

From *Madness, Rack, and Honey*, by Mary Ruefle

Poetry is NEVER encoded—it is NEVER a covert operation whose information is ciphered and must be deciphered—and yet it does incline toward self-concealment, insofar as it concentrates intently on what words *conceal*, or, to put it another way, on what language seeks to *reveal*.

It concentrates on the inside in an attempt to reverse the situation; to turn it inside out.

SHORT LECTURE ON THE DEAD

I never believed, for a moment, that anyone ever learned a single thing about poetry from hearing a lecture. Don't misunderstand me; lectures are important insofar as they teach us how to *talk* about poems, but never do they teach us how to write them. Nothing does. Except, sometimes, the dead. Why is that, I wondered, when poetry is alive and well insofar as plenty of still-beating hearts are writing it? And I came to believe—call me delusional—that no living poet, none, could teach us a single thing about poetry for the simple fact that no living poet has a clue as to what he or she is doing, at least none I have talked to, and I have talked to quite a few. John Ashbery and Billy Collins can't teach you a thing, for the simple fact that they are living. Why is that, I wondered. I mean I really wondered. I think it is because poets are people—no matter what camp they sleep in—who are obsessed with the one thing no one knows anything about. That would be death. They talk to

TWENTY-TWO SHORT LECTURES

the dead and have a rapport with the dead and write about death as if they had done it, which is utterly ridiculous because they are not dead and never have been and cannot teach us a single thing about death and being dead. And yet—here's the weird thing—THE MINUTE THEY BECOME DEAD THEY CAN TEACH US EVERYTHING. Why, why is that? I think it's because the minute they are dead all of their poems about death become poems about being alive. And we are alive and can be taught something about that. I mean it. John Ashbery or Billy Collins can teach you nothing about poetry today, July 21, 2009, but if one of them were to die tomorrow he could teach you something about poetry on July 23, 2009. *Poets are dead people talking about being alive*. It's that simple. People who are alive are not really people because they haven't died; but people who have been alive and then died are the whole kind of people we want to be our teachers. I really can't explain it, being alive and all.