

The New Criterion

Dispatch July 17, 2008 11:02 am

Kay Ryan gets her laurels

by David Yezzi

It's heartening when good things happen to good poets. The announcement today that Kay Ryan will become the next U. S. Poet Laureate almost restores one's faith in the literary world--in which, so frequently, those lacking taste shower accolades (and cash) on those lacking talent.

Kay Ryan, who for decades has been quietly crafting brilliant poems at her home in the Bay Area, is the real thing. We are delighted to have featured her poems in *The New Criterion*. For those still unfamiliar with her work, here is an excerpt from a review of her latest book, *Niagara River*, that I wrote recently for *The Weekly Standard*:

[Kay Ryan's] willfully low-key ingredients are leavened by one of the finest (and funniest) caustic wits in contemporary poetry and by a humane melancholia that lends the poems urgency and grounds them in deep feeling. "Home to Roost" from Ryan's latest collection, *The Niagara River*, works its compressed magic on an old cliché:

The chickens

are circling and

blotting out the

day. The sun is

bright, but the

chickens are in

the way. Yes,

the sky is dark

with chickens,

dense with them.

They turn and

then they turn

again. These

are the chickens

you let loose

one at a time

and small—

various breeds.

Now they have

come home

to roost—all

the same kind

at the same speed.

At what point does the poem switch – delicately, almost imperceptibly – to a minor key. The comic notes sounded at the outset (flying chickens indeed!), underscored by the internal rhyme day/way and the insistent “yes” meant to tweak our incredulity, produce a smirk. So does the travesty of Eliot’s “Because I do not hope to turn again” and Yeats’s “Turning and turning in the widening gyre,” which dashes modernist poetics on the rocks of its own imperious shores. But then comes the shudder of recognition: these birds represent something of great delicacy and variety; great care was taken in letting them loose “one at a time.” Well, here they are again, the poet tells us, returned in lockstep and with an ominous uniformity like a parade of storm troopers. Chekhov is another modern writer who keeps us laughing until the moment we are brought up short by the opposite of laughter. Ryan closes with a show stopper, as “all” reaches up to claw at “small.” The poem sends our own personal chickens – the bitter specters of our best intentions – whirling into the air.

Occasionally, Ryan’s serendipitous rhymes and tightly turned ruminations approach a kind of light verse, sporting an against-the-grain delight in wit and a rare confidence that humor needn’t cancel the truth in a poem. “Atlas,” for example, tickles the reader while shrewdly identifying a palpable human experience:

Extreme exertion

isolates a person

from help,

discovered Atlas.

Once a certain
shoulder-to-burden
ratio collapses,
there is so little
others can do:
they can't
lend a hand
with Brazil
and not stand

on Peru.

The argument of the poem remains self-specific, its logic intact, while the experience it describes resonates broadly, becoming universal. Anyone may appreciate the inherent difficulty of coming to another's aid. Certainly any parent, or teacher, or friend, will appreciate the problem and even feel a twinge of remorse for the many Perus they have trampled while trying to be of help. One might be tempted to see Ryan's poems as a brand of what Harold Bloom has called "wisdom writing," if they just weren't so damned funny — and sad.

Ryan's work can be deadly serious as well, as in this passage from her elegy for the Holocaust-haunted writer W. G. Sebald entitled "He Lit a Fire with Icicles":

. . . How

cold he had
to get to learn
that ice would
burn. How cold
he had to stay.
When he could
feel his feet
he had to

back away.

The final rhyme lends an affecting sweetness to the poem, which doubles, like Auden's elegy for Yeats, as an apt bit of literary criticism. Such versatility as Ryan displays occurs rarely. Poets often develop a single mode and stick to it, yet one has the feeling reading Ryan that, while her lyrics proceed in their signature spindle of highly musical speech, she is constantly searching for new ground.

David Yezzi is former Poetry Editor of *The New Criterion*. His most recent book, *More Things in Heaven: New and Selected Poems*, is forthcoming from Measure Press.

Her poems are at once modest of means and boldly immodest in scope and in their desire to communicate the high-stakes information of the heart. "Ideal Audience" gets at the nature of this desire:

Not scattered legions,
not a dozen from
a single region
for whom accent
matters, not a seven-
member coven,
not five shirttail
cousins; just
one free citizen—
maybe not alive
now even—who
will know with
exquisite gloom
that only we two

ever found this room.

Ryan's poems are not written for billboards but for the solitary reader, who against the odds, has come upon her work and been moved by it. That reader, if you are lucky, might even be you.