where and who I was: to be American, to have a body loud and demanding, to feel politically, to think that my life, my place and time were worthy of poetry.

I always say that we American poets are all children of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickenson, that they blasted the road for us and we are still exploring the ramifications of what they opened up. Both were stone originals and thoroughly American, thoroughly of their landscapes and their own queer strong voices. I could not have found two better mentors for the beginning of my study of poetry, and I read both of them frequently to this day—still aloud and with respect and affection that have not eroded but grown.

From Emily Dickinson, I learned the value of compression and again, the value of what you know as a poet, your own experience as opposed to what other poets have written about and what you are expected to write poems about (paintings you have seen; your travels on Guggenheims; poems born of other poems). Her keen and exact and unsentimental confrontations with the natural world excited me. She had such a clear eye and such a good ear.

In William Carlos Williams I found the urban landscape of my own upbringing. I found an exact respect for the things and people encountered. I found again an American idiom that reflected a careful study and respect for what he met and what he knew and what he experienced and what he heard, day in and day out. There is also a wit that let me see that I could use my own without compromising the seriousness of my intent. I also found that in Ginsberg. From my own Jewish culture, I was used to the mixture of the tragic and the humorous.

Muriel Rukeyser gave me the freedom to deal with the experiences of a modern fully sexual

woman without that weakening and sickening coyness I had encountered. I began reading her when I was a senior in high school. I have never stopped. I had the great pleasure of meeting her and reading with her in New York. I tried to tell her how much she had meant to me. I wasn't exaggerating. I also learned a great deal of prosody from her. I learned you could write political poems that were fine poetry and extremely powerful and that to do so, you had to use all the resources of language and rhythm available to you. She was one of the poets who taught me how important the oral qualities of the poem are, how the poem performs. She was a woman poet who never concealed or apologized for her female experiences and never, never pretended to be a man or put on male clothing to be heard. She was an intelligent poet and one of great political integrity and empathy.

Reading Neruda, sometimes in Spanish and sometimes in translation and once spending a month trying to translate him for my own use was immersion in another great soul. I love his *Odes* particularly. Like Williams, he had the precise eye and passion for the everyday, for the things around him, but he transformed them, he transmuted them. Passion is caught in his poetry and loosed when you read it. Again, a very political poet and one of immense love and energy. His imagery astounds me. All these poets gave me permission to express my politics and my experiences in my poems, at a time when political poetry is looked down upon and when critics try to lock it in a ghetto of inferior genre. Neruda encouraged me to loose my imagination, as for that matter did Apollinaire, whom I read intensively in my twenties.

Wordsworth meant more to me in the "Preface" to *The Lyrical Ballads* than in the actual poems, although I certainly studied them hard and long for my own education. It is his insistence on poetry coming from and using the language of everyday life, of making the poem clear that inspired me then and still. "Accessible" is a damnation often now; an accessible poet is somehow less of a poet. But I don't believe that. I work hard and revise again and again to make my poems clearer.

Wisława Szymborska has been important to me because she reminded me that a poem can appear to be very simple and be very powerful. A poet does not need rich imagery to create a strong poem. I forget that sometimes, and she reminds me.

And finally I would like to mention Nelly Sachs, who taught me there is nothing that cannot be written about in poetry, in spite of what some critics say. No experience is too dreadful, too painful, too immense to create poetry out of, and in fact as poets, it may be our duty to confront such desperate subjects as well as we can. The last two poets I have read in translation, but they have been just as important to me as if I could read the languages in which they created.