Larry Sutin, Didi Koka, and Eric Hansen

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARY RUEFLE

Mary Ruefle is the author of eight books of poetry, most recently Tristimania, *published by Carnegie Mellon Press. Her book,* The Adamant, *won the 1988 Iowa Poetry Prize. She is the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, a Whiting Writer's Award, an Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. Her poems have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, including* Best American Poetry *and* Great American Prose Poems. *She lives in Bennington, Vermont, and teaches in Vermont College's M. F. A. program.*

Here is what poet Deborah Keenan says about Mary Ruefle's work:

> Mary Ruefle's bountiful sorrow, her way of making intimate gestures to the things and creatures of the world, gathering them into the body of the poem, or into the spirit of the narrator, her way of including the reader in her visions, her loneliness, her true wit – sardonic and funny, bitter and true – all of this makes her one of our finest, most interesting poets. Her philosophical stances and her passionate heart combine to form intelligent, original works of art.

This public dialogue with Mary Ruefle was held in front of a live audience on March 15, 2005, during her visit to the Graduate School of Liberal Studies at Hamline University. The three interviewers were Larry Sutin, a member of the faculty; Didi Koka, a student in the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies program; and Eric Hansen, a student in the M. F. A. program at Hamline. Questions at the end were from members of the audience.

Koka: Many of your poems are critical of God, or God's indifference, and show an influence of Christian themes. Consider the poems "Last Supper," "Presidium Arch," "Inner City," and "Something Comforting," among others. Were you raised religious – Christian or

otherwise? Can you speak to the subject of God's indifference or your views on God and religion?

Ruefle: I was raised as a Catholic in the United States in the 1950s. I no longer believe that God possesses a consciousness, nor sex, nor color, nor creed. If you do not possess a consciousness, you are indifferent. Consciousness is what produces and creates difference. On the other hand, I will say this: when I was fourteen years old, I had the great good fortune of traveling to Europe where I walked into a cathedral for the first time. Despite having been in planetariums, it was my first experience of the universe, and I have never forgotten it.

Koka: Were your parents religious?

Ruefle: My parents were married interfaith, which meant, in those days, that my father was Catholic and therefore, my mother had to sign a document saying that her children would be raised in the Roman Catholic faith and that she would promise never, ever to do anything to hinder that. In order to be allowed to marry my father, she gave up her Presbyterian faith. She never set foot in a church again as long as she lived. She hated all Catholics, including her husband and children. She would sit at a table all day long, and when you would say, "Mom, what are you thinking about?" she'd say, "God is in Heaven and he has a black book, and in this book he keeps a ledger, and he makes lists of people's names. I'm thinking about the people who are in this book and the people who are not in this book." I didn't want to ask the next logical question. So I left the room quietly.

Koka: You write poems from the points of view of statues and busts. Some of your poems read like art, some like still lives. To quote you, "God and art are dumpsters." In what way has visual art influenced your writing?

Ruefle: Enormously. God and art *are* dumpsters. What I meant by that statement is that in matters of art and religion, there is no bottom. You can feed them anything and they have no choice but to take it in – not only the essential questions, the good questions, the unanswerable questions about life, but the most mundane and inconsequential things, too – like the little girl who prays very hard that she gets a Miss Kitty diary on her birthday! Dumpster is a pejorative word – I know that – but I'm guessing I liked the sound of it in that particular poem. Was it a cynical poem? I don't remember. I'm not feeling cynical at this moment!

I don't separate the arts. I've never been able to. When I say that my life was changed by walking into a cathedral at the age of fourteen, that was a non-literary experience. I am – I like to think of myself as – a little bit of a visual artist. I make collages and installations in my own home, just things for myself and gifts for friends. The visual arts have influenced me my whole life. As I said in the workshop yesterday: we all remember we're writers, but we forget that we're artists. If a poet forgets that he or she is an artist, that's a deadly, deadly, deadly mistake. Writers who only think of themselves as writers tend to be bad writers and boring writers. When you think of yourself as an artist, the whole world opens up. You begin to *make* things.

When I was a dual major in college, it was painting and literature. When I graduated, I didn't have much money and I couldn't afford canvas and gesso. I made a decision to stop painting and I became a writer. And then, of course, the world was changing and I realized later, that if I had my life . . . well no, not if I had *my* life to live over again, but, if I were born into another generation, I would love, love, love to make installations. I'd make installations!

Koka: Related to the prior question is your use of food imagery, which is often strongly present in your work, as if the images were modeled after still lives. Describe this relationship with food in your work, and, is there a connection to visual art?

Ruefle: Food is as figurative as it is literal. There's a very long history of female poets and food obsession, especially anorexia. You can go back to poets in the past where it's not documented, such as Juana de Ibarbourou, with a line like, "I barely drink the precise amount to not perish." Or, you can turn to Louise Gluck who talks openly about it, and writes about it so beautifully. I'm not an anorexic, but *forms* of anorexia appear in other areas of my life. It is a great hovering between life and death, a great tension such as that at the heart of the universe. There are many different forms of anorexia, and they don't all have to do with food. But the same interface and energy take place. I'm not talking about medical anorexia – I'm using the word as shorthand for the act of finding *what will suffice*, which is Wallace Stevens' way of describing poetry.

I have an early poem about the Last Supper – look what's on the table, there's like half a walnut! There's another poem in which I say I haven't eaten anything all day but a hard-boiled egg and a lemon. It has to do with . . . withholding, soul withholding, the spirit withholding – concentrating and attending as a way both to get someone to pay attention and to let someone know that you will not be paid attention to. To discover *what will suffice*. It's so complicated.

The point I want to make is that anorexia doesn't only have to do with food. It can have to do with spiritual longing. There are people who say that Simone Weil was basically an anorexic, and then there are people who think that she was one of the great spiritual thinkers of the twentieth century. I use her as an example of how complicated all these issues are. There are always two ways to view things and there are two ways to do things. Someone once said: Anyone who approaches an anorexic with anything less than the utmost respect has no business going near that human being.

Koka: So it almost seems that the discussion is going back to spirituality again, that search for wholeness. How do you keep a balance between immediate conversation and challenging imagery in your poems?

Ruefle: I sometimes fancy myself as quite the intellectual, and every time I do there's another part of me that just cracks up. It's like having a dialogue with myself when I'm writing a poem: every time I think I know it all and that my opinions are well-formed, another part of me kicks in to remind myself that I don't know anything. Who am I to be so presumptuous? This dialogue is constantly going on inside me, and I think it shows up in rhetorical terms when I use a very polished turn of speech and then follow it by hollering out something like, "Colonel Mustard, Colonel Mustard," or "Mr. Potato Head, Mr. Potato Head."

To constantly question oneself is to constantly challenge oneself. Poets are not self-contented sages. If they were, there would be no need to write poems! As a matter of fact, I would go so far as to say that one of the most difficult things in life is to find the subtle balance between loving yourself too much and too little. This is a major force in the life of the human psyche. If you fall on the side of self-adoration, that's bad, and if you fall on the side of self-loathing, that's bad. How do we find a space in-between? How do we do that?

Koka: What is your habit of writing? Do you write daily, at a structured time or place, or are you more like the portrait of the girl in your poem, the "Sanctity of Muddle," who writes on inspiration, whipping out her notebook in the middle of traffic?

Ruefle: I have pulled out of traffic to write a poem. I do not actually have any memory of ever writing a poem. I don't know how they get written. It amazes me. Every person has to find what works for him or her.

T.S. Eliot said you have to write every day because it's like keeping in shape, like exercising for the marathon so you're ready when inspiration hits. Students of mine quote Mary Oliver, from her book about the art of writing poetry, saying you can't be a writer unless you write every day. I hope she didn't say that because I vehemently disagree. Some of you will find, based on your own character and personality, that you should and must write every day. You must do what Toni Morrison did, whom I have the utmost respect for, whom I'm in awe of, in fact. I may have the facts wrong, but the gist of it is, that for twenty-five years of her life she set the alarm for 4:30 A. M. so she could write before her kids got up at seven. Well, not everyone's like that, and if you're not, don't feel full of self-loathing.

There are also poets who simply walk around and write in their heads. They grab a piece of paper and write the poem down and never revise it as long as they live. Half the time I am that person. One half of the poems I've written I have never revised a single word or looked at them or worked on them again since the moment they were written. But that doesn't mean I don't believe in revision, because the other half of the poems I've written I have revised for thirty years. I have revised, revised, revised, revised. You have to find what works for yourself in terms of your habits. They say that Virginia Woolf wrote for four hours a day, but really, it's easy when you're wealthy and you don't have a job and have a loving, understanding husband and a mansion and people who buy groceries for you. I don't have these things, so what I do is this: I turn the whole year into a day, and write four months out of the year.

Koka: You talk in your poems about worshipping books and knowledge as a youngster. Your poems often deal with literary authors like Kafka, Keats, and Shelley, for example. Talk about this love.

Ruefle: When I was an adolescent, I didn't know it but I was lonely. I didn't know it but I was isolated. I didn't know it but I was suffering. I found these people who lived in books and they talked to me. They reminded me of myself and so I had the experience: *Oh, somebody else is lonely, too.* They kept me company, and so I decided to spend the rest of my life not only in dialogue with them but trying to pay them back for their kindness and their generosity at a time when I needed it. They are like brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers to me. Kafka was more isolated than any writer I can think of, and he reached more people.

I have a personal belief that there are only two ways people grow up to be writers. Only *two* ways. The first is that you're born into a literate family. Your mother and father are literate They read to you; they surround you with books. You grow up with enormous respect for books. You flow into it as a natural, given birthright. There are extraordinary writers who are produced like this, writers like Virginia Woolf or Henry James. The other way you become a writer is to be born into an absolute, utter dearth of any kind of sensitivity or culture, as I was. Then you turn to literature and art as comfort, escape, camaraderie, which enable you to survive. Kafka would be a perfect example of someone like that. Both routes are valid; they produce equally gifted writers.

I really couldn't think of another way, until recently, when I was talking to a young student I'm working with and I said, "Okay, how'd you end up writing?" I always think I know everything so I always wait for one of the two answers. She said, "Shonda Yen in the fifth grade wrote poetry and I was jealous of her. The only reason that I'm writing is to triumph over Shonda Yen."

Hansen: Mary, your poems have a way of starting in one place and then going someplace completely different really quickly. Sometimes, as in "The Feast," the poem circles back to the

concerns of the early lines. But often it does not. I was wondering if you would speak to the narrative movement in your poetry.

Ruefle: Well, the human mind's a labyrinth; there's no stopping it. Curiosity is a circuitous thing. I do not write poems from preconceived ideas, though that is a perfectly valid way to approach poems. Sometimes I do have a preconceived idea, but very rarely. Usually I don't know where I'm going when I start a poem, but I have a scrap of language, or a rhythm, and I let these things be my guide.

To speak for the thing I don't know about can seem presumptuous, but I am letting a process occur in the room and in my mind. I try very hard to remain as open as I can. Here's an example of something that *might* happen: I'm sitting at my desk writing a poem and I'm stuck and I look up and see a Post-it note and what's written on the Post-it note ends up in the poem, but the reader wouldn't know that. Or, I'm writing a poem and I don't like it at all, so I scribble a note to myself in the margin – *cut the shit* – and that redirects the whole poem and those words end up in the poem! Does that make sense? It's embarrassing. It sounds ridiculous, I know, but writers talk about it all the time.

Samuel Beckett was a personal secretary for James Joyce. They're working away on *Finnegans Wake,* and Joyce is dictating and Beckett is taking notes and there's a knock on the door – *knock, knock* – and Joyce says, "come in." Beckett is not paying attention. He's writing everything down, so he writes, "knock, knock, come in." When they go over the notes from the day, they realize there was this life intrusion, and Joyce says "keep it – that's great." And it's in the novel. Maybe it's *Ulysses,* I can't remember . . . .

You also need to know when to cut something like that. I'll go back and revise a poem, and a lot of stuff gets cut, but the fact that it was there lets me know where it might be going

next. I'm not a Surrealist. I don't follow Surrealist models of writing. I despise stream of consciousness and automatic writing, unless they come from a genius, so please don't think that's what I'm talking about because it isn't. I'm talking about finding a place where you're very still and very open. And you're *listening.* Listening to the outside stuff becomes listening to the words you just put on the page. It's a very mysterious process – it's a lot like being alive.

Hansen: A group of us were reading a chapter on originality in Jane Hirshfield's *Nine Gates*, and we agreed that everything's been said before. I thought of you because you have lines like, "put the eyeballs in the goblet and flambé them there." That's a line that has never occurred in the history of language. I wonder to what extent you are seeking entirely new word combinations in your poetry.

Ruefle: We're always seeking new word combinations because we want to make it new. But in our entirely new word combinations we're saying the same things that have been said for a millennium, so our job is to use new words to say old things. I'm so happy at this moment that I can connect this directly to Jane Hirshfield, whom I admire very much. I once was in the audience for a Q and A with Jane Hirshfield. Somebody asked her, "Basically, Jane, what do you think is the purpose of poetry?" She said something I've never forgotten so I can practically quote it verbatim: "Well, basically, people only use poetry for three things: births, marriages, and deaths." It's true, when you think about it. I mean, you might be interested in poetry, but we're just specks, right? Have you noticed how when people are dealing with births, marriage, and deaths, they always go to poets and say, hey, you know poetry, could you suggest a poem for this occasion? Could you write a poem? People need poems at these moments in their lives. These are the moments when big questions are being asked.

Hirshfield says that your job as a poet is to make sure that out there on the bookshelves are poems to choose from that are written in contemporary vernacular, the speech that readers of your time will understand. It goes without saying that it's only going to be educated, liberal arts types who want to read Wordsworth or Rilke or Valery on these occasions. Hirshfield stressed that life changes a lot faster than you think, so every generation needs new poems that are completely fresh in their own vernacular. I thought that was a wonderful answer. We want to say the old things that have already been said, but in new ways. We might want to beg or borrow or steal a quote so that readers will discover a new freshness of view.

If you quote a line from Christopher Smart, some people might not know who Christopher Smart is, but they might find in you something comparable. It's your job to carry on. You're passing a big, big, big jug over a lot of shouldes – it's one big drink. And Shakespeare's back there somewhere and you may not be Shakespeare or ever *be* Shakespeare, but the jug that passed over his shoulders is passing over yours, and when you really come to understand that, it gives you the shivers.

Hansen: Writing teachers always, or often, say that style matches content. For me, the content of your work is phenomenally original. The visual styles of your poems on the page are more traditional, I guess, left-justified. Could you comment on the visual appearance of your poems and the choices you've made.

Ruefle: The visual appearance of the poems? Oh yeah, boring, boring, boring. Have you ever looked at them? They're blocks on the page. Do I do anything interesting with stanzas or line breaks or fragments? No. Am I aware of this? Yes. Am I trying to address this problem in my work? Yes, but they still look the same.

I looked in my first book after I had gotten to my fourth book, and I saw that I hadn't known the first thing about line breaks. I was basically untaught because I didn't have an M. F. A. I mean, they're just blocks! I've been trying to teach myself about stanzas. There's amazing stuff being done visually with poems on the page right now. Some of it I find very exciting; some just bores me. I can't bear experimentation for the sake of experimentation. But it doesn't bore everyone so that's all right. If you look at people in their twenties and thirties, and you look physically at what the best poets among them are doing, there are no blocks on the page. You can just look: it's like window shopping, you don't even have to read. It's all about the line and a lot of space and no punctuation and lots of parentheses. They are anti-block. That is so intelligent. I should pay more attention. I promise to get better.

Hansen: You said, "I'm such a literal reader." While your work is filled with literal images, a reader might not say that they're literal poems, and I wonder if you'd speak about that play, that dichotomy.

Ruefle: I'm a very literal reader. Most poets are people who take everything literally figuratively, and everything figuratively literally. I'm not the only person to note this or to write about it. It means that your mind is constantly interpreting the world in these flip-flop ways that seem very odd to other people. Some of you have had the experience of driving down the road and seeing a road sign that says "soft shoulder," and you think of a soft human shoulder. Do you know there are people for whom that comparison would never occur? They think soft shoulders of the road. All language is original metaphor that has been deadened but still somehow sometimes bursts through to you.

Conversely, when you hear something that is meant to be figurative, you take it literally. John Ashbery's famous example of this is the TV ad that says "kiss your bleeding hemorrhoids

goodbye." It is meant to be taken figuratively, but if you hear it and take it literally, it's very funny. So, it's this constant flip-flop that makes everything fresh and vibrating and new. Everything is not as it seems, and the provisional nature of language becomes apparent.

Personally, I think my poems are quite literal, but many people have written about them as if they were figurative. I have a poem about two dead owls in the middle of the woods. A reviewer spent a lot of time on that poem trying to figure out how I was writing about the death of language. I was like, *Oh.* I mean, I was talking about two dead owl-lovers in the woods. I have a poem about peeling an orange. I mean, have you ever peeled an orange? It's about the most amazing experience on earth, and the reviewer said, ". . . and then there are those mysterious, dense poems no one will ever figure out, like 'Peeling the Orange' – what could that possibly be about?" It cracks me up because it's about peeling an orange.

Hansen: Among your contemporaries, your work seems remarkably undomestic. Would you speak more about your relationship with the everyday in your work?

Ruefle: Isn't it more that my work *is* domestic?

Hansen: It's *un*domestic, I mean, to *me*, remarkably so.

Ruefle: I think I write pretty much like any homebody. Aren't I always moving things around in my house and washing dishes? There's a lot of domestic detail. There used to be more natural detail because I lived in a cottage setting surrounded by a hundred acres of wildlife, but that was a long time ago, so that's dropped out of the books. I celebrate the everyday – small, domestic things like dish-washing. But I turn the domestic into the fantastical because if the domestic is all you have in your life, you'd die if you didn't use your imagination and give the soap a name and talk to it. So everything, like soap, has a name and I talk to it. I imbue these inanimate objects with life. It's a survival strategy.

Hansen: That's what I was getting at – taking it to a fantastic level.

Ruefle: Yes, imagination has to do with that.

Sutin: Mary, would you be so kind as to read a poem from your second book, *Life Without Speaking?* The poem is called "Reader Ride By."

Ruefle:

READER, RIDE BY

If I have led you into this solitude
by means of identical gesture
so shall say so long
as the length of leash it's taken.

Your memory will build rooms
for the imposition: if you've
one word left, save it for sudden
consolation, like a jigger of rye
held in the mouth for years.

There will be measurements other
than those you know. A bar of soap
washed down to its pith pinpoints
a new beginning. You will look forward
to the thrill, searching the house
for things about to disappear.

Without eating you'll take to
picking your teeth, every gesture
with a clarity as if for the last time
though whether they be your last gestures
or last clarities I'm uncertain:
that much is up to you.

When the fighter pilot drops a pamphlet
or balloon in your lap, grin and wave:
this means the end of your nights.
By morning the skywriting will pale.

Fantastic birds will be flowering in trees
where delicate bells are falling like fruit,
delight out of this world in which you will
wake like a master of rare knowledge in an

astonishing lapse of attention and hear
nothing, as if it had snowed all night.

Sutin: That poem is the closest thing I've found to an artistic statement on your part to the reader. God help me if I'm turning this into a figurative as opposed to a literal poem. It seems to me that you as a poet explore areas of consciousness and experience that, as a reader, I find many poets filtering out. "Reader Ride By" seems to me to be a kind of warning to the reader that this is so. Do you believe that your range of subject matter includes the exploration of challenging areas of consciousness and experience?

Ruefle: I think that's the reader's job to determine, not mine, because in order to answer your question, I would have to conceive of it. To conceive of it, I'd have to think about it. To think about it, I'd have to pay attention to it. To pay attention to it, I would have to be more presumptuous than I'm willing to be. Oh, what an answer! I don't really remember the poem, but it seems to me the last stanza says "everything comes to naught, or "the more you know, the less you know, but at least you know that."

Sutin: You mentioned in your reading last night, when you read from your cross-out work, that you were at that point switching from writing poems to writing poetry, and that there was a very important difference between the two. Could you elaborate?

Ruefle: A poem, of course, is a made thing, and it's whole. But there are not only whole things in the world. There are also fragments, things in our lives that are broken, unfinished, un-begun, unresolved. And a fragment holds poetry. It can never *be* a poem because it's not a whole, finished thing.

For my whole life, I've been interested in fragments. Doing the cross-out books is a way for me to fulfill my life-long love of fragments because every page is a fragment of pure poetry. I'm not willing to be presumptuous in talking about my poems, but I can get really presumptuous

talking about the cross-out books. I think it's pure poetry to find an isolated fragment like that. Poetry is the stuff *from which* poems are made, so there's that difference.

Right now, fragments are being thought about in universities a great deal. There's a whole movement of writers whose aesthetic is predominantly based on the fragment, which of course they trace back to people like Sappho and Emily Dickinson. Somehow I can't quite go, on the page, where I can go in the cross-out books. If you look up the word "poetry" in the dictionary, you'll find it means a lot of different things. My business of poetry is the written tradition of the poem. But someone plays the piano and you hear that it was pure poetry. When was the last time you heard somebody look at a painting and say, oh that's pure music? It's always pure poetry, right? We don't look at a poem and say, that's pure sculpture. The poem has this free-floating quality. I'm very satisfied with that. It fulfills me. I don't ask for more in my life, but in workshops I ask for more on the page.

Sutin: You've written essays and prose poems, and you seem to be drawn to prose forms increasingly. I'm wondering if you could say anything about what prose opens for you, allows you to do, in distinction to poetry.

Ruefle: The English sentence. The English sentence is a challenge; the English sentence is an ever-changing, vibrating form. It is so various in form, it just slips through your fingers. You can do so much with it. I would go so far as to compare the English sentence to the string theory of the universe. It's astounding – can I write a sentence that is three pages long? Can I do this? Can I do that? It's really so challenging for me.

I've spent my life writing poems, and even though I use sentences in most poems, I don't do so in *all.* Basically the unit of a poem is the line, not the sentence. I think the English sentence is a joy and a challenge. It gives me a reason to be alive, to play with this thing, and so

prose more and more interests and amazes me. I'm just beginning to understand how one can devote one's whole life to the sentence.

Sutin: What is a poem?

Ruefle: A poem is the linguistic search for unknown finality. That definition is, I believe, by the Cuban *novelist* Jose Lima. It takes an unknown to know one. I also believe that the poem is a configuration of linguistic energy, "configuration" being the gist. There's a million different definitions for poems, and if you ever catalogue them together on a page, and you look at them, you'll see that they all say the same thing. The beautiful thing about poems is that the more general the definition, the more accurate it is. The more general the definition of poetry, the more specific it is. You wouldn't expect it to work that way.

Question: Do the lines in your cross-out books ever end up in your poems?

Ruefle: Yes, all the time. When I give a cross-out book as a gift to a friend, I attach a note saying, I retain the right to use any of these lines in poems.

Question: Where did you get the idea for the cross-out books?

Ruefle: There's a long tradition, called "elision." There are many, many other people who have done it, who do it. The most famous twentieth century example, from which I was inspired originally, is the extraordinary book, *Humument*, by the British artist Tom Phillips. Since he's a painter, every page is a work of visual art. Since I'm a poet, it is not my intention to turn every page into a work of visual art. I'm much more interested in the text and in creating poetry, whereas Phillips is creating a novel in paint. I consider *Humument* one of the major works of art in the twentieth century.

Question: You talked about one of the most difficult things in life being finding the balance between loving one's self too much and not enough. Do you think this has something to do with humility?

Ruefle: Well, humility is an extraordinary state of grace, and grace is an extraordinary state of being. It's so easy to talk about and so hard to embody in one's being because many people think they are being humble when, in fact, they are being self-effacing and self-erasing, and that is no form of humility that I know of. To address the question of humility, we would have to create a course that lasts a lifetime because humility has many dangerous disguises. I do believe that there must exist somewhere some true state of humility, which is a very blessed and rare state. I want to say humility in the face of death would be the only proper stance, but then I'm reminded of all the other stances. These are tough questions. You can't reread your notes from an evening and think you've found the answers. Those notes would simply be stepping-stones to take you into the future and keep you curious and keep you on your toes.

Question: Last night you said that you're working on a book of prose pieces. Not prose poems, but prose "pieces." Could you talk more about that landscape between prose and poetry?

Ruefle: The new pieces are being published as prose poems, but I think that's because I'm a poet. They're also being published as – the new term is *lyrical essays.* I have a prose piece that is included both in a prose poem anthology and in an anthology focusing on "new" essays. I think we're entering a time in our culture and in civilization in general when the boundaries between genres are fading. It's easier to see if you look at the visual arts. Some ten years ago I had several former students who got M. F. A.s in non-genre visual arts. That's what they called it. It means they're doing installations, site-specific works, performance art, and combinations of all of this. And what do you call that? Right now, in what we call the Art world, capital "A," of

which we are, of course, a part, no one is questioning this. Galleries have performance pieces and installations and site-specific pieces all the time. But in writing, we're lagging a bit behind, though we have seen the rise of creative nonfiction and the creative nonfiction degree. My cross-out books, what are they? I call them cross-out books; I say they're poetry and not poems, but someone else could, you know, say they're the same.

One of the good things about postmodernism is that all these divisions are breaking down. I'm less interested in defining what's what than in *doing* it. I often sit in classes with students who want to spend two hours talking about what a prose poem is. I just think that our time on Earth could be better spent than trying to figure out what a prose poem is. I read a prose poem and I recognize it. It has the qualities of poetry, but it's written in prose. It's not a short story; it's not a novel. Mine are like short-shorts. Lydia Davis is known as a fiction writer, so how come one of her short stories ended up in *Best American Poetry* last year? These things are happening all the time. It's all human creation, all art. I guess I'm saying that my business is just to make things, and someone else's business is to decide what they should be called and where they are best published.

There is a little poem from my second book, called, "Barbarians," that I'd like to end with.

BARBARIANS

Here and there, between trees,
cows lie down in the forest
in the mid-afternoon
as though sleep were an idea
for which they were willing
to die.

Note: Both poems by Mary Ruefle are from the collection, *Life Without Speaking.*