POET'S CORNER: **Kay Ryan at home in Fairfax. You might say her whimsical, easy-on-the-ear poems offer relief from the incredible heaviness of being.**

Let There Be Lightness

Poet Kay Ryan knows what the world needs now.

BY CYNTHIA L. HAVEN

Kay Ryan, WITH IRISH POET PAUL MULDOON, WILL BE INTERVIEWED NOV. 15 BY FORMER U.S. POET LAUREATE ROBERT HASS, HERBST THEATRE, 401 VAN NESS AVE., S.F., (415) 392-4400.

A bubble. The foam on a stein of beer. A tulip quivering on a slender stem. A feather, to counterpoise the world's density, inertia, heaviness.

Lightness is a much underrated virtue, and a much misunderstood one. "Lightness" does not mean being vapid or intellectually shallow. It means looking at the world from a different perspective, with a different system of weights and measures. Marin County poet Kay Ryan—a very quiet writer who is suddenly creating a lot of noise—does exactly that in her poems.

It's a pickle, this life.
Even shut down to a trickle
it carries every kind of particle
that causes strife on a grander scale.…

The lightness of atoms inhabits Ryan's fey, easy-on-the-ear poetry, which wins her instant fans at her occasional, low-key readings. She explains what she's after this way: "It's the object of my life to get things to float. Because I like it. Because it's a relief. It *is* relief. It's freedom. So I would like my work to be weightless." But in today's grim and weighty world, she's been rebuked with charges of insubstantiality, even frivolity. *Library Journal* gave Ryan's 1994 book of poems, *Flamingo Watching,* a stern "not recommended," commenting, "Ryan's cramped syllabics have a monotonous density that too often mistakes sound for sense… these poems are derivative and lacking in substance."

There's nothing frivolous, however, about the attention Ryan has been getting lately, finally, after decades of writing and six books of poetry, including 2000's *Say Uncle.* Within a few months last spring, she won both a $40,000 Guggenheim Foundation fellowship and the $100,000 Ruth Lilly prize from Chicago's esteemed *Poetry* magazine. The award, praising a "singularity and sustained integrity that are very, very rare," establishes her in an enviably successful firmament that includes Adrienne Rich, Philip Levine, Anthony Hecht, John Ashbery, and W.S. Merwin—heavyweights all.

One thinks of Ashbery's avant-garde experimentalism. One thinks of the erudite Hecht's dark and troubled formal verses. One thinks of Rich's heavy-duty poems on poverty, racism, lesbianism, violence. Or of Levine's obsessions with working-class life in Detroit, or Merwin's dreamy, densely imagistic poems, with their long lines. One thinks of millions of poems everywhere, trying to impress you with their suffering and how very seriously they take themselves. Clearly, Ryan is hacking out a path of her own, but with a scalpel, not a machete.

She's not so much treating serious things lightly as she is turning the world upside down—not being drawn into its heaviness, not letting its heaviness inhabit her. In a sense, she's been keeping the darkness of the world from extending its territory, which is a signal act of defiance, perhaps more so than that of many "protest" poems. (Witness the leaden dullness of so much of the work in the Poets Against the War movement.) Ryan's

Photograph by Robyn Twomey

poems may shimmer on the surface—and how is that a bad thing?—but they are compelling in the quiet knowledge they bear.

Typically, Ryan begins with a tiny observation on a grand theme, then she extends it, spinning it out like sugar on a whimsical thread of thought. Her poems

Believing in their worth, Ryan sent the *New Yorker* her poems for years.

are a bit addictive: one finds oneself quoting them, mentioning them to friends, returning to them again and again, in the way that one does with the very best poetry.

Yet until recently, Ryan has been almost entirely unclaimed by West Coast literati. She's never been up for a California award: the Commonwealth Club's poetry medal, or the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize, or a PEN Center USA literary award. And yet what living poet is more a daughter of the Golden State? True, it's a voice light-years away from, say, Robert Hass's long meditations on Northern California wilderness, or Kim Addonizio's in-your-face sexuality. Ryan's is a voice born of the San Joaquin Valley and glamour-free Mojave Desert ("hot, empty, friendless"), where she grew up. A place, in Ryan's words, where any event is a big event. "Most of my poems," she says, "are opportunistic, about plucking an image out of the air."

Who else would write lines like this, if not a child of the desert?

The only justification
for extraordinary lengths
is extraordinary distances.
Yet you don't find this
In the majority of instances.

Or this:

Here is the virtue
in not looking up:
you will be the one
who finds the overhang
out of the sun
and something for a cup.

Ryan may be the least-known famous person in California. She has taught basic-writing skills at the College of Marin for 33 years. She and her partner of decades, Carol Adair, have owned the same house off Sir Francis Drake Boulevard since 1979. For years, she sent poems to Alice Quinn, poetry editor of the *New Yorker,* before she was published in its pages beginning in January 1995. "You may not see the excellence of these poems," Ryan wrote Quinn, "but I'll keep sending them until you do."

Now, with that amazing *Poetry* windfall in the bank, she's taking this term off to finish writing the poems for a new collection; mostly, the prize is her retirement money. Certainly, the new fame will give her a pulpit for the benefits of lightness. A few years ago, after winning an NEA fellowship, Ryan took on her critics, saying, "I don't know why lightness isn't more talked about, more valued, more pursued in poetry. I suspect it is out of the fear that one will be 'taken lightly.' But I ask, is there a sensation more exquisite than the feeling of having the burden of oneself borne off by a poem? The burden only, note; not the self. One's atoms are mysteriously distanced from one another. That is to say, one still has all one's own atoms, but for the moment they are not the trouble they were."

Science, in its obsession with subatomic particles, DNA, and microorganisms, has long since discovered that lightness is far from lightweight. Apparently, in poetry, we are finally discovering the virtues—the necessity—of lightness. In an epoch of small worries and very big fears, it might be the tonic we need. Just as Kay Ryan always knew it was. ●

Cynthia L. Haven is a literary critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle,* the *Washington Post,* and the *Times Literary Supplement.*

[open book]

A SENSUAL PALETTE

The Painting

by Nina Schuyler

ALGONQUIN BOOKS

BY PAMELA FEINSILBER

I hope that all the people who made *The Confessions of Max Tivoli* a local best-seller will look at Nina Schuyler's first novel. (Her name is pronounced NI-na SKY-ler, by the way.) What helped make Andrew Sean Greer's book so popular (and aided our belief in a narrator who aged backward) was its loving evocation of San Francisco in a much earlier day. Schuyler, who teaches writing at San Francisco's Academy of Art University, goes Greer one better by writing parallel stories, each set in 1870—one in a Japan just emerging from feudalism; the other in Paris during the Franco-Prussian War.

There's nothing dry or arcane about either tale. Schuyler revels in colors, scents, and sounds; her descriptions are as textured as the images Ayoshi, her sorrowing Japanese wife, paints of her lost love. ("Her mind skips across the blues, like a flat stone on water. A brush made from the tail of her father's horse dips into a pool of bruise blue and prances across the white sheet of paper.") In one excellent scene, Jorgen, a badly wounded soldier now laboring for a profiteer in a gloomy mansion, is astounded to see a tree bearing all its branches, its leaves reflecting the gold and purple evening sky. Paris has been besieged for months, and most of its trees have been axed for firewood. He thinks of the painting beneath his bed, "the couple standing underneath a magnificent old tree and the branches splintering the light. The leaves, a dark red-purple." Ayoshi—whose husband is a potter, favored by the harsh new government because of his exports to the West—impulsively hid this painting by wrapping it around a ceramic bowl sent to France.

More than a plot device, the painting, with its tender, vivid rendering of subtle details, slowly softens Jorgen's bitterness and guilt, helps him care for the world again. Meanwhile, Ayoshi, her husband, and a young Buddhist monk contend with the violent forces hauling Japan into the modern age. The book wears its scholarship well: the carrier pigeons with their silk-tied messages, Japan's flimsy wooden shops and tea-houses, the starving Frenchwomen who fought in that ancient war are integral to the stories, not a weary researcher's extraneous particulars. Beyond the well-paced unfolding of the plots—and it is impossible to predict how either will end—the novel immerses a reader in worlds far removed from our own, my own favorite form of escapism. ●