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Diane Di Prima

McKenzie Livingston

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Diane DiPrima's Search for a Familiar Truth

The image of Diane DiPrima sitting on her bed in a New York flat, eyes cast down, is emblematic of the Beat movement. DiPrima sought to characterize her gender without any constraints or stereotypes, which was no simple task during the 1950s and 1960s. Many of the other Beats, who were predominately male, wrote and practiced varying degrees of misogyny, while DiPrima resisted with her characteristic biting wit. In the early days of her writing (beginning when she was only thirteen), she wrote about political, social, and environmental issues, aligning herself with Timothy Leary's LSD Experiment in 1966 and later with the Black Panthers. But in the latter half of her life, she shifted focus and mostly wrote of her family and the politics contained therein. Her intention was to find stable ground within her familial community, for in her youth and during the height of the Beat movement, she found greater permanence in the many characters, men and women, who waltzed in and out of her many flats. Eventually, she would find a stable "family" in her five children.

Although the breadth of DiPrima's influence was not immediately apparent to her contemporaries, she has become one of the most well known female voices of the Beat movement. Born in Brooklyn, New York, where she experienced a tumultuous upbringing, DiPrima's primary caregivers were her grandparents. She writes, "it was at my grandmother's side...that I received my first communications about the specialness and relative uselessness of men..." (*Recollections 2*). The trenchant wit so apparent here is scattered throughout all of her poems, which possess an underlying raw tenacity—she was not afraid to examine unorthodox subjects like gender, the limitations and failures of family, and above all, the beautiful

· Ann Charters, one of the foremost Beat historians and writers on the subject, capitalizes Diane DiPrima's name in a manner that differs slightly from other Beat scholars ("DiPrima"). Since Charters is an authority on the Beats, I have chosen to present DiPrima's name the way she did.

strangeness of love. In her memoir, *Recollections of My Life as a Woman* (2001), DiPrima writes that “love” is synonymous with “trust” (6), and she reflects that notion in much of her writing. Through her candid words, she consistently expresses “a willingness to peer into darkness. [A] Struggle for Truth” (9).

All of the Beats were known for their treatment of life’s difficulties. They drank up (literally and figuratively) anything that challenged mindless conformity, welcoming the uncomfortable and the uneasy that violated unwanted demarcations. Nearly all of these writers struggled “to produce out of the society we have to live in, a vision of the society we want to live in” (Charters xxxii). They were literally *beat*—beaten by society, by its rules, and by its moral constraints. Even though their wish to create a more idealistic society was never realized, they still made a large impact with their stark scrutiny of many social norms of the day by unabashedly writing the truth. DiPrima was no different. In fact, on the cover of her second book, *Dinners and Nightmares*, the publisher wrote, “her honesty will shock the romantic illusions of even the ‘beat’ generation.” Beat historian Ann Charters further comments that “‘Three Laments’ and ‘Song for Baby-O, Unborn’ are what [DiPrima] called ‘more or less love poems’ from that book [*Dinners and Nightmares*]” (359). Clearly, DiPrima sought to define truth in the context of a beaten-down world—and she did it through the lens of love. As Mel Ash writes in *The Beat Spirit*, “...[DiPrima’s] inner meaning of ‘poetics,’ that is, the style and the intent, [is] the artfulness with which we choose to love out our lives” (26).

***Dinners and Nightmares* (1961)**

DiPrima’s second book contains all of the usual Beat elements (unapologetic sexual transparency, references to Romantic poets like Shelley, and even jazzy, rhythmic syntax), but it also contains some of DiPrima’s earliest allusions to her desire for a family. Published in 1961,

only three years after DiPrima's inaugural text, *This Kind of Bird Flies Backward, Dinners and Nightmares* challenges the assumption that all Beat poems have to be about depressing or difficult subjects. DiPrima wrote plenty of other poetry, non-fiction, and fiction that did explore topics that may have been (and still are) classified as "taboo," but her early works still maintained a playful side. "i may be wrong," DiPrima writes, "but it seems to me we were happy" (*Dinners* 31). She dedicated this first book "to my three pads & the people who shared them with me...." This short but telling line reveals DiPrima's longing for a stable home life and familial relationships wherever she could find them—she did not fare well as a child, which explains her constant return to this theme. It is also interesting to note that DiPrima didn't dedicate her book to any immediate family members, but to near-strangers who used her Brooklyn apartments like revolving doors. At a public reading in 1998 now available as the video *Diane DiPrima, Beat Legend*, she prefaces a poem about one of her husbands by saying she did not necessarily want a traditional family since she had seen things as a child that made her dislike what many Americans saw as the "traditional" family.

DiPrima's poem "Song for Baby-O, Unborn" first appeared in *Dinners and Nightmares*. "I won't promise / you'll never go hungry / or that you won't be sad / on this gutted / breaking / globe // but I can show you / baby / enough to love / to break your heart / forever" (6-16). Here, DiPrima writes to her firstborn, Jeanne, about love's fickle nature. Although traditional poets may have written about love's enduring qualities, DiPrima turns the convention on its head (another attribute of the Beats) by guaranteeing her yet-unborn child will suffer, but despite this, the mother will show her "enough to love / to break your heart / forever." DiPrima's definition of love doesn't bind, but breaks. It fills up all of the empty space and then overflows. It may be

darker than traditional poems on love, but it also shines with realism. She was not afraid to lay out the truth.

Because of her willingness to talk about tricky subjects and her unconventional lifestyle, DiPrima wasn't considered a "mother" in the traditional sense, but she carried this nonconformist identity with pride:

In an interview with *Jacket* magazine, DiPrima spoke about her life as a writer, a mother, and an activist. "I wanted everything—very earnestly and totally—I wanted to have every experience I could have, I wanted everything that was possible to a person in a female body, and that meant that I wanted to be mother.... So my feeling was, 'Well'—as I had many times had the feeling—'Well, nobody's done it quite this way before but f*** it, that's what I'm doing, I'm going to risk it.'" (Poetry Foundation)

She was going to risk it. She understood the world would view her as a contradiction, but that was what she embodied in her poems—poems about love being the opposite of hunger and sadness, but still having the capability to break our hearts. This is one of the purest definitions of the word that has ever been written. DiPrima discusses this paradox further in her memoir, recalling advice she received from Jack Kerouac: "DI PRIMA, UNLESS YOU FORGET ABOUT YOUR BABYSITTER, YOU'RE NEVER GOING TO BE A WRITER." She writes, "I considered this carefully, then and later, and allowed that at least part of me thought he was right. But nevertheless I got up and went home.... Maybe I was never going to be a writer. But I had to risk it. That was the risk that was hidden (like a Chinese puzzle) inside the other risk of: can I be a single mom and be a poet?" (*Recollections* 202). Because of her love for poetry *and* her love for her children, she pushed against this typecasting and obviously triumphed, while discovering a "family" all her own.

The feminist challenges DiPrima so openly faced during her early life drew attention to cultural inequities feminists continue to struggle with today. Charters concedes, “The Beat generation did less well for its women. Reflecting the sexism of the times, the women mostly stayed on the sidelines as girlfriends and wives...the writing of the exceptional Diane DiPrima flourished, but most women living with or married to the Beats...took care of the children, worked to support the family, and did little writing, mostly memoirs years later” (xxxii). DiPrima confronted the prevailing assumption that women were either caretakers and mothers or career women, but certainly not both simultaneously. Her writing assertively/unapologetically/bravely challenged that notion.

William T. Lawlor acknowledges the significance of DiPrima’s special role in *Beat Culture*: “Prolific writer, founder of the Poets Press, and coeditor of *The Floating Bear*, Diane DiPrima defied the expectations of family, friends, and society—she pursued the path of a woman writer during a time when that was an anomaly, and she is thus considered the archetypal Beat woman” (83). She not only wrote about the archetypal woman, she became one.

“Brass Furnace Going Out” (1975)

DiPrima was a feminist who often wrote about the female body as an instrument for birth but also for pleasure (again, a paradox), which is perhaps why this poem has been misinterpreted and even skewed by anti-abortionists. She always sought to reveal truths—even to her fellow Beat poets, who were truth-seekers themselves but predominantly male and therefore lacking a female perspective.

In an interview with fellow Beat poet Anne Waldman in 1978, DiPrima said, “I think the poet is the last person who is still speaking the truth when no one else dares to. I think the poet is the first person to begin the shaping and visioning of the new forms and the new consciousness

when no one else has begun to sense it; I think these are two of the most essential human functions” (qtd. in Knight 31). She recognized that love was pain, and if love is truth, then truth is painful, too. In “Brass Furnace Going Out,” the speaker laments, “do you have enough sweaters, is the winter bad, / do you know what I’ve done, what I’m doing / do you care // write in detail of your day, what time you get up, / what are you studying, when you expect / to finish & what will you do. / is it chilly?” (25-31). Her speaker’s maternal instinct to care for her unborn child shows that DiPrima believed a woman could still love her child even if it was painfully absent—perhaps another allusion to her desire for a family. She longed for it and loved it, even though it was perpetually out of her reach. In Section VII of the poem, the speaker frets about the child being born into a beaten-down world and becoming “a murderer / a junkie pimp hanged and burning in lime / ... / or starved or been shot, or tortured in hunger camps” (96-100). This reflects DiPrima’s earlier sentiments in *Dinners and Nightmares* when she writes to Jeanne that the world will not be kind to her but there is still love to be had. At the end of “Brass Furnace Going Out,” the speaker asks, “will / you / come here / again // my breasts prepare / to feed you: they do what they can” (193-98). This powerful denouement haunts the reader long after they finish the poem—will the speaker ever find that purpose, that home she seeks? If DiPrima is indeed the speaker in this poem, we can assume that she did find that permanence for which she was seeking, but it was not until much later in her life.

Loba, Parts 1-8 (1978)

In DiPrima’s wonderful epic poem, she literally and unabashedly examines the facts that define her gender by setting the poem in the context of a sexist, male-dominated culture. Through her poem, she fights to live *in* that world, but not be *of* it. The *Loba* itself is not defined by gender at all—it is a creature, a wolf that *appears* as a woman, which says much about

DiPrima's view of her sex. She accepts and glorifies her womanhood but also recognizes its potential for more: "She raises / in flames / the / city / it glows about her" (1-4). In her article examining the rich symbolism and many allusions to the female body in *Loba*, Gillian Thomsen writes, "The feminine has been the passive medium, through which the masculine passes, metaphorically speaking. The poem suggests that the masculine has entered 'the city' through the feminine, where the city is metaphorically a place of power and embodies the cultural sphere" (3). By challenging this traditional distribution of power, DiPrima is saying that women can and should be doing more than men—they should "be" powerful cities, too. This was a rather extreme view at the time DiPrima first penned these words, since many Beats were men and too often considered more distinguished due to the simple fact of their sex.

The *Loba* "dances" and "treads / in the severed heads / that grow / like mosses / on the flood / ... / they /...sing / ... / they chant / *a new / creation myth*" (10-25, italics added). Here, DiPrima employs one of her favorite themes—female mythology—to illuminate a much more unconventional definition of gender. Her fascination with the historical past becomes an examination of truth in retrospect, for in looking back she attempts to mold a new future with a "new creation myth"—one in which the female isn't limited to societal stereotypes. Instead, she is a goddess. The persona's morphing into the she-wolf shows that she accepts her animalistic side that devours men—usually viewed as powerful—now at the mercy of her she-wolf. In Section III, "she strides in blue jeans to the corner / bar; she dances / w / the old women, the men / light up, they order wine..." (62-65). Here there are no constraints. Is the *Loba* in disguise or is this normal attire? DiPrima is again commenting on the sheer fluidity of gender and may be semi-autobiographical in her reference to blue jeans. In *Dinners and Nightmares*, she writes an

essay about meals she shared with her large Italian family while growing up. The following describes a common scene that may have occurred during more than one of these meals:

So I'd eat and eat and dance with the kids and with the older folks, I was sort of in the middle, and they would look sad, the older ones, and ask me if I was going back to school. And if I felt good I'd be honest and say no. They would ignore my blue jeans all of them except my mother and she would have taken me upstairs first thing to put on a dress...and I would say no, the hell with it and we'd go down again and join the others...I'd pick up the change I could find in the kitchen, and all the aunts would be in the process of leaving. Then I would say some cool things to my brothers, take the food and go back to my part of the world. (33)

The fact that DiPrima says she would return “to my part of the world” indicates an otherworldly quality she saw in herself, even (or maybe especially) when she was with her immediate family. She felt apart from them, but at home with her friends and lovers.

In *Loba*, as in all of her works, DiPrima stresses the fact that females cannot be “defined” or put in a box. She uses the prominent water motif to represent the *Loba*'s fluid sexuality. This is a point DiPrima also makes in *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, where she dedicates pages to her lovers, both male and female, saying her body needed the experience of both (198). “*Loba*, DiPrima's epic poem that began in 1971, shows DiPrima as one who has survived the struggling essence of a woman writer and who is thus prepared to examine the universal experience of a multilayered female life-principle” (Lawlor 85). Her dedication to exploring the female archetype may have been esoteric at the time, but it is now widely relatable, especially in the context of an ever-growing feminist movement.

Pieces of a Song (1990)

In this later poetry collection, DiPrima still seeks for the familiar, the family, but simultaneously redefines what family is. Paul Varner usefully describes this shift in focus:

While her early verse can occasionally be sentimental, her late work sharpens an edge and eschews softness at any level.

Perhaps her eventual legacy will be her defiance of the Beat chick stereotype and her hard-edged revolutionary feminism. [...] ...the process of childbearing is integral to her work, and “as a poet concerned with the meaning of words, and as a woman of childbearing capability, DiPrima participated deliberately in changing the meaning of the term ‘family.’” (78-79; Blossom S. Kirschenbaum qtd. 79)

In *Pieces of a Song*, it is clear that her poetry has developed a maturity that is different from but nevertheless dependent on her earlier works.

Included in this collection are DiPrima’s quintessential *Revolutionary Letters*, first published as a separate book in 1968. The poems are dedicated to Bob Dylan, who collaborated with many of the Beats, including Allen Ginsberg. In these poems, DiPrima again explores controversial political issues, as apparent in “Revolutionary Letter #53: How to Become a Walking Alchemical Experiment”: “eat *mercury* (in wheat and fish) / breathe *sulphur fumes* (everywhere) / take plenty of (macrobiotic) *salt* / & cook the mixture in the heat / of an atomic explosion” (1-5). In the first line of “Revolutionary Letter #1” she confesses, “I have just realized that the stakes are myself.” As it turns out, these poems are not just a catharsis for DiPrima—they are her manifesto. She declares herself independent and powerful *without* requiring the help of a man.

In “Poem of Refusals,” she gives us a clear view of these stakes:

No strong men in shirtsleeves

striding thru
 my kitchen: warm & obtuse.
 No me curled-like-kitten around
 A sleeping child & smiling
 Seductively.
 No short skirts, no long
 breaths; I will not
 glance sidelong after reading a poem
 to see
 if you understood it. (1-11)

She writes more about refusing to sit in a car “quiescent...while someone else drives” (18), that she will not have “checkerboard linoleum” (20-21), or “good legs” (24). Her speaker declares that she will not write “plaintive / poems about marriage” (24-25) and then she says, “Wind / is what the men are, & my poems / the sea. Children like grass / on the hills—they hang / in there. Or like a forest. / They don’t come & go” (24-29). Here is the message underlying all of DiPrima’s poetry (at least up until this point), brought together in this melancholic verse. She almost echoes her grandmother verbatim, commenting again on the “relative uselessness of men” by presenting them as less reliable than children. Children “don’t come and go” like the men in DiPrima’s life. Whether their leaving was by her own volition or theirs is irrelevant, because she was always *seeking* for some security or stability in something and only found it in her children. She didn’t find it in romantic relationships (although she explored them thoroughly) nor did she find it in a largely democratic society (she was and still is an anarchist). She couldn’t find it in

her own gender, since she was always challenging the definition of “gender” anyway (and if it should be defined at all).

Conclusion

In *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (1969), DiPrima’s “mostly autobiographical” novel, the protagonist urged her readers to avoid monogamy as she shared her bed with a host of characters. Although DiPrima later said that most of the book was made up, the attitude toward relationships she expresses in its pages is the attitude she incorporates in her poetry and prose for the next three decades. In a 2014 interview that appeared in *San Francisco Gate* magazine, DiPrima said this about her partner of thirty-six years: “We don’t tell one another what to do. I don’t force my will on him and he doesn’t force his will on me. That would be bad karma. I still feel that humans ought to live in tribes and not nuclear families.” Although she still self-identifies as an anarchist, artist, and poet who is willing to push boundaries (or completely redefine them), at the age of eighty-two, DiPrima seems to have softened in her views on the family, and happily, has found a stable relationship, or “tribe” where she can still exercise her independence. In seeking truth, the truth found her.

McKenzie Livingston

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