

An Interview with Brenda Yates

by Maura Snell



Brenda Yates is from nowhere. She grew up on military bases stateside and overseas. After living in Tennessee, Delaware, Florida, Michigan, Massachusetts, Japan and Hawaii, she settled first in Boston, then in Los Angeles. Her poems appear in numerous journals and anthologies including *Mississippi Review*, *City of the Big Shoulders: An Anthology of Chicago Poetry* (University of Iowa Press) and *The Southern Poetry Anthology, Volume VI: Tennessee* (Texas Review Press). Awards include: a Pushcart nomination, the Beyond Baroque Literary Arts Center Poetry Prize, a Patricia Bibby Prize, and honorable mention in the Robinson Jeffers Tor House Poetry Contest. Tebot Bach published her first collection, *Bodily Knowledge*, (winter 2015).

MS: What drew you to writing poetry? Have you always been a poet? Or did you come to poetry as you made your way through life?

BY: I first fell in love with poetry in high school. It was strange and wonderful. It tapped into a free-floating timelessness where even archaic words or language could create powerful images and emotions. Poems conveyed something very like the rock 'n roll that was central to my life, a universe where words added up to more than their sum. I found a few kindred spirits who were compelled to “roll their own” poetry. We wrote a lot of very bad poems and found out how difficult it was to write anything like the poets we admired. It didn't occur to me that it was a craft that you could study and improve.

Over the years, I enjoyed poetry but didn't write. My major creative endeavor, raising my son, changed dramatically when he became a teenager. He had his own interests and curiosities and he made it lovingly but emphatically clear that he needed a *lot* less input from me. I suddenly had more time for books. I'd read at lunch and was shocked at how uncomfortable my coworkers were with poetry. So as an antidote, I'd read them, say, Robert Hayden's “Those Winter Sundays” and this wasn't like the poetry they'd heard. It was beautiful or moving or great. I decided to make an anthology for people who didn't read poetry. As I worked on it I began to think “That's not how I'd say this” and I wrote my first poem in years. After a lot of failure I discovered workshops and slowly began to make poems that I was willing to lay claim to. Los Angeles has amazing writers and I found brilliant teachers.

MS: I love that your collection *Bodily Knowledge* has these layers of writings. There is a wonderful mix of poetry, lyrical essays, and prose, that adds up to a rich and varied reading experience. How or when did you decide to compile the collection this way. Why was it important to you to include all these different kinds of pieces here?

BY: Thank you for that question and that way of seeing the book. Some of the pieces are nearly old enough to vote and others are quite new. I had put together two or three manuscripts but was never satisfied. After writing what's now the last poem in the book, "Science," I had the odd feeling that this was the end of something both familiar and complete. I began pulling poems together and they formed a pretty natural arc. With a few exceptions (and fabulous suggestions from experienced and extraordinary poets), the book follows that order.

I hate to hear that poetry is this or isn't that, can't do this, has to, should only, etc. Maybe because I love the way poetry works in different forms, syntaxes, spacings, with different punctuations, grammar, etc., I love to experiment with these differences. Many times, I'll have more than a hundred revisions spanning a decade; what began as a prose block is now in a received or made-up form or vice-versa. Often, finding the form a poem should take is the last part of making a poem. So, I guess deciding to compile the collection this way was organic. Although other poets have created extraordinary books of sonnets or prose poems or squares, I don't write that way.

MS: Memory, of both the physical body and the mind, and the idea of place and home are strong themes in *Bodily Knowledge*. How has your idea of memory and place evolved since writing poetry?

BY: As a military brat, both memory and place changed all the time. The place revisited was not the place I had left. As an outsider, I saw the extent to which place creates identity. Hundreds of things are more obvious to transients than they are to natives. It's the water they swim in. And natives see hundreds of things I never did. Additionally, it was easy to discover that my sister and I have very different views of the same places. For instance, we might agree such and such was a terrible place to live—I'll say because the winters were brutal and she'll say because hot and humid summers enervated her to the point that she felt she was moving through molasses.

I'm not sure how my idea of these things has changed in my writing. Maybe someone else can see that better than I can. From the inside, evoking memory and place continues to be a striving for fill in the blank: authenticity, a way of seeing, or hearing or experiencing, sound, light, landscape, I could go on forever.

MS: Who or what would you say has been your biggest influence as a writer and poet?

BY: I was afraid you'd ask a question I really can't answer. I am probably more influenced by individual poems than I am by poets and their bodies of work. For instance, I love many poems written by Elizabeth Bishop, Seamus Heaney, Wallace Stevens and dozens

of other modernists. But that would leave out so much as to be meaningless. I'd probably have to break it down by generations beginning with Caedmon. That may be why I think that every poet should compile an anthology. It's a never-ending source of influence—certainly mine is still incomplete!

MS: This collection was published by Tebot Bach. Can you tell me a little about this organization? What are you most excited about in working with them?

BY: I am so glad you asked. Non-profit small press publishers like Tebot Bach (www.tebotbach.org) are the lifeblood of the poetry community. Tebot Bach's stated mission is: advancing literacy, strengthening community, and transforming life experience with the power of poetry through readings, workshops, and publications. Their literary activism extends to shelters, correctional facilities, schools, nursing homes, etc. Presses like this need all the support they can get to keep these programs going. Check out their website, donate, buy a book or two!

MS: What's the next thing on your list?

BY: I'm working on a new series called "Roadtrips and Other Getaways" which I assume will be part of another book if that ever happens. I'm also moving out of my comfort zone by giving readings and interviews. This is something I never imagined doing when I began my poetry journey.

