



Cascadia

Brenda Hillman

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Named for the ancient landform that preceded present-day California, Brenda Hillman's *Cascadia* creates from geological turbulence a fluid poetics of place. The book is Hillman's sixth collection and her most wide-ranging. The problem the book poses is nothing less than a phenomenology of transformation. In her previous work, Hillman's investigations of alchemy and of contemporary life have created their own distinct mythologies, and here she turns to the first of the four basic elements, earth, to demonstrate a visionary science with a combination of lightness, wit and force.

Embodied in syntax as unpredictable as the earth's movements, these poetic forms speak to and query the landforms as the line between faith and science blurs. Short lyrics inspired by the California missions, each with a retablo of punctuation, reflect on the solitude and history of the sign as it moves through the quotidian. Set among these lyrics, each of the three long poems in the book presents an aspect of Hillman's topography. By the end of this powerful work, a new state is visible: a Modernist poetics, subjected to immense internal pressures, above and beneath unsettled ground, has emerged in original shapes

Cascadia Details

Date : Published October 22nd 2001 by Wesleyan

ISBN : 9780819564924

Author : Brenda Hillman

Format : Paperback 88 pages

Genre : Poetry, Academic, School

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From Reader Review Cascadia for online ebook

Christopher says

4.4 of 5. Wesleyan University proves once again (to me, at least) that they are surely the finest publisher of fresh, new poetry. Hillman owes a lot to Ashberry and others, but.. really, what a fantastic read. A little difficult, surely difficult for those that don't read much like this. Extremely playful, yet serious. Hillman obviously has an incredible understanding of form.

Stephen M says

Upon a second reading, I found this gem that I overlooked.

"Monsters of will and monsters of
willessness confront the garden; a dragon

crow greets the dusk with its
prow. Rhyming is a tool of

friendly desperation. The spirits will return
though they're not here now."

Woah! "Rhyming is a tool of friendly desperation"! That line alone earns it another star.

Lightsey says

I have given this the once through and am now wading back through it. I'm puzzled by Hillman's formal inventions and don't quite follow her through all her quirks, but I like the approach to subject matter, how her research on geology results not in polemic or metaphor but in actual physical presence--shelves and faults as much in the poems as people or history. I also like the wide scope, and that Hillman doesn't seem to feel the need to close her circle, to line up and account for everything.

Karli says

Writing the California landscape onto the body, these poems move from self to other and beyond. One of my favorite collections by a contemporary poet.

Sandra says

Brilliant-as tidy as the geological processes that are at times front and center, sometimes below the surface of this place we call California. Hillman has a way of using language that represents the reality it depicts. Loved the gold rush series of about four poems midway. Also "Franciscan Complex," Shared Custody," and "Wood's Edge." Hillman brings in a sense of our becoming in the becoming of the land, as in the title poem "Cascadia," which could be a parable of California--its uniqueness, its restlessness in both domains. I need to read this work (checked out of the library) again in its entirety, because it is a whole poem with beginning and end, to capture the nuances of our ways of knowing the land Hillman references in history, religion, science, and our own intimate experience of living on it.

Mike says

Much like the studies of geology and history which form the foundation of her sixth collection of poetry, Brenda Hillman's "Cascadia" (2001) often feels like a mystery waiting to be unpacked. In comparison to her first collection of poetry, "White Dress", "Cascadia" leaves the reader with the impression that Hillman has spent the intervening decades digging deeper into her understanding of place, relationship, and what – in fact – is poetry.

The collection is built from the poet's exploration of California through the lens of geology. Indeed, one can easily imagine Hillman and a companion spending several weeks or months driving up, through, and across the great state, guided, perhaps, by Roert Durrenberger's "Elements of California Geography." Explanations of geological processes, mountain formation and the plate tectonics which led to the submerging of a landmass known as Cascadia and the geological creation of California as we now know it provide a consistent motif throughout Hillman's collection. This bedrock, in turn, provides the basis for reflections on architecture, history, beating addiction, industrial development, poisoned landscapes, relationships, and the act of writing poetry.

This last topic of reflection is both explicit in Hillman's writing and implicit in the changes one observes in the presentation of her writing in comparison to "White Dress." While the shift may appear more subtle to someone who has had the opportunity to savour Hillman's intervening published works, I found it to be quite striking. In "Cascadia," the majority of Hillman's poems are several pages long and feel much darker than the ideas in "White Dress." Hillman's writing also feels more 'modern' (I use the term reluctantly) in that the ideas written explicitly on the page feel more abstract and loosely connected, there are more spaces (both in her language and the physical presentation of words on the page) for the reader to make his or her own connections. This approach is reflected in Hillman's use of line breaks and white space mid-line.

Even more notable is her use of words and punctuation around the margins of her poems. (It's also interesting given her discussion of margins and poetry using the metaphor of plate tectonics throughout these poems). In "A Geology," for example, each page is marked with a word in a corner of the page. On the first page, the words (clockwise from top left) read: "range, condition, locust, disagree", while on the eighth of eight pages, the words read: "fault, fault, fault, prevalent." On this same page, she muses in the body of her poem, "tempting to pun on the word fault." The poem "Sweeping the interpreter's house" is marked with four different combinations of the symbols + and -, in sets of three. The poem Noon Chain Replica includes a vertical chain of curved parentheses on the left-hand margin. These are just a few examples. Another way that Hillman enlists the margins of the page for the success of her poems is with the inclusion of vowels as

with “Emigrant Gap” and “Twelve Vowels” or bracketed words in “Dioxin Sunset.” One of the most striking examples of this is the poem, written in grey text, which shadows her poem “Cascadia” in its left-hand margin.

The poem “Hydraulic Mining Survey” also introduces an interesting visual-textual feature with the second, third, and fourth stanzas rotated 90-degrees counter-clockwise. While these lines are clearly a part of the poem and present a striking visual representation the methodology and impact of this type of mining, the poem can also be read – with different consequences for the reader – without these stanzas. Finally, Hillman employs numbers, asterixes, and other punctuation throughout some of her poems as if to represent the unrepresentable word. Her poem “Pre-uplift of the Sierra”, for example, opens with the line: “Hermit thrush ,??;:&~, (Having chosen the wrong female) –”.

While the fifth stanza of the poem “The white of action in literature” reads:
“ ;;;?(), —!”

As with my review of “White Dress,” I’d like to conclude by sharing some of my favourite lines from Hillman’s poems in “Cascadia.” The poem “Past Guinda” opens with the lines: “The temporary, remade milder, / into permanence.”

The poem “The (or: It)” includes the lines:
“A translator trying not to decide God’s gender:

“wretched was”
his/her (or: it) – vaguely,
like ordering from a truckstop menu.”

Her poem “The Rise of the Napa Hills” opens with: “The sea has receded a little. Mild layer stack up / without panic, like email.”

I also greatly enjoyed “The Shirley Poem,” written with the found text from “The Shirley Letters, Being Letters Written in 1851-1852 from the California Mines” by “Dame Shirley” (AKA Louise A.K.S. Clappe).

Finally, I spent a long time considering the final lines of “Sad Cookies,”:
“Double Jeopardy category sweet nothings for \$200 / Sweet nothing surrounded by anything // What is a poet’s destiny?”

Simone says

In Brenda Hillman’s *Cascadia*, a twin(n)ing of selfscape and landscape occurs. Like the protean California coastline, Hillman rapidly shifts between images of landscape to bodyscape, often employing declarative paratactic constructions.

By constructing a textual relationship between geography and self she attempts to impose a container over the luxuriance of landscape, bordering her poems with mathematical symbols, various punctuation marks, and single words located at the four corners of the page, producing a language framing device. This typographical partitioning of text echoes her obsession with the California coastline specifically in her poem

“A Geology,” which creates a double helix of the diction of geology (granite, quart, hornblende, Miocene lave) and addiction (drug, methadone, veins, 12 step, addict). A construction that likens the self(ves) to the landforms/faultlines (which she obsessively puns on) of California in which a person like “a geology breaks in half to grow.”

In a subsequent poem “Christ’s Height,” bound by addition, subtraction and equal signs instead of words, her mathematical symbols imply that each addition has a subtraction, and yet, it isn’t a matter of canceling out what exists, but more an equalizing gesture. Hillman writes:

A lily advanced
in three ways,

algebra powder on its tongue;

centuries passed;

a poet
burst with happiness.

Her metaphorical quickstepping and connotative construction of “algebra powder” as pollen (from “lily”), gun powder (from “burst”), and eucharist (from “tongue”), that causes a burst in the poet captures beautifully and paradoxically the violent alchemy of being which permeates the book. Hillman’s book rearticulates her opening Blanchot epigraph: “The poet’s destiny is to expose himself to the force of the undetermined and to the pure violence of being from which nothing can be made...but also to contain it by imposing upon it restraint and the perfection of forms.”

sarah says

Never has a sense of geologic time contained such intimacy. This thin book brought me back to poetry after a very long hiatus I blame on a creepy intro to poetry prof. Anyway, this was assigned reading for Susan McCabe’s contemporary poetry class and the closer I read it the more I loved it.
