



The Poetry Deal

Diane di Prima

SAN FRANCISCO POET LAUREATE SERIES NO. 7

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Poet Laureate Series Number 5



City Lights Foundation
San Francisco

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INAUGURAL ADDRESS

I want to say thanks to all the folks who nominated me and made me Poet Laureate but I decided that to name all those folks gets to be a litany, and really finally I would have to say thank you to all sentient beings.

(Laughter/applause)

There isn't a thing that's happened that hasn't helped put each of us where we are, so thanks everybody!

This is what I've written for us:

When I came to San Francisco in 1961, I came to a magical place—a city of bright air and beveled glass, of jazz and poets—stained glass windows tucked above the front door in even the poorest neighborhoods, and vistas of bay and hills and sailboats that took my breath away while I waited for a bus.

I moved here in 1968. I brought with me fourteen grown-ups (so-called) and all their accompanying kids & pets, horns & typewriters, and at least one rifle. We moved from the Hotel Albert on University Place and 10th Street in Manhattan to a fourteen-room house on the Panhandle of Golden Gate Park—a house with an in-law apartment, a two-car garage and a garden, that I'd rented for \$300 a month.

I came away from a city where I'd run the New York Poets Theatre and Poets Press, and produced the mimeographed newsletter *The Floating Bear*, first with my

lover, LeRoi Jones, and later when I left him and married someone else, alone. Roi resigned. He said it was for “personal reasons”.

But New York was a city that had by that time grown too harsh, too hard to live in. A city in which I’d seen too many deaths. I came to new dreams: to a choice to be active, to *actualize* what in New York I’d only been able to write about. I came here to work in new ways for change: the grace of possibility that had opened on this coast.

Because in the New York of the 1950s, where I came of age as a poet, one wrote one’s dreams, but didn’t try to make them happen. To bring about what *could be*.

I’d like to read a poem I wrote back then when I decided to go ahead and have a baby, to be a single mom. “Song for Baby-o, Unborn”, written for Jeanne, my first child, in early 1957. I was 22.

Sweetheart
when you break thru
you’ll find
a poet here
not quite what one would choose.

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

I can't tell you how many young mothers have written to me, emailed me, about this poem in the years since.

I grew up in the world of McCarthy, of the death of the Rosenbergs and of Wilhelm Reich, of endless witch-hunts. I remember to this day where I was sitting—it was on the steps of the New School for Social Research—when I got the news that the Rosenbergs had been executed. I was 18. I had dropped out of college that year, and was living on the Lower East Side.

You trusted very few, and you trusted them with your life. You never talked politics or sex in public, or talked about a lot of the literature you were actually reading. I worked for years in a bookstore where you'd better know the customer well if you were going to pull out a copy of Jean Genet or even Henry Miller, when he or she asked—they were illegal.

I'm going to read a poem from the early 1960s, when I had a theater which was busted for showing the Jean Genet film *Le Chant d'Amour*. It's one of five silly theatre poems I wrote that season.

THEATRE POEM #1

How can I be serious when there are so many cops at the door

threatening me with papers or asking to see my papers like in a Merle Oberon movie, but I don't feel glamorous would you, if you hadn't washed your hair in a month or combed it in a week for that matter?

Logan Smiley says Alan's a genius, Jimmy Waring
hates everything we do, but continues to do it with us
They keep stealing Ray Johnson's pictures out of the lobby
and changing the front door lock

Well, we've been here thru a blizzard, a raid & a rainstorm
so I guess we're here to stay, the same old people
keep coming back every weekend to see the same plays

[1963]

I had begun writing poetry when I was seven. I never stopped, but I was twice that age—fourteen—when I gave myself wholeheartedly to the poem. I had been reading Keats' letters, reading Shelley and Thomas Wolfe with my friends, while going to a high school that frowned on all things Romantic, when I had a kind of epiphany. My mind moved in an instant from hero-worship, gazing upward, to peership, looking straight on. I realized there was no reason I couldn't do what these folks had done. No reason I couldn't at least try. At that moment I made what I knew would be a life-long commitment.

From then onward for many years I didn't let a day go by without writing.

Poetry became the guiding force in my life. It led me a few years later to drop out of college and find an apartment on what was then the Lower East Side.

Poetry led me to study ancient Greek, to visit Ezra Pound in St. Elizabeth's Hospital, to found the New York Poets Theatre with my friends, to learn offset printing and raise the money to buy my Fairchild-Davidson press. (I was very proud of it. It came second-hand with a week of printing classes.)

Poetry gave me a good, rich life on the East Coast—New York City was my school, my university for many years. It was where I learned the discipline of daily work at one's craft. I learned how to look at painting, listen to music, really *see* dance.

And one day Poetry let me know for sure that it was time to move West, to my real home, San Francisco.

Let me read a poem from 1993. About forty years after I'd committed myself to poetry, it occurred to me that—although I had always imagined the artist's life to be completely pure and selfless, there actually was—and *is*—an unspoken contract between me and the Muse. So the “you” in this poem is Poetry itself.

THE POETRY DEAL (*See p 19.*)

The San Francisco I came to in 1968 was welcoming and sweet, as it was tough and scary.

“Your writing helped bring all this about,” Peter Berg had said to me two months before. (I was then in San Francisco on a reading trip, staying with Lenore Kandel.) Now he said, “Come and enjoy the fruits.”

It was hardly that simple and I knew it. But the possibility of actualizing some of the dreams I'd absorbed from my anarchist grandfather and hung onto ever since—the chance to actually *act* on what I believed in, to take a shot at creating the world as we dreamed it—made me eager to join these amazing folks: poets, Diggers, Panthers, Zennies, out-riders and rebels of all sorts, in the hope-filled and wild experiment that was bubbling away in this City 1968.

My way was made easier by many: Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Nancy Peters at City Lights advanced money on the *Revolutionary Letters* I had yet to finish; Michael and Joanna McClure, Lenore Kandel, Peter Coyote, Kirby Doyle and Dee-Dee Morrill, Lew Welch, Marilyn Rose, the folks at the *Oracle* and many, many others, made it clear that I and my sprawling and non-descript tribe were welcome here. That there was plenty of work to do and plenty of room for us all.

Back in New York, my friends and I indulged in some creative financing spurred on by the many assassinations in the news—remember? Remember 1968?—and a general sense of urgency in the air. I returned from a reading trip, from San Francisco, in April. By summer solstice we were all back in San Francisco, ensconced in our newly rented house on Oak Street.

REVOLUTIONARY LETTER #4

Left to themselves people
grow their hair.

Left to themselves they
take off their shoes.
Left to themselves they make love
sleep easily
share blankets, dope & children
they are not lazy or afraid
they plant seeds, they smile, they
speak to one another. The word
coming into its own : touch of love
on the brain, the ear.

We return with the sea, the tides
we return as often as leaves, as numerous
as grass, gentle, insistent, we remember
the way,
our babes toddle barefoot thru the cities of the
universe.
[1968]

The Diggers immediately put us to work. My household was responsible for delivering free food to 25 urban communes twice a week and free fish which was available on Saturday mornings. (Friday was fish day in this still-Catholic city.)

Meanwhile I was writing *Revolutionary Letters* at a fast clip and mailing them to Liberation News Service on a regular basis; from there they went to over 200 free newspapers all over the US and Canada. I also performed them, sometimes with guitar accompaniment by Peter Coyote, on the steps of City Hall, while my comrades handed out the *Digger Papers*, and tried to

persuade startled office workers on their way to lunch that they should drop out and join the revolution.

I had a good friend—an old buddy of Will Geer, Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger—named Bob DeWitt. Bob was a barefoot potter. A communist millionaire who had a ranch near Mariposa. He joyfully supplied us with sides of beef and whole sheep for our larger be-ins and other shindigs. I made a few overnight trips in a pick-up truck to bring home the goodies for these occasions.

REVOLUTIONARY LETTER #11

drove across
San Joaquin Valley
with Kirby Doyle
grooving
getting free Digger meat
for Free City Convention
grooving
behind talk of Kirby's family
been here a long time
grooving
friendship renewed, neat pickup truck, we stopped
at a gas station
man uptight at the
sight of us, sight of Kirby's hair, his friendly
loose face, my hair, our dress
man surly, uptight, we drove
away brought down
(across fields of insecticide and migrant workers)
and
"Man" I said "that cat

so uptight, what's he
so uptight about, it's not
your hair, not really, it's just
what the TV tells him about hippies
got him scared, what he reads in
his magazines
got him scared, we got to
come out from behind the image
sit down with him, if he
sat down to a beer with you he'd find
a helluva lot more to say than he'll find
with the man who makes your image
he's got nothing in common
with the men who run his mind, who tell him
what to think of us”

SMASH THE MEDIA, I said,
AND BURN THE SCHOOLS
so people can meet, can sit
and talk to each other, warm and close
no TV image flickering
between them.

[1968]

It was good times. For a while the Free Bank lived on top of my refrigerator: it was a shoebox full of money. I never knew how much was in there. I didn't really care. Anyone who needed cash could come by the house and take some. Anyone who had extra that they didn't need (and there were many—rock musicians and dealers, among others) would drop some off. The whereabouts of the Free Bank rotated

from one Digger house to another, but the Bank itself was solvent, the shoebox was full for at least six months that I know of, which is proof enough for me that such institutions are possible. San Francisco was . . . yeah. . . [laughter]. Also that we might as well print our own money and forget about them, about banks. . . [laughter]

San Francisco was then and still is for me the place where you can take your dreams into the streets and make them happen. Make change.

I wrote this next “Letter” in a truck as I was going, was being driven, from Tassajara to a demonstration where I’d been asked to read, at UC Santa Cruz. We had just started bombing Cambodia. Yeah, Cambodia. If some of you young ones don’t know what I’m talking about, that’s okay. Get someone to explain later.

SAN FRANCISCO NOTE

I think I'll stay on this
earthquake fault near this
still-active volcano in this
armed fortress facing a
dying ocean &
covered w/ dirt
while the
streets burn up & the
rocks fly & pepper gas
lays us out
cause
that's where my friends are,

you bastards, not that
you know what that means

Ain't gonna cop to it, ain't gonna
be scared no more, we all
know the same songs, mushrooms, butterflies
we all
have the same babies, dig it
the woods are big.

[1970]

(applause) They're still pretty big, guys.

I know because I'm told—it's been repeated to me by all kinds of folks: on NPR by Michael Krasny; it's in the paper; it's a fact of life from my poetry students that San Francisco, even the Mission or the Western Addition, is getting too expensive for artists. That dancers, poets, musicians are moving somewhere else. And every once in a while I read the paper and realize how much of my city is now run by the UN-PHUN Party. (*laughter*) That's spelled U-N P-H-U-N. I call them the UnPhun Party, the Surrealists call them Miserabilists. (*laughter*)

They can be Democrats, Republicans, radicals—it doesn't matter. One way you can identify them is they don't even know how to distinguish between noise and music, or between vandalism and art. They just want it *out* of their neighborhood. They are afraid people might be having a good time.

That UnPhun Party has unfortunately gotten very big in San Francisco. It can now be found on many boards and planning commissions. (*laughter*) Selling fear, selling puritanical morals, making rules about *eros*, lumping all drugs together, so that one high school kid I met while teaching told me, “I might as well shoot heroin. I’m already evil. I smoke pot.”

But I’m old enough so that most of the time I suffer from the senility of star-dust in my eyes. I think they call it the beginning of cataracts. (*laughter*) I’ll read you a poem from this past spring. You’ll see about the stardust. It’s called “Reality Is No Obstacle”. (*laughter*)

REALITY IS NO OBSTACLE

for the Chicago Surrealist Group

refuse to obey
refuse to die
refuse to sleep
refuse to turn away
refuse to close your eyes
refuse to shut your ears
refuse silence while you can still sing
refuse discourse in lieu of embracement
come to no end that is not
a Beginning

And I let this stardust, these cataracts, the dust or bus-exhaust or whatever it is—I let it convince me that I live in the place I dreamed of when I came here. The

place I knew San Francisco was going to grow into when I moved here over forty years ago.

I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections, and the truth of Imagination, said John Keats. Remember? *What the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not.*

So, a San Francisco where all sexual preferences are good, all pleasure and delight is wonder-full as long as there is joy and communication and no one cares about marriage and no one by the way wants to join the Army, any Army! *Why would you do that?* Where no drug is criminalized, though some are more useful than others, and addictions are treated benignly and without judgment. Where everyone is taught how to use psychedelics. Even how to use pot. Just as one is taught both safety and *pleasure* in sex education and *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* by Wilhelm Reich is required reading in high school. (*laughter*) In the fifth grade kids memorize the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

A San Francisco where no one is hungry and free meals are festive communal banquets, or delivered and elegantly served to those who can't or don't want to go out or eat in a crowd. Where folks are housed where and with whom they choose, because *housing is a basic human right*. Where health care is free and available in all its forms: acupuncture, western medicine, chiropractic, orgone box, hypnosis, ayurveda, magickal ritual, laying on of hands—modes I haven't

even dreamed of, performed by shamans of every sex. And the healers have offices if they wish on campuses where folks are paid to play flutes or bongos under the trees and make all patients feel welcome.

The schools are full of poetry, music, painting, boat-building, farming, astronomy, jazz, sculpture, studio recording—whatever the kids deem useful and want to learn. The colleges are free and full of excitement, because the people who are there really *want* to be there and are studying only what they want to know.

A San Francisco where all empty buildings have been turned into theatres, meeting halls, performance spaces, living quarters—whatever their respective neighborhoods decide.

Where even the words “surveillance”, “immigrant”, “deportation” have never been spoken and everyone is welcome. Everyone shares their music, their food, their vision with everyone else. Where the words “juvenile criminal” are seen as the oxymoron they are and prisons have been abolished. Where war is a fading memory—a story told by our elders and those invasive Blue Angels have long since gone elsewhere—anywhere they’re welcome, if they’re still welcome anywhere at all.

Oh, did I mention that there is plenty of work? Everyone who needs or wants one has a job: people are busy fixing streets, restoring, & replanting Golden Gate Park—that jewel of our city!—and all the smaller neighborhood parks are rejuvenated, their rec centers

open late into the night. Every neighborhood park has after-school fun stuff to do. Free daycare of all kinds is available. Parents and kids get to choose what works for them. Young people are busy tutoring kids, caring for, visiting, amusing, learning from the old. The disabled are using their many skills. They have friends, they feel valued, a part of our social fabric.

People are painting murals, playing music, making art everywhere and being paid for it. Muni & BART are free as are the ferry boats. Cinemas, theatres, museums [*applause*] opera and jazz concerts—all free.

Of course there are jobs on the welcoming committees. Young musicians and artists and crafts-people when they arrive are welcomed and given housing and supplies and a stipend for food and clothing. They are given a map of the places where they can perform, or show their work, print their books. Communal graphics studios and art studios are in every neighborhood.

[Pause]

What happened folks?

This is where we were heading. How did we allow ourselves to be derailed? So badly derailed that I read in the *Chronicle* last week that if you can't pay your rent in this town and you have school-age kids, you won't be evicted until the school year ends—how stupid is that?

“School’s out! Yay! Goody! . . . uh, uh! All our stuff’s in the street, there’s a lock on our door. . . . now mom is crying. . . .” What kind of human passes a rule like that?

They're even waffling on, or have completely dropped by now, our long-held policy of *sanctuary*—used to be a sacred word—remember? Sanctuary. Asylum. For so-called “illegal immigrants”.

My peeps—I am ashamed to be one of you.
(silence)

And it's not just our town, it's the country as a whole. Now we've suspended medical evacuations from Port-au-Prince till it's clear who's going to pay. Even the Borg behaved better. At least to their own species. My friends—I am ashamed of who we are. What we've become.

(tears)

Well, that ain't my San Francisco. Not the San Francisco I am Poet Laureate of. I owe my allegiance to poetry and to the people of this city. I owe my allegiance to the City I came to—that San Francisco. City of sunlight bounced off ocean and bay, city of kindness: of people who have time—time to look each other in the eye. Time to listen, to bear witness to each others' lives.

I'd like to read one more poem. When I wrote it, I was already Poet Laureate, but nobody had announced anything. We were waiting on Mayor Newsom. Then Jack Hirschman asked me to read at the International Poetry Festival he curates here every other year.

**FIRST DRAFT: POET LAUREATE
OATH OF OFFICE**
for all poets everywhere

It is the poem I serve
luminous, through time
that celebration
of human breath, of *melos*

it is and always has been
the muse androgynous and ruthless
as any angel scattering words that need no
radio frequency no broadband

it is the light on the ocean here and
the sky in all its moods
luminous fog that wakes me up
to write, and something I call the
“Imp of the Short Poem”

it is the people of San Francisco
in their beauty
Bright luminous eyes looking out
from homeless faces

looking up
from gardening skateboarding singing
playing cards playing ball
barbecuing in their backyards

the folks in the Mission
the Excelsior in Bayview
Hunters Point

Japantown
North Beach
folks in the Sunset
working & idle
passionate angry silent
powerful in their silence

my friends and neighbors
parked at Ocean Beach, at Twin Peaks
in their cars
watching the sun go
down

my vow is:

to remind us all
to celebrate
there is no time
too desperate
no season
that is not
a Season of Song

[2009]

THE POETRY DEAL

I want to say that I don't want anything
but the whisper of yr scarf as you do
the Dance of the Seven Veils
soft sound of yr satin slippers on the carpet
and the raw, still bloody meat you toss my way
that I chew on, all night long.

I don't want anything you don't already give me:
trips to other worlds, dimensions of light
or sound, rides on the back of a leopard
on those black rocks, high over
some sea or gorge. But it isn't true

I want all that, sheet lightning of quasars
that you dance between, those colors, yes,
but I want you as mother, sister
stone walls of the cave I lie in
in trance for seven days, the mist around my cabin
that makes it invisible.

I want the flare & counterpoint of words
& I want the non-verbal—what never can be spoken
as a foundation.

I'd like my daily bread
however you arrange it, and I'd also like
to *be* bread, or sustenance, for some others
even after

I've left. A song they can walk a trail with.

I don't think we talked abt money or success
or fame, whatever that is—for a long time
I hoped you'd forget that part, now I'll do as you say
about all that. Whatever seems most useful.

I'd like to keep learning how to brew bitter herbs & how to make them translucent, edible almost crystalline.

What I offered *you* wasn't much: you can always wake
me
Like my closest friend, or most loved lover.

You can burn my favorite snapshot of myself
Lead me on paths or non-paths anywhere
You can not make sense for years & I'll still believe
you
drop husbands, tribes & jobs as you wish

Now I've come to a place
where there are no kids, no tribe, no bread, no
garden
only you in your two faces: formed & formless.
Nothing to hold back now
& nothing to offer.

I stand before you: a piece of wind
w/a notebook & pen

which one of us is it dances?
and which is the quasar?