

Mary Ruefle's Stunning Color Spectrum of Sadnesses by Mary Ruefle

“There is the dumb silence of slumber or apathy... the fertile silence of awareness, pasturing the soul... the silence of peaceful accord with other persons or communion with the cosmos,” Paul Goodman wrote half a century ago in his taxonomy of the nine kinds of silence. Like silence, sadness too occupies a vast spectrum of hues; sadness too can be menacing — but it can also be beautiful, bountiful in its portality to other realms.

Such is the rare, rapturous awareness with which the poet Mary Ruefle paints the color spectrum of sadnesses speckling her slim, miraculous collection of prose poems, meditations, divinations, and deviations *My Private Property* (public library) — a title bowing to the inalienable sovereignty of the inner world, the place where we ultimately live out our entire lives, the world philosopher Martha Nussbaum exhorted the young not to despise in order to have a full and flowering life.

Goethe’s color wheel, from his 1809 theory of color and emotion. (Available as a print.)

Nearly two centuries after Goethe contemplated the psychology of color and emotion, Ruefle’s chromatic taxonomy of sadness cracks open the eggshell of our fragility to reveal within it a kaleidoscope coruscating with irrepressible aliveness. What emerges is the feeling — something beyond the reasoned understanding — that sadness is not the tip of the Atlantis-sized iceberg of our hard-wired grief for life, but the blazing fire of life itself, of the love of life, burning with the elemental fact that there is no disappointment without hope, no heartbreak without love; in the shadows that sadness casts on the cave walls of our being is the delicious delirium of the life-dream itself.

Rising from the page as a creature belonging to some liminal world — a world between ours, which she inhabits with staggering erudition, and another, lightyears beyond the imaginative reach of the rest of us — Ruefle writes:

Blue sadness is sweetest cut into strips with scissors and then into little pieces by a knife, it is the sadness of reverie and nostalgia: it may be, for example, the memory of a happiness that is now only a memory, it has receded into a niche that cannot be dusted for it is beyond your reach; distinct and dusty, blue sadness lies in your inability to dust it, it is as unreachable as the sky, it is a fact reflecting the sadness of all facts. Blue sadness is that which you wish to forget, but cannot, as when on a bus one suddenly pictures with absolute clarity a ball of dust in a closet, such an odd, unshareable thought that one blushes, a deep rose spreading over the blue fact of sadness, creating a situation that can only be compared to a temple, which exists, but to visit it one would have to travel two thousand miles on snowshoes and by dogsled, five hundred by horseback and another

five hundred by boat, with a thousand by rail.

Color chart from Werner's Nomenclature of Colours — the revolutionary 19th-century chromatic taxonomy that inspired Darwin. (Available as a print and as stationery cards.)

In her stunning serenade to the color blue, *Bluets*, Maggie Nelson wrote: "I have felt myself becoming a servant of sadness. I am still looking for the beauty in that." The beauty may have eluded her because one ought to look beyond blue to become — to become not the servant of sadness, not even its master, but just to become. It is this vibrant and variegated becoming that Ruefle uncorks with her ecstatic spectroscopy of sadness:

Purple sadness is the sadness of classical music and eggplant, the stroke of midnight, human organs, ports cut off for part of every year, words with too many meanings, incense, insomnia, and the crescent moon. It is the sadness of play money, and icebergs seen from a canoe. It is possible to dance to purple sadness, though slowly, as slowly as it takes to dig a pit to hold a sleeping giant. Purple sadness is pervasive, and goes deeper into the interior than the world's greatest nickel deposits, or any other sadness on earth. It is the sadness of depositories, and heels echoing down a long corridor, it is the sound of your mother closing the door at night, leaving you alone.

[...]

Gray sadness is the sadness of paper clips and rubber bands, of rain and squirrels and chewing gum, ointments and unguents and movie theaters. Gray sadness is the most common of all sadnesses, it is the sadness of sand in the desert and sand on the beach, the sadness of keys in a pocket, cans on a shelf, hair in a comb, dry-cleaning, and raisins. Gray sadness is beautiful, but not to be confused with the beauty of blue sadness, which is irreplaceable. Sad to say, gray sadness is replaceable, it can be replaced daily, it is the sadness of a melting snowman in a snowstorm.

Art by Sir Quentin Blake from Michael Rosen's *Sad Book*

A century after Rilke observed that "almost all our sadnesses are moments of tension that we find paralyzing because we no longer hear our surprised feelings living," Ruefle — a poet of Rilke's lyrical, linguistic, and empathic powers, but one of superior subtlety — fills her chromatic classification of sadness with precisely this throbbing surprise at being alive, at the miraculousness of the mundanity of it all:

Red sadness is the secret one. Red sadness never appears sad, it appears as Nijinsky bolting across the stage in mid-air, it appears in flashes of passion, anger, fear, inspiration, and courage, in dark unsellable visions; it is an upside-down penny concealed beneath a tea cozy, the even-tempered and steady-minded are not exempt from it, and a curator once attached this tag to it: Because of the fragile nature of the pouch no attempt has been made to extract the note.

[...]

Green sadness is sadness dressed for graduation, it is the sadness of June, of shiny toasters as they come out of their boxes, the table laid before a party, the smell of new strawberries and dripping roasts about to be devoured; it is the sadness of the unperceived and therefore never felt and seldom expressed, except on occasion by polka dancers and little girls who, in imitation of their grandmothers, decide who shall have their bunny when they die. Green sadness weighs no more than an unused handkerchief, it is the funeral silence of bones beneath the green carpet of evenly cut grass upon which the bride and groom walk in joy.

Color wheel based on the classification system of the French chemist Michel Eugène Chevreul from *Les phénomènes de la physique* — a 19th-century French physics textbook about how nature works. (Available as a print.)

In consonance with her credo that “we are all one question, and the best answer seems to be love — a connection between things,” articulated in her sublime and unclassifiable earlier book, *Madness, Rack and Honey*, Ruefle approaches her sadness-spectrum with the same soulful insistence on this quiet, invisible interleaving as the canopy of our inner life:

Brown sadness is the simple sadness. It is the sadness of huge upright stones. That is all. It is simple. Huge, upright stones surround the other sadnesses, and protect them. A circle of huge, upright stones — who would have thought it?

What makes Ruefle’s taxonomy so powerful, so colorful, so life-giving is that it explores not the bombastic, Byronic dolours we die for, but the neglected, gnawing desolations we live with:

Pink sadness is the sadness of white anchovies. It is the sadness of deprivation, of going without, of having to swallow when your throat is no bigger than an acupuncture pin; it’s the sadness of mushrooms born with heads too big for their bodies, the sadness of having the soles come off your only pair of shoes, or your favorite pair, it makes no difference, pink sadness cannot be measured by a gameshow host, it is the sadness of shame when you have done nothing wrong, pink sadness is not your fault, and though even the littlest twinge may cause it, it is the vast bushy top on the family tree of sadness, whose faraway roots resemble a colossal squid with eyes the size of soccer balls.

Art from *Cephalopod Atlas*, the world’s first encyclopedia of deep-sea creatures. (Available as a print and as stationery cards.)

In a passage that calls to mind Van Gogh’s orange-haunted *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear*, painted shortly after the fateful night when his existential anxiety erupted into

self-mutilation, Ruefle writes:

Orange sadness is the sadness of anxiety and worry, it is the sadness of an orange balloon drifting over snow-capped mountains, the sadness of wild goats, the sadness of counting, as when one worries that another shipment of thoughts is about to enter the house, that a soufflé or Cessna will fall on the day set aside to be unsad, it is the orange haze of a fox in the distance, it speaks the strange antlered language of phantoms and dead batteries, it is the sadness of all things left overnight in the oven and forgotten in the morning, and as such orange sadness becomes lost among us altogether, like its motive.

Prismatic: Color wheel by Moses Harris, 1766 — one of 100 diagrams that changed the world. (Available as a print, a notebook, and stationery cards.)

To me, the crowning curio of Ruefle's spectrum is the color of The Beatles' submarine — one of non-negligible personal significance. She writes:

Yellow sadness is the surprise sadness. It is the sadness of naps and eggs, swan's down, sachet powder and moist towelettes. It is the citrus of sadness, and all things round and whole and dying like the sun possess this sadness, which is the sadness of the first place; it is the sadness of explosion and expansion, a blast furnace in Duluth that rises over the night skyline to fall reflected in the waters of Lake Superior, it is a superior joy and a superior sadness, that of revolving doors and turnstiles, it is the confusing sadness of the never-ending and the evanescent, it is the sadness of the jester in every pack of cards, the sadness of a poet pointing to a flower and saying what is that when what that is is a violet; yellow sadness is the ceiling fresco painted by Andrea Mantegna in the Castello di San Giorgio in Mantova, Italy, in the fifteenth century, wherein we look up to see we are being looked down upon, looked down upon in laughter and mirth, it is the sadness of that.

One of Ernst Haeckel's otherworldly 19th-century drawings of jellyfish, named for the mourned love of his life. (Available as a print.)

And then, in a tiny, dazzling author's note tucked into the neglected endmatter of the book for the discovery of only the most devoted and sensitive readers, Ruefle names the unnamed subversion at the heart of her color wheel of the mind:

In each of the color pieces, if you substitute the word happiness for the word sadness, nothing changes.

Light distribution on soap bubble from *Le monde physique*. (Available as a print.)

Delve into Ruefle's *My Private Property* for more of her chromatics of feeling, including her black and white sadnesses (or happinesses), that pepper this altogether gorgeous collection of reflections ranging from the search for language and meaning in the forest to the hungry human mythos of immortality, then revisit the most beautiful meditations on blue from the past two hundred years of great literature, spanning from Thoreau to Toni Morrison.