

## **A Selection of Marge Piercy's poetry published in *The Monthly Review***

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### **This is our legacy (2019)**

How will they curse us,  
the 3rd, 4th generations,  
the ones that survive  
the deaths we left them?

How could we explain  
the world on fire, species  
wiped out daily, oceans  
with more plastic than fish?

That we let a corrupt man  
stomp refugees fleeing  
rape, murder and hunger  
that we let him set blazes

no one could put out.  
We saw the cliff ahead  
We were well warned  
We took everyone over.

That was how our world  
ended, in lies and greed  
vast and numerous maggots  
dining on the corpse of hope.

### **Stragglings onward (2019)**

Every day is worse than the one before  
a killing of all that was legislated  
to be kind, helpful, healthy for all  
living creatures, prisoners of this earth.

The meanness of it gets me, the hatred  
for those who have less money and things  
and thus count less and should be  
punished or simply pushed into some

locked closet of poverty and forgotten  
except for occasional rhetoric blaming  
them for the state of that closet. How  
do these men stand being so cold

and full of malice? They have plenty  
left to flog women for having bodies.  
How dare women desire, how dare  
we choose, say no, resist, insist.

I can't give up, no matter how cozy  
that looks by contrast with all this  
jabbering, this attempt to organize  
our anger into some kind of weapon.

### **How does it end? (2018)**

From Guatemala, from El Salvador,  
Honduras they travel overland  
with little, with nothing but hope  
out of terror, from rape and murder

with daughters and sons. babies  
they hope they're carrying to safety.  
They believe the old promises.  
Here you will be safe, here there's

work no white American wants.  
You'll save to save family members.  
This will be a home forever.  
Here you will not cower in fear.

They cross and are treated  
worse than thieves, shoved  
into overcrowded camps, into  
cages like dogs no one wants.

Here the children they fled so far  
to save are ripped from them  
penned like sheep, alone in crowds  
crying, confused, terrified again.

Oh, Emma Lazarus, could you see,  
would you recognize this country?  
France, you must take back that lady  
with her now extinguished torch.

### **I am wrestling with despair (2017)**

Every day is worse than the one before  
a killing of all that was legislated  
to be kind, helpful, healthy for all  
living creatures, prisoners of this earth.

The meanness of it gets me, the hatred of who have less money and things and thus count less and should be punished or simply pushed into some locked closet of poverty and forgotten except for occasional rhetoric blaming them for the state of that closet. How do these men stand being so cold and full of malice? They have plenty left to flog women for having bodies. How dare women desire, how dare we choose, say no, resist, insist. I can't give up, no matter how cozy that looks by contrast with all this jabbering, this attempt to organize our anger into some kind of weapon.

### **Consider these but you won't (2017)**

Consider the child with curly brown hair sleeping with her dog in the back of an old SUV while her parents doze in scruffy front seats tilted back.

Consider the child with brown skin called nigger and told to go back to Africa, whose great grandparent built the road running past the school.

Consider the woman pregnant from rape, the woman who could not take off work to cross two states for an abortion, who tries hard to love

her child but he looks more and more like that nightmare rapist.

Consider men and women who worked the assembly line till their ears

dimmed out, back, kidneys rotted wanting a pension to reward them with sunshine. But the company no longer has to pay its promises.

Consider the family whose home will be taken by the bank while they can no longer pay for the pills for cancer that cost a month's wages

every month. So their daughter  
dies and they're still in debt. But  
Herr President, you cannot even  
see them; they're just too small.

### **Dirge for my country (2017)**

My country, you are hurtling us into a dark  
morass. In that old war, I understood  
the Viet Cong better than I understood  
the Pentagon. Alienated, at daily war  
in the streets and movement lofts against  
my government, yet I felt hope at least  
sometimes that we were pushing hard  
enough to birth a dream of equality.

Step by step those with stifled voices  
those dealt day by day fresh wounds  
in their minds, their backs, their cunts  
their very skin punished for itself  
moved a step closer to evident self  
hood, a step closer to that picnic  
in the sun of dignity on the grass  
of survival, our cultures melding.

We seemed to be growing up slowly  
to a willingness to listen to those  
who don't look like our mirror image,  
to those we perhaps had feared  
and turned to bogeyman shadows.  
We seemed to be almost arriving  
at something halfway holy and adult.  
Was it all seeming? All luxury?

We are rushing backward to a war  
against our best selves. We're suckling  
hatred, eating hatred for breakfast  
and lunch, snacking on hatred, fattening  
on it, bloated with it. We'll dance on  
corpses of good ideas. We'll burn  
dissenters like witches. Is this the end  
of good my country might've done?

### **In the boredom (2016)**

Do they yawn, these masters  
of our fate and wallets  
as they cast their weighted  
dice together, as they weigh  
our lives and find them  
negligible as we do when  
we swat a fly?

Do they still find it  
exciting as they plan  
a war or an election,  
a tax break or a politician  
bought for less or more  
than they judged him  
worth? Is it still fun?

Is it just routine now—  
a famine in Bangladesh  
a strike crushed in West  
Virginia mines, a plague  
ignored in the Congo,  
a carcinogenic drug  
widely advertised.

The draperies are drawn.  
We have no spies  
in those high places.  
Our phone calls recorded,  
our IDs stowed in files  
but they remain almost  
invisible to us.

### **We give up far too easily (2015)**

Why do people get so discouraged  
about political action? You take vitamin  
pills and imagine they do something.  
You don't say, I'll never wash dishes  
again because they just get dirty.

We all mumble silly prayers  
into the air, Oh please don't let  
me miss the plane, Oh please let  
him call me back. We never count  
times our wishes deflate as futile.

Inaction certainly will work fine  
for the overlords who own our work,  
control our lives, consider us  
collateral loss in their grand schemes.  
They only fear masses in motion.

A little at a time is the way forward  
an unending dance two steps forward  
and one and a half back. Sitting  
on your ass too long just makes  
you one. We're only what we've tried.

### **Trying to love Pilgrim Nuclear Power Plant (2015)**

First I will honor your name. Just as  
those colonists first used, then abused  
then tried to exterminate those whose  
land they coveted, so you squat leering  
at our homes, our bodies, our air and water.

Can I eat your plentiful pollution? Do  
the fish and the humpback whales shine  
from what you exude into the waters  
of Cape Cod Bay? Can I imagine  
your spent fuel rods where they pile  
in the pool built for a fifth of them  
leaking, always leaking poison,  
as so many fallen soldiers? As  
Tootsie Rolls clumping together?  
As fallen angels putrifying?

If only we could see your radiation  
as Northern Lights, we could enjoy  
as we bathe in it. You loom like fate,  
all manner of ailments cooking there  
bestowing cancer like alms.

You are an equal opportunity  
destroyer: seniors, toddlers, women,  
men, visitors, folks with McMansion  
summer homes, coywolves, cats,  
horses, chickadees, osprey. Your  
towers loom in our nightmares  
but like peasants under castle walls  
harvesting crops the lord will take,  
we're indentured to Entergy Inc.  
that will turn life to eons of death.

## **Welcome to post feminism and the left is obsolete (2014)**

There is no oppression. Just lean  
in to the corporate machine, become  
part of its vast personhood. You too  
every one of you can be a millionaire  
if you just try harder, gaze upward.

And you can win a lottery or two,  
give birth to or father a perfect plastic  
child who will become an even  
richer millionaire with no teen  
problems [or you have failed].

You'll be good looking till 90;  
anything bad can be replaced.  
Luck's a ripe fruit hanging high over  
your head, so jump. Keep jumping.  
Of course you can have it all:

that life snuffing pink slip, cancer  
from chemicals some corporation  
pissed into the water table, rotten  
mortgage to steal what little you  
saved before you started bagging  
at Wal-marts, rape in the parking  
lot, your family splintered under  
the weight of failure, cheap nursing  
home, urine soaked bed. Lean in,  
lean in. Your grave is already dug.

## **Who has little, let them have less (2014)**

The hatred of the poor, is it guilt  
gone rancid? That the rich have  
so much and still conspire to steal  
a baby's medicine, a woman's  
life, a man's heart and kidney.  
When those Congressmen talk  
of people who are counting  
their last change for gas or eggs  
choosing between cold and hunger  
they snarl. How dare we exist?

If they could push a button,  
if they could war on the poor  
here at home as they do abroad  
directly with bombs instead of  
legislation, think they'd hesitate?  
The righteous anger fermenting  
in them boils over in cuts to what-  
ever keeps people alive. They punish  
those who have little with less:  
a vast legal bus to run us over.

### **What they call acts of god (2013)**

How gorgeous is the snow and deadly.  
The roads are gone under its drifts.  
Hundreds of thousands without power  
in a frozen world where the wind  
howls like a pack of coywolves.

Already hypothermia fatalities  
mount — which is to say, huddling  
under blankets the old, the frail,  
babies shivered, stopped shivering  
and froze to death.

It costs too much to bury over-  
head lines, the power company  
officials say, who never went  
without water, without light  
never cowered in the frigid dark:

decisions made by those whom  
they do not impact, do not kill.  
We don't believe in climate  
change and besides, the cost  
benefit ratio does benefit us.

Drought from agribusiness stealing  
water. Lawns green in suburban  
desert. Houses washed away from  
cheaply done levees. In New Orleans  
rebuild for the rich and tourists



and let the ninth ward rot into weeds.  
Insurance companies hope you'll  
grow senile before they pay.  
Politicians sit on money to rebuild.  
And we call these natural disasters.

### **Ghosts (2013)**

How often we navigate by what is no  
longer there. Turn right where the post  
office used to be. She lives in a condo  
above where the bakery blew sweet  
yeasty smells into the street. A nail  
salon now.

Kelsey Hayes had a factory there  
on Livernois where our neighbors  
worked. A foundry spat out metal  
where the strip club spits neon  
now and loud skanky music  
into the night.

Rows of little cheap houses replaced  
by a few McMansions. Where did  
all those people go? The workers  
in factories, in tool and dye shops,  
the shoemakers and tailors, mom  
and pop eateries?

You can be plunked down in Anywhere  
U.S.A. and see the same row of stores  
Target, Walmart, Gap, Toys-R-Us.  
Exit the superhighway: McDonalds,  
Taco Bell, Burger King, Hardees,  
you haven't moved.

That's where the school was: see,  
it's condos now. That's the church  
the parish closed to pay for priests'  
sex. China got the shoe factory.  
Urban renewal turned the old neighbor-  
hood to dust.

Some things we make better and some  
are destroyed by greed and bad  
politics. We live in the wake  
of decisions we didn't share in,

survivors of a vast lethal typhoon  
of power.

### **What it means (2012)**

Unemployed: soon invisible,  
after a while, unemployable,  
unwanted, with your future  
eroding along with confidence,  
sense of self, the family  
cracking along old fault lines.  
And what do you do? Age.

Out of work: out of security,  
out of value, out of the routine  
that organizes the days, out  
of health insurance, out of  
the house when the mortgage  
can't be paid, out on the street,  
out of society, out of luck.

Your job was shipped  
overseas. Your job and two  
others are being done now  
by one frantic worker.  
A robot replaced you.  
Your company was bought  
and demolished.

Somebody elected you  
superfluous, a discard.  
Somebody made money;  
somebody bought a yacht  
with your old salary. Some-  
body has written you off,  
somebody is killing you.

At night when you can no  
longer sleep, don't blame your-  
self. What could you have  
done? Nothing. Choices were  
made to fatten dividends,  
bloat bonuses, pay for a new  
trophy wife and private plane.

You did nothing wrong  
except your birth. Wrong  
parents. Wrong place. Wrong

race. Wrong sex. If only  
you'd had the sense to be  
born to the one percent  
life would be truffles today.

### **The poor are no longer with us (2012)**

No one's poor any longer. Listen  
to politicians. They mourn the middle  
class which is shrinking as we watch  
in the mirror. The poor have been  
discarded already into the oblivion  
pail of not to be spoken words.  
They are as lepers were treated once,  
to be shipped off to fortified islands  
of the mind to rot quietly. If  
poverty is a disease, quarantine  
its victims. If it's a social problem  
imprison them behind high walls.

Maybe its genetic: how often they  
catch easily preventable diseases.  
Feed them fast garbage and they'll  
die before their care can cost you,  
of heart attacks, stroke. Provide  
cheap guns and they'll kill each  
other well out of your sight.  
Ghettos are such dangerous places.

Give them schools that teach  
them how stupid they are. But  
always pretend they don't exist  
because they don't buy enough,  
spend enough, give you bribes  
or contributions. No ads target  
their feeble credit. They are not  
real people like corporations.

### **These bills are long unpaid (2012)**

To predict disaster, to invoke treachery  
and malice, to spin tales of rotten  
luck to make it not happen:  
it doesn't work.

The wind is still rising with hail  
in its teeth. The waves are piling up  
then spilling back way, way baring  
bottom you've never seen.

There's ashes in the wind, darling,  
a taste of ashes in our food  
ashes on our lips in bed  
eyes blinded with ash.

There's a mortgage on my spine  
I cannot pay. Somebody has  
bought my teeth and wants them  
out tomorrow for dice.

There are real monsters under  
the bed, hungry for blood. They own  
the land this house stands on  
to stripmine for coal.

Santa isn't coming. The bounty  
hunter is. There's a lien on your  
ass and the bank is itchy to fore  
close your future.

If you're going to stand get up.  
If you're going to fight, get moving.  
Nothing comes to those who wait  
but hunger's claws

digging into the soft belly. If you  
value your blood, fight to keep  
it in your veins. You have nothing  
to lose but your life

and it was sold to them decades  
ago by your parents' parents.  
Their greed is endless. Your  
patience shouldn't be.

### **A hundred years since the Triangle Fire (2011)**

On March 25, 1911, a fire spread through the seventh, eighth, and ninth floors of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York City's Greenwich Village. The mostly immigrant workers, young Italian, Jewish, and German women who sewed shirtwaists, or women's blouses, were trapped behind locked doors. The death toll was 146, and many women, their clothing and hair burning, threw themselves from the windows to their deaths on the pavement far below, while spectators watched and could not help. Shortly thereafter, twenty thousand women struck for improved

working conditions and wages. The factory building is now part of New York University. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire remains the fourth largest industrial disaster in U.S. history.

Bodies falling through the air  
when all exits from the fire are closed  
to them and flames lick their skin:  
we have seen that.

In our time and theirs.  
Labor was cheap then;  
too often cheap now, sweat  
shops, whether crammed into

Brooklyn lofts or shipped  
overseas. Women are cheap and  
children are cheaper. Doors  
locked against their escape.

Growing up in center city  
Detroit when the factories  
hummed like huge hives  
at night and the sky was pink  
from steel mills on the river  
I learned early how replaceable  
we all were to those with  
power to replace us.

I see your charred clothes  
glued to flesh as you hurtle  
toward pavement, my sisters,  
hard worked women with  
blistered hands, forced to labor  
six days, whose rest came  
only in histories that can never  
rectify what greed ignited.

### **Workingclass nostalgia (2010)**

I remember Detroit when it hummed  
with factories like an army of bees  
all day, all night. I remember downtown  
when it felt too fancy for us, Hudsons  
with window displays of clothes  
we might find secondhand  
in a year or two or three.

I remember Detroit when Grand River  
was bright with stores arguing

for your paycheck. The bars  
thrummed with our music.  
You might have to lie to get a job  
if you were Jewish, or be turned  
down if you were Black, but jobs  
filled the papers we marked with  
crayon circles. Who sucked  
the money out? Who sent the jobs  
overseas to gut the unions?  
They live out in the more distant  
suburbs where we never went  
except as maids, way past  
the end of the bus lines.  
Invisible unless we appear  
where we don't belong among  
decision makers who view us  
as beasts of burden. They are  
persons; we are only numbers.

### **For Howard (2010)**

A light has gone out  
and we see and understand far less  
of who and what we are  
of the task only begun  
in the space your life carved out  
for us to follow and lead on.

In 1967 in a vast militant protest  
like a hundred others in which we both  
marched, spoke, were battered by police  
we met. We agreed, we argued,  
we shared meals, we wrestled, we praised—  
an ongoing dialogue cherished  
and now cut off. There is nothing  
left to do but continue the work of freedom.

### **Who's Naïve? (2009)**

A young woman said to me  
you guys in the sixties were so  
naïve. How could you ever believe  
there would be a revolution?

Oh, child of the oughts, did you  
ever believe Wall Street would  
turn out to be a sham, stocks  
made of piffle and hype?

Did you ever believe General  
Motors would come to tax  
payers cup in hand begging  
not to go out of business?

Did you ever believe we would  
go to war on a lie? That one  
president could fuck up every  
thing standing in just eight years?

That we would elect an African  
American president? That in some  
states, lesbians and gays could marry?  
That greed might go out of style?

What I've learned on my hard  
scrabble way is that nothing remains  
but trouble and love and opportunity  
we can make to change what needs it.

### **Stately vistas of stately vistas (2008)**

Rooms opening into each other  
beckon, light filling each arch—  
not a railroad flat although I  
surely have lived in such  
in Chicago, Brooklyn.

Power, wealth require big  
rooms and vistas—Hampton Court  
for instance that Henry stole  
from Cardinal Wolsey. I'm  
reminded of old condensed

milk cans with cow inside cow  
inside cow, as I stand staring  
but Versailles salons are all  
for giants or those who think  
they are. I can walk through

entering the rows of door  
ways each contained in the next  
to my eye. Whoever needed

to spread out so, amid chairs  
no one could loaf in, tables  
fit only for night long feasts  
mirrored rooms reflecting  
mirrored rooms? I escape  
into the sunlight under  
standing the guillotine.

### **Peace Now! Or Anytime in This Lifetime (2008)**

Peace is always somewhere else—  
in Utopia, Shangri-La, the New Jerusalem.  
Peace is the walled garden we never  
saw where erosion has made a desert.

Peace is always sometime else—  
the golden age where our distant  
ancestors squatted eating dates  
and roots together in primal bliss;

or the future ever more distant  
when robots do all the work  
and we zip about in clean air  
over clean cities eating manna.

Peace is up above the clouds  
among plump cherubs and skinny  
angels. Peace is within: Om.  
Peace is what politicians sell.

I have never lived when there  
was not a war. So long as profits  
swell with heaps of bodies,  
so long as rulers conflate penises  
with power, so long as war  
is confused with a hockey game,  
peace will lie in pieces, small  
moments, an occasional blue day.

### **Pushing the Clock Hands Back (2006)**

Important bloated men squat on the facts  
thinking they can hide them with their weight:  
men who think their power like King Canute  
ordering the sea to behave, can abolish  
the eons slow inexorable rise of mountains,



the branching and dying of species, wind  
and water that will grind the Himalayas to dust.

They lean on the hands of the cosmic clock  
protesting time itself, legislating false history.  
Time does not end. Only civilizations  
mad with power and drunk with riches,  
building war machines that drain hope  
and money from the poor and the formerly  
middle class which is itself going extinct.

Time does not end, but species do.  
Let us vote and rejoice to join our relatives  
the dodo, the great auk and tyrannosaurus.  
Time wears all egos down to blowing dust  
although presidents, CEOs and preachers  
stand tall and wave their bravado like a red  
cape trying to stop change. It always comes.

### **Can't You See It Coming? (2006)**

Fires crackle in the brittle trees  
bled dry by drought, the grass,  
bleached straw on the dusty hills  
where rain no longer falls  
in what used to be its season.

Polar bears fight to the death  
on floating islands of loose  
ice that once were solid.  
They are starving as sea bird  
nests float like uprooted bladderwrack.

Bread baskets of the plains  
will blow in the long arid winds  
as dust. The rice fields  
will go under rising tides.  
The only catch for fishermen—

huge beached shoals of dying  
creatures whose waters have  
grown lethally warm. What do  
we do to solve this disaster we  
are creating for all living

on this planet except beetles  
cockroaches and flies?  
We conquer more oil.

We burn more oil and coal.  
We burn and we burn and  
we burn. Our smoke rises  
stinking incense to the heavens  
while we drown our grand  
children in refuse and oily muck.  
Gentlemen, start your engines.

### **In your name (2004)**

In your name, we have invaded  
come with planes, tanks and artillery  
into a country and wonder why  
they do not like us  
be proud

in your name we have bombed villages  
and cities leaving torn babies,  
the bloated bellies of their mothers,  
a little boy crying for his father  
who lies under his broken house  
the smashed arms of teenagers  
in the sunbaked streets  
every death creates a warrior  
be proud

In your name we have taken men  
and women from their homes  
in the afternoon breaking down their doors  
in the night waking them to the rattle  
of weapons leaving their children  
weeping with fear  
be proud

in your name we have taken those we suspect  
because they were in the wrong place  
or because someone who hated them gave their names  
or because a soldier didn't like the way they stared at him  
put them in cells and strung them up like slaughtered cattle  
stripped their clothes and mocked them naked  
ran electricity through their tender parts  
set dogs to rip their flesh  
in your name  
be proud

This is who you are becoming.  
There is none other but you sanctioning this.

In your name young boys from Newark and Sandusky  
are shot at by people who live in the place  
they have been marched to.

In your name a young woman from Detroit  
is disemboweled by a bomb.

In your name the sons of out of work miners  
step on land mines.

In your name their bodies are shipped home.

In your name fathers return to their children  
maimed and blind, their brains seared.

This is who you are in Athens or in Lima not Ohio  
when people glare at you in the street.

This is the person your passport identifies,  
the one who allows the order to be given  
for blood to be mixed with sand  
for bones to be mixed with mud

In your name is all this being carried out right now  
as we sit here, as we speak, as we sleep.

Every day we do not act, we are permitting.

Every day we do not say no, we all say yes  
be proud.

### **Sneak and Peek (2003)**

Under the patriot act, any strong arm  
of law enforcement  
has the right to enter your home covertly  
while you sleep  
while you are out  
on suspicion you might  
be hiding something under the bed  
among your boxers or thongs  
on your computer among the porn.

Are you patriotic?

Do you submit lists of what you read  
to the F.B.I. without waiting to be asked?

Do you spy on your neighbors checking  
if they play Middle Eastern music

if they smoke other than tobacco

if they read the wrong books—all u.s.

right thinking people know what

they are. If they have too much sex

or sex of the wrong kind—all u.s.

right thinking people know exactly

what we mean. Do you believe  
in the separation of Church and Hate?  
Evil our President says is everywhere  
and obvious and must be invaded  
mostly by Black adolescents  
whose morality is dubious anyway  
unless they die as heroes.

We, your bornagain FBI  
have collected receipts from your  
restaurant meals for the past five years.  
You have ordered hummus six times,  
falafel twice and lamb four times  
which is suspect because your  
President eats only beef and ham.  
What are you planning to do with that  
sesame tahini from Stop & Slop.  
Your credit card records indicate  
you purchased 8 bags of fertilizer  
on April 11 at 17 hundred oh 8.  
You also purchased nails—  
material for anti-personnel devices.

You have turned off the television  
48 times while Our President spoke  
words of wisdom and Christian endeavor.  
During the State of the Union address  
you were observed on your couch  
making derogatory faces and obscene  
remarks. You have emailed quotes  
from our sacred leader miscalling  
him Shrub. You may not criticize  
the President nor his lady Laura  
nor his omniscient veep  
the great grey Cheney of oil  
nor the secretary of defense  
Our Donald whose brain shines  
bright as solid titanium  
or our Grand Master Ashcroft  
into whose perked up ears  
every men's and women's  
room in the country is directly  
bugged. You may be detained  
on suspicion of being suspicious  
You want to protest?  
That's grounds enough.  
You are under arrest.

You have no right to remain  
silent, to seek counsel  
or to defend yourself. Welcome  
to the New Inquisition.