Praise for Brenda Hillman

"[Hillman’s] most recent books are rooted in broad social and ecological interests: ‘passion’ is a better term. She has invented a kind of dialogue with the earth; she writes with an intimacy and directness few equal and a magnificence of conception almost no one espouses to."
—Gibbons from the American Academy of Arts and Letters (Morton Dauwen Zabel Award 2020)

"She is lightning: ‘the sea shines purple in’. With a seed bomb of words, she takes on the system... without once turning her back on lyrical splendor."
—C.D. Wright, “The Book That Brenda Wrote”

"Hillman’s poetry asks readers to partake in the largest worlds possible while at the same time remaining rooted in the here and in the now."
—Alan Gilbert, American Book Review

"We are so vulnerable, [Hillman] seems to be realizing, but there are small things that keep us anchored: birdsong, the birth of a new baby, words that prove others are struggling, searching, attempting to hang on to the large and small emblems of what matters."
—Tracy K. Smith, “The Slowdown” February 28, 2019

Brenda Hillman’s eleventh volume celebrates minutes of visible and invisible existence; it is in her most intimate and wide-ranging collection to date. It is also her third book about time, following books that explored seasons and days. An iconoclastic ecopoet who has led the way for many emerging artists, Hillman continues to in-spit innovative poetic form as instruments for tracking human and non-human experiences. Twenty-four-line lyrics sit beside longer poems of architectural play to show a life of action and of contemplation. At times the poet deploys short dialogues, meditations or trance techniques as means of remaining inner states; other times she uses narrative, documentary or scientific materials to record daily events during a time of pandemic, planetary crisis, political and racial turmoil. A masterful final sequence braids images of wildfire evacuations in an homage to a long marriage. Hillman proposes that poetry offers courage even in times of existential peril; her work represents what is most necessary and fresh in American poetry.

Brenda Hillman is a writer, teacher, editor, and activist. She has published ten collections of poetry from Wesleyan University Press, including Bright Existence, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, and Practical Water, which won the Los Angeles Times Book Award for Poetry. With Patricia Dienstfrey, she edited The Grand Permission: New Writings on Poetics and Motherhood, and with poet Helen Hillman, she translated At Your Feet by Ana Cristina Cesar. A Chancellor Emerita of the Academy of American Poets, Hillman serves on the faculty of Saint Mary’s College in Moraga, California, and as a staff poet at Community of Writers. She is married to poet Robert Hass.

Author photo by Robert Hass

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Also by Brenda Hillman

POETRY
- White Dress
- Fortress
- Death Tractates
- Bright Existence
- Loose Sugar
- Cascadia
- Pieces of Air in the Epic
- Practical Water
- Seasonal Works with Letters on Fire
- Extra Hidden Life, among the Days

CHAPBOOKS
- Coffee, 3 A.M.
- Autumn Sojourn
- The Firecage
- Four Poets (with Brett Fletcher Lauer, Joshua Marie Wilkinson, and Andrew Zawacki)
- Her Presence Will Live Beyond Progress

AS EDITOR
- The Poems of Emily Dickinson
- The Grand Permission: New Writings on Poetics and Motherhood
  (with Patricia Dienstfrey)
- Writing the Silences: Selected Poems of Richard O. Moore (with Paul Ebenkamp)
- Particulars of Place by Richard O. Moore (with Garrett Caples and Paul Ebenkamp)

AS TRANSLATOR
- Instances by Jeonrye Choi (with the author and Wayne de Fremery)
- Poems from Above the Hill: Selected Poems of Ashur Etwebi (with the author and Diallah Haidar)
- At Your Feet by Ana Cristina Cesar (with Helen Hillman and Sebastião Macedo)
In a Few Minutes Before Later
In a Few Minutes Before Later
(dedication)

These poems were composed between 2016 & 2021, half before & half during the pandemic. They were composed

- for life beside & inside the humans, non-humans, plants & kingdoms that are not plants or animals, including cyanobacteria & protozoa;
- for pre-life spirits (even if they are metaphors) seeking science threads when they arrive;
- for artists from different spiritual densities, designations, identities, & regions;
- for workers & loved ones who deliver food & flowers;
- for everyone’s children & grandchildren, for Amelie, Bari, Bear, Callie, Cole, Ella, Elliott, Emily, Finn, Fiona, Gabriel, Grace, Hazel, Josephine, Leon, Lily, Malachai, Noah, Ruth, Simon, Simon, Truman & Zach;
- for 49 people who helped & forgave; for the ones we tried to forgive but cannot;
- for families who had babies during the pandemic; for Louisa, for Leah;
- for medical staff & essential medical workers; for Dr. Anthony Fauci;
- for those who endured violence & racist systems & those who protested;
- for older women, especially my mother Helen who is alive & her sister Thelma the pianist who died during the pandemic; for women & women-identified poets of all ages;
- for my brothers, making music, doing research, taking care of elders, cooking, reading the New York Times online & in the print edition;
- for Forrest Gander & Karin Gander;
- for creatures that kept us company indoors, for spiders that lowered themselves into bathtubs;
- for the wood rat, the fox & coyote, for two squirrels that learned to operate the squirrel-proof birdfeeder till the spring broke, for the fawn that ate the baby lettuces while its mother watched, for powdery mildew that dominated the kale & fruit flies that couldn’t;
- for punctuation, especially commas & semicolons;
- for our imitators who have forgotten they imitate us;
o for the numbers 3, 6, 12, 18 & 24, & the spaces between numbers, for the between
2,103,840 & 2,628,000 minutes that passed in the making of this book;
o for the irrational growth of stressed oaks & laurels chased by Apollo; for the white
moths & cabbage butterflies;
o for the great dead in dry hills praying for rain;
o for shared & unshared myths, for science & magic in equal parts;
o for the number 9 mechanical-pencil collection at Payn’s Stationery Shop on Solano Av-
venue & for the owners, thank you for keeping a mask policy, yours is my favorite store;
o for unchartered laws of rivers & fires, for molecules of William Blake’s breath;
o for Bob whose company made life matter in space & time;
o & for poetry daughters & sons who may not have time to read; this book is for you when-
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::: [ untitled ] :::
::: [ to the voice of the age ] :::
::: [ in a place  with no light ] :::
[  ______________________________________ ]
::: [ smooth black stone  has seen everything ] :::
[ chiasmus with all the other animals ]
::: [ the voice of the age  chorus ] :::
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I. Some Landscapes of Stress & Beauty

12 poems & 1 interruption

Every duration is thick; real time has no instants.
Henri Bergson, “Concerning the Nature of Time”

We lived for some years through magical thinking

Oh, time—so long & so ago—
Lisa Alvarez
Micro-minutes on Your Way to Work

Days are unusual. The owl sends
out 5 zeroes from the pines
plus one small silver nothing. Where
do they float? Maybe out to
sea, where jellyfish are aging left
& right. They have some nerve.
Today, no new wars, probably. No
big button. The owl could be
your scholar of trapped light or
Walter Benjamin who writes a storm
blows in from paradise. Thinking through
these things each week, you cross
the bridge: gold coils, fog, feelings . . .
syllables also can grow younger like
those jellyfish. You bring your quilt
of questions in the car. At
work, you’ll have to be patient
in the risky enterprise of talking
to other people; so little progress
in this since the Pleistocene. Mostly,
though, you’re calm when traveling: silver
nothing, moving right & left; day
releasing the caged stars; one thought
mixed with no-thought, packed with light . . .

for MK
A Slightly Less Stressful Walk Uphill

How do you hope to survive?
& not just that: was it even the question?

By midday the fog was burning off;;

screech & call beside the anyway:::::: the parent osprey
 had gone out looking for the right fish

(did it fear stone?) & bryophytes rested on the soil

as the soul might rest on the what ifs—;

you were trying not to waste poetry’s time on stupid questions,

all the you’s going along out there tired,
 getting through meetings—

 never enough sleep even if you nap at the office—
 checking the phone tiny electrons of joy,

messages from large specific you, small specific you,,
 large general you,

 pressure-filled colleagues

whose healing had not occurred but still might . . .

Tech certainly hadn’t helped; chlorpyrifos;;—
cities eking out funds, people sleeping in tents
with black & white dogs & children;

racist prisons—you’re getting numb to the list—“growth
in the service sector”—

women working three jobs—production of power

& that tone in the profit voices when you call customer service
growing slightly more officious suspecting the next “downturn”—

you wake with nano-minutes of stress built up overnight—
    offshore breezes, fear of fires—

mosses bunched , , , , , , , , near the small oaks (did they fear stone?)

Women had experimented for centuries with too much cortisol—
so, what to do now, since doing was the problem— It was just

mainly important to get through the day

with the minutes moving roundly, rather than lengthwise—

Surely one note could be singled out

—for example ::::: the screech of the baby osprey,
& the nest waiting, heavy with proudlings—;

perhaps a calm could be entered (like cooked fog

or a monarch butterfly coming through looking like John Clare
flying across the enclosures—)
", on the other side of the highway steel tubes of dairy trucks
were grinding along—

the milk sloshing inside
& besides that  the hope of

the circular spirits bringing a map of formless order

where a legendary love was taking place, beyond control—
Dawn Tercets, with Blake & Nuthatch

& a new thought waited in its
triangle—refusal, hope & dream—then, as you slept—light
between the commas of dawn birds (not even sure

if the bird you hadn’t seen—white-breasted nuthatch,,
could find its commas, in the tree) then:
the knowledge of the them you feared failing, not the test from some
thug inner government — or someone else’s conscience—
but yourself, at your most secret public,
since language is a living thing, vital, vast — . . .

The naturalist had
taken a knife from the group
to slice open
an insect gall at the edge of the leaf . . . it looked like a pouty
red lip or a valentine. He wanted to see the larva
inside, was slicing
to show, well, maybe
the opposite of Blake. Rose, thou art
not exactly sick, thou art merely inhabited . . .

The instrument of change would chew itself out,
eventually. But you were human.
You wanted to be desired. Thought of.
Right Before Dusk, Some Meadow Fragments

—& there was a feeling
right before
the feeling, sort of a pre-feeling when

it announced itself in overlapping contours
or the edges & quantity became
discernible, thing-like. (Dread can have
a little fringe
of whiteness but
the pre-
dread has a roaming subcolor
that can go toward joy plus a soft gray pleasure
& the remaining context) —

Suppose you’re in a meadow
& someone has hurt your heart;
you check your phone.

Held on the leash of now,

the moon rises. A group
of starlings had lifted its (their?) imported heads . . .
the call was gold,

thin as a lost key, then

\[ \text{yip yip yip} \quad \text{[yip yip]} \]
the coyote pack, east of here.

If meaning had wings it would long have flown.

Yet experience had gathered itself, dark-eyed;
& an odd love
came into focus like remaining

snow, mirroring something inexact—
A Goodness That Comes from Nothing

Skinny afternoon moonrise,
— the stab of it, dropped
parenthesis blanched, stolen from an
earlier whiteness, & its tip snagging the peak . . .
you walked along (the words of your friend having stung from the smart phone. What’s so smart about it?)
& in the eaves of the mostly white people hotel: mud nests of swallows, then the word middens came. Middens of comfort. Swallows’ nests are like anaphora in a poem, all lined up with no grief. Nothing had been wronged there; & around each nest, tiny mozart flies, keeping the tempo . . .
— golden calls from within—(some birds just sound squeezed, particularly the babies, though nothing has been wronged . . .)
Which voice is here, which you is living you? It’s so completely not interested in letting go of anything. On the mountain, marmots would be scampering around not judged but filled snow lakes.

Sky with grisaille—an art term!—plus gray hatching strokes. Though you could not be at peace quite yet— for now, a bristly,
stretched,signifying moon—
sometimes a song of abstract stresses leading nowhere
sometimes between each stress a helpful nothing
sometimes a goodness leading nowhere someone sees
The Highest Part of the Dust

Italic Z of snow. A perhaps raptor’s nest
beside it in the pine. Families are going in
at dusk, voices fading like numbers
on used tram tickets run over
in the parking lot. Small bag of
dog shit placed beside a rusty pole.
Sometimes even outdoors there’s a stress
you can’t get out of, spinning aimlessly:

you pass the mosses, life lifted from a rock.
Half a billion years here now—operculum,
seti—the parts heaped up
without aura. Across the meadow,
the mostly white people micro-doom
condos trying to blend in, dark glass.
There’s a specificity most things would like
to have, purpose & meaning, or:

no purpose but some meaning. You think
of the lines about the highest part
of the dust, humans coming from that.
Mosses cling to their miracle. A blackbird
flies through minutes all at once,
struggle & beauty in no particular
order & you make a little doorway
in the air for that. (Or, half of a doorway . . .)
Poem Before the Power Went Out

The future was handsome before the power went out

She wrote to say he was being nice

Scythes of eucalyptus weekday resentment
Pink Kleenex snagged in the fence

Where did it come from our hydropower
& if from the mountains as if

Wind in the country spiky sports hair
Elections electrons in free fall

They never knew where their power came from

Nuthatch left stripes when it flew off

Laws paused evening impeached them
Morning chill of being a self

Ceasefire on rural roads local displacement
& if from the rivers as if

She wrote in a notebook Once you were calm
Vorisively she made up a word

Coyote bushes filled with dire minutes
A spark whispered not this again
Old souls leaving the city

She called to ask are you being strong

How can we live now vision & science
In love with forever stones limped along
Poem While the Power Was Out

Hot winds settled east of here;  
the blurred silences began. Stripes of  
the nuthatch stayed when the nuthatch  
flew off; & though you felt  
the sunlight might bring harm,  
an odd forgiveness entered the suburbs  
where, like the dog in childhood,  
you drew comfort from the floor.

The adults seemed baffled, wondering what  
to do next. Shouldn’t they know?  
You sat quite still, & still  
all the way up your spine  
reason had hung its unreasonable lights.  
O.K., then: you were supposed  
to remain strong; you knew this.  
You were supposed not to worry.

Once you were strong; the rare  
historical voices moved aside so you  
could be different. Now, afternoon was  
dark, so how to tell which  
ones were real? They pressed along  
through massive centuries. What do you  
need? What shall we do now,  
they kept asking you, their ideal.
& After the Power Came Back

The great dead circled the serrated hills; they tried to remind you
to breathe. An old rat crawled
under fire-forgotten rocks; it was called
& pulled to a movable nothing
far from the human need to
heed & heal. Maybe you can’t
find it now, but the season
hails the wind inside & because
you’re a student you can put
some questions in your phone, especially
when you feel you shouldn’t cry . . .

Stipple the worry, the grief-torn, those
patterns of should & won’t ::; new
minutes set in past danger—spikelet
or callus on the roadside; you
stop in awe & are home.
Your human burden varies; the once
boundless freedom you sought even in
private still pulses on your skin . . .
The little thistles between the human
& non-human animals, the linked auras
in trees & a colorful radiance
of bodies are hunched to begin—

for the students
[interruption stichomythia]

—the topic of “time” has mostly been addressed in poetry

—a timeless topic, but, yes

—she’s got a kind of batty sense of time

—let’s not malign bats iambically

—her brain is like a hive of sleepless bees

—that also scans
People’s Emotions in One City Block

half-shame, mild joy at hope for food, gray fear of
the walk-through monument, partial love of some humans,
cold resentment at bank options, extra pride at skin color, delight
at witnessing the number heap, shame times dread needing help,
2 quasi-firm hesitations, disgust at fried eagle, half-joy
at pride after sex, deep grief plus middle deep grief, twice
terror at law enforcement, half-worry for someone not the right one,
mild anxiety about pigeons, light interest in flower salads, oblivion
about skin color, eager reckoning at the gallery, mysterious relief
about 3s, white numbness at doorway sleepers, swell of allowable rage
craving for flower salads, semi-pride after sex, love of fire enforcement
blue terror at the bank options, craving for fried eagle, post-fear
of the number heap, furious regret at auto-correct, sweetness
of the drug in the dream, pure love of the right one, rage
at the change of schedule, dark love of hope for sex, shallow wit
plus shame, dark love of trees & birds, fear of minutes, regard for
spines & thumbs, relief for the sick one, hesitant fear before joy

for MR, Washington Square Park
After a Pageant, Before a Birth

In winter, among laws of probability
the quiet ones merge
into earth. They sort the fertile chaos
from flat statement.
What they derived was vital & vast,
a justice outside our usual music.
Packed into again dry ground
the eye-
shaped seeds point south :::
sprout, yonderlings! We’ve been in touch
with the king of thieves
who keeps our health; all
the wild noons hang down.

i sort the troubled jewels of intention,
i count the half-rings of the owl,
i ponder my petty resentments
& can maybe keep
two of the twenty-four (ponder
yonder ponder yonder); weak one,
don’t pretend you’ve seen enough
to change the ratio—

(then a whatness
seeped from the lining of our hearts,
& let us switch tones to survive—)

for BL
Poem Describing Time to the Unborn

Today the half-moon presses an obvious ear to the sky; some clouds cover the alarming part. It’s going to be a hopeful day. You, listening from the other side, have not experienced sequences or fear. A worm, crossing the battlefield, its mouth filled with silt, will slowly become a blue moth while grasses spring upward, escaping the doomed canopies. So the future grows at different rates.

We think of you, inching along, making matter, bone & blood, before meaning sets in. Meaning is made of time;—oh—; winged history advances, the shoe is invented, the hand-held phone. . . . Your ancestors wove a fine gray cloth for strangers; your parents have woven a name full of vowels to be opened when you appear. Most minutes aren’t clear. Some will seem tangled when they are lacing your shoe, but minutes will be better when you are here—

for MZO & EME
II. Activism & Poetry—Some Brief Reports

12 poems & 2 interruptions

for Muriel Rukeyser, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Claudia Rankine, Rebecca Solnit, Shanee Stepakoff, Brenda Iijima, Greta Thunberg

What does it mean to thrive?

Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon, from “Blooming”

It isn’t that one brings life together—it’s that one will not allow it to be torn apart.

Muriel Rukeyser, from an interview, 1972

Certain effects
Would seem all at once like glamour, oracle and rubble . . .

Eric Falci, from “Index”
The Times We Find Ourselves In

Laws were not working so we went outside
after the shootings the latest shootings

Mountain creek full of summer runoff
2 centuries after Whitman's birth

The bullshit Congress not in session (That is so not respectful brenda)

Aspen & madia roots veritable congresses
Ridged halted radials light dragged the minutes down

Couldn’t not think of the shooter’s mother

Couldn’t not think of dead children’s hair

Couldn’t not think of the gun at the gun show

But actually Walt we did not suffer we were not there

The problem with walking outdoors in America
Besides some yous may be shot at any time

So little holds the ground together It’s very crumbly right now

Mountain mosses hold it lengthwise & clockwise
Colors albeit stressed as we are
Saw reddish ones    granitic    apex & dry-shoot

& over them extremely fluttering    migrating tortoiseshells
Ovate vacant spots    resisting their flight

Spoke of great beings    not listed in the guidebook
Their making might go on somehow

A law of misty    rootless process

A kind of light that comes from below
Activism & Poetry—A Brief Report

 Sometimes i’m called an “activist-poet,” maybe to make my aesthetically odd poetry seem more relevant or marketable to audiences other than poets. i’ve gotten to dislike the term “activist-poet” especially the hyphen. Mostly i’m not active & feel passive dread, bringing pagan practices outside, talking to insects & plants during the minutes etc. My practicism occurs too rarely, but basically i can’t stand 95% of what is going on about anything.

On Friday of National Pollinators Week, it is suggested that we take letters to our local Kroger Market for a campaign against pesticides. Kroger uses deadly pesticides in their brand. Had signed up to drop off a letter to the manager of Kroger. i’ve never heard of Kroger before this; i’m from Berkeley. i drive to the nearest Kroger; my friend Jane comes along for support: she is a great calm beautiful woman. The area around the store is being gentrified & is getting whiter. We’re supposed to hand letters to the managers directly.

A large percent of insect species

Will go extinct by the end of the century. i’d like to become a bee when i’m nonhuman (“b will be a bee”). My letter says Kroger’s brand contains glyphosates, organophosphates & neonicotinoids. i go into the market; the security guard looks bored but the energy over her is silver. She has long brush-like eyelashes, even maybe an inch long. She points to the cashier. Endangered things in Kroger on the shelves include

Apples, sardines, plastic purple beach balls. The humans are in danger. There is Roundup. It is National Pollinator Week. The cashier calls the manager for me. He comes out. i am the only white person in Kroger. i feel shame for having come here. White person from Berkeley telling N, a worker of color not in my neighborhood, what he shouldn’t have on his shelves because the bees are dying. Profit systems are full of

Violence, is my usual line . . . . .
N, the manager, is friendly & not tired. I experience the energy over him as vital golden flecks of winged things that could enter his circle without danger. I am a teacher, I explain; I want humans to go on living. Can’t Kroger do something I say & hand him the letter. He looks at me with mild pity. Energy wings ^^>><< while we are talking. They never listen to us, he says. He says, Call national Kroger & tell them what you told me. I start to say, Kroger is committing economic terror on the people of your city. The cereal & even the beans have been horribly sprayed. Buzzing of moral confusion, I am a white person coming into a store not in my town to hand the letter. The young cashier waits while this is happening, all this. She is as patient as Mary in a painting. I say to N, can you just take my letter? He takes it. Both

Of us know they never listen to us.

To learn more about this, visit BeeAction.org, is what my letter says. Capitalism will last longer than the bees; I saw a dead bee near our hive. Sometimes I feel terrible after “activism” but sometimes not, depends on what gets folded in. Whether or not I feel terrible is irrelevant but folding in the Why feeling even a tiny bit less terrible seems to be part of it.

for JM
In the Gardens of José Martí

You came from the shadows
with your recent friends;
at midday a mild joy entered,
then the rind

of hope; imperial history
& colonial rage
stopped at the blue door
& waited;

but a poet is like a tiny
starving cat
eating stolen food
from the fingers of the group.

When the garden sighed
in Tuesday heat, revolutionary
love was given back—past
civil law„„, curled

in limestone walls
where workers sang
laments. What

keeps you hiding
gives you energy:
alphabet of
zeroes, cave refrains, dreams
of the little dire fishes—

for CK & SR, remembering Havana
Notes Outside West County Detention Center

The collective body sends out magnetized curved energy to the west, it snags in the teeth of the field daisies & on the hemlock Socrates maybe ate, it circles to where some stand in useless protest under windows where the immigrants are locked & can’t hear. Grinding smoke from the refineries.

On Fridays gray is slower.
The actions rule out rest, money for jobs or being dead & there is mostly little news of danger here.
A white moth drops to the asphalt, carries the suffering on two of its gray specks. No sign of life from the jail.
There is some dust among us from before the sun was made, it fell in great slashes seen by first peoples here, we place these slashes on the instrument of time// The sheriff’s men were later immigrants, they touch their stupid guns, they become magnetized with their elbows in 7s. Some hate their jobs, some like policing for the state. If love were kept from hurt it might bend metal. The families stand under the overhang while the perhaps
200 are inside for something like a traffic ticket. 
ICE gave the Sheriff money for each prisoner. The Sheriff ends the contract. 
Why does he end the contract? He says, & these are his exact words, 

_The protests have become expensive for the county_


& though i don’t believe 

   in hell   i have placed the Sheriff’s non-remorseful 
soul among non-souls, a living stone with the wrong idea—

Dante would know where to place him, spare 

ICE far down in hell 

   but in this terza non-rhymed rima   i will

lock the Sheriff’s non-remorseful soul in 

@@@@ signs & burning ampersands & & &

where it can circle 
till he apologizes. Moves the men 
to Stockton or Nevada, 

   profits will rise 

   & as i told Alan 

it’s not that protests are useless, it’s that 

some usefulness is too American. 

In tract homes nearby, black, brown & white 
children lower their heads over games on screen. 

By the time this poem is printed the immigrants 
have been moved 

to what knows where & families 

   don’t know where they’ve gone. That’s why we call 

   some evil the non-soul. Centuries pass, 

invasive but non-imperialist species are heaped 

   in the field, useless magnetized 

energy snags in the teeth of the daisies—
[interruption stichomythia]

—there’s no such thing as political poetry

—yes there certainly is

—put it this way, there is no such thing as non-political poetry

—yes there is, actually

—what if the Sheriff sees that poem she just put in there

—he is totally not going to see that poem