CONSIDERING THE POETRY *of* KAY RYAN

"While writing a poem the hot wire of thought welds together strange chunks of this and that. It can't completely combine the disparate elements and make a new element of them, but it can loosen the edges of mutually disinterested materials enough to bond them so that a serial lumpy going-on is achieved, crude emergency bridges made, say, of brush and old doors, just barely strong enough to get the thought across before the furious townspeople show up."

If Fishes Were Wishes

Rubbing Lamps

Things besides
Aladdin's and
the golden cave
fish's lamps
grant wishes.
In fact,
most lamps
aren't lamp-
shaped and
happen by
accident: an
ordinary knob
goes lambent
as you twist
or a cloth turns
to silver mesh
against a dish —
something
so odd and
filled with promise
for a minute
that you spend
your only wish
wishing someone else
could see it.

I am partial to the gnomic opening gambit in poems: "Water is best"; "Something there is that doesn't love a wall"; "There's a certain slant of light." It's the authority that grabs my sleeve, and I sit down to listen.

Nearly every Kay Ryan poem opens in such a way, an apothegmatic observation, often a quirky one, that is then worked out to its logical yet wholly unexpected conclusion. The poems make their way carefully and sometimes counterintuitively across a precarious surface (I think of the butterfly collector in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* hopping over the treacherous mire) or clambering over a cliff face to some sort of seemingly safe landing by handholds or footholds of rhyme, full and slant, that may appear at ends of lines, or anywhere else.

I first encountered Kay Ryan's work, as many people did, in the mid-90s, in *The New Yorker* of all places. I remembered being utterly stunned at finding rhyme — rhyme! — in a poem in *The New Yorker*. Such poems were quirky and off kilter yet laced tightly together with webs of sound and sense. That *The New Yorker* would publish such poems (at such a time, when most poems there elicited

a puzzled shrug from me) seemed to open a world of permission for those who did not want to give up on wit, nor on — not melody exactly, for "musical" is not an adjective I would casually place alongside a Kay Ryan poem — but sympathetic harmony: how one plucked rhyme word's vibration sets another on the same frequency humming.

If I could trace the lineage of these poems, they might be love children of Emily Dickinson and Lorine Neidecker; further back Marianne Moore and Stevie Smith might be in the family tree. But of course a Ryan poem is also its own stubborn thing.

One in particular has been in my mind of late, "Rubbing Lamps," from *The Niagara River*. The poem is typical Ryan in many ways: the gnomic opening, the short lines of "optical dimeter" (they look like they might be metrical or syllabic, but it has more to do with making a Jenga-tower of precariously balanced characters), the weave of sounds: wishes and fish's will naturally call forth "dish," but also conjures "silver mesh," and, at a greater remove, "twist." "Lamps" keep rubbing up against "ands," and lamp itself becomes "lambent." The closing off rhyme actually becomes a cracking open, the slant rhyme of "minute" and "see it," just as the miracle shimmers and disappears.

It is as good an *ars poetica* as any, and illustrates, or rather dramatizes, an experience that is also for me the moment of inspiration, when suddenly ordinary objects or moments shimmer with heightened significance. That for me is when the brain has switched to poetry mode. But the success of the Ryan poem is to enact it on the page, beginning with a sort of little-known fairy-tale fact, that there are other objects than genie-filled lamps that fizz with optative magic.

The strangest leap comes early in the poem is from line three to four — we assume the golden cave is Aladdin's cave, but instead golden cave seems to modify fish — a bioluminescent cavefish, perhaps? It almost escapes our grasp, and fish seems to be there partly, if not principally, for its rhyme on wish. (This is not even the only Ryan poem to pivot on this conventional rhyme — see "Fishing.") But the poem thus begins on a kind of slippery grammatical shift, on wrong-footing us headlong through the rest of the poem.

"In fact," we are reassured, most lamps aren't lamp-shaped. The doorknob, of course, shares many Aladdin-lamp-like features: it might be brass, and polishable, it fits into the hollow of the cupped hand. (The dissimilar simile goes both ways: a magic lamp opens doors with a twist.) A reader of my generation may also have in mind the brass bedknob (well, after all, it isn't specified as a door-knob), which twisted grants wishes of travel, from the movie *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*.

The least lamp-like image is the last one, also perhaps the most domestic, of the cloth against the dish. Here we have a rubbing of course, and a twisting motion, and the gleam of a clean dish (perhaps the water of the dishwashing is the liquidity that ties in the cave fish), but it is a magic move to transform a textile into metallic mesh — a transformation on the level of Rumpelstiltskin's spinning straw into gold.

The poem's spell performs the alchemy and the wish-fulfillment even as it also vanishes in a contrary-to-fact condition, the rub of the evaporating moment. And the reader has been briefly transformed, become both wisher, left empty-handed, and the "someone else," whose witnessing of the miracle fulfills the spent wish.

And poetry turns out to be the un-lamp-shaped lamp.

AMIT MAJMUDAR

Compact and Dangerous

Sharks' Teeth

Everything contains some
silence. Noise gets
its zest from the
small shark's-tooth
shaped fragments
of rest angled
in it. An hour
of city holds maybe
a minute of these
remnants of a time
when silence reigned,
compact and dangerous
as a shark. Sometimes
a bit of a tail
or fin can still
be sensed in parks.

Kay Ryan's poetry embeds its rhymes like sharks' teeth. Her rhymes are sounds that draw attention to themselves, but not too much attention, so that all that the ear senses is "a bit of a tail / or fin."

The first internal rhyme, *zest*, sets the theme of the rest of the poem, but obliquely. The buried metaphor relates to the second, culinary meaning of zest, a shred of lemon or orange rind that adds flavor to a dish. Noise may seem to have "enthusiasm or energy," the other meaning of *zest*, but the poem upends our understanding of noise. The enthusiasm or energy really derives from silence — or, as *zest's* other embedded rhyme would have it, *rest*. Rest's many meanings reecho by the end of the poem, as well. Besides musical rests, those silences that structure music, the "rest" of something is the "remnant" of something, just as the teeth are what remains of the shark. Shark's teeth themselves served as raw materials for some of the earliest weapons in North America — remains of now-bygone indigenous civilizations, long since laid to rest by noisy modernity, but never — in our genes, in American place names — completely gone.

The sharks are vanished dangers at the start of the poem, only their teeth left behind. Yet by the end of the poem, they are circling a bench in a city park: solitude's quiet, fragile raft. The sharks are silence. Why is the silence dangerous? Everyone will have a different answer to that question, but they only have to answer it when they are alone, or alone with silence. Safer to return to the noise of the city, that cacophony created to distract from the fin that awaits us, the appetite that lurks beneath the surface of everything.

Silences, Ryan tells us, have teeth, and sharp ones. Silences swim silently up to us. Silences can tear us open and tear us apart. Conscience-haunted memory quickens its pace through Ryan's silence-infested park. The unease is not the poet's; it is the reader's. Her poem is not confessional. It is *a* confessional, coaxing the reader to fill in lived context. To fill the awkward silence after its "resonant" image of sharks' teeth, all the more personal for not being "about" a person at all, neither the poet's subject nor the poet herself.

This reveals one of the central strategies of Ryan's versecraft in general. Notice the absence of specific context in Ryan's poems: The reader rarely learns of a personal story behind the utterance. The poet does not share details about the unhappy marriages, messy divorces, dead siblings, abusive fathers, social injustices, or childhood traumas that fuel so much of contemporary poetry. A Ryan poem cannot be quoted out of context because it has no context, other than the observed world it is a part of — embedded at an angle, like a shark's tooth. Each poem is small enough that it must be recited entire if at all; the hidden rhymes and rapid-fire enjambments refuse to cooperate with anyone who would make an excerpt.

An absence of grounding details does not impoverish the poem; rather it allows the poem, like all Ryan poems, to travel anywhere. This trait is shared by the most famous poetry in our language. "To be or not to be" has long since floated free of its dramatic moment in *Hamlet* to become a general, existential meditation. Notice that Hamlet, in that passage, does not refer to his mother, his father, his uncle, Ophelia, or Denmark. That lack of signifiers became an advantage. Kipling's "If," because it's Kipling who wrote

it, may evoke historical images of pith-helmeted British officers keeping their heads under fire, like the outnumbered soldiers at Rorke's Drift. The poem itself lacks any such references; Kipling kept "If" all-purpose so the reader or listener could imagine the context.

Paradoxically, even though Ryan manages this contextlessness, she also manages to encode a back story in the poem, entirely through metaphor. The back story of the poem is the antediluvian back story of all civilization. By the time "Sharks' Teeth" opens, silence has retreated like flood waters from Ryan's nameless, placeless city. Mountaintop seashells (and sharks' teeth) hint at a world before the world. Imagine that bygone environment, the ambient noise muffled, the emptied sky an original and liquid womb. The mind, embedded in meditative silence, rests like a shark's tooth in an underwater city. Ryan's suggestive phrasing drowns this city. Shadowy hammerheads thread its skyscrapers and parking decks. A deluge of some kind antedated the sunlight and chirp. It is a city like any other, with a park and a fountain whose shallow waters run impossibly deep. No Swimming.

Poems are not always about themselves, but every poem is a commentary on poetry, if only at the level of style. Ryan's efficiently unending poems are "compact and dangerous." Each poem resembles, with its "small shark's-tooth shaped" form, silence itself. It angles strangely in the memory. A minute of one contains an hour.

CHRISTIAN WIMAN

Undertow

The Niagara River

As though
the river were
a floor, we position
our table and chairs
upon it, eat, and
have conversation.
As it moves along,
we notice — as
calmly as though
dining room paintings
were being replaced —
the changing scenes
along the shore. We
do know, we do
know this is the
Niagara River, but
it is hard to remember
what that means.

What that means is an end to everything we have and love, the whole kit and caboodle of our carefully constructed lives crashing down some Niagara of intake forms, formaldehyde, and tag sales, oblivion swallowing it all down without so much as burp. This undertow, the tick-tock mortality of poetry (of life), the sense that even our joys come to us through a scrim of sorrow and longing, can be oppressive if it's all you learn to hear.

But there's an interesting paradox in this poem: we must *remember* what is ahead of us, as if our deaths were in our past. ("Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting," as Wordsworth says.) Another interesting thing: time as a river is a common metaphor, in which there is never a now one can seize and hold. Rivers run toward seas, though (in this instance an immense lake, but close enough); implicit within the image is a much larger life with which the one river eventually merges. "People still persist in thinking that *life is flat,*" wrote Vincent van Gogh, "and runs from birth to death. But life, too, is probably round, and much greater in scope and possibilities than the hemisphere we now know." I find that a powerful intellectual

consolation but a difficult thing to genuinely feel — except in certain moments. Poems can be such moments. Certainly this poem by Kay Ryan, with its two undertows, is that for me. It momentarily transcends the limitations to which it seems to concede. It briefly releases a reader from the confinement it describes as absolute.

ANGE MLINKO

Spectacularly Pincered

Crustacean Island

There could be an island paradise
where crustaceans prevail.
Click, click, go the lobsters
with their china mitts and
articulated tails.
It would not be sad like whales
with their immense and patient sieving
and the sobering modesty
of their general way of living.
It would be an island blessed
with only cold-blooded residents
and no human angle.
It would echo with a thousand castanets
and no flamencos.

After *Götterdämmerung*, what? Valhalla is in flames, the gods are dead. From the ash and clinker rises *Trois pièces en forme de poire* ("Three Pieces in the Shape of a Pear"). Or *Embryons desséchés* ("Desiccated Embryos"). *Sports et divertissements* — a sport and a pastime — entails these instructions to the pianist: "In the morning, on an empty stomach." "A dog is dancing with his fiancée." "Scotch tweed of a violent green." "With moderate joy."

Thus Erik Satie: the dollop of lemon sorbet palate-cleanser between late Romanticism and early Modernism. Living through the catastrophe of World War I, he wrote the least self-important music. It's almost as if art should be *inversely* proportional to the forces of history! Which must be why Jean Cocteau wrote: "Satie's smallest work is as small *as a keyhole*. Everything changes if you approach his eye." And, indignantly, "Audiences are shocked by the charming ridiculousness of Satie's titles and notations, but they respect the tremendous ridiculousness of Parsifal's libretto."

A charming ridiculousness animates us. Isn't that the gauntlet thrown down by

A Midsummer Night's Dream? Or "The Comedian as the Letter C?" Or *Alice in Wonderland?* A perfectly executed comedy shows us life at its best. As Oscar Wilde quipped, "The good ended happily and the bad unhappily. That is what fiction means."

Auden liked his logic and his love poems to be tongue-in-cheek. In his commonplace book, his entries on "Logic" and "Love, Romantic" are cheek-by-jowl, and only incidentally alphabetical. He gives us an unattributed quote: "Logic is the art of going wrong with confidence." And among his thoughts on romantic love he offers: "when it comes to writing about the emotional relation between the sexes, whether in verse or prose, I prefer the comic or the coarse note to the hot-and-bothered or the whining-pathetic."

Recognizing ourselves as comical, or absurd, reconciles us to each other.

In Kay Ryan's *Elephant Rocks,* from 1996, we find two references to Erik Satie: "Les Petites Confitures (The Little Jams)," about a set of miniatures "for piano or banjo" that surfaced in a Métro station where he had hidden them decades before. A few pages later we read "Intransigence," which takes its epigraph from a biography of Satie: "Intransigence is the main fault — or the great virtue — of the Saties." This might be a point of identification between the composer and the poet who wrote in her infamous essay "I Go to AWP:" "I have always understood myself to be a person who does not go to writers' conferences."

Kay Ryan doesn't flaunt her learning. Her flights of fancy are belied by a deadpan tone, much like Robert Frost and Marianne Moore. She doesn't make a show of being experimental, all lower-case and unpunctuated. Yet the pointed double-reference to Satie allies her with the Surrealists who took Satie up when he was composing in obscurity and penury. The association runs in a subterranean way through *Elephant Rocks,* from the first poem, "Living with Stripes" ("miniature themes and counterpoints") to "Cirque" (shades, too, of Bishop's "Cirque d'hiver" with its reference to de Chirico) to the punning "Bestiary" ("the spectacularly pincered") and "To the Young Anglerfish." Any of these could serve as her ars poetica, but it is "Crustacean Island" that waves the most antennae.

"There could be an island paradise ..." begins the poem. This is already humorous. It's the stuff of travel industry advertisements, a couple of lovebirds in mid-molt clinking mai tais on their chaise lounges. It's Fantasy Island, or Love Island, a perennial return to the insularity of the bedroom farce. So that's why we're drawn up short by the second line: "... where crustaceans prevail."

Shudder! Now we're in the terroir of Satie, and a bucket of icy water wakes us up. There are real crustacean islands, aren't there? In the Indian Ocean, an estimated 44 million red crabs dominated Christmas Island. The largest crab species, the coconut crab, is thought to have gobbled up Amelia Earhart when she crashed on Nikumaroro Island. (If you tickle their soft undersides, however, they will release their pincers.)

Yet it is not crabs we're speaking of, but lobsters — mascots of the Surrealists. Their hero Gerard de Nerval walked his pet lobster Thibault on the Paris streets with a blue ribbon for a leash. And who can forget the Lobster Quadrille?

"You can really have no notion how
delightful it will be
When they take us up and throw us, with
the lobsters, out to sea!"
But the snail replied "Too far, too far!" and
gave a look askance —
Said he thanked the whiting kindly, but he
would not join the dance.
Would not, could not, would not,
could not, would not join the dance.
Would not, could not, would not,
could not, could not join the dance.

'"What matters it how far we go?" his
scaly friend replied.
"There is another shore, you know, upon
the other side.
The further off from England the nearer is
to France —
Then turn not pale, beloved snail, but
come and join the dance.

I think too of the Lobster Dress, cut on a bias, perfect for dancing, which was the co-creation of Elsa Schiaparelli and Salvador Dali. Lobsters and couture make sense: lobsters have blue blood.

Dali also created the Lobster Telephone, thus allying the creature with an ear-and-mouthpiece. Ryan writes: "Click, click, go the lobsters / with their china mitts and / articulated tails." Or would that be articulated tales? The click, of course, is the phone hanging up on the other end of the line. Compare these witty lobsters to the sad whales "with their immense and patient sieving" and one immediately thinks of the predominant mode of American poetry, which is, as the British say, "wet." The dry by contrast are "cold-blooded." The island has no human "angle," the old word for Englishman, and often punned with "angel." Angel derives from the Greek for "messenger." The island is paradoxically "blessed" for having no angels. It is all charmingly ridiculous and menacing. Especially because, unlike crabs, lobsters don't leave their seabeds for dry land if they can help it: these lobsters, then, have transcended their circumstances.

"Crustacean Island," besides being a miniature in the mode of Satie, is a condensed "The Comedian as the Letter C," Wallace Stevens's *chef d'oeuvre.* As he wrote to Richard Latimer in 1935:

... by the letter C I meant the sound of the letter C; what was in my mind was to play on that sound throughout the poem. While the sound of that letter has more or less variety, and includes, for instance, K and S, all its shades may be said to have a comic aspect. Consequently, the letter C is a comedian. But if I had made that perfectly clear, susceptible readers might have read the poem with ears like elephants' [sic] listening for the play of this sound as people at a concert listen for the sounds indicating Till Eulenspiegel in Strauss' music ... As a rule, people very much prefer to take the solemn views of poetry.

Ears like elephants — or elephant rocks. "Crustacean Island" culminates in the word "castanets" (with its hidden imperative: cast a net, castaway!). All castanet and no flamenco? But in language there is no "no." Say there's no flamenco, and the flamenco magically appears in the mind's eye. The match is lit on a dry island. That "flamenco" is the last word in the poem also belies the "no." Dali didn't give his Lobster Phone the alternate title "Aphrodisiac Phone" for nothing.

A future expedition into "Crustacean Island" might consider it alongside Elizabeth Bishop's

"Bone Key," or *Cayo Hueso* (Key West), as it relates to Schiaparelli's "Skeleton Dress," but that must wait for another day. For now, I would simply point to Satie and Cocteau's collaboration on the ballet *Parade*, in which Satie scored a typewriter. For surely, on Crustacean Island what we hear are not castanets, but typewriters. It is an imaginary writer's conference — solitaires, typing away.

WILLARD SPIEGELMAN

Spring Songs

Sonnet to Spring

The brown, unpleasant,
aggressively ribbed and
unpliant leaves of the loquat,
shaped like bark canoes that
something squashed flat,
litter the spring cement.
A fat-cheeked whim of air —
a French *vent* or some similar affair —
with enough choices in the front yard
for a blossomy puff worthy of Fragonard,
instead expends its single breath
beneath one leathery leaf of loquat
which flops over and again lies flat.
Spring is frivolous like that.

The Hinge of Spring

The jackrabbit is a mild herbivore
grazing the desert floor,
quietly abridging spring,
eating the color off everything
rampant-height or lower.

Rabbits are one of the things
coyotes are for. One quick scream,
a few quick thumps,
and a whole little area
shoots up blue and orange clumps.

Kay Ryan may be the most cunningly musical poet of our age: "musical" because she resorts to old-fashioned rhyme; "cunningly" because her rhymes pop up often where one might not expect them — in the middle of lines, for example, or at least not in close terminal proximity to one another. She is always a poet of surprise. She puts me in mind of the late English poet Charles Tomlinson, who was, like her, equally adept in free and more conventional verse forms. I like to imagine the opening of his own slantly rhymed "The Chances of Rhyme" as the appropriate motto for both him and his trans-Atlantic peer:

> The chances of rhyme are like the
> chances of meeting —
> In the finding fortuitous, but once
> found, binding.

Ryan would chuckle, I think, at the presence of an embedded full rhyme ("finding" and "binding"); a terminal partial rhyme ("meeting" and "binding"); even an alliterative sonic joint ("finding ... fortuitous ... found"). They all unite things through sound, and therefore in essence. Rhyme alerts us to commonalities. It also creates them.

Here is another trans-Atlantic resemblance. Tomlinson likes what he labels, in the title of a prose poem, "the insistence of things." Ryan, too, is alert to what *she* calls, in the title of one of her newer poems, "the things of the world": "Wherever the eye lingers / it finds a hunger. / The things of the world want us for dinner." Things turn out to be insistently, perhaps vertiginously, topsy-turvy. Linger with hunger and it will turn on you. You will be dined upon. We are subjects in the world. We are also its objects. Ryan likes to shake things up. She looks hard at things, and she allows them to absorb her attention. The world, full of dangers, consumes more than our mere attention. Looked at too long, it will devour us whole.

In other words, Ryan plays with her reader's expectations. As often as not, she goes on to undercut them. Consider the "Sonnet to Spring" (from the 1996 *Elephant Rocks.*) It's in the most conventional of forms; it's about the most banal of subjects. Ryan joins an ancient, honorable company of springtime worshippers: Catullus and Horace, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, John Clare, Keats, Christina Rossetti, Hopkins, Hardy, D. H. Lawrence, Edward Thomas, hundreds of others and, among her contemporaries, the

country boy Dave Smith, whose "The Spring Poem" has its own sly, cheeky duplicities, riffing off the tongue-in-cheek Louise Glück, who provided Smith with his poem's epigraph: "Every poet should write a spring poem."

Ryan is obedient. She, too, has written a spring poem. Like Smith, she is also subversive. Her spring poem overlooks the expected tropes: there are — almost, or not initially — no marvels, no rebirth, no rejuvenation. It is as if she is thumbing her nose at her predecessors, at the whole primaveral tradition, and at least a little at her readers and saying "All right. I'll write the required spring poem but there's going to be nothing overtly miraculous or flagrantly beautiful in it. I'll give you a spring you've not thought about, yet. No daffodils, no roses, no sweet showers; no people longing to go on pilgrimages, or young men's fancies gently turning to thoughts of love. Not even what Robert Frost calls the gold of nature's first green." Her spring has nothing long, or lovely or lush. Her spring is messy. It's cement and city or suburbs, not meadows, wildflowers and countryside. Instead of feathery things, she gives us "leathery" ones.

Ryan relies on her own eyes. She lingers outdoors. The loquat and its leaves that splatter on the pavement throughout her sonnet certainly do not seem to belong to the same genus described by one website as these "ornamental as well as practical" trees with their "whirls of glossy foliage and naturally attractive shape … [with] attractive fruit … against the green, tropical-looking foliage."

Ryan's scene is initially unattractive and unappealing, hardly what we expect from a sonnet for and about spring. We should not be surprised. Almost everything about the form of her poem also seems to subvert or transpose what we normally think a sonnet should be, how it should act, how it might be built. Instead of a Petrarchan 8/6, or a Shakespearian 4/4/4/2 structure, she gives us a 6/8 event. Or, looked at differently, the sonnet has a tri-partite structure, with three sentences: six lines, then seven, and a terse, final one-liner. Things seem haphazard, perhaps helter-skelter and scattered, or at cross-purposes.

Linger awhile and glance again: the poem inverts but it also maintains our generic expectations. The first six lines offer one view of the tree and its leaves. Then we have

the volta, the turn. With new information, the next eight lines give us a second take on the opening that utterly reforms and refines what preceded.

Consider the music. The poem's sounds convey, reproduce, embody, and alert us to the poet's — at least initial — disdain for the loquat tree. Her sonnet is written, for the most part, in couplets (a variation on the Clare sonnet), some of them rhyming imperfectly. Eleven lines end with a dental "d" or "t" sound. "Loquat," "that," and "flat" get repeated. Like the sounds, the diction is ordinary. And spring is marked initially by negation, harshness, and privatives: "unpleasant ... aggressively ... unpliant ... squashed flat ... litter."

But in the middle, we find two charmingly rhymed couplets — "air" and "affair," "yard" and "Fragonard," — the first of which does not end on a hard consonant. And that unexpected proper noun offers a whiff of the rococo that will relieve and fancify the ordinariness of the heaviness, squashedness, and leatheriness of the suburbs. We have moved beyond flatness. We are now in the world of blossomy lightness. Is it significant that one line — (number 11) — has no rhyme? (Even "and" in line 2 blends in with "unpleasant," as does "cement" with the preceding "flat.") I would say yes. "Breath" is solitary. The very (monosyllabic) word suggests a trace, a hint of fresh air. It stands alone, unmated at the end of its line, recreating and representing the volatile merriment of spring. The exotic — Fragonard in California — arrives for a moment, and then disappears. A sophisticated insouciance floats in and out, perhaps by mistake. Ryan can almost not believe it. This eighteenth-century French stuff goes against her better judgment, but there it is, a "blossomy puff" that puts her in mind of the French painter. Again, rhyme binds things together, allowing for cooperation rather than competition: a fortuitous, unpredictable unification, like love. An affair of the air occurs annually but always surprisingly. And, again, alliteration does its own equivalent work: "one leathery leaf of loquat" practically sings out mellifluously, before the leaf subsides ("flops ... flat," another mimetic alliteration). Who could have ever predicted this French affair in the very air, Fragonard alighting metaphorically in the yard? Ryan goes even further, prompting one other, more modest, surprise: a non-French speaker might anglicize *vent* and pronounce it, wrongly, as "vent," to rhyme with "cement." Wrongly? Maybe not.

"Spring is frivolous like that." So is Ryan. Wary of the world, used to its disappointments, she cannot take her eye off it or lower her gaze. She likes finding and joining things through sight and sound. In another poem from *Elephant Rocks,* "Connections," Ryan notices that "Connections *lie in wait* — / something that in / the ordinary line of offenses / makes offense more great." This is gnomic wisdom. It may echo a famous couplet: "I'll so offend to make offense a skill," says Shakespeare's Prince Hal, "Redeeming time, when men think least I will." Like the things of the world that want us for dinner, those connections are there to be both made and discovered. "Offense" contains — sonically if not orthographically — "a fence" in it. You might say that a fence "more great" connects as well as divides, and is therefore no offense at all but a bridge. Ryan's poems encourage such quicksilver responses in her readers.

Another spring poem presents her at her observant best. "The Hinge of Spring" (from the 1994 *Flamingo Watching*) is her witty reply to at least the title of e. e. cummings's hinge-of-spring poem, "in Just-." Like cummings, she likes being on the cusp. This poem has two five-line stanzas. We are not in cummings's "mud-luscious" and "puddle-wonderful" world of school children and the god Pan, but a desert in which death and life are close cousins. Ryan sees nature red in tooth and claw, first rabbits eating herbs, then coyotes eating rabbits. Animals, vegetation, beauty and calamity all come together in a matter-of-fact cheerfulness.

Ryan for the most part represses feeling, or at least its declamation, in favor of observation and remarks, all embodied in the sounds that perform her bidding. Like Frost and Dickinson, she is a trickster. Because she is also a rhymester, like them, it is natural for the general reader to fall in love with her work. We are bound together, initially by chance, and then, it seems, inevitably. Ryan almost never says "I" or "me," although she is chatty and personal. She reveals almost nothing about herself. Her work is a bracing corrective to so much ploddingly earnest contemporary poetry. It is sobering and charming at the same time, serious but never heavy.

Kay Ryan is frivolous like that. But there is, as it turns out, nothing trivial about *her* lightest whims of air.

STEPHANIE BURT

A Sketch of the Blank Space

The First of Never

Never dawns
as though
it were a day
and rises.

Our day-sense
says a day
can be out-waited.
So we wait.

That's the
only kind
of time
we've ever known:

it should be
getting late;
she should be
getting home.

How does it feel to live, for years or decades, with the right lover, or a right lover, someone with whom you know that you belong? How does it feel to get used to that feeling, not so much to take your lover for granted, as to treat her presence as something given anew each day, regularly and always, like the sunrise or the air? How to honor that presence and its regularity, its predictability, its comfort, what Danes call its *hygge*, as well as its sexiness and its bodily joy? How can a thoughtful poet render new, and interesting, and strange, for strangers to read, an experience whose tender, welcome essence lies in its comforting predictability, in the privacy of the lovers' shared dwelling, within their sense of their own home, in (to quote the critic Nick Halpern) "the everyday, the human, the domestic and the ordinary"? How can a poet honor what Randall Jarrell called "the dailiness of life" in its happiest facets, the ordinariness of a happy couple, married or living as if they were?

This poem from Kay Ryan's latest volume *Erratic Facts* (2015) does not answer those questions, but rather provides a kind of photographic negative, a sketch of the blank

space where we might find an answer, or rather find the answer impossible. The joys and satisfactions of a daily life lived, predictably, with the right partner become manifest in words, can be made into art, can be made public, only once those joys are gone.

Kay Ryan and Carol Adair began dating in 1978, when both were college instructors in northern California; they married in San Francisco in 2004, during the weeks-long window when San Francisco could issue same-sex marriage licenses, and again in 2008. Adair died of cancer in 2009, while Ryan was serving as United States poet laureate. Adair, in the words of the scholar Sarah Gannett, "managed their social schedule, connected Ryan to the outside world, and filled their home with decoration": after Adair died, Ryan wrote directly to her in journal after journal (now with the poet's manuscripts at Yale's Beinecke Library). "The First of Never" reflects the poet's grief, not just at losing her life partner, but at the depthless disorientation, the loss of a way through time and space, that this profound new absence demands.

A reader familiar with marriage, and with grief, but unfamiliar with Ryan's poems, might say that the slim, nearly abstract poem, with its internal silences and lack of concrete images, embodies grief itself just by staying so short, so quick, as if an unbearable death has left the speaker of the poem (now a survivor) with almost no attention span, no energy, not much to say. Indeed the poem can feel that way: it's a poem about losing everything, having no way to go forward in space and time. It's a poem, too, about losing a partnership that could not exactly be named, in public, officially, for much of its length: "she" could be anyone (if we ignore the biography and the context). The poet — in contradistinction to the identifying details in poems by, say, James Merrill, or Chen Chen — could be almost anyone (even a man), as if her identifying details had vanished with her life.

And yet this kind of brevity, with all this white space, and this kind of distance from personal detail, does not *necessarily* represent grief in Ryan, since we can find it in almost all of Ryan's poems, from the late 1980s, when she discovered her signature style (her earliest work sounds, instead, like Marianne Moore),

all the way through the 2010s. Many of those poems eschew the first person, and those that do include an "I" or a "me" use the pronouns to signal a narrator and her tone, rather than to imagine an embodied person in a particular place. Ryan's reliance on figures of speech (sometimes on transfigured cliches), on dense patterns of sound, on resources available within the language itself, has given her — not impersonality (which is impossible in a lyric poem) — but a personality that emerges almost without reference to her life story. "Even when the poet seems most himself," wrote W. B. Yeats in 1937, "he is never the bundle of accidents and incoherence that sits down to breakfast: he has been reborn as an ideal, something intended complete."

The Ryan of Ryan's poetry has made herself into a poet of epigram, quip, proverb, and free-standing metaphor, a poet of what she called "derichment," gaps and shortfalls, a poet in the tradition of Emily Dickinson, recognizable for the way that she writes, not by facts about her off-page life. The novelty in poems, she argued, has to come from the language, not from a plot, and the language controls readers' sense of time, whether or not we are looking back in grief: as Ryan has written, "to acknowledge something new [in language] is to be engaged in catch-up: the mind rewrites … what's been going on." When her poems are not this sad, they can be outright funny; when they are they rely on wordplay anyway. "A poem is an empty suitcase that you can never quit emptying," she has said, like the ones opened and closed by circus clowns; she has also quipped that she likes "to see language get pantsed." "The First of Never" is, also, a pantsing. Her brevity cannot be taken apart from its wit, and both depend on a single, central conceit, in this case the common noun phrase in the title, used to mean something impossible, something that will not happen at all.

Except, of course, that the seemingly impossible thing — the loss of the beloved — *has* happened: the poem, punningly, embodies a first reaction, a first day, a "dawn," when that impossible loss has taken place. And that first reaction feels like the only one: time stops for this most consequential death, and feels as if it would never restart again. It is the endless, unresolved or unresolvable mourning that Sigmund Freud (who got so many things wrong, but this one right) called melancholia: a refusal to let go and to let time

pass. The sun itself should rise on the next day, but does not: instead, "never dawns." Ryan's syntax also suggests that she may never see the sun, nor another dawn. "Never ... rises": the sun will never rise again. Every day after a loss like this one, the loss of a long-term, regular, stabilizing, domestic beloved, feels like the first day, just one day, a day that might let us wait. Halfway through the poem Ryan has already repeated most of its key words, as if impatient for this day, this poem, this feeling to end, though it may never end: "day" three times, "wait" twice.

What's next? Alas, more of the same: "the first of never" occurs, like Groundhog Day in the movie, over and over, because the "only kind / of time" we've ever known — and, not coincidentally, the only kindness — means that each day ends when the beloved comes home. We cannot, must not, admit that she will never come. "She should be." "It should be." It isn't: she won't. — The poem then brings us where she can never be: "home." "Should," like many ultra-common words in Ryan, takes on the full force of its multiple meanings, which it bears one at a time in prose: "should" can mean that we expect something to happen, but also that it morally ought to happen, that it would happen in a just world. A world without the long-term, domestic, expected beloved is empty, unsettled, unjust, almost impossible: it will arrive on "the first of never," the day which has paradoxically come, a day when the speaker herself can almost admit that she will never again feel at home.

"The First of Never" offers by its absences, its regrets and its complaints a sense of the domestic, ordinary, everyday joys, certainties and reliabilities that poets can very rarely portray directly. What do we, the living, do with what we know about the dead? What can we give to this mourner, what can we take, what can we do? Perhaps nothing at all: the same distance from biography and detail that gives Ryan's poems their clarity, their authority, and their finish suggests that we, as readers, can do nothing for the speaker in this poem. It's a poem of despondency, a poem about waiting forever by a door that never opens, for a beloved who never again arrives, without a tomorrow or a change or a hope to meet in Heaven (nobody speaks about "the second of never," though the twelfth does pop up). It's also a poem that speaks to the perdurable effects of love in a life: of domestic, dependable, usual love, perhaps

especially an unconventional, queer love, a love that — like all love — seems eternal but is not: one we can only encounter belatedly, through Ryan's metaphors and paraphrases and omissions; one we can honor but cannot wholly understand.

Chance and Fate

Odd Blocks

Every Swiss-village
calendar instructs
as to how stone
gathers the landscape
around it, how
glacier-scattered
thousand-ton
monuments to
randomness become
fixed points in
finding home.
Order is always
starting over.
And why not
also in the self,
the odd blocks,
all lost and left,
become first facts
toward which later
a little town
looks back?

Three sentences. The first long, the second short, and the third a question. But that's getting ahead of things because the title, "Odd Blocks," does more than your average pair of syllables. It raises the type of questions — why odd, and blocks of what exactly — that delicately buttonhole a reader. That title also initiates the central drama of the poem: *odd* and *blocks* are not *sharp* and *dull* or *sad* and *happy*, yet they strike a contrast, however subtle: blocks are usually but not always rectangles, like the squares marking the days of the Swiss calendar in the first line, or the neighborhood "blocks" even little towns like the one at the end of the poem tend to have.

Usually — but not always. That seems to me what's unique about Kay Ryan: her penchant for precision, concision, as well as epigrammatic and aphoristic tones — in short, everything we expect to convey orderliness, authority, and lucidity, so often open onto something completely different, an experience of life as Heraclitean, disorderly, unrepresentable, mutable, chancy. "Order is always / starting over."

I mean that Ryan makes us feel the very logic of being not only because she's a

master of lineation, rhyme, and syntactic action, but also because she fully sees the human condition, and yet smartly spurns abstract loftiness like that phrase "the human condition." Ryan gets fundamental human drama into the pith of her grammar. Marvelously, this works the other way around, too: Ryan's skill for verbal particulars grounds and allows an almost eighteenth-century level of aphoristic abstraction, and all the attendant readerly pleasures. This artful negotiation of opposites — Ryan's range — shows in her balance of whimsy and gravitas, as well as her deft swerve from particular images of domestic spaces or landscapes into bedrock questions: How do we make shape of our lives? Can we do so? Should we want to? And, by the way — what agency do we have anyway? In fact, "Odd Blocks" seems to me about the strange overlap of randomness and "first facts," the ordinary and the cataclysmic, chance and fate, but also about doing what we do with blocks — odd, or not: this is a poem about making stuff, a poem, say, or a life.

Maybe the second or third time I read "Odd Blocks," after it appeared in *Threepenny Review* in 2007, I cottoned on to a curious aspect of the poem. "Odd Blocks" rhymes with "Elephant Rocks," the title poem of Ryan's superb 1996 collection. That poem strikes a similar but different note. The elephant rocks are those boulders that, as they surface through earth, expose "ancient, implacable" forces "too patient and deep to be lost." In "Odd Blocks" the introduction of the word "randomness" alone affects a crucial difference. There's greater existential instability in "Odd Blocks." Put differently, "Odd Blocks" could be "Elephant Rocks" in a minor key, but I wouldn't want to choose between the two poems. Ryan's willingness to make her poem itself both a looking back and starting over — a back-to-basics gesture that reminds me of such great contemporary lyrics as Rich's "Diving into the Wreck" and Heaney's "Mint."

Like those poems, Ryan's work remains a vehicle of wonder and an act of survival. With her masterful gift for rendering both everyday spontaneity and glacial inevitability, Ryan's work always reminds me of what Stella Adler told her acting students: "You can say that two plus two equals four and make it seem quite unremarkable. You can also say two plus two equals four in a way that reveals that it is an idea that took millions of years to evolve."

NATALIE SHAPERO

Laws of Disaster

Crash

Slip is one
law of crash
among dozens.

There is also
shift —
moving a
granite lozenge
to the left
a little,
sending down
a cliff.

Also toggles:
the idle flip
that trips
the rails
trains travel.

No act
or refusal
to act, no
special grip
or triple lock
or brake stops

crash; crash
quickens
on resistance
like a legal system
out of Dickens.

A I'm not sure whether to begin by saying that "Crash" is a paradigmatic Kay Ryan poem — it is, but maybe all Kay Ryan poems are paradigmatic Kay Ryan poems, rendering the statement redundant. Ryan's stylings are so specific and consistent, but somehow also immune to formula; the poems are crystalline and aphoristic, punchy and musical, and deliver context-resistant distillations of feeling and experience in tight, wild ways that can't be predicted or mapped. Poets like Ryan make poetry worth living.

Trains aren't uncommon in Ryan's work (see "Train-Track Figure" or the all-time classic "A Hundred Bolts of Satin"); less common is the appearance of laws. "Crash" works with both, and law appears in this small poem twice. As suggested by the title, the poem examines the occurrence of catastrophe; the opening lines about the idea of "slip" announce its project of taxonomizing the ways in which things can go dramatically wrong, with each subcategory conceptualized not as a mere instance, but as a "law." The language at this point, which invokes motion dynamics ("slip," "shift," "sending down a cliff"), suggests that the poem is using "law" in the Newtonian sense: a description of the physics of planet Earth.

Then, following the deep strangeness of the falling rock described as a "granite lozenge," the poem turns to machinery and the human-made. I'm interested here in the way that the crash in this examples is located not in the trains themselves, but in the "toggles" and the "flip." Here, the poem's specific description of the flip as "idle" makes it sound casual, done for fun or out of boredom, as a game or experiment. It puts me in mind of trolley problems, of initiation into attitudes that attempt to quantify our individual relative worths and posit that some kinds of lives are more valuable than others. And this literal switching of tracks is where the poem sort of switches tracks, also, moving away from the irrefutability of gravity and beginning to travel toward questions about the production and distribution of resources, of competition and hierarchization.

The poem then tells us both that crash is inevitable and that nothing can prevent it from happening ("No act / or refusal / to act, no / special grip / or triple lock …") and also that the crash's severity, on the other hand, is determined by external factors at the time of its occurrence ("… crash / quickens / on resistance"). And the poem's final stanza begins with the line "crash; crash"; reading this line on its own, I find that it invites me to imagine into it a second space and, rather than a single semi-colon, two colons — that is, it appears to me as it is but also, at the same time, as "crash :: crash," or "crash is to crash," taking the form of an elusive analogy or even a refutation of the trolley problem potentially conjured above. The practice of switch-flipping suggests that it's possible to determine that the loss of one life should mean more or less than the loss of another; "crash :: crash" is a paradigm that resists this.

I ended up spending a lot of time with this poem during the first months of the pandemic. In the winter of 2020, prompted by questions our child had been asking about the *Titanic*, my partner and I took her to the library and asked (shoutout here to children's librarian extraordinaire Megan Forsell) whether they had any books about the *Titanic* that were suitable for kindergartners. They had, it turned out, a whole bunch — apparently this disaster is a popular fixation. So when the library and so much else shut down, we found ourselves inside our home with a big stack of books about the *Titanic* and a build-it-yourself paper replica of the boat. We read,

we assembled. We watched the black-and-white film *A Night to Remember*. We made video calls to cooped-up friends in which we tried to entertain them by spreading a blue blanket on our couch and maneuvering the paper *Titanic* across the blanket and into a large ice cube we'd formed in the freezer. And we talked about catastrophe, about the component parts that can't be prevented and about the ones that can.

The poem here concludes by likening crash to a "legal system / out of Dickens." The return to law at the end — now a political system, rather than a scientific account — pushes us back to the opening stanza, casting new light on our initial reading of "law," turning it again to show us potential additional facets. The Dickensian world, like our world, is one of extreme inequities. Its arrival here at the end of the poem brings with it, for me, the weight of those inequities — and questions about the way they contribute to and exacerbate crash and its aftermath. The pandemic isn't done with us (and neither, apparently, is the *Titanic*), and I'm grateful for this poem as a guide to the laws — in both senses — of disaster.

HAILEY LEITHAUSER

Lonely but Not Alone

Lighthouse Keeping

Seas pleat
winds keen
fogs deepen
ships lean no
doubt, and
the lighthouse
keeper keeps
a light for
those left out.
It is intimate
and remote both
for the keeper
and those afloat.

The first time I saw Edvard Munch's *The Storm* hanging at the MOMA, I was instantly seduced. This was sometime back in the mid-seventies and it remains my favorite painting to this day. In it, an amorphous group of six women, placed slightly back and off to the left, cling to each other for support, while a seventh woman, dressed in white, stands in the foreground with hands pressed to the sides of her face in fear. Behind them a tree bends ominously in the wind and directly behind that is a house with every window lit by warm yellow lamplight. Beyond the house, unseen but assumed, is a fjord leading to the sea.

The reason I love this painting is that — despite its setting in Åsgårdstrand, Norway — it takes me back to the fierce sudden thunderstorms of my Florida childhood. Drama lover that I was even then, I used to call the storm clouds, "the black hand," and every afternoon in the summer they would come, and with little warning, just a slight frisson of electricity in the air, an uptick in the breeze through the leaves of the orange trees, a quick drop in air pressure, and I would have perhaps a minute's grace to race the long block home to the impregnable brick shelter of my room.

And this is what comes back to me whenever I read "Lighthouse Keeping." For me, this poem has the same sort of enticement as Munch's painting, that same sense of imminent danger exaggerated by the nearness of safety. It's a delicious feeling, simultaneously anxious and comforting, precarious and reassuring — immeasurable nature flexing her muscles while the prospect of refuge dangles before you if you can only get to it in time.

The poem begins in a marvel of concision, certainly nothing unusual for Ryan, with just ten bare, precise words to describe the coming of a storm at sea. There is a change in the pattern of the waves, fog obscures the shoreline, the ships list towards the water — the "no / doubt" assuring us of their inescapable fragility — and the winds rise, not just to blow or blast or even wail, but out and out keen like banshees against the plaster walls of the lighthouse.

Of course, we've always had good reason to fear this mercurialness of the sea. There is the brute strength of it, its breadth and unimaginable depths, the mysteries unanswered, the widow's walks and the children never returned from war. The Greeks filled it with monsters and tempests, as did medieval mapmakers. Melville wrote of the ego of the ocean and abandoned young Pip to go mad in his horror of its emptiness. Marianne Moore, worried over her brother's enlistment in the navy, described the ocean as an open grave.

And if the sea evokes fear and trembling, then the lighthouse on its thin jagged spit is a covenant of hope. It stands to mark the boundary between exposure and asylum, rogue waves and hull-crushing rocks versus hi-rises and the corner bar, or as Longfellow put it, the means to help remote ships "bring man nearer unto man."

I must stop here to applaud Ryan's choice of words in her title. Rather than "The Lighthouse Keeper," how much warmer and more vital is her use of the gerund, "Keeping," with its sense of ongoing holding, tending to, proffering of light. This poem isn't about one person or one static place; it is about an interaction, a need and response. It is reinforced by her description of the ships, which are not just out in the storm but "left out" — abandoned, excluded, forgotten, and on their own.

But along with the tension, what pulls me back time and again is the lovely loneliness in this poem. It's there in the separation and link between the keeper and the ships, which she describes perfectly in the opening of the brief second sentence. "It is intimate / and remote both," she writes, managing to articulate in six words how out of distance and isolation can come the most intense flashes of intimacy.

This is the feeling I sometimes get reading a superior poem late at night when the rest of the world around me is asleep, a visceral connection with the writer, the light reaching me across cities or centuries, an awareness Ryan discusses directly in a later poem, "Ideal Audience," in which she writes of the poet and reader knowing "with / exquisite gloom / that only we two / ever found this room." It is my favorite seduction of poetry, both the reading and the writing of it, the bittersweet ache of it, knowing yourself to be lonely but not alone.

UNCOLLECTED POEMS
by KAY RYAN

Some Transcendent Addiction to the Useless

George Steiner, *The Poetry of Thought*

Unlike the
work of
most people
you're supposed
to unthread
the needle.
It will be
a lifetime
task, far
from simple:
the empty eye
achievable —
possibly — but
it's going
to take
fake sewing
worthy of
Penelope.

Immense and Inclined to Pulse

Since then I have slowly learned to grasp how everything is connected across space and time.
W.G. Sebald, *A Place in the Country*

There is a webby and
exalted state of
comprehension wherein
discrete events — like the
rigging lights of separate
boats upon a midnight
ocean — suggest a net:
something immense and
inclined to pulse — not
hideous with meaning yet
but already strangely tedious
if expressed.

Even on the Greatest Subjects Too Much Can Be Said

Montaigne

You can oversell
the sea, say, or
the way we miss
the dead. The littlest
bit of absence excites
oceans. And of oceans
the less said the
better: *the wet beyond*
the land: we have a
built-in hair-trigger
primed to understand.

Only the Beginning of the Sharpness

What you think is the point is not the point at all but only the beginning of the sharpness.
Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*

It's hard for
the master
sharpener after
all that work
to have the shaft
taken for the point.
People run themselves
through right and
left and don't
know they do.
The point is
sticking out their
back and they're
still waiting
for it, looking
down the track.