



Poem: During an Enchantment in the Life

By Brenda Hillman

Selected by Victoria Chang

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Love poems are difficult to write and to read because they can be clichéd. This poem surrounds the topic of love versus sinking in it. In the title, love is “an enchantment,” not “my enchantment,” removing intimacy. Love is also expressed as something that lives “in the life” — it isn’t the whole life. The poem is written in second-person point of view, circumventing the potential sentimentality of the first person. The ending subverts some of the movements above, and the unifying principle of love is severed to a “they” and a “you,” with jarring new punctuation. Here, all the asynchronicities of love appear.

During an Enchantment in the Life

By Brenda Hillman

Do you love a living person

absolutely? Tell them now.

In a half-unwieldy life you made, under
the hyaline sky, while the dead

drank from zigzag pools nearby,

if they saved you in your wild incapacities,

in timing of the world’s harm

in a little pettiness in your own heart while others took

your madrigals in shreds to a tribunal,

when others said you should feel grateful

to be minimally adequate for the world’s

triple exposure or some tired committee...

The ones who love us, how do they
break through our defenses?

We’re tired today. Come back later.

Their baffled voices melting our wax walls
with a candle, the ones who understand
what being is — the glowing, the broken,

the wheels, the brave ones —

they have their courage,

you have yours,,;

when you meet the one you love,

it is so rare. When you meet

the one who loves you, it is extremely rare.



Victoria Chang is a poet whose new book of poems is “The Trees Witness Everything” (Copper Canyon Press, 2022). Her fifth book of poems, “Obit” (2020), was named a New York Times Notable Book and a Time Must-Read. She lives in Los Angeles and teaches in Antioch University’s M.F.A. program. Brenda Hillman is a teacher and an editor and activist, and is the author of 11 collections of poetry. Her honors include the Los Angeles Times Book Award for Poetry and the 2020 Morton Dauwen Zabel Award. This poem is from her new book, “In a Few Minutes Before Later” (Wesleyan University Press, 2022). A version of this article appears in print on Oct. 9, 2022, Page 14 of the Sunday Magazine.

You Poem, Love Poem

I was reading a magazine of conventional poetry and in an interview the poet being interviewed and the interviewer both complained about “you” poems. I found it odd that the second person was so reviled. (They’re not so bad.) With the advent of personal pronoun preferences, you could add a nuance to the poem, edging it closer to the infinite rather than be mired in the logical. I doubt Frank O’Hara would find the logical refreshing. Anyhow, *The Practice of Outside* might suggest *you* is whatever source guides the poems through you to be the entity (energy?) speaking. And how does any of this matter? Brenda has written other “you” poems such as “To a Desert Poet” from *Practical Water*.

In “During an Enchantment in the Life” we see Brenda (always working from the position of having permission to be strange) using “you” again and when we see the phrase “wild incapacities” we might think of her husband Bob Hass. (We might even think of him when we hear this is a love poem from Brenda Hillman.) And cliché is far from what Brenda does in her writing. Because she allows herself permission to be strange, because she writes a lot, reads a lot, lives the life of a poet, seems fearless in her writing and yet grounded at the same time, she’s created a body of work that will surely outlast her.

Notice though that the “you” she speaks of is not always the same. The first you might be her, or might be you, the reader. The second you’s the person who made this life you’re living and under a hyaline sky to boot.



What a great word! Hyaline. (Yes, I had to look it up.) The third you I'm convinced is Bob. The next you is a your and it might be critical Brenda scolding petty Brenda and winds through a small copse of yous to get to the you that has to attend countless, endless committee meetings. The kind that could put you to sleep. (You may be getting tired just thinking about it.)

Who do you have to write to employing generously the second person, one whom you love? Brenda suggests an urgency and we never know when your number is up, do we? Twenty-four lines is a nice number and all in six line stanzas, but you don't have to do either, though keeping it under a page is a good idea for you to consider, but then you know these things like the smell of new tires while flight after flight of planes with bombs pass over. Write a poem for you.



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