

NOTES TOWARD AN APPRECIATION OF AN AMERICAN ORIGINAL

By *klipschutz*

The Poetry Deal

Diane di Prima

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Also discussed:

Dinners & Nightmares

Revolutionary Letters

Memoirs of a Beatnik

Recollections of My Life as a Woman: The New York Years

Pieces of a Song: Selected Poems

“Can you feel what I feel / Can we make it so that’s part of the deal?” Robbie Robertson sings on one of his solo releases. In the title poem of her new collection, Diane di Prima lays out the terms of the deal *she* made, directly addressing the art form she has practiced almost daily over a long, full life. She expresses gratitude:

I don’t want anything you don’t already give me:
trips to other worlds, dimensions of light

Di Prima also intermixes obeisance with draw-the-line resolve:

You can not make sense for years & I’ll still believe you
drop husbands, tribes & jobs as you wish

* * *

“Choose between me & *it*”—“*it*” has always gone
Except when “*it*” was my kids

Husbands, beware!

Di Prima took her vows in the mid-1940s at age fourteen, the Brooklyn-born daughter of second-generation Italian-Americans new to the middle class, with Keats as an early lodestar, perhaps for his direct pipeline to inspiration, his wholesale dedication to achieving immortality through “our heart’s cry and our heart’s ease” (di Prima, in another context). By now, she has had untold satisfactions and reversals—five children, many books and public performances, teaching, extensive studies into the occult, world travels, financial reversals in old age, Parkinson’s—that Keats never knew, his life cut short by tuberculosis.

Di Prima was there at the beginning, before the Beat movement had a name, and she made the same epic journey in the early 1950s as Norman Podheretz did—from Long Island to Manhattan—though she moved in circles far removed from the *Commentary* crowd. A hipster to the marrow when the word meant the polar opposite

of what it does today, along with a few friends she changed the course of American poetry. Taking their cues from the Modernists, they educated themselves (Ezra Pound's *ABC of Reading* was a *vade mecum*), writing out of their own spoken vocabularies and provisional lifestyles: engaging in sexual experimentation, illegal drugs, and a thirst for experience and conversation that often rendered sleep an annoyance to be put off like a creditor. For all intents and purposes, their religion was Art.

With LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka), di Prima founded the *Floating Bear* magazine and taught herself offset printing. She typeset and proofread every issue. In *Recollections of My Life as a Woman: The New York Years* (2001), she relates how meticulously retyping Charles Olson's field of composition poems taught her more than any formal instruction in poetry ever did. We also learn why she was left out of Donald Allen's seminal *New American Poetry*: fallout from having had the audacity to bear the married LeRoi Jones's child, against his wishes! As a side note, the memoir roughly parallels the chronology and locales covered in Dave Van Ronk's *The Mayor of MacDougal Street*, back when poetry and folk music bled into each other, at times literally.

Di Prima was one of the few with the curiosity and courage to seek out Pound, then institutionalized at St. Elizabeth's in Washington, DC. In the memoir, she recounts her visits, over the course of a week in 1955. "November 2, 1972," a short poem written the day after Pound's death, about events that took place seventeen years earlier, first appears as part of *The Poetry Deal* in 2014. Score one for the long view, and patience! (An excerpt: "you handed me stolen food as I left / saying 'line those stomachs.'") The memoirs identify Sheri Martinelli as a go-between with Pound, possibly his mistress. Attentive readers of posthumous Bukowski marginalia will recognize her name from a Bukowski-Martinelli selected letters published by Black Sparrow.

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Allow me to digress and spotlight an early book, from the New York years, *Dinners and Nightmares* (1961), only parts of which have been reprinted. Written in her youth—when she was "down the block friends" with Frank O'Hara, had lovers of both sexes, prepared meals, gathered firewood from empty construction sites, dodged rats in coldwater flats (bathtub in the kitchen), took dance classes, posed for painters, worked at bookstores, translated poetry from Latin, read *The Golden Bough* in the twelve-volume version, had a three-dollar-a-year artist's pass at MOMA, and wore her hair long and flowing or cut it off to a butch haircut as she pleased—this book is my candidate for an unheralded minor classic of the New York School.

Its sly, wicked wit, in evidence throughout, grows out of the texture of daily life, when every morning seemingly promised a new escapade, whether triumph or disaster. Humor is not commonly associated with di Prima's work, but *Dinners & Nightmares* has it, in spades. Maybe she and O'Hara rubbed off on each other. (Food plays a prominent role—in the 1950s, chicken gizzards went for twenty-nine cents a pound, if you wondered.)

The unclassifiable “Conversations,” a section of one-to-four-page skits, comprises nearly half the length of *Dinners & Nightmares*. In “The Quarrel,” a roommate/lover paints and draws, as di Prima tells him she’s “pretty god damned bugged” [to be pulling kitchen duty] and has work to do too. He continues drawing, unconcerned. “Mark finished one drawing and looked at it. Then he put it down and started another one.” Eventually, she shrugs and goes “to do the dishes,” as he blithely calls in from the other room, “It says here Picasso produces fourteen hours a day.” Curtain. Shades of Jules Feiffer—or a female be-bop version of James Thurber.

“The Art Class” features the crosstalk of four painting students, as they disagree about abstract expressionism (passing fad or not), and di Prima poses for them, clocking it all. Class and piece end simultaneously:

Irma Betty said come and look at this. I think I got the distortion pretty good. Don’t you think so?

Irma smiled again. She felt very superior. She said just because it’s ugly darling doesn’t mean it’s art.

Note the bare-minimum punctuation, which speeds the action along and replicates the jumbled pace of actual conversation. Di Prima’s role as co-founder of the New York Poets Theatre puts the absurdity in context.

From “The Frenchman”:

Okay I said. I scrubbed the oatmeal out of the double-boiler. You start.

I have missed you he said. Then he said come here.

He sat down on the stove. There was a roach on the pot and I watched it climb up his elbow.

The title character of “The Poet” tells her, “You gotta love . . . The world is full of children of sorrow and I am always sad,” even as he is “watching this cat beat up his chick in the street.” Di Prima takes the type of scene Lou Reed would later depict in considerably darker hues, and lets the poet hang himself with his own airy bloviations. Shades of *Ubu Roi*.

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By 1968, having started a family, di Prima had changed coasts. She dove into the counterculture and anti-war movement, considering men a “luxury” not to be denied or counted on. In 1971, City Lights issued *Revolutionary Letters*, perhaps her most-recognized poetry title, at least among baby boomers. Parts of it read like a verse analog to *The Anarchist’s Cookbook* (eg, instructions on how to best survive a teargassing). Reread in 2014, the small dissents loom large:

for every revolutionary must at last will his own destruction
rooted as he is in the past he sets out to destroy

(“Revolutionary Letter #12”)

. . . there is no end. there are only
means. each one
had better justify itself.
to whom?

(“Revolutionary Letter #26”)

Di Prima also penned the oddity *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (1969). Written for Olympia Press for money, in the guise of oversexed confessions of a wild “chick” in Manhattan spanning four lubricious seasons, the book’s proceeds helped support a communal household of fourteen souls in San Francisco. It brims with fucking and sucking, gay, straight and group; though the real action is in the episodes between physical contortions—the filler, from the publisher’s point of view. One passing character is a “book-thief-turned-priest.” A passage called “A Night by the Fire” winks at the reader with its two subtitles, the first announcing “What You Would Like to Hear,” while on the next page di Prima recasts the evening as “What Actually Happened.” We also get to relive her first look at *Howl* in City Lights Pocket Book form, hot off the press, while remembering that she was Ginsberg’s peer and friend. By 1969, *Memoirs of a Beatnik* evoked an already long-gone era, the early 1950s.

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The Poetry Deal, issued as part of the City Lights Laureate Series, opens with di Prima’s 2009 San Francisco Poet Laureate inaugural address, which does double duty as an introduction to first-time readers and a welcome back to fans after nearly thirty years between collections. In the address, she reads older poems, and quotes both Keats and Pound.

The occasional poems in *The Poetry Deal*—delivered at May Day celebrations—reminded me that di Prima has filled the role of public poet, reciting before large crowds throughout her career. In 1967, my friend Charles Potts brought her to Seattle to perform on a bill that featured Buffalo Springfield, the Byrds, and the Seeds. He still remembers her perseverance in the teeth of the sheer noise and indifference of the rock ’n roll throng.

By the late 1960s, her stance had shifted somewhat from that of the 1950s (as expressed in the New York memoir):

To be an outcast, outrider was the calling. Not
fame, or publication. Keeping one’s hands clean,
not engaging. By staying on the outside we felt they
weren’t our wars, our murders, our mistakes.

Never part of the establishment, by 1967 she had been an elder stateswoman at the advanced age of nearly forty. As for her earlier stance, some bearings might help: Di Prima’s generation endured McCarthy’s rampage, the Rosenberg executions, and Henry Miller’s

books being contraband. During high school, she and a friend, having been discovered reading *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, were sent to a priest, who “wound up shouting at us, ‘Don’t think! Don’t think! You’ll spoil your faith!’” Naturally, the two girls found him ridiculous, but nonetheless learned a lesson of the times: not to let authority figures know what they were reading, or even thinking.

The Poetry Deal collects pieces from a wide range of years, and as might be expected from someone di Prima’s age, contains its share of nostalgia. There are elegies for, among others, Philip Whalen, Kirby Doyle, Audre Lorde, and Pigpen of the Grateful Dead. There are also memorials for non-famous friends, casualties of the AIDS epidemic.

I do not take well to being schooled by poem, and di Prima can sometimes make me roll my eyes. The bracing and sobering opening of “Haiti, Chile, Tibet,” however, stopped me in my tracks, despite the screaming caps, given the competing connotations resonating from the word “tribes” in a post-9/11 world.

LET’S STOP FOR A MOMENT TO REMEMBER
WHAT WE ARE

a handful of tribes on a rather small rock

Perhaps being the mother of interracial children provided her unusual perspective in “& About Obama”:

if you were living
in the enemy’s house
wife & kids there too

& guarded—all of you—
by known assassins

how hard wd *you* fight
do you think
for what were only—
after all—dreams

(Coincidentally, as this review is being written, a Secret Service scandal over lack of presidential protection continues to unfold.)

In “Gracias,” di Prima takes a lunch break from her teaching duties, amidst the sights, sounds, and aromas of San Francisco’s Mission District: “The corn chips / taste of maize growing tall in desert . . . She brings / guacamole I see avocados of San Joaquin Valley . . . Add cheese & sour cream . . . cows on northern / California hills.” Slight but touching, these lines count blessings for each ingredient as the poem then broadens to embrace “Chinese man / in Oakland A’s cap, gay lad in enormous / cowboy hat.” The human comedy on display, a celebration of locavore culture, di Prima works on the fly, like a painter getting it all down on the canvas of the page.

Di Prima has always drawn from a wide range of forms. Among her few rhyming poems is the standout early “Dee’s Song,” a ballad that teeters on the verge of doggerel while delivering its stunning, tragic tale of a woman on her way to prison for “ten years and a day”

on a heroin charge (See *Pieces of a Song: Selected Poems*). In *The Poetry Deal*, we get alchemical arcana reminiscent of her epic poem *Loba*, tear-down-the-walls fervor à la *Revolutionary Letters*, haiku, and “Wisteria,” a prose poem.

For me, the multi-page “Clearing the Desk,” which hearkens back to *Dinners & Nightmares*, and almost reads as light verse, puts it all together. Shedding her priestess robes, her incendiary’s marching boots, and the urge to instruct, in a burst of energy cum parade of minute particulars di Prima shows *and* tells how overwhelming dailiness can get. Via the list poem’s chiseled form, she encapsulates mood swings and exhaustion, through the prism of demands on a sought-after public person’s energies. By turns playful and spent, bemused and confused, its easy touch drills deep, even as she blows off countless correspondents in one long sweeping motion. Here are some salient excerpts:

*I'm sorry I was
sick
on the road
at the gym
on retreat
meeting a deadline
buying socks . . .
when you came to town*

*I was too
broke
tired
busy
discouraged
dirty
unhinged . . .
to answer yr letter*

Later in the poem:

*I'd love to send money (if I only had some) to
the UFW
Nalanda Translation Committee . . .
the Society to Lynch Newt Gingrich
& that new one: People Against Impermanence
(such a sweet idea)*

It concludes:

*I didn't mean to ignore you
or hurt your feelings
but if it helps at all
feel free to ignore this note
I will understand*

In my initial readings of “Clearing the Desk,” the generational self-parody in the stand-alone line “on the road” went right past me.

It bears repeating that the blinding media spotlight on the Beats lasted only two years or so, and was over by the early 1960s. The word “beatnik” became a punch line; the movement’s founders went hither and yon. One of them, Diane di Prima, went to San Francisco and continued writing and thriving, the textbook definition of a survivor. Encountering her work in the twenty-first century, the young poet Sandra Beasley was “impressed by how fierce her voice was, how unapologetic.”

Ultimately, Diane di Prima will escape her status as the most famous female beatnik and a “feminist icon,” and readers will encounter a multi-faceted poet whose complicated lineages and stubborn personality produced a rich body of work containing several timeless lyrics. Still, it’s far too soon to know which ones they are.

