BOOKS

THINK SMALL

America's quiet poet laureate.

BY ADAM KIRSCH

Kay Ryan has become a famous poet in much the same way Ernest Hemingway described a man going broke: "gradually and then suddenly." She was nearing forty when her first, self-published book appeared, in 1983, but neither that début nor the two books that followed got much response from readers or critics. In 1999, when Dana Gioia wrote an essay calling attention to Ryan's work, it was the first substantial review she had ever received. Gioia recalled that he had discovered Ryan "almost by accident," when he was given a copy of her 1994 collection, "Flamingo Watching." "No critical fanfare accompanied the slender volume," he wrote, "and I had no special reason to think it possessed singular merit." Though Ryan was then fifty-four, and had been publishing for the best part of two decades, Gioia still considered her a "new" poet.

That was just over ten years ago. Today, Ryan is entering her second term as poet laureate of the United States, and has received most of the awards American poetry has to give. The appearance of "The Best of It: New and Selected Poems" (Grove/Atlantic; $24) confirms her stature: only the most eminent poets command this kind of publication, which represents for a poet what a career retrospective at a major museum means for a painter.

Yet to speak of Ryan's success in conventional terms, however accurate it may be, feels like an irrelevancy, if not an impertinence. "One can't work/by lime light," Ryan wrote in a punning poem in her 2000 collection, "Say Uncle": "A bowlful/right at/one's elbow/produces no/more than/a baleful/glow against/the kitchen table." And the more prominent Ryan has become, the more cuttingly she has criticized the very poetry world that seeks to honor her. In a wonderfully impolite essay published in *Poetry* in 2005, she wrote about attending the annual convention of the Associated Writing Programs—the umbrella organization for all the nation's university creative-writing departments. Ryan compared the event, with its two-hundred-and-thirty-page schedule and its fifteen simultaneous panels, to a trip to Costco: "The AWP catalog says to you, as the Costco shopping cart says to you, Think big! Glut yourself!"

To a poet like Ryan, nothing could be more of an anathema than bigness. Open "The Best of It" to any page, and you will find a narrow column of verse, held aloft by taut rhythms and irregular rhymes; her poems are seldom longer than a page and never longer than two. There have been great poets devoted to glut, but Ryan belongs to the other—and usually more trustworthy—camp, the one ruled by what she calls "That Will to Divest":

> Meaning: once
> you've swept
> the shelves
> of spoons
> and plates
> you kept
> for guests,
> it gets harder
> not to also
> simplify the larder,
> not to dismiss
> rooms, not to
> divest yourself
> of all the chairs
> but one, not
> to test what
> singleness can bear,
> once you've begun.

In American poetry, the contest between glut and starvation is inevitably epitomized by Whitman and Dickinson. Between these two tutelary spirits, Ryan would of course choose Dickinson, and the resemblances between them have been made much of by critics. This is natural enough—after all, Ryan, too, writes brief, compressed lyrics, and has been a kind of outsider to the literary world.

But the comparison does not really

capture Ryan's style and personality, and she sometimes seems to be consciously repudiating it, as in the poem "Hope." Hope, to Dickinson, is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul; to Ryan, it is merely "the almost-twin/of making-do,/the isotope/of going on." The chemical vocabulary dissents from Dickinson's romantic imagery, just as Ryan's wry pessimism keeps its distance from Dickinson's metaphysical despair. Often, in fact, the poet Ryan sounds most like is Philip Larkin: she, too, aspires to be one of "The Less Deceived"—the title of Larkin's second book.

Certainly Larkin would have appreciated the metaphor in "The Niagara River," the title poem of Ryan's 2005 collection. "We/do know, we do/know this is the/Niagara River, but/it is hard to remember/what that means," she writes, and her deliberate refusal to name the famous falls in the poem both mirrors and mocks our tendency to ignore the ending we are all heading for. Larkin, it bears remembering, was another sharp critic of creative-writing classes, and of poetic cant in general. He was in the university world, but as a librarian he was not quite of it—just as Ryan has been a professor not of creative writing but of remedial English, at a community college in Marin County.

Ryan herself attended Antelope Valley Community College, before transferring to U.C.L.A., and her signature effort as Poet Laureate is the Community College Poetry Project. Perhaps because she grew up in remote parts of California—the San Joaquin Valley and the Mojave Desert, far from the coastal metropolises—Ryan has a pronounced sympathy with those who approach poetry with a sense that they are entering a foreign country. One early poem, "A Certain Meanness of Culture"—the phrase is T. S. Eliot's dismissive description of William Blake—proclaims her allegiance to those "born on deserts" who "start to value culture/like you would water." "You get/pretty stringy and impatient/with the fat smoke off/old cities," she writes, sounding like a New World populist in the William Carlos Williams tradition.

But this persona is not a good fit for Ryan, whose poems feature epigrams from and references to Fernando Pessoa, Martin Buber, and Joseph Brodsky (as well as "Ripley's Believe It or Not!"). Reading "The Best of It," it becomes clear that Ryan, like all genuinely gifted poets, is a democratic élitist, believing that many are called but few are chosen. It is precisely because she earned her own intimate relationship with literature—because she needs "culture/like you would water"—that she believes in greatness, which is simply another name for effectiveness: great writing is writing that really does quench your thirst. She has no patience for the clumsy sincerity of what she calls, in one poem, "Outsider Art": "There never/seems to be a surface equal/to the needs of these people. . . ./We are not/pleased the way we thought/we would be pleased."

Ryan's poems are personal, but reticent, not confessional.

JODY HEWGILL

One of the clearest signs of Ryan's seriousness and talent, in fact, is her willingness to sound the old, noble, and unfashionable note of high poetic ambition: "Few/are the willing/and fewer/the champions," she writes in "Repetition." This kind of ambition would be equally familiar to Whitman and Dickinson, but it is another barrier between Ryan and the conventional poetry world. In her essay in *Poetry*, she describes listening to panelists talk about how teaching creative writing fuels their own creativity, and feeling the same kind of guilt a four-star chef might feel at a church potluck:

> My sense of this panel, mostly made up of women and attended by women, for what reason I can't say, is that these are sincere, helpful, useful people who show their students their own gifts and help them to enjoy the riches of language while also trying to get some writing done themselves. They have to juggle these competing demands upon their souls and it is hard and honorable. I agree and shoot me now.

This is abrasive, and so, at its best, is Ryan's poetry, as in "Periphery":

> Fountains, for instance,
> have a periphery
> at some distance
> from the spray.
> On nice days
> idle people circle
> all the way around
> the central spout.
> They do not get wet.
> They do not get hot.

It is Ryan's version of Frost's complaint: "They cannot look out far./They cannot look in deep." Reading her, one remembers that abrasiveness used to be a prized characteristic of American literature, a reflection of the democratic orneriness of the homesteader and the frontiersman. Now that literature is largely a profession and an institution, it is hard to imagine how D. H. Lawrence could ever have said that "the essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer."

Ryan is no killer, of course, though when she writes about nature she does tend to sympathize more with the predator than with the prey: "Rabbits are one of the things/coyotes are for," one poem observes. But Lawrence's other adjectives are a faithful enough description. "It takes a courageous/person to leave spaces/empty," Ryan writes in "Leaving Spaces," condemning the medieval mapmakers who filled up

their blanks with monsters or pretty designs: "Of course they were cowards/and patronized by cowards." She uses the same metaphor in protesting creative-writing classes: "One must truly HOLD A SPACE for oneself. All things conspire to close up this space." If this were simply a complaint about the poetry world, it could be dismissed as mere crankiness; as an expression of Ryan's sensibility, or even her philosophy of life, it goes much deeper. Thoreau would have understood it perfectly.

It may seem like a paradox that a poet who makes much of her independence should turn out to be one of the best contemporary poets of marriage. But the paradox is only superficial: it is because Ryan values true companionship so highly that she scorns its easy simulacra. In interviews, Ryan has spoken about the role that her wife, Carol Adair, played in her development as a writer; in a recent *Newsweek* profile, she called Adair "my strongest advocate and my single companion in my poetry life." The two met in 1977, when Ryan was teaching an English class at San Quentin State Prison (where Adair worked in the education department), and they were together until Adair's death, last year.

Yet aside from the dedication—"For Carol/who knew it"—Adair's name never appears in "The Best of It." This reticence is entirely in keeping with Ryan's approach to poetry, which developed in reaction to the vogue for confessional poetry in the nineteen-sixties. "I just didn't like the style that saying 'poet' meant," Ryan told *Newsweek*. "Anne Sexton was a poet. Robert Lowell was a poet. People who cut a dramatic swath. Lots of medication. I didn't want to be dramatic."

When Lowell wrote about his marital griefs, he spared no details: "Why not say what happened?" he asks in a late poem. With Ryan, by contrast, it is entirely possible to read her 1996 collection, "Elephant Rocks," without fully realizing that she is chronicling, with touching delicacy, a domestic crisis. It becomes clear only in retrospect, for instance, that "Hope," that despairing poem—which speaks of "the always tabled/righting of the present"—is part of the same sequence that includes "Bad Patch," "Swept Up Whole," and "Relief," each observing a moment in the trajectory of a marriage or love affair. Even at her most explicit, Ryan never gets more confessional than "A Plain Ordinary Steel Needle Can Float on Pure Water" (a factoid credited to "Ripley's"):

> It's a treat to see water
> so rubbery, a needle
> so peaceful, the point encased
> in the tenderest dimple.
> It seems so *simple*
> when things or people
> have modified each other's qualities
> somewhat.

The technique of talking about people by talking about things, as well as the slightly arch tone and diction, are Ryan's legacies from Marianne Moore, who is a sometimes overbearing presence in her earliest poems. Who is the tender water in this relationship, and who the needle? That "somewhat," carefully placed on its own line, is surely a clue to the answer. It is the poet who, with prickly honesty, insists on the limits of mutual accommodation, just as she insists, in "Heat," that sexual attraction can be deceptive:

> There is a heat
> coming off
> anything we meet
> our-sized and
> mildly round.
> Who has not found
> herself warmed
> by certain stones,
> for example, or
> made occasional
> "mistakes" about things
> that didn't turn out
> to be people?

Compared with the way many poets write about sexual or romantic disappointment, this sounds almost like indifference. It takes an ear attuned to Ryan's pitch of irony to appreciate the contempt and regret she packs into words like "certain" and "mistakes." In fact, the more directly Ryan writes about desire, the more indirect she becomes, as befits a poet for whom, it seems, the most important things are the ones that are hardest to say. In "Green Hills," for instance, is Ryan writing about landscape, or about young, unattainable bodies, or both, when she observes, "Their green flanks/and swells are not/flesh in

any sense / matching ours, / we tell ourselves"?

Certainly it is not just the fish we are supposed to sympathize with in "To the Young Anglerfish," when Ryan, spurred by a quotation from Stephen Jay Gould, sympathizes with a creature caught in mid-evolution, its lower nature at war with its higher one:

> Meanwhile, the problems of life enhance:
> an awkwardness attends the mating dance
> and an inexplicable thoughtfulness
> at the wrong moments.
> That part of you that is pledged to the future
> abstracts you in some way from nature
> with the small *n*.

Here it is easy to recognize the classic complaint of the writer (usually, however, the young writer) who finds her self-consciousness inhibiting her instincts, especially when it comes to sex. The problem is that self-consciousness, "inexplicable thoughtfulness," is also the writer's greatest point of pride. It is what makes Ryan, in the title of another poem, "Cut Out for It": "Cut out / as a horse / is cut / from the / pack," she finds her very isolation is what gives her "such a feeling / for the way / they touch / and shift / as one, the / beauty when / they run."

This melancholy lucidity is Ryan's greatest gift, and it can be heard in all her most successful poems. But her most startling discovery is that melancholy, with its tendency to brood and spread, is best contained in a form that is tight, witty, almost sprightly sounding. Her poems are often built on the logic of the pun, taking an ordinary word or dead cliché as a title and then jolting it to unexpected life. The title of the book itself does something like this: "the best of it" is simultaneously a boast ("These are my best poems"), a demurral ("This is the best I can do"), and, most powerfully of all, a description of Ryan's stoic art (poetry is the way she "makes the best of it").

That stoicism is especially in evidence in the collection's new poems, which seem to deal—in typically oblique fashion—with Adair's illness and death. In "Bitter Pill," Ryan makes the title phrase surprisingly literal: it is an actual pill, in a bottle with "your name" on it, and the bitterness is not just that of seeing a loved one sick but of actually swallowing the medicine. In "Dogleg," Ryan first challenges the title word by observing that "only two of / the dog's legs / dogleg," then extends its meaning by seeing it as an emblem of those moments "when life has / angled brutally."

But the pun is not a very challenging kind of wit, and Ryan's least satisfying poems are those in which she settles for the easy payoff of verbal comedy. "Bestiary," for instance, begins, "A bestiary catalogs / bests," and goes on to contrast it with a "goodiary." "Extraordinary Lengths" imagines "lengths / swagged from balconies, / ribbons of lengths rippling," and so on. Where Ryan's technique truly justifies itself is when pun deepens into symbol. In "Chop," Ryan turns the footprint of a bird on the beach into an "emperor's chop"—that is, a Chinese stamp or seal, used for signing documents. But the real point of the poem is what happens to that proud signature:

> Stride, stride,
> goes the emperor
> down his wide
> mirrored promenade
> the sea bows
> to repolish.

The sea seems to be doing homage to the bird-emperor, but in fact it is effacing every trace of his passage—just as, Ryan does not have to say, time and nature do to all our imperial ambitions.

A poem like this helps to explain why Ryan would choose to write an elegy for the German writer W. G. Sebald, with whom she seems to have little in common, at least on the surface. But, after all, Sebald wrote a book called "The Rings of Saturn," and Ryan is another disciple of the god of melancholy; Sebald was obsessed with transience and decay, and Ryan can never stop noticing what she calls, in "Slant," "a bias cut to everything, / a certain cant / it's better not to name." Ryan's poem for Sebald is titled "He Lit a Fire with Icicles," which is both an incident in the life of St. Sebolt, the writer's namesake, and a description of his technique: "How / cold he had / to get to learn / that ice would / burn. How cold / he had to stay," Ryan writes. Her admiration is unmistakable. ♦