

SUSAN MCCABE

"Platonic Oxygen": On Brenda Hillman's *Pieces of Air in the Epic*

Pieces of Air in the Epic by Brenda Hillman. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005.

Brenda Hillman still tackles, in her eighth book, the large meta-physical questions. *Pieces of Air* is part of her teratology of books based on the four elements. *Cascadia*, her last book, excavated the layered, shifting earth, linking (among other things) the adrenal Gold Rush, the formation of California, and drug addiction; here she fathoms the volatile air in its myriad forms, wanting to know: "Can we remake the elements" ("6 Components from Aristotle"). In "Platonic Oxygen," one of a sequence of "library" poems mourning the "death of paper," she meditates: "what is thought It is a breath." Breath is, above all, our means of survival, bound with cadence and inspiration. When Hillman places a gap or extended caesura in a poem, divides her poem into two columns, or drops an untitled parenthetical fragment at the bottom of an otherwise blank page, words show up as exhalations, part of the very process of being articulate, thinking humans. Hillman enacts a very particular kind of seeing with breath, squinting her eyes in "Echo," using "blur techniques," to trace the edges of air. Who knew we might see air—"Blond oxygen hovers over the tree" ("White Fir Description"), or the coloring of objects by the intricate movements of breezes?

Oxygen is a necessity, and in keeping with Hillman's mercurial leaps, governments, along with the narratives they iterate, can deprive us of it. In "6 Components from Aristotle," the "submarine Kursk, its night full of embalmed men used by the state—"suffocate in a "tube of silence." Too much oxygen makes us anxious; the poetry of "half states," prized in *Pieces of Air*, follows where "dread meets ecstasy's skid-mark" ("Wind Treaties"). Trees supply oxygen and textiles; in the dance of this logic, writing IS on the air, in a circumfluent way. "Papermill Creek before the death of paper," as a line, works by witty condensation (giving us "nature" in a name brand), yet less bleakly, another voice corrects:

String theory posits no events when it isn't a
 metaphor; donut twists in matter 10
 to the minus 33 cm—its inverted fragments like Bay
 Area Poetry—

Hillman's attention is here cocked upon the "not unsayable," curling back towards the invisible, to the "platonic" mysterious space surrounding the thread.

What I call the book's "library sequence" with its murmuring students and floating particles asks to be read in the context of Walter Benjamin's famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." He argues that we have lost the aura of authenticity when works can be mass-produced; we have lost art's singularity, immanence, and timelessness. Hillman similarly mourns the loss of "thingliness," so addresses the erosion of oral culture (the epic carried inside us) as well as the near demise of the age of the book ("Were you afraid / your book would vanish"). Many of these poems are about dust given off from the breath of books, signaled through a trio of colons at the beginning and end of a title as well as by the generous spaces between phrases. Auras, it turns out, coexist with the loss of them. Thus, we have, for instance, "::::" and "::::" We see the motes as the poet flits "Past modernisms" "mazedly" among "artaud dust" and the "scent of greenly ravished civilization ~ ~ ." Each book still has its "personal blond number on / its spine." Like us, books are "timelings," and as readers "with wind-whirled fingers," motes fly hither and circulate. Rather than the print, it is the wind's dust that Hillman scrutinizes most closely. We might hear T. S. Eliot of *Four Quartets* incanting: "Dust in the air suspended / Marks the place where a story ended," as if the quickened reader shuts the book and dust scatters (Eliot is writing during the Blitz when ash covered everything, when "fire was the death of air.") Hillman is among "dust acolytes" plus she perceives "auras" encircling people and books, "Old Blake" sleeping with "a bunchy brown aura around his / head."

These poems, without doubt, denote lyric nostalgia, tempered with dashes, and pliant, canny observations:

When paper lived in the Radiance
 Forest, stored blindfold gray;
 sleeps nicely
 now— after sunlight training (invited measure)
 as if a shadow sat down—

Hillman is funny in the right places so that she spots the visionary "Radiance," but also comments: "So much stubborn air / escapes the canon"; or "knowledge is lonely since meaning left." The sudden resonant scientific observation also has its place: "Turns out there *are* bugs that / eat book glue birth slash death / of knowledge in their bodies." The oblivious backpacking students that populate *Pieces of Air* seem to carry the birth and death of knowledge in their bodies. In a constant state of disintegrating attention, they carry their "tiny screens embedded" in their cell phones, have parents who drive SUVs called "Caravan" and "Quest," yet "winds rarely visited them. / Their president says global warming doesn't exist" ("Air in the Epic"). They live within the folds of an "epic" / "epoch" unbeknownst to them, while "construction trucks find little Troys." It is no wonder they "dislike thinking about Agamemnon," and do not know how to respond to the Iraqi war. The tiles at the hallowed mall "predict the future like Aeneas's shield" but no one can decipher them. Indeed, like a clairvoyant ("i sat on a hill / To contact the spirit world"), Hillman mock-prophecies: "The ATM is jammed / Wind will rend the suburbs" ("Altamont Pass").

Pieces of Air draws upon the ephemera of contemporary culture, yet gestures towards the ample epic, a genre traditionally used for narratives that substantiate oral history and nationhood. At the same time, the book mocks the epic's usual trajectory of gathering and sustaining a single cultural myth, of "installing" nation ("My country / 'tis of installing provisional governments"—"String Theory Sutra"). The flag sewn and reproduced in "String Theory Sutra" shrouds corpse soldiers; it is a blasted totem. The pilot who wears his Target tie over his heart has an atavistic relation to the flag, yet absurdly loses sight of the fact that the flag is a *product* of the "united sales" (from "Nine Untitled Epyllions") made cheaply by the poor. He is thus part of an ongoing epic, in which "Flags for the present war / / / were made in countries we bombed / in the last war." An object, like a state mandate, can take up space, use up air, stop the breath of protest, and so on. It is important to emphasize how much of this "air" manifesto is indeed a new kind of protest poetry, echoing Allen Ginsberg's diatribe in "America," and continuing: "I, it, we, you, he, they / / / am, is, are sick about America" ("String Theory Sutra").

In keeping with her rewriting the epic, Hillman deflects the masculinist bias of the tradition, inserting Iphigenia ("who waits for winds to start" in "Air in the Epic"), evidently so she won't be sacrificed and the Greeks can set sail (Hillman humorously asks why they didn't think about rowing). "Private Dido" in "6 Components of Aristotle" witnesses

the men suffocating in their submarine as a version of the tragic woman, hurled in repeatable ruin: "The men are more of a Dido. Their hope has only one ship that keeps getting lost over and over." "Thyme Suites" makes her heroine one of changeable elements: "Tuesday glitter on our / heroine. All flames she was, then water, then air." Perhaps the book's most radical act is substituting the hero/heroine with the sentence itself, so that it is in language, through our syllables, that we remake our world ("every century changes what / cloth is").

Hillman is both nervy and fluent, moving between the "high" and the "low" in a hip-hop manner. "Your Fate" (with its epic Sybil embedded in its furl) is a prime example of how her varying registers clash and merge: she waits for "the tech support person" at the end of a phone line while "rereading the epic—actually the translator's notes" and begins to like the "on-hold music." Between the *Iliad's* marginalia and the present moment, she detects "mythical" presences:

Who has come? What ironfoot iliad
 girl approaches the PS's, her weathers
 locked in gray flame?

This language spreads immanence upon the dewy decimal; it is an interrogatory haptic, it is momentary, it is fleeting, it is a "ps"—but also quite simply, the new zesty beautiful.

Hillman is a West-Coast trailblazer, who is not abashed by mystery (she quotes Einstein to that effect), who is not hesitant to invoke "being cycles" ("Clouds near San Leandro") or numerology (shaman "robertduncan" has a name with double 6s in a poem subtitled "Ethical 6" in "The Corporate Number Rescue Album"), who has a willingness to be cute amidst terror ("bears hold hands" in "On Carmerstrasse"). Hillman is not just playing around (but what if she were?). Instead, as with her earlier volumes, she astonishes with a renewal within the limits of the page and technology: so she jokes about Microsoft not allowing "loostatic" ("Nine Untitled Epyllions"). The book, dead serious in its inventiveness, is full of fresh soundings (the sprinkler, for instance, in "Reversible Wind" with its "fss fsssss fs-s-s-s-s-s").

Lest we feel we have entered too romantic a register with our "iliad / girl," Hillman provides the centerpiece of "Nine Untitled Epyllions" (dedicated for those who have suffered from the war in Iraq) which faces off poems on black pages with those on white; one is free to read all the black, or all the white, or in the order they appear. They are part of a weave, and make us breathe differently. "Something about

breathing / The air inside a war," so one of the black pages ghostwrites. Opposite, the disembodied lyricist says she "made a winged / creature" that floats through war-zones, but "O / blood river it cannot / cross nor the y / in abyss, sleeps for / the them whose helmets / lost their eyes in / s/hell oil past." The book keeps returning to the triangle letters like "y"—a visual/verbal incantation, and a triangle where air slips through, but here it is literally the place that cannot be crossed in consciousness, between the imagination of suffering and suffering.

Thus we are in the realm of delay, incongruity, collision, yet also in one of mystery and wonder: "The heat sing-ing-ing" in "Doppler Effect in Diagram Three." She asks, with real amazement, "How does air feel with waves inside it," or later "How do airwaves get through all the numbers / & how does the ((((((((do it." She thus visualizes the Doppler Effect, the way sound waves come closer in space to a standing body, but also how there are no *standing* or "universal" bodies. This poem expands upon the relativistic perspective of Wallace Stevens's "So and So Reclining on Her Couch" where he invites us to "call this Projection B":

In the model an observer
The platform & we grow to love him
He is wild & is thinking of nothing
Let us call all of this observer A
There is a row of bending sounds
As the trouble curves rightward
Mr. Doppler is in heaven by now
A slim hush as the fat springs click

After this synchrony of moments, a few lines later we find the passengers waiting on the platform:

You are you & no one & everyone
The oscillating quality of dusk clashes with
What is universal just as the vowels
In a person's name clash with his handwriting

Eventually we lose Mr. Doppler as well as the passenger ("observer A") for "[i]n the pulling away life is continuous," and indeed our hero/heroine "The sentence has started its journey." Hillman's "seeing" is indeed almost at the molecular level (there are "worry hyphens inside the molecules"); or she scintillatingly writes from the position of one who

vibrates with "the skirts of sound." I don't, however, want to suggest we have all "luft" without any earthbound reality. The danger of writing a book on air is that it might disappear at crucial moments. Yet here there is no loss of imagistic precision, as with this condensed pair of lines: "Each aspen leaf a coat of arms / A toothless lineage of solitude" ("Reversible Wind").

Hillman in these various ways grips the intellect *and* the gut. She is one of our most "platonically" driven by a Lucretian desire to recreate a cosmology. Her prior obsession with the Gnostics (here they are in "recovery" in "Altamont Pass") still holds forth. Hillman's idiosyncratic voice fathoms the place where the "not unsayable" touches the unsaid, where horizon lifts away from meaning, where she squints her eyes to see dust motes, air, and auras: "I made my eyes pointy to look at air / in corners" ("Echo 858"). She has oracular ambition, say so or not.

Among the many forms the book invents, there are a series of narrow, mostly enjambed poems, where a disembodied voice describes nearly post-nuclear landscapes. The first, "Street Corner," introduces a "speaker" that floats as a moving place: it is "where I went for centuries not as a / self or feature but / exhaled as a knowing." There is a "knowing" and semi-omniscient consciousness, a matrix of energies that is not a bounded "I." Such poems present "citizens" (or are they syllables?) who wander in areas that have been wrecked to seek a poetics where "abstraction and / the real could merge." The poet is a "singer" become "seamstress," weaving the world from words and weather. Yet these are not technically happy marriages, for something has certainly been lost in the slippage between "strings" and "theory," song and language, saying and meaning. "We could have said / song outlasts poetry" turns into "We could have / *meant* song outlasts poetry" ("Street Corner"). As if undergoing a Doppler effect, "The war is forgot forgot forgotten." "The line structure changed," she writes in "Air in the Epic." What isn't clear is how this change has been shaped by politics. The book addresses and forces this question. There are not many poems in this volume that end decisively with a period—one of the lonely has an evaporative image—"bracelets of ether." ("Mars Field Speaks to Vvendensky"). Words interrupt the elastic space within which language resides. "I would like to record / a feeling that isn't there," she writes in "Echo 858." There is an urgency to find new forms—as with Hillman's "needle" that "means / nothing to the State"—for our songs that may not outlast air.