MARY RUEFLE

Could We Invent a Question for this Answer?:
An Interview with Mary Ruefle

In the summer of 2002, Crazyhorse *editor Carol Ann Davis sent Mary Ruefle the following questions. Mary Ruefle replied to those, and added one answer more, having written at the top of the page, "Could we invent a question for this answer?" We liked that answer so much that this is where we began.*

That so many vastly different kinds of expression or construction are called poems—that's amazing to me. And I believe it. I mean, what matters to me is the underlying sense of poetryness that we can recognize across the spectrum, not that we can intelligently argue that one fragment of the spectrum is somehow "more" than another. Personally, I'm not looking to please the crowd and I'm not looking to please the elite. Perhaps that's a problem, my problem, whatever. I *love* writing poems, and when I say that I mean I love *trying* to write poems—there's no guarantee that anything will be realized, or achieved, but I do it anyway. It can be like watching two squirrels run around the bark of a tree: one of them is having so much fun, and the other one is terrified.

Poems originate in the mind, always and only in the mind, and then they grow into things, artifacts, the poem—which goes out into the world, and exists. That is astonishing to me. People originate in the body and then grow into bodies which exist in the world. But things created in the mind—who can say what their origin is? It is the same mystery as to where the universe comes from—or is coming from. Are we the offspring of another universe? Is the mind an offspring of another mind? One doesn't always want to think about these things. It's a conundrum. Sure, we all have poems about which we can say "I was driving along and saw this scarecrow," but then there are those poems about which we know nothing and are clueless—how on earth did this thing come to be? Those poems are like answers to a question we have yet to invent.

Whom do you imagine when you imagine "the reader"? Or, do you imagine the reader?

A sympatico listener. I can know them, or not know them; they can be living or dead; they can be real or imaginary. I do know that I began writing secretly, as a child, and so I have always thought of my writing as secret, not in the sense of being hidden, but in the sense of being an inward activity carried inwardly to another's sense of interiority. And in retrospect I see I was more often than not addressing the

dead, the authors whom I had read and who had spoken to me just as if I were sitting on their lap . . . and I wanted to speak back . . . I didn't understand for years that my writing was really a form of listening to them, of telling them or showing them that I was listening . . . and yet I was not born when they were speaking to me, so the unborn very much fit into this equation . . . it seems at such moments the dead, the living, and the unborn are all one person . . . the "you" and the "I" the same. Your question is really another way of asking "who is the you?" and the best answer I have ever had the privilege of reading is in the form of a poem: the poem "Whoever You Are" by W.S. Merwin, a poem which is addressed to Whitman, whose own famous (or infamous) "you" is of course brought into play. That poem sends shivers down my spine.

If someone asked you to define tone, to give a short talk on it, where might you start?

I guess I would bring a bell into the room for starters. I would look at tone in another medium. I would wonder what two very different musicians had to say about it . . . John Cage and Glenn Gould, for instance. I would point out that tone, as a verb, means both to strengthen and to soften, as in to "tone your body" or "tone it down." That just about wraps up tone . . . anything you can say about it can be reversed; it's just an indicator of state, it is not itself a state. Ah, I see that what I have just said is arguable, but that's just the problem . . . in today's world, what *isn't* arguable? But I think I know what you mean . . . you mean an inflection expressive of an attitude . . . still, I think it is just a sound of definite pitch and vibration. And when things have a definite pitch and vibration they are vital and resilient and constitute a voice. We are able to recognize the author of a poem in the same way we are able to recognize a familiar voice on the telephone, the way a particular voice will rise and fall and shift and change. I've never thought about it before, but I suppose, in my own poems, I have an arch tone, and a base tone that is the flat bridge of my being, and then a deep melodramatic Victorian tone, my personal favorite, no doubt considered in poor taste by many. And sometimes I mix them up and sometimes I keep them separate. The poem dictates that . . . and if someone out there has a preference, that is not my concern. To be perfectly honest, I think some of the time when I am trying to proceed soberly in a poem, certain readers or hearers of that poem think/assume I am proceeding wildly, in some kind of kitsch way. But I'm not! I am not *trying* to exaggerate, I *am* exaggerated; that is the way I perceive the world . . . as a very serious place of gigantic proportion, regardless of whether I am feeling happy, sad, or indifferent about it. Well, I guess I'm not really talking about tone anymore, I'm just talking about myself, which

is much more boring. My friend Ralph Angel once said in a workshop that a poem is the interpretation of "weird theatrical shit." It was a serious jest . . . his tone might have been a sunbeam at that moment, but there were primal floods in the rafters. Theatre is a serious word; it's not trite at all. It implies an arena, and an observer. Stage and audience; *limits and their witness* (even if, yes, the witness defines or effects those limits). An art possesses these two things. You know the question about the tree falling in the forest? If no one hears it, it's not art.

I'm very often astounded, when I read your work, at how an image from very early in the poem will reappear towards the end totally changed—almost as if the image had aged. The effect is to bring something familiar back but also take away its familiarity. Two questions on this: do you structure poems so that they return to the image? And/or: must a poet balance the familiar and the unfamiliar?

I am not aware of consciously structuring the poems in any way, but now that you have pointed it out, I might try *not* to return to the image! I noticed, after the fact, that almost every single poem in my first book ends with a simile, and I certainly didn't let that happen again—I mean, not so repetitively. We take what we learn and move on; at every stage we do what we can. But as for your second question, yes, I think a poet must always balance the familiar and the unfamiliar, if by that you mean the known and unknown, the this and that, the internal and external, Whitman's shoreline, Dickinson's window, Keats's sense of light and shade. There are two fields of energy at work in the world, and that's true of literature, too: literature is not benign, its core can be dark and monstrous, though I am hardly addressing your question now . . .

About the image. "The verbal search for unknown finality" (José Lima's definition of poetry)—I would like to extend that to the image. I'd like to say something, not about poetry or my own poems, but about Japanese novels. I have tried to read as many Japanese novels as I could in this life. And they are very strange. They seem to be constructed very differently than our own, though of course there came a time when the Western novel influenced them deeply.

And by the way, the Japanese were doing all kinds of things before we were—the novel made up of linked stories, the short short—they were doing all that long ago. Anyway, I want to say that the image works in strange ways in those novels. Initially, a reader, the Western reader that I am, will be smug and smart and say Ah! a symbol for X. But by the end of the novel, the image will be glimpsed one last time and appear to be completely disintegrated in terms of its "meaning"—it will be more clearly than ever itself and only itself but at the same time richly

and finally mysterious. It will have transformed itself. But what surprises us is that in fact the image has not changed, the *character* has—and by extension the *reader*—and this results in the image *appearing* to have changed. I am thinking of that late novel by Kawabata about the old man who hears the mountain rumbling throughout the novel—I can't remember its name—and how many incarnations that rumbling makes before we stop seeing it as a symbol and begin to see it as the phenomena it is. Maybe all this is garbage, but from time to time I like to dwell on existence!

The many ways we can approach an image reveal the many ways we can approach existence. I know I flip my approaches like a dying fish, yet my ultimate goal is a state of calm and peace, just as that is, or should be, the collective goal of humankind. But someone always louses it up, sometimes *I* louse it up. I would *love* to write a book of contented poems—but is it possible? Have you noticed how poets always try and place a contented poem at the end of a book? It reflects a sincere desire. Yet they don't stop writing, another agitated poem rears its head . . . the verbal search for unknown finality goes on.

Who are some people you read early on in your poetry-writing life? Whom do you read now?

I have read 2,452 books in my life—and last year 200,000 were published. I read the dead more than the living. My reading is eclectic—I like Tristan Tzara and Sara Teasdale, albeit for different reasons. I can't really say that I read along one end of the spectrum. For instance, I *hate* raisins, but I *love* currants—so go figure, because they share a lot of the same characteristics. When I was twelve I was reading Rod McKuen. Last night I was reading Freud. This year I read a lot of John Berger and John Cage—and H. Rider Haggard. I love Robert Walser and Emily Bronte. I hate big, good book stores and big, good libraries. I love used book stores out in the country, where nothing is organized too well and you never find what you are looking for—you discover something else. And I love small town one-room libraries where you can check out stuffed animals. My favorite books of the last year were those by W.G. Sebald—I read everything in print by him, and I was *devastated* when he died—and *Seabiscuit*, the bestseller about the horse, and I loved saying to myself *Sebald and Seabiscuit*. For me, there's something Sebaldian about the story of Seabiscuit. If he had come across those old newspaper clippings himself, he would have written it. Perhaps what I am trying to say is: he could have invented it.

The pacing in your poems—the balancing of image, rhetoric, narration, and many others—is so compelling, so aware of the need to search. From line to line, how do you find your sense of movement?

I pray very hard that it will find me! Honestly, I'm not sure . . . my process is very intuitive, I follow my intuition, my intuition is backed up by my experience and taste—that's inevitable I think, true in everyone's case—and . . . and . . . I am not very conscious when I write, I am not exactly *a thinking being*, or perhaps I am so *intensely conscious* that by comparison my quotidian state is positively unconscious! I don't know, I haven't figured it out yet. That would be awful, wouldn't it, to figure it out? All I know is, verbal pressure mounts in the head and *seeks a form*—in my case the form of a poem—and that's distinctly different from mere release, mere expression—we have conversations, diaries, other stuff for that. Whatever it is, it has to do with *listening*, writing is a form of listening, you listen as each word modifies the previous word—I think William Gass said something to that effect. I may be simplifying matters, but it seems to me that when we speak, each word modifies the *next* word and when we listen, each word modifies the *previous* word; it is as if we speak forward but listen backwards; that's my sense of movement. It is certainly how we read, and suddenly I am reminded of something very obvious yet wondrous and strange; you can read something without writing it, without having written it, but you can't write something without reading it; isn't that odd? The reader doesn't have to be a writer but the writer *has* to be a simultaneous reader—he has no choice. At the same time, I am aware of how crucial the participation of the reader is, I mean how the poem exists somewhere between the page and the perceiving consciousness. Yes, I'm aware of that, but I still stand by my previous statement—the reader doesn't have to write, only configure, while the writer must both write and read (configure).

What are some of the things poems have taught you—through writing or reading them?

The world really is an immense museum of strangeness, as de Chirico said. But as if that were not enough, we live in it! It's not an empty museum—we are walking through it and having reactions to everything we encounter, which is a strangeness in itself. And yet even that is not enough—we also *create* things as we walk through this museum of strangeness, things that bear no resemblance to anything we have seen there, new strangenesses that increase the overall strangeness of all that already is.

And that the soul is infinitely tender and tough—or has the capacity to be tender in the midst of so much violence, damage, and death. And that language—the thing by which our whole species measures itself—is so deeply ambiguous, it's frightening. And that, too, is a moment when the tender soul rears its head.