

Mary Jo Thompson

Body Breakers

They do not perform the rite with gravity.
They talk and laugh as in any labor, the Tibetans

who help the soul to move from that uncertain
plane between this life and—what?

The lead man cuts off the limbs
and hacks the torso to pieces, handing each

to his assistants who use rocks to pound the flesh
and organs together into a pulp they mix

with *tsampa*, barley flour moistened with yak milk,
before they invite vultures to feast.

They remove the hair from the head
and throw it away or keep it in a handmade box.

When only bones remain, the workers
grind them with mallets and give them to the crows.

Quite the opposite of old Egyptians, who,
fond of clay and wood containment, anointed

the body and wrapped it in fat and wax to keep
carrion eaters away. Funny how wealthy Victorians

bootlegged those sarcophagi, ground up
the mummies and stirred them into wine.

To sip and be ageless! And just last year,
the body of Angel Pantoja Medina,

dead at twenty-four, was specially embalmed
and stood upright in his mother's living room

during a three-day wake. His brother explained
that he wanted to look lively, ready to party

in the afterlife. Angel in his sunglasses and trademark
Yankees baseball cap, beer in hand, the other raised

to high-five the mourners, just a few of whom
looked sad, like those hired funeral mutes once common

in Europe, who stood near church doors in tall hats with silk ribbons,
dark cloaks, and gloves. Angel's family did not sob

or shriek and claw their faces. They'd agreed on his final
aspect, his outfit, and that became a permanent

decision. Once we choose and the rites begin,
we cannot change our minds. Not that you,

my black cat, lying here at peace and still
miraculously breathing,

have ever dreamed ahead or gazed behind.
You may be old, but you never think about that.