

Diane Di Prima's Revolutionary Letters

Contributed by Andrei Codrescu

POETRY THAT STAYS NEWS by Andrei Codrescu On the reissue of Diane di Prima's expanded edition of Revolutionary Letters by Last Gasp Press Live long enough and the deja-vus will be trippy enough to make you forget what year it is. I just read a new, expanded edition of Diane Di Prima's 1971 book, Revolutionary Letters, and it all came back to me. We had one quasi-legal war going on in Vietnam, and another illegal one in Cambodia. There was an oil shortage and a gas crisis around the corner, soon to be followed by hyper-inflation. A whole generation of young Americans was ready to abandon "the american way of life," with its conspicuous consumption and mind-numbing frivolity. The first edition of Revolutionary Letters appeared in 1971, when it looked to some of us that the U.S. was making its first world-wide bid for a merger between a collapsing economy and the Apocalypse. Even the so-called "straight" people were panicking because it looked like they might not be able to sell enough vacuum cleaners to keep up their beloved car and American dream-house payments, or generate enough taxes to pay for the wars. Those of us who navigated the cosmos without a map, looked with exceedingly critical eyes at all the proffered solutions, and there were plenty of them, from buttoned-down economists to hallucinating prophets. The Revolutionary Letters couldn't have arrived at a more opportune time: in poem-form they were a guide for how to live, steeped in the anger and emotion we all felt. "not western civilisation, but civilization itself/ is the disease which is eating us" (no. 32) followed by "turn off the power, turn on/ stars at night, put metal/ back in the earth, or at least not take it out/ anymore" (no. 34) and "take vitamin B along with amphetamines, try/ powdered guarana root.../it is an up/ used by Peruvian mountainfolk." This may seem new to the freshly panicked, but these poem-manifesto-wisdom works spelled it all out with passion: the energy crisis, the need to renew our communities on the basis of human beings not corporate profits, the urgency of returning to sacred roots, and a whole new outlook on nature. In retrospect, some things weren't even that bad in 1971: the dollar was worth a hell of a lot more, and our government wasn't doing all the nasty things we suspected it of doing, like listening in to our private phone calls. We were quite outraged back then when all that seemed far-fetched, but we aren't now, when it's a certainty. Diane Di Prima's revised and new Revolutionary Letters follow the poet's philosophy over the following decades, and what was a guidebook in 1971, is still one in 2008, but there is never a loosening of the poet's grip on the gritty and very real world we are in, proving that good poetry becomes news again every time the world goes to hell (again!)