

Dear Brenda Letter

The epistle is an ancient poetic form which makes it ripe for an update that allows you, when writing projectively, to discover something about the subject and yourself. For those who've steeped themselves in Brenda Hillman's book *In a Few Minutes Before Later* there's generosity, openness, surprise mind, formal invention, dedication to justice and other qualities that give such vitality to her work. One quality in Brenda's work not often mentioned but begs consideration is wisdom. Nowhere in *In a Few Minutes Before Later* is that more clear than in HER epistle "Dear Emerging, pre-emerging & post-emerging poets,". Written for the Harriet blog, Brenda tells us, no matter where we are on the poetry-experience spectrum, what we need to hear:

Dear emerging, pre-emerging & post-emerging poets,

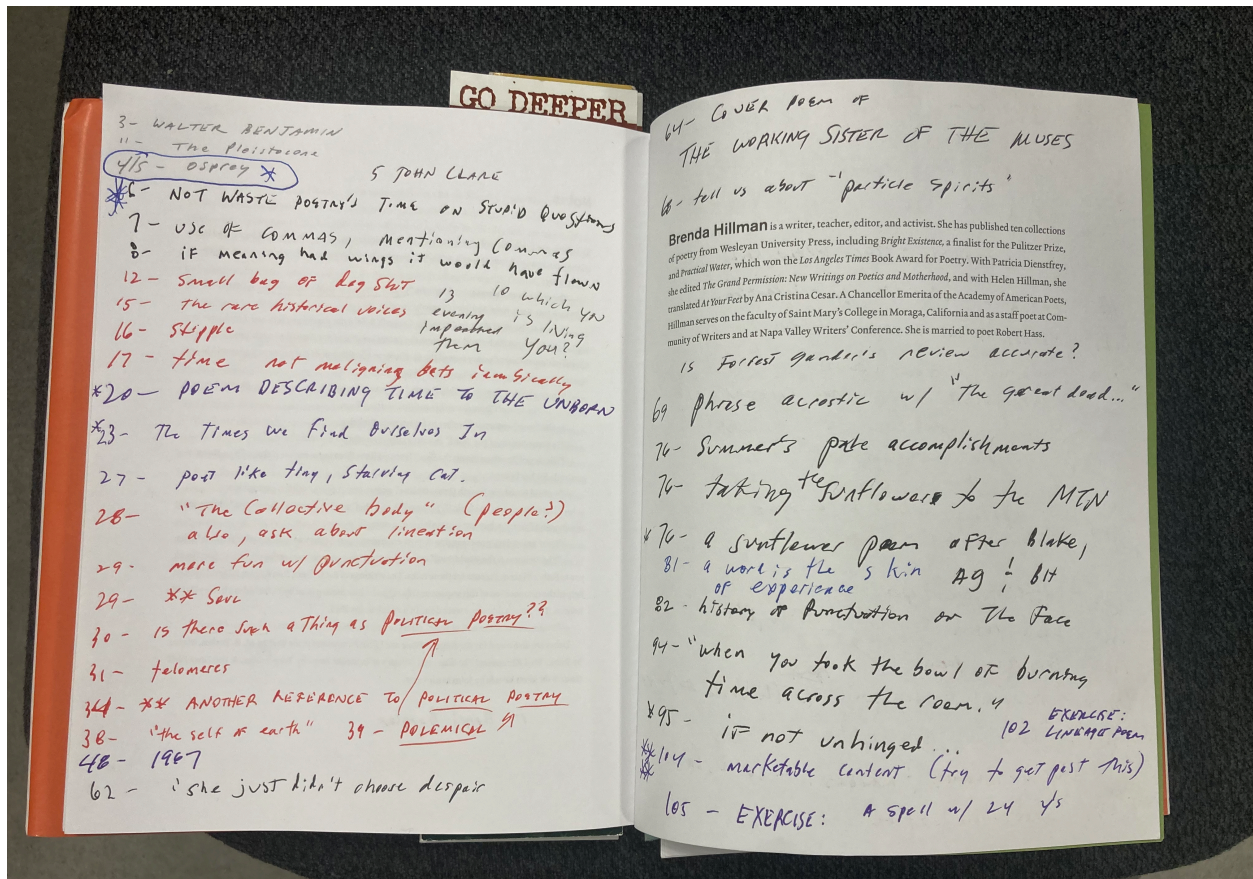
Lisa has asked me to write you a note in case you are feeling discouraged about some public aspects of your poetry. It's hard not to be discouraged when there is so much ignorance helplessly displayed toward our art. It is not surprising that you feel overly sensitive when poetry—or your poetry—is ignored. Books of poetry are left off "best-of" lists; they are rarely reviewed in major venues & when they are mentioned, it might be only for some perceived aspect of marketable content. Try to get past this. You are bringing your rare imagination & your love of language to the culture that needs those things. Poetry is not a "specialized field." It has universal & eternal value. It is something most people start writing when they are children. It is what humans read to each other at weddings & funerals. It takes us into vast spiritual adventures. It enacts original dreams. You do not need to dumb down your art or ignore a century of modernist practice to please what is sometimes called a larger audience. It is not a poet's job to simplify the mystery of existence or its lexicon. Is the life of the soul ever easy? When you feel downcast, keep in mind those who have encouraged you along the way & write for them; imagine a stranger who may be reading one of your poems in secret someday. Try not to think about people who are writing facile things on the internet. Remember the radical ancestor poets who have gone before, especially those who received less acknowledgment than they should have, those whose genius was insufficiently recognized. Their poetry provides excellent company, as does the work of great living poets who offer inspiration & consolation. Read across aesthetic lines & identity groups, assembling a varied canon. When you feel paralyzed by the pointlessness of temporary fashion, or when dull or predictable work is lauded, try new things that will surprise you as you work for the joy of the process, remembering that all a writer needs are four true readers & one of them can be a tree. Never look at your phone when walking downstairs. Do not destroy your body by self-medicating under poetic stress. Just write new poems & read them to your community. Keep the ego in balance because the ego project is doomed to fail. If you don't receive the rewards you deserve from "the outside world"—and you very likely will not—try to celebrate the good work of others; hold love in your heart; work for justice for humans & non-humans & keep writing. love,
Brenda



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When I read a book with the possibility I will be interviewing the poet, or studying it deeply for personal reasons, I take extensive notes. For interviews, these notes serve as potential topics of conversation. When I saw Brenda at AWP23 in Seattle, I apologized for marking up her book so much, but she loved the notes and encouraged me to post them on social media and so I did with an apology:



GO DEEPER

111 - "a soul can crouch a long time
while the heart expands to
reach its edges."

111 - WINTER SING...

113 - SICKNESS & THE UPRALO SONG

118 - reliance, what is your intention.

121 - "belief is not irrelevant to this."

122 - launch a few vowels

* 123 - inexhaustible light has entered us

* 124 - "each breath a soul we loved
like woman's art"

EXERCISE
bonus points for writing a part 2
ekphrastic about a woman
painting or art work by a
woman

129 - after George Oppen

131 - LIST poem

132 - Forgiveness poem

133/135 - reversal technique To The Voice of the Air

* 135 - in a place w/ no light

What are the dates / numbers? - Covid Curses

* 137 - smooth black stone

142 - another reference to whiteness
143 - pain is a portal

151 - energy leaks between worlds

153 - where the title comes from

155 - June Carter's ring of fire

156 - mystical consciousness

* 157 - poem punctuation at the end of time

158 - axis off center as in most poetry

161 - your time on earth is brief, so
LOVE & MYTH speak your love without delay

163 - write a poem about the
Age of Paper

162 - The Themes in American

167 each angel rushes in differently

14 angel references

2 references to angelic

* 166 - During an Enchantment in the Life

172 - IN A FEW MINUTES BEFORE LATER

177 - our life a time-shaped miracle

Bryophytes, Chlorophytes & the protist voices are
but 3 images in one poem by Brenda Hillman,
early on in her new book In a Few Minutes
Before Later published by Wesleyan University Press.
She draws on influences including Henri Bergson, Marjorie
Raukseyer Friedman & Lorine Nadel to create an
idiosyncratic oeuvre that's ecological, activist,
playful & vulnerable. There is no poet like her
writing now and probably forever & she's our guest
today, this writer, teacher, editor, activist poet.
BRENDA!



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 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



There's a bit of my personal mythology showing and my editor skills came into play when I structured the interview questions and then again in the moment of the interview when I decided what to ask next.

The Letter

After reading a book by a poet, you should have some sense of who they are, what their priorities are and maybe what they don't like. Poets who write more difficult poems, experimenters, may make entry into their poetry harder for you, but we're partial to WCW's doctrine that: "There is no poetry of distinction without formal invention, for it is in the intimate form that works of art achieve their exact meaning..." The work of poets engaged in formal invention are harder to grok at first, but that opens up the realm of inquiry, no? What would you ask Brenda if you wrote to her? What's with all the commas, Brenda? Why do you talk to yourself, Brenda? How many selves do you have, Brenda? You could even lard your own Brenda letter with commas, semi-colons, asterisks or sidebars into other realms of *your* self. Her tricks are fair game for you and she might expect them, or may block you on Instagram or write about you in a future poem. Of course, "If we don't show anyone we're free to write anything." You don't have to mail the letter to Brenda, but you should write to her in an intimate and vulnerable way. She would expect nothing less.

11:42am

13-MAR-2023

Casa del Colibrí

Works Cited

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