"in my city": Diane di Prima and the Lineage of Haiku

By Daniel Shank Cruz

The role of the Beat poets, especially Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, in cultivating awareness of haiku in the United States after World War II is widely acknowledged. However, the haiku and other haiku-like short poems of another Beat poet, Diane di Prima, are less well-known, despite their quality and despite di Prima's status as an occasional practitioner of the genre for more than fifty years until her death in 2020. This lack of renown perhaps results from di Prima's most notable foray into the genre, her 1967 collection *Haiku*, being out of print for half a century. I think her haiku deserve a more prominent place in the history of the genre because they raise thought-provoking questions about how we write haiku during this time of what disability justice activist Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha calls "the triple pandemic" of climate change, COVID-19, and fascist tendencies in global politics.[1]

Haiku was published in 1967 in an edition of 112 copies, which were sold by the Phoenix Bookstore in Manhattan's Greenwich Village. These copies consisted of thirty-two unbound haiku by di Prima (100 copies of the poems were printed and di Prima wrote twelve out by hand) and thirty-six woodcuts by George Herms that were contained in a light brown leather envelope with the collection's title and di Prima's name on the front and Herms's name on the back flap.[2] After these copies were sold, *Haiku* remained out of print until X Artists' Books reprinted a bound edition of 1,000 copies in 2019. This edition (new copies of which are still available from the publisher and amazon.com) includes Herms's illustrations in full color along with photographs of the front and back of the original edition's envelope. The book's poems are divided into four sections named after the seasons, beginning with spring. di Prima tells Sarah C. Bancroft in an interview that "in New York City, [where di Prima was living at the time] you think a lot about the seasons because they are so

distinct," so she was drawn to haiku because of its traditional use of seasonal references.[3]

Like many poets of the time, di Prima assumed that R. H. Blyth's erroneous definition of haiku as "consist[ing] of seventeen syllables which may be broken into three parts, five, seven, five" was correct.[4] But part of what makes *Haiku* a fascinating object of study is how di Prima rejects the boundaries of this form and lets each poem find the structure that it needs to convey the emotional force of its content. Some are seventeen syllables, some are fewer than seventeen, a few are more than seventeen. Some are haiku, some are senryu.[5] The poems attempt to convey the spirit of haiku rather than concerning themselves with the genre's supposed form. Here is a prime example:

> new street lights in my city
> now the snow is blue
> instead of yellow[6]

The poem investigates our relationship with nature, which is present even in cities. This subject matter, emphasized with the *kigo* "snow," places the poem firmly within the haiku tradition. The poem uses the cut between the first and second lines, which contrast "street lights" and "snow," to show how the decision to tinker with human-made objects—the streetlights' bulbs—causes di Prima[7] to see the natural world differently, a profound change.

In addition to its content, the poem's formal choices are noteworthy. Two choices in the first line cause readers to slow down and ponder how the poem works: the first is the decision to split "streetlights" into two words. For brevity's sake it should be one word, though separating them does not matter syllable-wise. The choice to divide the word echoes how William Carlos Williams splits two words, "wheelbarrow" and "rainwater," that usually appear as one into two, "wheel barrow" and "rain water," in his ever-anthologized poem "The Red Wheelbarrow" (it is one

word in the title but two in the poem itself).[8] Williams's poem of four four-word stanzas could itself easily be revised into a haiku (though not necessarily a memorable one) by eliminating the first stanza: red wheel barrow / glazed with rain water / beside the white chickens. This resonance helps di Prima's poem illustrate her poetic lineage in circular fashion by combining haiku's emphasis on imagery with a reference to an Imagist poet, reminding us of haiku's significant influence on Imagism, and Imagist poets'—most notably, Ezra Pound's—influence on di Prima.[9]

di Prima's poem contains seventeen syllables, though it uses a 7-5-5 format rather than 5-7-5. If the appropriate length of haiku in English is between nine and fourteen syllables,[10] the poem is a bit long, which might be seen as a blemish. Although I am arguing that di Prima's haiku can still speak to us today with our contemporary understanding that English-language haiku does not use the 5-7-5 form (an understanding that I wholeheartedly agree with), it is also worth noting that at the time of the poem's composition, the syllable question was not a fully-settled one.[11] In the case of di Prima's poem, it would be possible to delete "in my city" to create a thirteen-syllable haiku. "In my city" is implied because the speaker is there observing the change, especially if readers are aware of di Prima's prominent association with two cities, New York and San Francisco. However, deleting the phrase would also take some intimacy away from the poem. The phrase matters because it's *her* city, and this sense of belonging is what makes the observation about the bulbs a haiku moment. di Prima's choice to use the extra syllables acknowledges that haiku is not a rigid form, it is a practice. Practicing it successfully means finding the structure that works best for a specific poem.

The intimacy of "in my city" in the poem reminds me of the yearning in one of Bashō's city poems: "Even in Kyoto— / hearing the cuckoo's cry— / I long for Kyoto."[12] Because it is di Prima's city, a sense of loss results from the powerlessness she feels

when the lightbulbs change without warning, especially when considering the old yellow bulbs' softer light in comparison to the new ones' harsh institutional blue. di Prima's poem documents how cities change subtly over time, and hints at how the accumulation of these small shifts ultimately results in completely altered landscapes. Haruo Shirane laments how there has been a perceived reluctance to write city haiku despite the potential of city life to "provide some of the richest sources for modern haiku."[13] Studying di Prima's work offers encouragement towards remedying this problem. Her little-known poem is important in city haiku's lineage.

Other poems in *Haiku* also offer aesthetic enjoyment for readers, even though they sometimes resort to a 5-7-5 structure. The following senryu depicts the starving artist trope that goes back at least as far as Bashō to illustrate how encounters with the natural world do not always offer transcendence:

> no roaches in it
> and it's better than nothing
> yesterday's coffee[14]

di Prima is so broke she cannot even afford a new can of coffee from the bodega, but she still recognizes that her leftover uncontaminated coffee is a blessing worthy of being celebrated in a poem.

In addition to *Haiku*, di Prima wrote short poems throughout the rest of her career that are clearly influenced by her investigations of the genre. She labeled some of these poems haiku, while others she did not. Here is an example from her 2014 collection *The Poetry Deal*:

> raindrops melt in the pond
> & it's hard to say
> just what "lineage" is[15]

The poem moves from a scene in nature to a meditation on what influences us and how it connects us to something bigger than ourselves. The raindrops integrate effortlessly into the pond like the drops that have fallen before them, but the poem's speaker remains unsure about who they have been influenced by and who they will influence in return. The use of "pond" rather than a kind of body of water more relevant to di Prima's life—a "bay" for her time in San Francisco or a "river" for her time in New York City, for instance—again brings Bashō to mind as one figure in di Prima's poetic lineage.

di Prima's magnum opus *Revolutionary Letters*, which includes poems written from the 1960s up until just before her death, also includes a selection of haiku-like poems. The two most striking examples each respond to war. This poem is from a three-poem sequence labeled "Short Poems on the Afghan War":

> small bones of
> mountain children
> in the snow[16]

This haunting poem includes a *kigo* but lacks a traditional *kireji*. However, although "small" and "mountain" both describe "children," the contrast between the sizes that the words represent gestures toward such a cut. Such formal concerns feel irrelevant considering the emotional weight of what the poem describes. Again, di Prima's haiku succeed because they focus on conveying the power of the haiku moment rather than worrying about the structure that contains that moment.

di Prima utilizes the genre in another three-poem sequence, "War Haiku, Lebanon":

> even an hour of this
> would be too long:
> white phosphorus[17]

This poem is the least haiku-like one examined here, despite its title. (And, of course, the title's presence itself might disqualify the poem as haiku for some readers.) The poem does not reference nature, a punctuation mark manufactures its cut rather than its language, and "white phosphorus" is a vague image because of the substance's rarity, though it may evoke images of horror in a reader's mind if they have seen photographs or video footage of the material's victims.

These two poems might also seem too overtly political to be considered haiku for some readers. The second one especially might seem too far from art and too close to propaganda. But I include them here precisely because of their provocative nature. Jan Walsh Hokenson documents how early investigations of haiku outside of Japan by European and Latin American writers such as Paul-Louis Couchoud, Julien Vocance, René Maublanc, José Juan Tablada, Carlos Gutiérrez Cruz, and Rafael Lozano viewed it as an appropriate genre for expressing revolutionary ideals. The narrative of Pound's work with the genre has eclipsed this part of haiku's history because of his influence on the Beats and their subsequent role in popularizing haiku.[18] But the genre's political content has manifested itself all over the world. Hokenson names Richard Wright's haiku as part of this revolutionary tradition in the United States, and Masaya Saito describes how Japanese poets who wrote anti-war haiku on the eve of World War II were imprisoned because of their poetry.[19] Poems such as Nick Virgilio's "spentagon / pentagony / repentagon" also stretch the definition of haiku.[20] Knowledge of this history makes it plain that di Prima's haiku converse with an important aspect of the genre's lineage even though she, too, encountered haiku through Pound.

More recently, the lineage of haiku's political activism contains a strong feminist component that di Prima's work fits into. In the 1980s, Marlene Mountain argued that just as "Issa wrote about fleas because they were a part of" daily life in his time, the time

for "issue-oriented haiku… has come. It's unrealistic for haiku not to deal with our polluted environment, society's violence upon itself, denigration of women, the threat of nuclear war, and so on."[21] Four decades later, this activism continues in journals such as *#FemkuMag*, which publishes poems that are openly feminist and queer, just as di Prima was openly bisexual throughout her life, and *Heterodox Haiku*, which dedicated a 2022 issue to queer poems.[22] In our time of ecological collapse, we can even consider writing traditional haiku that celebrate nature activism calling for nature's preservation. As someone who grew up in New York City's nature—it is my city too—where I moved back to a few years ago after two decades away, I can attest that the distinct seasons that drew di Prima to haiku no longer really exist here. Fall, winter, and spring all intermingle until summer comes along in May or July.

Analyzing di Prima's thought-provoking haiku reveals their richness, which argues for including her work more fully in discussions of haiku's lineage in the United States. di Prima's poems help to provide a link from the writers of a century ago to those poets writing now who are investigating how to represent social issues in haiku in a way that respects the genre as art. All of us in the haiku community need to be thinking about what role the political should or should not play in the genre during our "triple pandemic" times. Anita Patterson believes that haiku "offers a hopeful, peacebuilding alternative" to global strife.[23] How can we use our work to help this vision come to fruition? In light of this question, I am less interested here in whether di Prima's poems fit a specific definition of haiku than I am in what those of us involved in the haiku community can learn from them and their spirit. How do they help us to see the lineage of haiku in new, fresh, inspiring ways, and what might this seeing mean for our future work?

Notes:

1. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *The Future is Disabled: Prophecies, Love Notes, and Mourning Songs* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2022), 41.
2. Sarah C. Bancroft, "On Making *Haiku*," in Diane di Prima, *Haiku*, illus. George Herms (1967; South Pasadena, CA: X Artists' Books, 2019). Bancroft's five-page essay appears at the end of *Haiku* without page numbers. di Prima also tells the story of *Haiku*'s genesis in *Recollections of My Life as a Woman: The New York Years* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 382-83. Herms, an artist who is most well-known for his found-object sculptures, says that his art reflects the belief that "any object, even a mundane cast-off, could be of great interest if contextualized properly." Quoted in "George Herms," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Herms, accessed March 17, 2024. This philosophy resembles haiku's celebration of moments from everyday life.
3. Quoted in Bancroft, "On Making *Haiku*."
4. R. H. Blyth, *Haiku, Volume I: Eastern Culture* (1949; Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2021), 126.
5. I make this distinction between haiku and senryu here to indicate that some of *Haiku*'s poems do not include *kigo*, but generally when I discuss haiku as a genre in this essay, I am using it in a broad sense to include senryu as well.
6. di Prima, *Haiku*, 34.
7. Based on the discussion of *Haiku* in *Recollections* cited above, it is fair to assume that di Prima is the speaker of the collection's poems.
8. William Carlos Williams, *Selected Poems*, ed. Charles Tomlinson (New York: New Directions, 1985), 56.
9. di Prima describes Pound's influence on her development as a poet in *Recollections*, 140-44.
10. Lee Gurga gives the range of "nine to twelve" syllables in *Haiku: A Poet's Guide* (Lincoln, IL: Modern Haiku Press, 2013), 15-16. Michael Dylan Welch gives the range of ten to fourteen in "The Heft of Haiku," *Frogpond* 44, no. 2 (Spring-Summer 2021): 111.
11. For instance, Cor van den Heuvel discusses how the question remained contested in the early 1970s in his "Introduction" to *The Haiku Anthology: English Language Haiku by Contemporary American and Canadian Poets* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1974), xxxii. Marlene Mountain goes so far as to state "war broke out" over the issue and it "made people hate each other" to the point where "some people quit

writing" in "Self-Interview: Discussions," c. 1976/1977, https://www.marlenemountain.org/essays/sinterview_discussions.html, accessed 2 March 2024.

12. Matsuo Bashō, "Even in Kyoto," in *The Essential Haiku: Versions of Bashō, Buson, and Issa*, ed. and trans. Robert Hass (New York: Ecco, 1994), 11. Other translations of this poem include Makoto Ueda's "even in Kyoto / I long for Kyoto— / a hototogisu" in *Bashō and His Interpreters: Selected Hokku with Commentary* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), 294; and Jane Reichhold's "even in Kyoto / longing for Kyoto / the cuckoo" in *Basho* [*sic*]*: The Complete Haiku* (New York: Kodansha USA, 2013), 165. I prefer Hass's translation because of how its placement of the sense of longing in the last line gives this emotion extra emphasis.

13. Haruo Shirane, "Beyond the Haiku Moment: Bashō, Buson, and Modern Haiku Myths," in *The Routledge Global Haiku Reader*, ed. James Shea and Grant Caldwell (London: Routledge, 2024), 26. The theme of the 2023 Haiku North America conference in Cincinnati, Ohio, "City and Soil," was another encouraging development in this area.

14. di Prima, *Haiku*, 15.

15. Diane di Prima, *The Poetry Deal* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2014), 93.

16. Diane di Prima, *Revolutionary Letters*, 50th anniversary edition (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2021), 134.

17. di Prima, *Revolutionary Letters*, 152.

18. Jan Walsh Hokenson, "Haiku as a Western Genre: Fellow-Traveler of Modernism," in Shea and Caldwell, *Routledge*, 159-62, 166-69.

19. Hokenson, "Haiku," 170; Masaya Saito, "Introduction," in Sanki Saitō, *Selected Haiku 1933-1962* (Tokyo: Isobar Press, 2023), 22-25.

20. Nick Virgilio, *Collected Haiku 1963-2012*, ed. Geoffrey M. Sill (Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2023), 266. Originally published in *Modern Haiku* 17, no. 3 (1986): 35.

21. Marlene Mountain, "Self-Interview: Two Femmarks, Inner: Review," July 1982, https://www.marlenemountain.org/essays/sinterview_twofemmarks.html, accessed 2 March 2024.

22. *#FemkuMag*, https://femkumag.wixsite.com/home; *Heterodox Haiku*, no. 1 (Autumn 2022): https://issuu.com/heterodoxhaikujournal/docs/heterodox_issue_i_art_bananas. di Prima recounts stories of sex with women and with men throughout *Recollections*.

23. Anita Patterson, "Afterword," in Shea and Caldwell, *Routledge*, 332.

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