



**POETRY**

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**CHAPBOOKS**

*Coffee, 3 A.M.*

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**AS EDITOR**

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*on Poetics and Motherhood*

[WITH PATRICIA DIENSTFREY]

*The Poems of Emily Dickinson*

*Writing the Silences: Selected Poems*

*of Richard O. Moore*

[WITH PAUL EBENKAMP]



# **PRACTICAL WATER**

WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY PRESS

MIDDLETOWN, CONNECTICUT

Published by Wesleyan University Press  
Middletown, CT 06459

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Hillman, Brenda.

Practical water / Brenda Hillman.

p. cm.— (Wesleyan poetry)

ISBN 978-0-8195-6931-8 (cloth : alk. paper)

I. Title.

PS3558.I4526P73 2009

811'.54—dc22

2009012350

Design and composition by Quemadura

Printed on acid-free, recycled paper  
in the United States of America



Wesleyan University Press is a member  
of the Green Press Initiative. The paper  
used in this book meets their minimum  
requirement for recycled stock.



NATIONAL  
ENDOWMENT  
FOR THE ARTS

A great nation  
deserves great art.

This project is supported in part by an award  
from the National Endowment for the Arts.

*This book is for my brothers, Brent & Brad Hillman*

---

*for Cal Bedient & Forrest Gander*

*for veterans of the current wars & CodePink*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS & NOTES



(OF INTERNATIONAL WATERS)

*Water, whatever it communicates, remains always at a level.*

DAVID HUME *Political Discourse of 1755*

*As far as the eye sees, little garments of rain . . .*

BARBARA GUEST "Constable's Method"

*. . . the third commonness with light and air . . .*

WALLACE STEVENS "A River of Rivers in Connecticut"

*Though this bright world of all our joy is in the human brain . . .*

WILLIAM BLAKE *The Book of Urizen*

We bury the sparrows of Europe  
with found instruments,  
their breasts light as an ounce of tea  
where we had seen them off the path,  
their twin speeds of shyness & notched wings  
near the pawnbroker's house by the canal,  
in average neighborhoods of the resisters,  
or in markets of princely delphinium & flax,  
flying from awnings at unmarked rates  
to fetch crumbs from our table half-spinning  
back to clefs of grillwork on external stairs  
we would descend much later;

in rainy neighborhoods of the resisters  
where streets were taken one by one,  
where consciousness is a stair or path,  
we mark their domains with notched sticks  
of hickory or chestnut or ash  
because our cities of princely pallor  
should not have unmarked graves.  
Lyric work, flight of arch, death bridge  
to which patterned being is parallel:  
they came as if from the margins  
of a painting, their average hearts half-spinning  
our little hourglass up on the screen.

What does it mean to live a moral life

It is nearly impossible to think about this

We went down to the creek  
The sides were filled  
with tiny watery activities

The mind was split & mended  
Each perception divided into more

& there were in the hearts of the water molecules  
little branches perpendicular to thought

Had lobbied the Congress but it was dead  
Had written to the Committee on Understanding  
Had written to the middle  
middle of the middle  
class but it was drinking  
Had voted in cafes with shoplifters &  
beekeepers stirring tea made of water  
hitched to the green arc

An ethics occurs at the edge  
of what we know

The creek goes underground about here

The spirits offer us a world of origins  
Owl takes its call from the drawer of the sky

Unusually warm global warming day out

A tiny droplet shines

---

on a leaf & there your creek is found

It has borrowed something to  
link itself to others

We carry ourselves through the days in code  
DNA like Raskolnikov's staircase neither  
good nor bad in itself

Lower frequencies *are* the mind  
What happened to the creek  
is what happened  
to the sentence in the twentieth century  
It got social underground

You should make yourself uncomfortable  
If not you who

Thrush comes out from the cottony  
coyote bush glink-a-glink  
chunk drink  
trrrrrr  
turns a golden eyebrow to the ground

We run past the plant that smells like taco sauce

Recite words for water  
weeter wader weetar vatn  
watn voda

[insert all languages here]

Poor Rimbaud didn't know how to live  
but knew how to act

Red-legged frog in the pond sounds like him

Uncomfortable & say a spell:

*blossom knit & heel affix*

---

*fiddle fern in the neck of the sun*

It's hard to be water

to fall from faucets with fangs  
to lie under trawlers as horizons  
but you must

Your species can't say it

You have to do spells & tag them

Uncomfortable & act like you mean it

Go to the world

Where is it

Go there

Sunlight tosses the small grasses its brain method. Once

it gave us

a dynamic hurt but we've gotten

over it. Wobbly jay: the aspen is see-thru today,

waiting for the Ice Age, & alphabets appear in

every stem of it, tail shaking to a Y

not far from ecstasy.

The diverted creek sounds sad so maybe i better

take our dowsing stick out to the field, for our Y will

pull &

find buried water. With twig lines on our face & humming. With up &

down for the world needs

a water-finding stick for bringing wrecked water

sideways

beneath blue mist— For water wants to be equal. Water wants

to be equal & the world

needs women with sticks & dusk husks, since they have

taken the husks of damselflies when they straightened

the creek, when the golf course needed its tight white

globals (though the cowbird's yellow beanie eye

will survive the terrible pocked ball)—

Where there is a break in the fence near sweet horses we will skip

through

& hold down our stick in a shiny chipping field, cabbage white

butterflies in pairs, pennyroyal— Diet Pepsi plastic on its side

& to the diverted creek & old creek bed

say Meet

this dowsing wand Come in—

Mist rose this morning

as i crossed the field; heard the crooked cries cry creek to me,

cried creek to me unable that the world wants

water girls to work with mice, chipping off the blossom part of

bitterbrush to save for later. Forced to mark

---

them out shy. Thanks for letting us know, hydrogen-times-two; leave

the periodic

table & come to the dowsing stick, oxygen;

come to the water table— we are taking this finding down to

delphinium,

angelica, mimulus, letting water go or we will go at night,

among introduced grasses, under the moons called

Duir or Harvest,

Deer Paw the Earth & Gort, our stick

will dip down

in a Y for

Yes

it's here. Aspen, don't quiver, there's root parties a plenty & we will be

wicked with our wick in our turn—< the stick will summon

meandering streams for penstemon dandelion hair face,

even the fungus beetle; those. Those qualities below. We miss

our mother. Dear mother, daughter, pilot, poet, sister,

student, teacher, waitress, worker, water girls & girlie men, don't do

their war; take Y rods, angle rods, bobbars, pendulums & loops

for the stick is the witch with dew,

electrons & glaciers the stick does do;

for you miss your mother too & you can take your broken

Y stick past the field they trapped energy in, poor stream,

in their system there, to pull

your water table up for water to be equal

like the warbler

building nests against the imposter egg, will use that twig

to mend the place where they have cut California in two.

One at a time the simple

drops will come, though Agricola warned not to use the enchanted twig but

you must come, it has

gotten serious!

So in binding oxygen to thin wild hydrogen & so in the earth you

can bring energy from your

stick signatures, earth's meridian roused from

---

a source,

we will squint our ears to the babble & make for them

a wavelength over the old new field—



## BALLAD AT THE STATE CAPITOL

---

When we climbed the steps of the Capitol in the middle  
of winter the middle of main, there were pale new  
earthworms washed up on the steps, flat pink circles  
around their necks as we passed the hollow in  
the soldier's face where he sat in the park not thinking  
of the law of If any man steal a minor son he shall be

put to death & so on. Shared light curled under the dome as we  
walked. As we crossed. When we rose in the elevators,  
we rode with platform managers & retail managers,  
investors of mutual funds & stock options, with slim  
portfolios that were feeling a little bullish, even slim women  
were feeling a little bullish with their trim leather pouches

they took to the staff while the Dow was up & the up was down  
past guards with chains that were effective. Through  
double doors we walked with our stop-the-killing data  
we brought through double central doors where If any  
man put out the eye of another his eye shall be put out etc.  
we went up dressed like sunrise, for the limits of color

are the limits of our girls. Officials waited like squid for us not  
pretty of course like squid in the sea, propped up in  
numbered offices when we took our motion in to them  
but they flopped. Flopped floppety forward because of  
having no spines. Floppety forward they couldn't sit up.  
Washington knows best, said Room 2141, Probably not

but Hmm said Mr. Speaker himself. Maybe Yes but No, said Ed in 2148. Why try, said Jenny O.  
Here is some cake! It was written on the wall past the chief-of-staff's head that If any  
man harm the captain injure the captain or take away from the captain a gift presented to  
him by the king he shall be put to death Raised Seal

Not Required. Thanks for dropping by! said the Canciamilla-squid as we read the writing past his  
plutocrat head, in endless vengeance decimals of pi, two eyes for an eye, he said, Bye,  
ladies, goodbye! As we carried our vitamin shadows out. As we shook their flaccid  
tentacles off. As we slipped. When we slipped down the steps

in the middle of rain, the earthworms adjusted the alphabet so the next thing may not be the next  
thing, they wrote. They spelled in calligrammes & codes. When they brought back  
Ishtar's cuneiform. For the love of myrtle, cedar & rose that came from dust. The vine

sisters twisted in stone as they turned in earth to speak to us.

---

And  
a black-  
bird follows  
you from city  
to city, changing  
names as it flies (osle,  
merula); it sheds its first  
music at daybreak (Amsel) as  
it drops letters that will float in a  
river of your father (lon dubh, lon dobh)  
or into the slight raindrops of your mother  
(melro, merle noir), onto a forest or desert floor  
(merlo, karatavuk, κότσονφας) where the ochre  
worm feeds quietly in starlight. With a ring around its  
famous eye (kostrast), restless and a little shy between trills  
at night (mustrāsas, zozo), it flies to places where gods are called  
Disposers and yet are commensurate with life. So when another  
name springs open in your heart (komunsae, 검은새, mirlo, КОС, kos)  
—or in the aqua crucible of dawn—syllable and bird (merel, svarttrost)  
long for each other in the description, dragging lovers to light (mustarastas,  
solsort), dragging meanings as dense and particular as food or as pieces of songs,  
as existence that hopes for itself (juodasis stazdas, черный дрозд, chernyi drozd, Al-  
Ta'er, روح شربلا, A-Sho'hroor, רוורתש, Sha-ch-rur) as spaces in songs after morning—

A row of hyphens exists in the sea

You squint to find it x miles down

You saw it in the magazine

& eyeless fish that swim under it

You left one perfect day for your friends

What will they do with a perfectly left day

watching clouds on Yellow Mountain

touched by night in the Hall of Speaking

A row of red hyphens exists in the sea in scales

of fish in dropped-back hours

You the seer of your life

your friends the seers of theirs

touched by sunrise on one side only

before a moon touches you on the other

in blue or local blue eternal time

They keep you with you you keep them with them

You keep them with you

They keep you with them

# THE EIGHTIES

---

## AN ESSAY

A friend asks, "What was at stake for you in the Eighties?" She's trying to figure out Bay Area Poetry. There was Reagan's New Morning for America. Garfield dolls stuck to the backs of windshields with suction cups. At the beginning of the Eighties I was married & at the end i was not. The Civil Rights Movement became kind of quiet. Feminism became kind of quiet. An editor told a woman he couldn't read her poems because it said she was a *mother* in her bio. Many thought about word materials. Environmentalism got kind of quiet. The earth spirits were not quiet. Buildup of arms. Iran-Contraband Savings & Loan scandal. Tax cuts gave way to library closings. The *Challenger* went down with the first woman astronaut aboard. People read letters to her on TV. Mini-golf places with purple castles opened on Highway 80 in the Eighties. Chernobyl exploded & the media announced it as a setback for nuclear energy. People ate out more because of tax cuts. i fell in love with a poet. Earth dropped in the dark clock. A few wrote outside the margins. Mergers & Acquisitions. The Bay continued to shrink. Many got child-support checks. Many came out. Deconstruction found the moving circle. A few read Lacan. Guns 'n Roses Sweet Child o' Mine. Our daughter drew pictures of trucks with colored fur. She had 24 ear infections in one year so why were you not supposed to write *mother* in your bio. Many wrote the lyric with word materials. The Soviet Union began to free prisoners. America freed few prisoners. Superconductivity. Gorbachev became president instead of something else. One son went to college. We cried. There was no e-mail. Art pierced the image. Blue-rimmed clouds hurried past outside & in. Some wrote about childhood; some wrote about states of mind; some wrote word materials instead of about. Symbolist poetry, by then 120 years old, pushed the dream nature of the world. Hypnotherapy. i began the trance method. In the Eighties, Mt. Tam stayed the same. Mt. Diablo stayed almost the same. Many species died & would not return. At stake. One son started a punk band. he had a one-foot-high purple Mohawk. i listened to the tape with another mother trying to make sense of the words. Oliver North held up his right hand. Reagan turned off his hearing aid. Sentences fell apart but they had always been a part. Yeltsin. Walesa. Wall comes down. Romania. El Salvador. Noriega. Some elderly folk lived on dog-food when their pensions collapsed. People worried about children, lovers, ex-husbands, jobs. Consciousness stayed alive. Interest rates leapt through the vault of the sky. We cried & cried. We made food & quit smoking. We learned the names of wildflowers & forgot them & re-learned them. This was only the beginning. There's so much more to be said in answer to your question.

(i looked up from my reading;

---

the one who is  
always visiting  
stood on the rug  
in one of her Europe moments;

i asked her whether  
i should be writing  
when i'm not writing or  
not writing when  
i'm not writing—)

## PHONE BOOTH

---

There should be more nouns  
For objects put to sleep  
Against their will  
The “booth” for instance  
With coiled hidden wires  
Lidded chrome drawers  
Tipping up like lizards’ eyes  
We looked out into rhymed rain  
We heard varying vowels  
Rimbaud’s vowels with colors  
Orange or blue beeps  
Types of ancient punctuation  
The interpunct between words  
A call became twenty-five cents  
Times in a marriage we went there  
To complain or flirt  
Two more decades & we wised up  
Got used to the shadow  
The phone booth as reliquary  
An arm could rest  
On the triangular shelf  
A briefcase between the feet  
A pen poked into acoustic holes  
While we gathered actions/wits  
For magic & pain  
The destiny twins  
Folks scratched pale glyphs  
Onto the glass door while talking  
One day we started to race past  
& others started racing  
Holding phones to their ears  
Holding a personal string

To their lips

---

If there are overages

There might be nouns for

The clotting of numbers in the sky

So thick the stars can't shine through

A word for backing away

From those who shout to their strings

In the airport while eating

We loved the half booths

Could cup one hand on the mouthpiece

Lean two-thirds out to talk to a friend

Sitting in the lobby

The universe grows

We are dizzy as mercury

We are solitudes aided by awe

Let us mourn secrets told to

Fake wood & the trapezoidal seat

Perfume in the mouthpiece

Like a little Grecian sash

Why did we live so fast

The booth hid our ankles

We twisted the rigid cord

As we spoke

It made a kind of whorl



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sample content of Practical Water (Wesleyan Poetry Series)

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