

# BLESSING CREATION

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*EARLY GRRRL:*  
*THE EARLY POEMS OF MARGE PIERCY*

Marge Piercy

The Leapfrog Press  
PO Box 440735, Miami, FL 33144  
153 pages; paper, \$15.00

*WHAT ARE BIG GIRLS MADE OF?*

Marge Piercy

Knopf  
159 pages; cloth, \$25.00

Once upon a time (about last Friday, as A.A. Milne would remind us), little girls were supposed to be made of “sugar and spice and all things nice.” Once upon about the same time, there were not supposed to be any kinds of girls *but* little. Marge Piercy is among the small group of major feminist poets who began to change all that in the 1960s and 1970s. Her poems were a direct challenge to the *status quo*. They modeled female rage for a generation of women; they were necessary, historic. The poems in *Early Grrrl* (collected here from four out-of-print books: *The Twelve-Spoked Wheel Flashing*, *Living in the Open*, *Hard Loving*, and *Breaking Camp*, with additional youthful and other uncollected poems written over four decades) are not subtle; they do not wish to be. They are missionary, prophetic, apostolic. They proclaim their politics, their sexuality, and their anti-modernist, straightforward poetics bluntly, boldly, with Amazonian full-frontal nudity.

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*Since a prophet hath no honor in her  
own country, she must like  
Cassandra repeat herself in the hope  
that the people she is trying to save  
will hear her.*

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At least, that’s what I expected. Reading *Early Grrrl* after I had composed the above sentences for a review of *What Big Girls Are Made Of?*, I discovered something quite different: a young poet finding her voice through early, sometimes rhymed and metered, verse on the themes of nature, love, and death; echoing ancestors like Emily Dickinson; learning beside contemporaries like Sylvia Plath, Margaret Atwood, and Erica Jong; experimenting with the uses and misuses of her language; discovering her gift for images; beginning to indulge her weakness for explanation. Politics, and especially the personal-is-political brand of feminist analysis, enters the poems early, prophetically:

What I found among the cobblestones,  
the bombed-out streets, the ghettos  
squashed like egg cartons, the spires and  
apses and domes, was myself:  
a past that led bleeding toward me  
a present in which I flourished in my  
poverty  
like a flowering weed out of asphalt  
and the word, the word, the future word  
was being formed in my blood.  
In me was the poet I will be.  
In me were the words heating,  
hardening, the words  
taking shape and growing,  
ticking in my womb  
like a bomb.

(“Grand Tour 1957”)

Politics underlies most of the poems in *Early Grrrl*, but, except when she is proselytizing (“For Inez Garcia”), there is a refreshing lack of righteousness. Even in so directly political a poem as “Smoke in the wind,” the emotion is carried in the images:

Darkness is coming early  
under wings of a vast bomber  
taking off. Lovers

are touching bellies.  
A child draws pictures in the dirt.  
An old man leads a water buffalo  
down a road no one  
will ever see again.

Though, with the mention of the child, the poem verges dangerously towards sentimentality, pulling back at the last possible moment by focusing on the disappearance of the *road*, and leaving the people's fate to the reader's judgment and imagination.

One of the early poems in *What Are Big Girls Made Of?*, her thirteenth collection, is called "Song of the nudge." It's a self-portrait. Piercy is a nudgenik still, just as

impolite  
as wind that blows umbrellas wrong  
side to and dead leaves down.

I cannot stay out of crevices.  
I cannot abstain from tipping  
things over and stirring up dust.  
("Brother-less six: Unconversation")

She proselytizes, as in "For two women shot to death in Brookline, Massachusetts." She laments, in the title poem here as in the poem from *Early Grrrl* called "Exodus," that women are constructed like manufactured products; she compares our "retooled, refitted and redesigned" bodies to sports sedans, satin eels, scissors' blades, topiary hedges, science projects, "gardens to be weeded,/ dogs to be trained." She castigates us, "Why should we punish each other with scorn/ as if to have a fat ass/ were worse



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than being greedy or mean?" She asks, "When will a woman cease/ to be made of pain?"

Sometimes there is an element of condescension in the tone of Piercy's anger, which the title, *What Are Big Girls Made Of?*, unfortunately reinforces. Also, her tendency to summarize, to point to a moral, and to oversimplify has gotten worse. In this she is no doubt doing her job as prophet: since a prophet hath no honor in her own country, she must like Cassandra repeat herself in the hope that the people she is trying to save will hear her.

But I'm reminded of the brilliant and famous quip with which Dorothy Parker responded to the challenge of using the word horticulture in a sentence: "You can lead a horticulture but you can't make her think." Perhaps I am that unreconstructed "hor," perhaps another woman's anger still makes me uncomfortable; or maybe these preachy poems don't work, or don't work anymore.

I could be wrong. *What Are Big Girls Made Of?* was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 1998 and named one of the Most Notable Books of the year by the American Library Association.

It is notoriously difficult to write poems with an agenda. Outrage tends to push them towards polemics. A reader's judgment must depend on whether her emphasis falls on the agenda or the poetry. If on the agenda, the content of the poem may persuade her that the poetry works. If on the poetry, the formal criteria must take precedence. Piercy's political poems succeed, in my view, when they are more narrative than rhetorical, when she allows the story to speak, more or less, for itself.

It is for this reason that I tend to prefer the political poems in *Early*

*Grrrl* to those in *What Are Big Girls Made Of?* They seem fresher, perhaps because the issues were new when the poems were written, perhaps because they are generously interspersed with poems on other themes, perhaps because they are more imagistic, more personal, and in many cases, funnier. Take “Between the end and the acceptance of the end,” which begins, “She has him like walking/ pneumonia”; take “Ask me for anything else,” which begins, “Patience is dun-colored”; or take “Make me feel it,” which ends, “I fear nothing like this silence/ filled with the satisfied nibbling of myriad teeth/ of the little appetites.”

*Early Grrrl* is not barren of Piercy’s more declamatory verse, however (see “The token woman”), nor is *What Are Big Girls Made Of?* devoid of political poems that work. “A little monument,” for instance, tells the story of a favorite childhood cat who was poisoned by the boy next door when the Piercys sold their house to a black doctor. Similarly, “A day in the life,” which begins with an ellipsis that immediately gets our attention:

She is wakened at four a.m.  
Of course she does not  
pick up...

and goes on to describe the minute-by-minute, brutal daily experience of an abortion clinic receptionist, who, even when she comes home, comes home to a boyfriend who is, “she can tell, getting tired/ of her tears.”

Next morning  
she rises and day falls  
  
on her like a truckload  
of wet cement. This is  
a true story, this is  
what I know of virtue,  
this is what I know  
of goodness in our time.

Piercy gives us her characteristic *envoi*, but it does not overwhelm the story; in the poem’s only simile, day, which is supposed to rise like every other ordinary, working stiff, falls instead on top of the poor receptionist,

knocking her down (again), hardening even as it lands. The power of the image allows the rhetorical ending to work.

The political poems in *What Are Big Girls Made Of?* are all grouped together, to their detriment, in one (the second) section of the book; other sections include love poems, nature or environmental poems, rich family poems, and a troubled opening sequence called “The Brother-less Poems,” in which Piercy chronicles her ambivalent relationship with a much older, now deceased half-brother. Despite later estrangement, she acknowledges his powerful influence on her development:

Thus we grew out of the same mother  
but never spoke real words since I turned  
twelve.

Yet you built into my psyche that  
space  
for a man not of ice and thumbtacks,  
a man who could think with his body,  
a man who could laugh from the soles  
of his feet, a man who could touch  
skin simply as sun does.  
You gave me a license  
for the right of the body to joy.

If Piercy’s political poems showcase the strength of her aggression, her personal poems prove the equal strength of a rich tenderness, humor, and vulnerability. One of my favorites is “Belly good” (from *What Are Big Girls Made Of?*), a lovely and loving appreciation of womanhood:

Even when I have been at my thinnest,  
you have never abandoned me but  
curled  
round as a sleeping cat under my skirt.  
When I spread out, so do you. You like  
to eat, drink, and bang on another  
belly.

Piercy’s insistence on the physical, her open presence to the world, is one of her major strengths as a poet. She draws deftly on simile and metaphor. Night “soaks/ its dye into the edges of day,” “the night’s creek/ rushes over our shining bones,” “The night is our fur./ We curl inside it licking.” Breasts “shimmer” or gleam

