The Adamant
Poems by Mary Ruefle
The Adamant
Winner of the Iowa Poetry Prize
for my sister
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I rode back through the woods of Turgenev's Spasskoye in the evening light: fresh greenery in the woods and under foot, stars in the sky, the scent of flowering willow, and wilting birch leaves, the sound of the nightingale, the hum of beetles, the cuckoo and solitude, and the pleasant, vigorous movement of the horse under you, and health of body and mind. And I thought, as I constantly think, of death.

Tolstoy, in a letter to his wife
Already quite leafless, the butternuts
are growing less and less sane,
as though the waste of being something
were so great, they shuddered
and threw off the future.

They take an antisocial turn.
Though a few may rouse from their drowsiness
and some may even open their arms
and glance your way,
so much for that:
love doesn't grow on trees.

They might have died from it.
As it is, there are enough
to fill the cage of a century.
What shall we do with them now,
their skeletons drooping
with sugar?

Is there life in a look
at a dead thing?
What I would call living
is pure idiocy:
speak and be burned.
Why We Have Stars

Anything as big as one
can’t be a useful number

One star disappoints
Two stars disappear

No less intense
than life in this desert

A pair of wet, black horses
brilliant as yellow ferns

Three cries for water
followed by total darkness

Angle of pain
Angle of sex
Angle of time

The acephalous system
of wonder!
Green Pears

The beautiful vagueness with which green pears drop dead on the lawn and are heard for the first time: it is the moment rattling to death, the dark recklessness of being born, something unbending and almost insane.
Then the pears on the ground split apart, showing the semifruitful that lives inside of the living like an extraneous truth.
Movements of grace, hardness of heart, what came before and what came after?
Two bold worlds too many.
White January

The cow’s teats have frozen, two candles dipped on the same string.

There are three boys out there combing the rough and distant glitter for a mane among burdocks:

By the time they reach that horse the colt they lost will have vanished.
Lo and Behold

Mountain tips soften after so much rain,
the wild guesses of birds blending with air
and the uppermost buds, with a godlike
promotion, burst open.

Especially beautiful
are the brown and drunken bats
who nosedive down the barnside,
not quite earthbroken.
Gulley Farm

*What is a farm but a mute gospel?*

Emerson

Red deer stop sucking at turf
as though the living came to life
in a pose. And the queen sheep,
white ruffs on the neck, gaze
with renewed immobility
at their shepherd in moonboots
stalking the volatile hush
of a hidden reactor.
In a true pastoral,
he’ll pull back from the planet,
the connecting valley
of her thrills and, floating
upwards, spot a dish
full flush in the goldenrod
where the future
is milling
and the colt bolts off
with a fart.
Success

Cottage in which quiet persuades me
I am the only one who has made myself useful,
like God beginning to eat his young:

One by one
like poisoned mice
the years smell in the wall.

Hell's Peeping Tom with his ruddy face
takes a closer look in the hole.

At dawn and at dusk,
a sky newborn and wet like a dark red calf
standing in straw, then falling.

The last one to try
becomes a small voice
calling from a drifting cloud . . .

Days, nights, confined like a leak hitting
the same dull pail, keep falling
from heights that have grown.
In the Bitter Country

Man up early. Muskmelon, horsebean, snowpea bundled away. Birds looting the lawn.
Sliding across our pond
two ducks at chess.
The horizon injects herself.
You cringe, spot the sun stealing oranges from the pockets of mountains.
That seedspitter. Where on earth is the lardball you hung on a bough till it swung like a Christmas killer?

Ah but the grapes! They sweeten and sweeten. Deep in the arbor a cluster swells into focus, choking a nest:
blueglaze on the grape's eye grapeskin on the bird's eye and your eye, all pupil now, just at the start of a downward chill—
Love Lies Bleeding

Red wax of the apple,
small brown pears not yet
figured:
a perfect day's picking
and still an untouched ladder
slants under the seckle tree.

The ashy-headed geese overhead
trembling in a wedge:
they too will go down in the hourglass
this month, October, dingy Goya!

Working until my hands are useless
I hear in the distance
the prolonged shrieks of dogs
—they must be mad—
chasing the dead deer.
Jealousy

The whole season split and stank, a bad log.

We all wished God had taken our heads away.

Or never given them out in the first place.

There was no desire. Nothing.

We were a village in the valley. Pine daubs on a snow bough.

On Sunday evenings as soon as it got gray

the bells broke out and up over the hills

like loosestrife.
Winter Sleep

Something unpronounceable
followed by a long silence
points out my life
is becoming a landscape.
After awhile,
the first signs of spring
appear in a charcoal drawing
with some flair.

The word means
a balcony off the body.
Is it possible to live
on hallucinations, on
what one sees there,
the gradations of wet
yellow grass?

The lily cracks open
like a painting restored
and I pray when I wake
the earth and I
will be pasted together
by some sacred, unassailable
stroke.
Today we kill the fire.
Mix the ash with the mud
firing the spring shoots.

Waste nothing
and there shall be
nothing not freed:

This is a rebellion.
Even the colt's foot
comes back charged
with the scent of
trampled flowers.

What wild black eyes
have been hoodwinked
into believing
a life at attention
may continue at ease
in the grass?
Slave to a Springtime Passion

For the earth
I get down,
putting the mud on.
Now I know everything.
The rains come,
a cold white wine
for the feet.
Twenty-eight days
later I look
like a sea horse,
all brain
and spine.
Spring lasts just so long
as it takes to seed.
Then I'll get up,
pillar of red,
and spout what I know
to the green.
The Law of Least Action

The difference between summer and winter will do for distraction in a life.

You must believe it.
Recall my white hands
in the bush
while the ants watched, their eyes segmented like blackberries.

One drowned in a bowl,
half milk, half cream,
and I ate him.
Now I no longer love to be idle.

Sooner or later, all of our heads will be tested.

First snow, then vodka.
One by one

cut off or crowned.
Surprised Girl of the North

The sun sinks,
a blue plum in brine.
Tiny birds flicker in the heads of trees.
Two rodents come out.
The birds eat out the eyes
of a long-since-dead and gnarled
sunflower head.
The rodents enter my house.
As cartographers used to cram monsters
in the void of their maps
and call it terra incognita,
*I don't know anything anymore.*
The astonishment of astronauts
must be like this,
when at the height of dawn,
in Damascus,
a lamb is sacrificed
in front of the television
as scenes of the blastoff are shown.
Oh the girls, the young girls
who have not yet begun to eat,
I can see them there: they have
brought their simple lunches and
spread them under the sun
on the warm grass
between the tombs.
They throw back their heads
and they laugh, their hair shines
and one of them leans
on a marble lamb.
And there, where one of the stones
lies broken and flat, they find
a kind of table for their wine
where they discuss with such candor
a fabric or a shoe
that I think language must be new,
and these stones, in the years
to come, a sign of their gaiety
before it was undone.
Heaven on Earth

*My heaven will be spent on earth
up until the end of the world.*

St. Thérèse of Lisieux, 1873–1897

---

You know, mother, I have always wanted to be a saint. Ever since Celeste held up a basket of dress scraps, crying "Here my little sister, choose!" And I chose—*all.* There are always children spinning themselves into statues, having to choose in the terrible stillness *what am I* before being able to move the enactment: had you not brought me up so well, I would never have cried when choosing to be *his plaything.*

---

A hoop of no value, an even smaller ball—something he might lose, nothing with a string. I beg to be *stolen!*

---

Whenever the boys spoke to me, I hid my fingers in my muff and there I would make small imitations of Christ. These little acts of love formed a flower bud out of my face. Although I was barely fourteen, I felt it best to leave the world at once.
iv

What an interesting study the world becomes when one is ready to leave it: a skirt, a set of kitchen utensils, little parcels. The yellow shop on Rue Demi-Lune where there’s an éclair in the window waiting for me! And the libraries where I would have broken my head.

v

Now all of my sisters are sealed round the bed like a row of onions: vocation of the Carmelite, sister, spouse, mother, warrior; the priest and the doctor. I would that all of their torments were reserved for me. But I am too small to climb the stairs! I want to seek out a means of going to heaven by a little way, a way that is very straight, very short and totally new. I want to ride in an elevator.

vi

Believe me, don’t wait until tomorrow to begin becoming a saint. I oblige you to take your wooden tops and go play for at least an hour in the attic. I must stay here in my bed. I’m waiting for the Thief, you know.
I wonder what he will do at my death to surprise me. Will he sip me up like a dewdrop? So, I’m already thinking that, if I am not surprised enough, I will pretend to be surprised just to please him.

I’m suffering very much, it’s true, but am I suffering well, that’s the point. Take silence for example—what failures in clarity it prevents. I speak especially about silence because it’s on this point that I fail the most.

Are peaches in season? Are they selling plums in the street? Violets from a cart? Only in the kingdom of heaven will it no longer be necessary to have some souvenir.

No line has ever given me more pleasure to write than this one in which I have the good fortune to tell you he is very nearly through unpetaling me!
They think I have difficulty in breathing! I am pretending to take little sips to let him know that I am drinking in his words.

Scarcely had I laid my head on the pillow when I felt a bubbling stream on my lips. My blood was like a plaything. When God abandoned it, he fell asleep and dreamt he was still playing with it.
Council of Agde

In the village of Agde, in 835, an ecclesiastical court, after much debate, ruled for the first time that women had souls.

Armed with a cottonpuff and a little sword
the bachelorette is attacking her toes:
Lesbos blue, black grape, pink stupor.
The variegated half face of a modern master
leers on the wall.
Everything she owns has its own white space
and is centered so: spare hangers
in the spare closet, shoes
in their own neat row.
The phone has its own room
and is held like a gun,
snug to the temple. Meals?
She’ll touch nothing but noodles,
finely sauced in a cardboard box.
And babies? At the end of an alley
an old woman sits with her needles
knitting them out of dead skin.
Perfume River

She thinks fishing is an odd way
to make love: watching her husband rooted
in water, slick to the hips under the arch
of a bridge, his whole rod nodding
like hart's-tongue fern in its youth.
She has other thoughts hidden
inside of these, barely visible
like the stamens of crocus.

Ah spring! The cedar waxwing with a plume
in his ass, pumping seeds from his mouth
like a pinball machine.

Palaver of scents
and the boys standing naked under the waterfall.
Pachinko! The word enters her bloodstream:

Holy Mary mother of God-who's-gone-fishing-today,
she'll stay out bog-trotting until she's
blue in the face, like an orchid.
The Details from Your Last Letter

As winter comes on,
blue sloes hang in the hedges,
yellowhammers gather on the slope.
I string up the garlic,
throw salt on the hock.
Lifting the lid off
the pot, my glasses
steam up.
Thank you for the details
from your last letter.
The baby is fat, and always reaching
for something that’s not there.
I show her the map.
The little countries which used to seem
so far away are now the distances
I focus on first.
Did I tell you there are blue sloes
in the hedges, bitter and ripe?
The last few martins are leaving
for Africa tonight.
When I'm one white jawbone
with an army of molars
how strange it will be
for Uranians
or Plutonians to arrive
and find my ashtray
with the crashed white stubs,
some with red rings,
and never know the language:
never guess mouths
drifting from kiss to kiss
made words
driving the spaceships in.
Find Me Another

Monday's drug makes the mill women feel like columbine, hair dampened and stuck to the nape, a sudden cape on their shoulders, dye smell spreading like a peacock's tail, his siren a cleansing of great wings in midair: on certain days such freedom fluctuates in the wind, departing towards its destiny during a game of horseshoes at noon.
Big fat moon
clearing the clothesline:
buffoon in a cheap red shirt,
he's knocked himself out
on a bottle of wine.
His wife's resigned to looking
like this, propped up in bed,
wads of Kleenex under her night table,
chicken feathers round the stump.
She sees things on TV.
How to stuff the little chicken
in French; its infantile figure,
naked and winged, flying off
before Madame can get the
vitals back in.
Sunday, before light, the clothes
start flapping.
All of the crows take flight.
She crosses herself,
and knows his scabby head
will be beating old sores
against the window tonight.
The Ferns

One day we will no longer be stunned
by the bric-a-brac,
the china model of each month
with her name on a sash,
February molded with a miniature muff
or June with a tuft of net
glued to her tiny shoe.
The violet dachshund made of clear glass,
chipped yellow plate,
pink chalk of the pots-de-crème
in the salt-eaten blue of the snappy air
where we found our troves,
these conversation pieces
with nothing to say.
What were we doing out there in the world
but looking for something to bring back
and set by the bed
as proof we had been?
Do nuns collect?
And the favored whore
in her high shoes,
insteps arched like a back in labor,
needs a few things to survive.
We put on and put off
our coats.
We know the earth
once belonged to the ferns.
But these earrings
in the shape of grapes,
complete with frosted leaves,
they dangle and glisten;
we bear their weight
for awhile.
An American Dream

i

November, a godless month, full of tiny deer barking like dogs through the purple bracken. The pig’s head lies on a plate at some distance from his body, amber fat jelling around the eyes. The oven is on, and speaks to us of things rising and burnt, of bread and hope and sometimes the whiff of bodies burning. My husband is happy as a poet and falls asleep in his chair, dreaming the last dream of the old oak. My son, an adolescent in a turmoil over gravity, won’t come out of his room. What can I say? That we are sponge divers with rock tonnage tied to our waists? So I stuff dough with mince, reading the side of a box. And the man in the chair, whoever he is in his sleep, lets out the sound of stones rolling in surf.
As I open the oven door I speak in the lowest fashion.
An imprecation of love, I think.
All my life I have tried to love God without his knowing.

I slip on the old black sweater, making my way towards the bracken over frozen mud cracked as an old map.
And then the daydream I’ve had two thousand times or more comes back to me:
two men playing checkers in Greece, dozing on and off in the heat, while the boys come and go from the sea as they please, and the women pile into church.
III
The Last Supper

It made a dazzling display:
the table set with the meat
from half of a walnut, a fly
on a purple grape, the grape
lit from within and the fly
bearing small black eggs.
We gathered round the oval table
with our knives, starved
for some inner feast.
We were not allowed to eat,
as we had been hired as models
by the man at our head.
Days passed
in which we grew faint with hunger.
Later we were told
that although we did not appear
on the canvas
our eyes devouring these things
provided the infinite light.
At the Lip of the Well

One does not have to listen before hearing them, the goats at sea who are fastened on a crag and left to rot. Their miserable, ankle-pegged bleating keeps us awake: it is useless to keep track of the ones who drop, for they never quite perish, having gone over the edge. Their fate is to be suspended over the plankton, clanging like buckets and drenched in the mist, while ours is to gossip and give up and go home.
A Bat out of Hell

Lest the objects of night be of no
effect, the moon in her prime
puts a bat light running crossways
in your brain, thoughts brightening
but with black, black brightening
like stove lustre, the swank blue glisten
of a beetle running
from the swinging and barren fixture
of your disbelief . . .

Outside, the whimper of a cornstalk,
her head jostling among the other spears,
and stars, always willing to fall:
whiplash of light still falling
and always falling: think, in the
time it takes to reach you
you’ve already failed
ten thousand times or more.

Flies you watched die
on the sills and panes
are beginning to buzz,
swaying the swat of your heart
already broken into little windows
where an angel and an angel (both
bound and masked) are asking
is it still day, is it still dark?
The Devil’s Attention to Detail

Have you signed our little cathedral yet? The Bishop says it is the beginning of the coming universal wish not to live. All of the pictures painted this year show the same thing: men killing men while women observe, holding a breast in one hand, feeding whole apples to newborn mouths with the other. The angels play stringed weapons and sing, their hair falling into pleats with the gesture of cards being spread in a game. This is a very serious jest. You too will live with the desire to do something else. When happiness comes it will bring less joy than expected: the birth of a boy is to be watched. If he chooses to paint, observe how I am placed, like the hidden star of appleseeds, at the very center of his new life. Erase me, and I shall run after him in the odor of his pigments. The very spirit of heaviness which shall be, even by the Bishop’s standards, difficult to attain.
The Beginnings of Idleness in Assisi

Mark how curious it is with him:
he would walk for days
in the same field, wearing
no more than a robe,
stooping now and then for
a sprig of woodruff.
His passion
was to be stung by a bee,
his body releasing its secret purpose
into the body of the bee, that
he might be done with it
once and for all. It took
his breath away, and
forever after he stood there
lonely as a finger: whatever
touched or hoped to touch,
whatever tried to count
the features of his profile
found only a thumbnail sketch.
Like this little tiger lily,
his new stance we never understood
with any human certainty.
Indeed, we ceased to believe in it.
Either he is letting go
all of the animals at once
from his bosom, or welcoming
them one by one
into his arms:
the birds at his feet do not hold
his kindness against him,
chattering to one another that one day
he will come to his senses,
and sitting down, the whole
beautiful and weighted world
will settle in his lap
like the statue of a cat.
As in Venice

during the days of Carnival,
acting like lovers
caught in a bonfire
is not so unusual.

Everyone is in one room
holding a mask on a stick.
Each wants to add to his face
hesitation

like the long pause of a dancer,
the dancing greatest in her
before she spins through the door
and out into the world:

then for nothing will she slow back down
to the bituminous black of her eye
when it saw the first spark
and when wailing, leaving the other
and others behind.
Toledo

Dawn, and the certainty of a Mass being spoken somewhere in Spanish or English.
An open window, her curtain lilting like a cow’s tail.
Circle of fruitflies over the melonhead that fell.
How many lives do you think have been spared?
How many Masses in how many years?
Cut the shit.
There is nothing in this motel room but a blanketless bed and the dead timber of a desk.
I attest to that.
But it is morning, and I have not seen you in years:
Svane, my friend, should ever Christ cling to you, sing to him,
show him the flesh croquettes of your conical breasts,
brush the dust from his armpits when he holds you:
fear of losing you in his Siamese dumpling-assed twin.
Light Orchards

I was late driving home from the funeral, 
passing back through Lebanon, Austerlitz 
and Amenia, where the lotto line was 
nine blocks long; 
the lawn still wet with great clumps of cut grass 
when I walked the last hundred yards 
in Wellingtons, and opened the door to find 
your bottle of Margaux, a gift, on the table. 
As in 1973 you came home late from Cliff’s 
Villager Bar to find a bunch of blue plastic 
grapes hanging on a lamp with the note: 
*someday we will be drinking the wine of it all.* 
I don’t remember writing it, but I believe by now 
Noel is in heaven, ringing for a waiter. 
And at this odd hour I pick up the corkscrew, 
a semicircle of silver over its head, and 
pump up the arms of a crucifix rooted in cork: 
the wine drips from his would-be feet 
and I’m telling you neither this nor that 
is the drink that I meant. 
Though sometimes when I am driving back or forth 
on Route 22 I can see little light orchards 
growing off in the distance— 
I can very nearly paint the fruit on their arms— 
before an interceding glance reminds me: 
we know nothing of the unborn, 
never guessed I would sit and clean my boots 
and fall asleep, the wine on the table 
breathing.
Millbrook

after Montale

What becomes of the leaf
that followed you (now that
you’re dead) whenever you
walked in the woods?

The deer still stare and
the roses pop up; your
umbrella gets opened
and shut.
I take off my glasses at night.
If I talk to the dark
I’m afraid to say
it no longer belongs to you.
Max Gate

A few dried things, once called leaves, tremble in the swelling air. I cough up my phlegm. My wife reaches for her hairpin, and all of the years caught up in that instant come down in the storm. The fixed foot of an oak uproots. And I think, oddly, of the kitten, half black, half white, we drowned this morning in sterling weather.
Martello Tower

I pried not a chink
of the tubular granite,

locked inside and out,
nor took the student tour.

I circled it once
and no more.

When coming round
the cold shoulder

I spied the swimmers
halting me:

all the arms there are,
lifting in twos and threes

off lonely seas
of a hideous blue!
At the North Pole

More hopelessly than in the first dream
you walked away . . .
but through what streets
I do not know
since it is no longer a question
of architecture
in my city of dreams,
where meetings, vague encounters,
even glances
topple like rubble in a tropical storm:

Perhaps there are only paths of weather
after all,
all weathers and a crossroads
where heaven police
let the palm that will save you
enter the blizzard that will kill you
so that the whole world
shall see it singled out,
lonely and planted in a white swirl.
Either the city is so small
or the palm so enormous
that in any case
it fills it completely.
The Path of Least Resistance

-5 degrees and I walked out on you
for a smoke.
A vow collapsed into crouching by poplars,
afraid of the wind.
When the sound of an enormous hint
started to swell in my ear &
I started to climb & the higher
I climbed the easier it was to keep
climbing & climbing & the closer I came
to the stars, the more clearly I heard
singing:
I know what I've said about stars
in the past: no more able to tell us
our future than a boy loitering in a
phonebooth. But they sang! And
the words of their song were the text
of the earth & all of the planets with it:
each star is a word & each word a cluster
of stars & the spaces between stars
are words & the spaces between words
are for gathering breath and hurling it down:
my breath froze among the stars &
I looked down upon the yellow light
of home & the woodsmoke writing its way up
from where I imagined you sat, reading
your book on keeping a lawn.
Then in the ditch something sparkled
& the butt end of my cigarette
leapt up before it died.
A field net of frost had fallen.
Tell me, what is it we do with our eyes?
Forgive this way of putting it,
I can find no other.
Russian Proverb

For the dead red fox
in the delivery lot
behind K-Mart
with a rib hole where
scab meat blows in,
bloows out, making the carcass
a drum: still-sharp teeth
flashing around the snout:

Once you were bristling
and light, lightest at night
when you were the one
light spot I followed
until my sense of sight
was gone.
Why look so stunned
and solvent? I’m not
asking words, but I happen
to need your advice.
Six times I’ve walked
around the big store
hunting the perfect gift.
I need something quick—and
cheap, if I happen to like it.
My father will soon be dead.
No, it’s not that exactly,
it’s just that—I am,
you might say, afraid
of being transparent.
Life is not a walk
across an open field,
the moon chilled
by a nimbus.

I stand where the snow lies
in a field of trash, and the
hard facts fall beautifully:
they enter the bloodstream
without words, they go straight
to the heart like the eyes of a fox
faced with a flashlight
before his neck takes its casual turn
and the long trot off begins.
Christ Speaking to the Lame

I saw a man walking stoutly
suddenly become a cripple.
And I call that a kind of
miracle.

And why not? I’m yours to adore
or abhor as you will:
some say I’ve entrusted my destiny
to untrustworthy sorts.
That makes me the man

in lederhosen with a wildflower book,
heading for the ledge
you’ve already tried.
He loves to unpetal the world.

And why not? When you leapt
with the energy of angels
under terrestrial stress,
what could be said for the flowerhead?

What could be said at all?
The important thing is not to get depressed. Why, I am certainly no drunkard, nor a spendthrift. I am a regular German in my behavior.

The doctor visiting Chekhov, who spat blood on his bed, was called by a crude phone to go at once and treat Tolstoy, whose intermittent heartbeats were signaling for help. Now if it were not for the doctor I think I might start drinking if you told me this tale.

But imagine his joy, riding between commitments along the coast of Yalta in the fresh open air!
Tom’s First Brush with Modernism
for Tom Melvin

He had come from the range
with his holster and spurs
to stand in the MOMA,
a formidable ghost.
He touched his gun, briefly,
not knowing what to expect:
here, his guide said, you see
the famous fuzzed edge receding
from the somewhat melted center.
He stepped back
in his black clothes,
spreading his legs
for balance. The white glare
of a dangerous noon!
He had seen it happen before,
to cows. Then, out of respect,
almost tenderly, removed by bullet
all that had congealed
in the lady’s eye.
A bedbug born in 1852 . . .
The prize grape of Glendale,  
Massachusetts or California.  
Certain remarks amount to as much.  
These days, something enormous  
just missed happening in my life.  
Boats breeze by, filled with bouquets.  
All of the faces filled with scrutiny  
as if they were writing.  
Why talk  
in the words that come to you?  
As hard to comment on  
as a whippoorwill starting up  
at dusk, his unaccompanied brain  
a little too late in asking  
for the name he was given  
at birth.
At the Nipple

When my grandmother and I
were alive together
the grasshopper hopped,
clearly,
on his way to be married.
A samurai in the rosebed
made lace out of the flowers
all afternoon, his armor shining
with sweat.
I watched while the hedgehog
puckered and ducked and the daffodil
spit out her cup.
What I would later call living
was nothing special.
Now I've grown up
into a full-fledged liar.
And loneliness says
let us go through this
again together,
you and I.
Mud scuds on the windshield.
I drive through a foreign park—
it's drizzling, I'm sniffing—
when waterjets spring
from the breasts of my car!
A lake is never the body you think, 
not the limb, lip, portion or curve 
of a life, half or whole; nothing at 
all like a thing you ever saw, said 
or did. You must step out of it now. 
The years you have wasted, glimmered 
and stammered away go with you, 
they are like nothing you can toss off, 
nothing you can talk about. 
A maple leaf planes down, 
fluttering caddis 
over the water. 
You have to have in you 
a fatal leisure 
to stay any longer, 
always wondering what world 
this world could have become. 
Remember the gulls? Their straight white strokes? 
Wringing the water out of your hair, 
throwing it back over both shoulders 
and staring upwards, 
into the sun? 
You spent years on the spot 
like a great cell stopping to think 
how it first joins 
and now divides: 
how else do we grow? 
Behind you now
a bird dips and rises,
lacking the time or the willingness
to explain what he's seen:
all these years he's been defining,
down or up, the infinite approach
of some meaning.
To this enlarged and private place
in one plane a day
a hundred lovers fly,
their clothes in a box.
Their half-naked bodies are
beginning to run on the beach
with that *freedom to mate*
that makes each one a lighthouse
to the other, each lighthouse a warning
that forms are beginning to blear.
There's always that chance,
while between them
birds hide, sick with space,
bending to die in the dunes.
The Beautiful Is Negative

What is to be made of this custom:
piercing the eyes of a bird
so that it may sing better?
You ask me that! Paul, this is
the twentieth century: trouble is real.
Deer polish their antlers
on fruit trees, like a girl
polishing apples on her hair.
Don’t be a fly wringing his hands
as though worry could save the world.
What’s wrong with the world?
Human hair hung from the lowest limb
will keep out the deer.
This is the animal kingdom, where
danger is clear and the tree grows
out of itself like an antler
butting the air—
huge, inexpressible growth!
Boys, girls, say sincerely
what you would like to become:
thighs shining like braided bread
in the grass,
or crickets scraping away
when words fail you?
I had hoped for an order of bloom
impeccably correct,
but one violet is out of whack,
bolt upright on her embarrassed stem:

often you would wake suddenly
from a dream and sit up
beside me, holding your head.

What Einstein meant was not
to disturb these things.
But so little did we know then
Endless Nights of Rain

So it rains,
and time, that hourly girl,
tilts up her mold,
filling with mercury.

While you sit
examining your hands
as though water
could change the world.

That's right,
it's the pure, brief space
that is yours:
nothing fills it.
Don't look at the moon after I've gone.
Look down at the thin snow, translucent where trucks have passed.
How delicately
the yellow brushstroke of piss
unfurls on the lawn!
Go home.
Take off your shoes,
examine the hulled silence of your toes.
You may have extinguished your highest hopes,
but intact are the little trinkets from which they leapt up like flames.
I hear over in China
people break a willow branch
whenever they say good-bye.

My mind is no longer serene.
Late April and the willow,
already yellow, is broken

with snow. Roadside daffodils
are tearing their sleeves, but
lightly, with the semiconfidence

of someone shrieking in a movie.
I eat popcorn like tiny pieces
of crumpled paper.

The words dissolve
on my tongue.
I know this world up and leaves
on a lacquered palanquin,
taking with it a splendor
I won’t see again.

But the gods will go with me
if I put myself in their path.
How is it done?

All of the heroes
you see falling down
were filmed trying to stand up.
The Iowa Poetry Prize Winners

1987

Elton Glaser, *Tropical Depressions*

Michael Pettit, *Cardinal Points*

1988

Mary Ruefle, *The Adamant*

Bill Knott, *Outremer*
The Adamant
Poems by Mary Ruefle
1988 Iowa Poetry Prize Cowinner

“Mary Ruefle’s poems are spirited and, in the best sense of the word, spiritual. Balanced between faith and doubt, Ruefle withstands loss and decay with wit, play, and the energy of her unique imagination. The poems in the last section, especially, display the heart, toughmindedness, and love of language that make The Adamant a moving and original book.”
—Ira Sadoff

In this refreshing volume, Mary Ruefle establishes herself as an independent voice in contemporary poetry. With an impeccable eye for metaphor and, as the volume’s title suggests, an immovable stance in the world, she emerges as a poet of powerful sensibility. A sense of wonder and sophisticated delight color the “beautiful vagueness” she speaks of, the archetypal vision where emotion dwells in things, thoughts are concrete, and truth is alive and everchanging.

Without romanticism or banality, these poems live in and of themselves; the language is allowed to breathe and work, not be worked. Ruefle knows a fundamental principle often forgotten in American poetry today, that language is smarter than the writer is. The result is an independent aesthetic that is both charged and honest.

The wisdom of the volume is in its essentiality, its precarious balance of image and thought. A careful reading of these poems allows the authority of the speaker, and of the world itself, to move us closer to our own sense of the world and of ourselves in it.

Mary Ruefle is the author of two previous volumes of poetry, Memling’s Veil and Life without Speaking. Recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, she lives in Shaftsbury, Vermont.

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