

THE LONG DEATH

by Marge Piercy

Radiation is like oppression
the average daily kind of subliminal toothache
you get almost used to, the stench
of chlorine in the water, of smog in the wind.
We comprehend the disasters of the moment,
the nursing home fire, the river in flood
pouring over the sandbag levee, the airplane
crash with fragments of burnt bodies
scattered among the hunks of twisted metal,
the grenade in the marketplace; the sinking ship.

But how to grasp a thing that does not
kill you today or tomorrow
but slowly from the inside in twenty years.
How to feel that a corporate or governmental
choice means we bear twisted genes and our
grandchildren will be stillborn if our
children are very lucky.

Slow death can not be photographed for the six
o'clock news. It's all statistical,
the gross national product or the prime
lending rate. Yet if our eyes saw
in the right spectrum, how it would shine,
lurid as magenta neon.

If we could smell radiation like seeping
gas, if we could sense it as heat, if we
could hear it as a low ominous roar
of the earth shifting, then we would not sit
and be poisoned while industry spokesmen
talk of acceptable millirems and .02
cancer per population thousand.

We acquiesce at murder so long as it is slow,
murder from asbestos dust, from tobacco,

from lead in the water, from sulphur in the air,
and fourteen years later statistics are printed
on the rise in leukemia among children.
We never see their faces. They never stand,
those poisoned children together in a courtyard,
and are gunned down by men in three-piece suits.

The shipyard workers who built nuclear
submarines, the soldiers who were marched
into the Nevada desert to be tested by the
H-bomb, the people who work in power plants,
they die quietly years after in hospital
ward and not on the evening news.

The soft spring rain floats down and the air
is perfumed with pine and earth. Seedlings
drink it in, robins sop it in puddles,
you run in it and feel clean and strong,
the spring rain blowing from the irradiated
cloud over the power plant.

Radiation is oppression, the daily average
kind, the kind you're almost used to
and live with as the years abrade you,
high blood pressure, ulcers, cramps, migraine,
a hacking cough; you take it inside
and it becomes pain and you say, not
They are killing me, but I am sick now.



Marge Piercy is the author of twelve collections of poetry, including *The Moon Is Always Female* and *Mars and Her Children*. In 1990 her poetry won the Golden Rose, the oldest poetry award in the country. She says, "It is hard to see how there could be a better use [for this poem. Nuclear Guardianship] is exactly what the poem was written to accomplish." "The Long Death" is from *Circles on the Water* by Marge Piercy, copyright © 1982, reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.