Poetry of Marge Piercy

The Art of Blessing the Day - from THE ART OF BLESSING THE DAY

This is the blessing for rain after drought:
Come down, wash the air so it shimmers,
a perfumed shawl of lavender chiffon.
Let the parched leaves suckle and swell.
Enter my skin; wash me for the little
chrysalis of sleep rocked in your plashing.
In the morning the world is peeled to shining.

This is the blessing for sun after long rain:
Now everything shakes itself free and rises.
The trees are bright as pushcart ices.
Every last lily opens its satin thighs.
The bees dance and roll in pollen
and the cardinal at the top of the pine
sings at full throttle, fountaining.

This is the blessing for a ripe peach:
This is luck made round. Frost can nip
the blossom, kill the bee. It can drop,
a hard green useless nut. Brown fungus,
the burrowing worm that coils in rot can
blemish it and wind crush it on the ground.
Yet this peach fills my mouth with juicy sun.

This is the blessing for the first garden tomato:
Those green boxes of tasteless acid the store
sells in January, those red things with the savor
of wet chalk, they mock your fragrant name.
How fat and sweet you are weighing down my palm,
warm as the flank of a cow in the sun.
You are the savor of summer in a thin red skin.

This is the blessing for a political victory:
Although I shall not forget that things
work in increments and epicycles and sometime
leaps that half the time fall back down,
let's not relinquish dancing while the music
fits into our hips and bounces our heels.
We must never forget, pleasure is real as pain.
The blessing for the return of a favorite cat, 
the blessing for love returned, for friends' 
return, for money received unexpected, 
the blessing for the rising of the bread, 
the sun, the oppressed. I am not sentimental 
about old men mumbling the Hebrew by rote 
with no more feeling than one says gesundheit.

But the discipline of blessings is to taste 
each moment, the bitter, the sour, the sweet 
and the salty, and be glad for what does not 
hurt. The art is in compressing attention 
to each little and big blossom of the tree 
of life, to let the tongue sing each fruit, 
its savor, its aroma and its use.

Attention is love, what we must give 
children, mothers, fathers, pets, 
our friends, the news, the woes of others. 
What we want to change we curse and then 
pick up a tool. Bless whatever you can 
with eyes and hands and tongue. If you 
can't bless it, get ready to make it new.

**Learning to read** - from THE ART OF BLESSING THE DAY

My mother would not teach me to read. 
Experts in newspapers and pop books 
said school must receive us virgin. 
Secrets were locked in those 
black scribbles on white, magic 
to open the sky and the earth. 
In a book I tried to guess from 
pictures, a mountain had in its side 
a door through which children ran in 
after a guy playing a flute 
dressed all in green, and I too 
wanted to march into a mountain. 
When I sat at Grandmother’s seder, 
the book went around and everybody 
read. I did not make a distinction 
between languages. Half the words
in English were strange to me. I knew when I had learned to read all would be clear, I would know everything that adults knew, and more.

Every handle would turn for me. At school I grabbed words like toys I had been denied. Finally I could read, me. I read every sign from the car. On journeys I read maps. I read every cereal box and can, spelling out the hard words. All printing was sacred.

At the seder I sat down at the table, self-important, adult on my cushion. I was no longer the youngest child but the smartest. When the Haggadah was to be passed across me, I grabbed it, roaring confidence. But the squiggles, the scratches were back. Not a letter waved at me. I was blinded again. That night I learned about tongues. Grandma explained she herself spoke Yiddish, Russian, Polish, Lithuanian and bad English, little Hebrew. That’s okay, I said. I will learn all languages. But I was fifty before I read Hebrew.

I no longer expect to master ever alphabet before death snatches away everything I know. But they are always beckoning to me those languages still squiggles and noises, like lovers I never had time to enjoy, places I have never (yet) arrived.
The aunt I wanted to be - from THE ART OF BLESSING THE DAY

My aunt Ruth was the youngest girl, halfway in age between my mother and me. She read mysteries, so when I was twelve and thirteen, I read all the mysteries in Gabriel Richard Library—where my favorite librarian explained to me that the name whooshed, being French, and rimed with hard.

I followed Ruth to the golf course, carrying her clubs like bouquets of exquisite flowers. I walked just behind her, imitating her swinging walk.

How she laughed. It made me glad to hear it building from her navel and tumbling out. She was not like my mother or other mothers.

She was childless and worked. She earned her own money. She wore suits. She wore slacks before other women dared. She had rows of bowling and golf trophies and muscles she let me feel in her arm, but her husband beat her. It was a shame we never spoke aloud.

Sometime she would wear makeup so thick it flaked and still I could see the purple rose on her cheek. I did not love him. Nor did she.

She eloped with a neighbor, and off they ran to California where they were poor and merry and kept kosher together and she gave up golf for swimming and grew roses and tomatoes. Behind every strong women my age someone like my aunt stands like a signpost pointing: to a place she could only glimpse.
like Moses on Mt. Pisgah, that land
of freedom we promised ourselves
and are still fighting to conquer.

To be of use - from THE ART OF BLESSING THE DAY
The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.
They seem to become natives of that element,
the black sleek heads of seals
bouncing like half-submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.

Woman in a shoe - from THE ART OF BLESSING THE DAY
There was an old woman who lived
in a shoe, her own two shoes,
men’s they were, brown and worn.
They flapped when she hobbled along.
There was an old woman who lived in a refrigerator box, under the expressway, with her cat. January, they died curled together.

There was an old woman who lived in a room under the roof. It got hot, but she was scared to open the window. It got hotter.

Too hot, too cold, too poor, too old. Invisible unless she annoys you, invisible unless she gets in your way.

In fairy tales if you are kind to an old woman, she gives you the thing you desperately need: an unconquerable sword, a purse bottomless and always filled, a magical ring. We don’t believe that anymore. Such tales were made up by old women scared to be thrust from the hearth, shoved into the street to starve. Who fears an old woman pushing a grocery cart? She is talking to God as she shuffles along, her life in her pockets. You are the true child of her heart and you see living garbage.
Meditation before reading the Torah - from THE ART OF BLESSING THE DAY

We are the people of the word
and the breath of the word fills our minds with light
We are the people of the word
and the breath of life sings through us
playing on the pipes of our bones
and the strings of our sinews
an ancient song carved in the Laurentian granite
and new as a spring azure butterfly just drying her wings
in a moment's splash of sun.
We must life the word and make it real.

We are the people of the book
and the letters march busy as ants
carrying the work of the ages through our minds.

We are the people of the book.
Through fire and mud and dust we have borne
our scrolls tenderly as a baby swaddled in a blanket,
traveling with our words sewn in our clothes
and carried on our backs.

Let us take up the scroll of Torah
and dance with it and touch it
and read it out, for the mind
touches the word and makes it light.
So does light enter us, and we shine.

The scent of apple cake
My mother cooked as drudgery
the same fifteen dishes round
and round like a donkey bound
to a millstone grinding dust.

My mother baked as a dance,
the flour falling from the sifter
in a rain of fine white pollen.
The sugar was sweet snow.

The dough beneath her palms
was the warm flesh of a baby
when they were all hers before
their wills sprouted like mushrooms.
Cookies she formed in rows
on the baking sheets, oatmeal,
molasses, lemon, chocolate chip,
delights anyone could love.

Love was in short supply,
but pies were obedient to her
command of their pastry, crisp
holding the sweetness within.

Desserts were her reward for endless
cleaning in the acid yellow cloud
of Detroit, begging dollars from
my father, mending, darning, bleaching.

In the oven she made sweetness
where otherwise there was none.