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## A Conversation with Kay Ryan, United States Poet Laureate

Words [Luisa Igloria](#)

Sunday, April 4th, 2010 at 12:24 pm

**Kay Ryan's poems and essays have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *Poetry*, *The Yale Review*, *Paris Review*, *The American Scholar*, *The Threepenny Review*, and *Parnassus*, among other journals and anthologies.**

Ryan was elected a Chancellor of The Academy of American Poets in 2006, and in 2008 was appointed the Library of Congress's sixteenth Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry. She went on to serve a second term as U.S. Poet Laureate, which will conclude in May this year.



Ryan began writing poetry at the age of 19. Her first collection, titled *Dragon Acts to Dragon Ends*, was self-published in 1983, according to her only because she believed "it was utter hopelessness that anybody else was ever going to publish my poems." Since then, Ryan has published several other collections: *Strangely Marked Metal* (1985); *Flamingo Watching* (1994), which was a finalist for both the Lamont Poetry Selection and the Lenore Marshall Prize; *Elephant Rocks* (1996); *Say Uncle* (2000); and *The Niagara River* (Grove Press, 2005). A re-issue of her 2002 collection, *Believe It or Not!*, poems inspired by stories from the newspaper cartoon *Ripley's Believe It or Not!*, has been re-released and re-titled as *The Jam Jar Lifeboat & Other Novelties Exposed* (Red Berry Editions 2008). Her most recent publication is *The Best of It: New and Selected Poems* (Grove Press, 2010).



Various reviewers have described her work as precise but also densely figurative, vividly etched and fleetingly allegorical; and her style as pithy and intelligent, but without ever being inaccessible. J.D. McClatchy has said: “Her poems are compact, exhilarating, strange affairs, like Erik Satie miniatures or Joseph Cornell boxes. She is an anomaly in today’s literary culture: as intense and elliptical as Dickinson, as buoyant and rueful as Frost.” Dana Gioia writes in an essay on “Discovering Kay Ryan” of being deeply impressed by her originality; she is “an outsider to the institutionalized world of contemporary American poetry. She did not emerge from a writing program or the New York arts world. She is entirely the product of California but not the glamorous state of Hollywood and Silicon Valley.”

Kay Ryan is keynoting this year’s [Tidewater Community College Literary Festival](#) and reading in the Roper Auditorium at the downtown Norfolk campus on Monday evening, 5 April, at 7pm. From her home in Marin County, California, Kay spoke by phone recently with Norfolk-based poet [Luisa A. Igloria](#), who directs the [MFA Creative Writing program at Old Dominion University](#).

**Luisa Igloria: Thank you for taking time for this conversation today. I want to start by referring to what many reviews and articles have described of you — something you’ve also used to describe yourself — as a kind of self-taught poet. I find myself attracted to that, perhaps because I’ve often felt myself to be an outsider to the “formal” culture of creative writing that abounds these days, especially in the academic setting. For instance, the first time I set foot in a creative writing workshop, I was 30 and had just begun my graduate studies...**

Kay Ryan: Sometimes I do think it an advantage to not have had that kind of previous background!

**Do you have a story about coming to writing, specifically, how you came to poetry?**

I came to poetry in a sense because I think I had exhausted other avenues that were not completely satisfying to me. I have said many times before that I really resisted the idea of being a poet because it was such a serious thing to be, such a profound thing. In my mind, I think I wanted to be something much more superficial: when I was young I thought I wanted to be a stand-up comedian, or a carpenter. I thought it would be really wonderful to do something that had a clear result and a definition in the world that wasn’t so vague and so... dramatic. It was in the ‘70s when poets were thought to be very dramatic, confessional, given to excess, given to a lot of self-exposure. I didn’t like any of that, but what happened ultimately was that at 29, I approached this condition that I was pretty much going to be giving my life to (poetry). I realized my mind was getting cornered: it was engaging more and more in a lot of found amusements and I remember one occasion when I was reading a novel or some kind of prose work, and everything started rhyming to me. My mind was rhyming without my guidance or my permission.

**You were rewriting the novel in verse?**

I was finding rhymes where I wouldn’t have thought to find them.

**You don’t think then that there was any one external, catalyzing event?**

**The Open Road (Photo | Richard Webb) 1**

It was gradual, in a sense. You’ve probably read about how I did this cross-country bike ride. I had come to this position where I realized I wasn’t going to be entirely satisfied by being a teacher; and, let’s face it, I wasn’t going to be a carpenter. But I was preoccupied with poetry. So in 1976, there was a cross-country bike ride in conjunction

with the bicentennial celebrations; I thought that it would be a good opportunity to think about whether I was going to be a poet or not. I sat on a bicycle for 4,000 miles to think about it.

I was pretty deep into the trip but I had not had any luck coming into any sort of revelation into writing. But as I was going through a very high pass in the Colorado Rockies, suddenly my mind felt extremely clear and powerful and it was as if I had entered into some condition that poets tend to talk about— I realized I could think very clearly, and the normal vision of self and everything else had fallen away. Somehow I had entered into this condition of being— not “one with being,” it’s so hard to talk about and I’m trying to avoid all the woo-woo words, these are so cliché— but in any case I found myself in an altered condition which allowed me to ask the question of myself or whatever I was feeling. I sort of proposed in my mind, Shall I be a writer? (I really meant poet, but I have such an allergy to the word.) The simplest possible answer was a question: Do you like it? And that just stripped away all the ancillary questions of Am I good at it? Will I find success? I just laughed, because of course I like it better than anything.

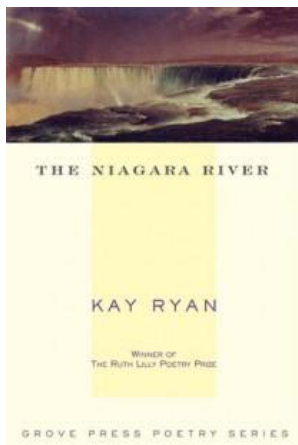
I truly went down the other side of the mountain knowing that this was what I was going to do with the rest of my life. It’s an interesting story because I am the kind of person that doesn’t look for or ask for experiences like that— I have never been a seeker. I value things, but I trust information thrust upon me— when something happens to me independent of my having had anything to do with it, I have more of a tendency to trust that.

**Let’s digress for just a moment, back to what you said earlier about wanting to be a carpenter. Do you make things with your hands, then?**

I put my tools down after I shingled my house. I completely shingled my house and my partner and I had roofed our house. Here in my bedroom where I am right now there is a large closet that I built; I’ve built tables and odds and ends and things, but the closet is the biggest thing I have ever built or made. I like making things from castoffs, from recycled bits. If you go into the hardware store or lumberyard you can get anything you want. But if you just look at the things you have in your basement and want to make something it’s more fun to do it that way.

**A while back you wrote an essay on taking a walk, that’s been published on the [Poetry Foundation website](#) called “Marin County, Sort of: Life, Shard-to-Shard”. In it, you say you are “interested in the life in shards, among shards, between shards, shard-to-shard.” You speak of the pleasure you take in those moments when you’re able to recognize something and perhaps later on find another piece of information that matches up to what you’ve stumbled upon.**

**I particularly enjoy the part where you say, “I admire how good the mind is, what a small actual bit it needs to call up the whole, and how it attributes value to things simply because it recognizes them. I take the keenest pleasure in knowing that a small trapezoid of gold slashed with red is part of a Dos Equis label. I know it. I’m a weird expert in these identifications. I don’t know how I trained, certainly not consciously. Maybe it’s just that I’ve always enjoyed looking down...” How much of this process of information gathering has been part of your “education” in writing poetry? What part does it play in the process of writing? What’s the rest of the process?**



You realize you are asking some immense questions here. I do think however that a poem depends upon happy accidents and connections that the mind can make essentially on its own if you give it some space. I would say that an essential component of writing a poem is getting your mind around to a condition of playfulness. With me, I think that I prefer to start with something tiny, just like a snowflake or drop of rainwater has to start with a little tiny grain of something. But then all it needs is a grain and then it starts building a crystal or a poem around it. So I think starting is the most essential thing.

And then there are a couple of machines that help my mind terrifically — By machinery I mean it’s almost like some kind of chemical process that, once started, wants to continue: a word, a couple of words are in my mind or on the page, and they on their own begin to find their family members... The first is rhyme. Rhyme is

nonsensical. I have a mind that likes to make a point. If i were in perfect control I would probably make the point much differently and it would be something I probably knew I wanted to say already. But rhyme has a way of waylaying me. The other engine or machine is metaphor, which is also powerful but works differently. Metaphors are pictures, and they want to live on their own. They have an independent impulse, and a desire to go off in their own direction.

These engines pull me away from whatever little thing it was I thought I was pursuing at the outset, so that I am confronted by distractions and don't really know where they are taking me; just like little children who pull you this way and that. And yet I know there is someplace I want to get to. Writing poetry is a combination of the desire to go somewhere, and these distractions.

The most interesting things to me in writing poetry are the things I can barely, barely perceive— some thought that is beyond my capture. I will think those things are signals that are weak, but only because they are coming from so far away; and yet I really want to get them. They are like the light coming from the furthest star, but this light is the most incredibly strong because it has come from such a distance.

### **That's a lovely metaphor.**

And so I am very interested in the inklings of light from that star. When I get the signals they are very weak and I can't really read them for I am just human. But what I found I have done in my poems is that I take this slight, slight knowledge, so slight I feel I am half- or more than half making it up; and amplifying it, turning it up so whatever it is can make me see more clearly or make itself understood... This is so hard to talk about! The cartoon-like nature perhaps of some of the things in my poems, is therefore that sort of deal where I've got so little information so I have to jack it up and darken the outlines in order to make it perceivable. It's like making a painting of something I can't entirely see...

**... like cartographers in the old days who drew maps but did not really know what a continent looked like?**

Yes, yes, they would say This is the border, but they didn't really know that...

**And the old mapmakers sometimes drew all sorts of fabulous creatures on the margins of maps...**

That is a very good analogy! When I am trying hard to explain these things it's nice to feel there's someone on the other end of the line trying to form her own images. I feel sometimes as though some things I say just land on the floor, that there's no receiver...

**I'm doing my best to catch! But let's talk about another part of that essay you wrote, where you define poetry as "an impossible pang" — but one that you try to channel, bring to some perceptible shape and form. I think you were also saying that any encounter with a good poem has the ability to elicit that muscular, deep, and resonant experience of feeling the "impossible pang" of experience in the mind and heart. What about poems that are not as successful— how do you know, and why do they fail? Or are they failures in their inability to capture that difficult to name state that is poetry?**

I don't think I really know how to answer that. I think we mostly create failures. Almost everything I write fails in that I don't know [all about it] ... Almost everything fails. We all fail. But I know I'm very interested in poetry and nothing else gives me that entire engagement as being involved in writing a poem. If anybody knew the answer they would do it all the time.

**But is it possible to discern whether a poem is not going to make it as a poem? I've heard some poets say with so much confidence that they know a poem is there when they hear an audible click in their heads...**

It's tricky sometimes. I'm thrilled and grateful when I feel that what I've written seems right and the pieces have locked together in a certain kind of way— That does happen sometimes. But it isn't generally that clear.

**Do you abandon those efforts?**

I find that I am not a great judge of what I've done... But I might finish something in the morning and put it away in a strange state of exhilaration thinking I've really gotten something, then will look at it later and say Kay, what were you thinking? But I never throw it away and what I find is that my opinion of what I've done flops back and forth radically. Days later I will say This is embarrassing and then six months later I might say This is a very good poem. So I have learned not to understand my opinion of my work— I don't even know when I could "fix" it but I can say that I stand by most of the work I've put in a book since Flamingo Watching: I haven't stopped thinking that for the most part it is the very best that I could have done. Some writers say they can't recognize earlier work, that it feels like it was done by someone else. But I know that my work is mine— it feels like what I could say, an idea that I was wrestling with at another time.

**In your new and selected poems, at the very end of the first section of new poems, you have positioned a much older poem there, dated 1965 ("After Zeno"). Can you tell us why?**

*"After Zeno"*

*(For my father)*

*When he was*

*I was*

*But I still am*

*and he is still.*

*Where is is*

*when is is was?*

*I have an is*

*but where is his?*

*Now here—*

*no where:*

*such a little*

*fatal pause.*

*There's no sense*

*in past tense.*



Because I had never published that poem. It is the first poem I ever wrote and it followed my father's death. I was nineteen then. And I have always found it strange and mysterious that I wrote this poem. I didn't think I wrote anything that good again for years, and it looks so much like my mature work now. It gave me thought that perhaps inside of us there really is a condition which never really changes, but that we only get access to sometimes. In other words, this poem is something that has always been in me, though I can't necessarily visit it very often. Do you know what I mean?

**Yes, like after the bike ride, that condition of clarity you spoke of inside of you that allowed you to live in your mind and in your whole being?**

**"After Zeno" refers to Zeno's paradox— the idea that the distance you cover is always infinitely halved, and therefore your approach to anything is always a perpetual deferment. I do like what you said about how there is an unchanging condition that allows you to come to places where you can write things like this. But is this model of continual displacement unsettling to you at all?**

Do I think it tragic that the idea or fact that what one pursues is forever elusive, and that you can just get a little tiny clip? No, I find it consoling. I find the whole condition to be one that makes me want to continue doing what I do. It can't be tragic because it isn't a loss though it's just not a definable gain... What you have in a way, is that the poem is just a kind of marker for experience. You use it like a lens and the thing is different from the poem. The poem is just a kind of lens, words put together in some kind of animated relationship to each other so that something else, some kind of condition, is perceivable and one can enter that condition through this animated arrangement of words. But it is always so much better to write poems than to talk about them!

**I agree. Now I want to bring up one poem you've written — "Miners' Canaries." To me the poem is about risk. Can you say a little something about that in terms of what you do as a poet?**

*"Miners' Canaries"*

*It isn't arbitrary;*

*it isn't curious;*

*miners' canaries*

*serve ordinary purposes*

*with just a fillip of*

*extra irony.*

*Something is always*

*testing the edges*  
*of the breathable—*  
*not so sweet, not so yellow,*  
*but something is always*  
*living at the wrong edge*  
*of the arable; something*  
*is always excused first*  
*from the water table,*  
*chalking the boundary*  
*of the possible*  
*from the far side;*  
*even in the individual.*

I don't think anyone's ever mentioned that poem to me. It was written a long time ago, but you are absolutely right that there's the fact that you have to go too far. One of the indicators that a poem is ultimately of interest to me is if I feel as if I've gone way too far out on a limb and there is no tree left, it's all limb. Later I think that maybe (as the old cliché goes) I have made something out of whole cloth, that it is all fabrication, that it doesn't connect and no one would ever be able to get to where the poem has gotten to. But later I find that those poems are probably the ones that are the most alive. You have got to not be in control of it.

I have a poem called "Patience" and when I wrote it I was so hoping that it wasn't true.

*"Patience"*

*Patience is*  
*wider than one*  
*once envisioned,*  
*with ribbons*  
*of rivers*  
*and distant*  
*ranges and*

*tasks undertaken*

*and finished*

*with modest*

*relish by*

*natives in their*

*native dress.*

*Who would*

*have guessed*

*it possible*

*that waiting*

*is sustainable—*

*a place with*

*its own harvests.*

*Or that in*

*time's fullness*

*the diamonds*

*of patience*

*couldn't be*

*distinguished*

*from the genuine*

*in brilliance*

*or hardness.*

I didn't really want to know in the end, that it was truly information I didn't want to have; I didn't want to believe the products of patience could be the same as the products of pure inspiration, but I found that out anyhow. Despite how I thought I had begun in exaggeration, ultimately I found out that I do believe that what I said was true.

**Is risk-taking or going out on a limb, the same as not being interested in what people have to say about caution? is it opposed to saying what people will find comfortable to hear?**

I know I don't want to confuse being as clear as I possibly can, with risk-taking. I know that obviously, since I don't know everything, some things remain great leaps. I hope to write to any intelligent person who is willing to get in there and try. I want to be clear, and do not ever want to generate confusion or add to the mess. But I want readers to take those leaps too, and I want to give them what they need in order for them to be able to do it.

Also, a poem is language that you make public. If you have done that, then along with it comes an obligation to make it available to the reader.

**How do you make time for the mind to get unfettered and free, to get to that place of playfulness? There are many writers who want pragmatic advice on something like this.**

I wish I had something better to say than that my disposition and nature have been such that I am quite allergic to responsibility and I've arranged my life so that I don't have very much responsibility. I don't have children; I have always taught part time and I didn't even try to clutter my life with my mind. However, if I have responsibility, I feel that responsibility very keenly. Whereas some people have a lot of responsibilities and just blow them off; I can't do that. The only way I could avoid those things that pull on us is by not having them or keeping myself at a distance from them. I have so much compassion for people whose lives require so much from them.

**One last question – what is today going to be like, in your life as a poet laureate?**

I'm packing for a trip to D.C. to do a video simulcast for community college poetry day. From the Library or Congress, we'll be linked up with other community colleges for an April 1 program. Then I will be in Maryland, Philadelphia, and Virginia. I'll be gone for days, and my cat doesn't even know it yet. A neighbor is going to take care of him, but he will be lonely and he won't like it.

*Kay Ryan is keynoting this year's Tidewater Community College Literary Festival and reading in the Roper Auditorium at the downtown Norfolk campus on Monday evening, 5 April, at 7pm. For more info on the TCC Lit Fest, [click here](#). For more info on Luisa Igloria, [click here](#).*