

My Mind, Not Being Empty

My mind, not being empty,
contained a multitude of
chambers housing categorical birds.
Surprised, as when
the Dalai Lama said he does eat meat—
doves flew out
of their pigeonholes; definitive
peregrines flung
themselves into the sky and circled,
too unsettled to light.
I had to spend a long time
trying to recapture them
before slowly grasping

fruitlessness,
and only then realized, or half-
remembered—each moment's
an idea that can't be held or reclaimed,
like old bumblebees
at the end of their season, drowsy
with cold, stubbornly
buzzing about on tattering wings. But
bees leave something...
a queen waits out the time between
now and then, doesn't
forget what she must do, or need to be
startled into recollection

How does a soul make a body,
or a body a soul?
Is it an assigned role, like seed sown
in fertile ground, or
mind put to work on an appropriate
path, a just way?
Why forget all earlier chapters if
they're necessary stairs?
Or feel uneasy—no, angry—at finding
this cranium on display?
Wasn't that the purpose of living
apart from the village,
in a desolate place? Wasn't I at home

among corpses
left above ground? Didn't I choose
to be reminded
of transience, and the human bones

that I cut and whittled
into trumpets, bowls, utensils
or beads, the proof?
Didn't necklaces, and all the aprons
strung with my carved
animals and faces and gods
rattle when the dancers
danced? If all I ever might have known
was forgotten,

why care that this skull has turned
to ivory,
that its sutures are like dark stitches,
and look so vulnerable?
Why does it matter if a skull is gold-
lined or rimmed, if it's
overlaid, inlaid, imbedded with
turquoise,
red coral or pearls?
What are deathbed wishes
anyway, but
a way of binding those you leave?
Though I *was* definite
about wanting a sky burial.

Is it so very hard to carry a body
(not very far)
up the side of a mountain, to hire
monks to chop it up
and feed it to the vultures? How
long do questions
wait to be born? I needed to forget,
to remember.
I needed what came after, and to be
surprised—to learn,
for instance, that each branch is only
carbon, hydrogen
and oxygen, that every piece

of wood is nothing
but water and air.
The yogin who
carried me back
to the cemetery
where I had once lived,
must have
understood that, and understood
as well how
attached I'd become to the
trees outside
the window of the room
where I died.

He must have been patient,
too, waiting
for my skull to be suitable
for carving.
He must have known that
art persists,
and that Tantric vessels
intended for ritual
offerings would someday come
down from the roof
of the world to remind us
that we are like air,
like water.

Brenda Yates



Brenda Yates is from nowhere. A military brat who grew up on SAC bases stateside and overseas, she settled first in Massachusetts and finally (so far) in California. Her poems have appeared in *Mississippi Review*, *Eclipse*, *In Posse*, *Pearl*, *51%*, *Cider Press Review*, *Spillway*, *Blue Arc West* and *So Luminous The Wildflowers*, *An Anthology of California Poets*. She was awarded the 2005 Patricia Bibby Memorial Scholarship at Idyllwild Arts.