

In new collection, Marin poet Kay Ryan contemplates nuances of loss

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Ryan Kost

“When you read a poem and it communicates to you, you feel that you half wrote it. You feel part of the making in a way. It’s a wonderful thing. You’re in cahoots. You’re in cahoots with the writer.”

— *Kay Ryan*

Kay Ryan’s poetry stands on its own, separate, as she might put it, from any “autobiographical gloss.” If you read enough of her poems, say a dozen, you may learn some things about her, about the thoughts that occupy her mind, her wry sense of humor, her sly way with the words she chooses. You would not, however, learn about her dusty youth, the long bike rides she used to take that had her waking up dew-covered on the beach or the home she has made, tucked away in Marin.

Perhaps most notably, you would not learn about Carol Adair, her partner of 30 years and a person whose introduction to Ryan’s life almost exactly marked the beginning of her writing career (a career, it must be said, that has since been honored with almost every prize imaginable). “There were people,” Ryan once told the Paris Review, “who I could drop a stone down and hear it go plunk really fast. But I could drop a stone down Carol and never hear it hit the bottom.”

For that story, you would have to find a copy of each of Ryan’s collections, flip to a page near the front and read the dedication. You would have to do this chronologically, starting with “Dragon Acts to Dragon Ends,” published in 1983, and ending with her most recent work, “Erratic Facts,” published just this month. Once collected, the vaguest outlines would begin to appear, as if in an unintended piece of almost-poetry.



Kay Ryan sits for a portrait on Thursday, Sept. 10, 2015 in Fairfax, Calif. Ryan, winner of a genius award, the Ruth Lily Prize, the Pulitzer Prize for poetry and previous U.S. Poet Laureate, is coming out with a collection of short, witty, playful and incisive poems. Nathaniel Y. Downes/The Chronicle

“for Carol and the first 50 subscribers” — “Dragon Acts to Dragon Ends,” 1983

Ryan is short and short-haired, salt-and-pepper at age 70. Her face is boxy and lined. She plays with words and phrases almost absentmindedly. Sometimes, she seems to catch herself off guard with her own jokes (she is very funny) and begins to laugh. In the middle of a three-hour conversation, she might ask to feel your shoes or announce she wants your same haircut.

You can tell pretty quickly that you’re reading a Kay Ryan poem; a few things give them away. There are the technical aspects, most famously her “recombinant rhyme,” a big-sounding name for essentially playing fast and loose with the rules. She’ll slide a rhyme into the middle of one line and at the end of another a few beats later. Sometimes you don’t even notice they’re there; suddenly “afford” rhymes with “a four-oared.”

There’s the size. The poems are usually thin and short. They look a bit like cliffs on the page, smooth on the left and jagged on the right. Ryan likes edges. She says they open a poem up. She prefers “You” or “We” to “I.” Her poems are playful, and they teach. There’s a certain momentum to them. Imagine that feeling you got when you were a kid and you’d run full tilt

down a hill. It's a bit like that. Her poetry is often about small things — not things that don't matter, but things that are nearly imperceptible. "What I try to do is make them visible without destroying them," she says. "Hard to do."

Ryan's latest collection, "Erratic Facts," is full of gaps and blasts ("fibers trying to/ reach across the gap/ as fast as possible,/ following a blast."), references to loss ("loss doesn't get/ into the subsets/ of absolutely/ everything"), and broken things ("hearts can go/ with chambers/ broken open"). There is something different about this collection that sets it apart from the seven before it.

"It had to absorb Carol's death," Ryan says. "That made it different."

"for Carol" — "Strangely Marked Metal," 1985

There hasn't been anything exhaustive published about the life of Carol Adair, just slips of information here and there. She was a single mother of two. She could sort out most any problem. She was a profound reader. Among the bits and pieces, there is one constant theme: Her profession — she taught English, first at Cogswell College and later at the College of Marin — was not a job, but a calling. "Teaching was her consuming art and genius," read her obituary.

This calling, it happens, also brought her and Ryan together for the first time in 1977, at the snack bar in San Quentin State Prison. Adair was in charge of creating a curriculum for inmates who weren't allowed to leave their cells for class. Meanwhile, Ryan, who would go on to spend more than three decades as a community college English teacher, had been assigned to the prison by the College of Marin.

It would be easy to romanticize the fact that the beginning of Kay and Carol coincides with the beginning of Kay as a poet. It would be easy to believe that Adair might have brought something out in Ryan that led her to greatness or renown. It may even be true. But games of "what if" — *What if Ryan and Adair had not been moved to know one another and to continue knowing one another?* — are mostly worthless in any practical sense. What we know for sure is this: For the next 30-some years, Adair would offer a wide and special kind of support. She was, simply put, essential.

"for Carol" — "Flamingo Watching," 1994

Before the writing and the recognition, before Adair, Ryan spent her early years growing up in the small towns of the San Joaquin Valley and later on the thirsty edge of the Mojave Desert. Ryan's father held a lot of jobs through the years. Mostly, though, he gets called an oil well digger. He'd come home dirty, covered in earth and the stuff from inside the earth. He

was also a dreamer. “He liked those get-rich-quick books,” Ryan says. He dreamed of mines and farms, sometimes they were full of chromium and gold, sometimes Christmas trees and worms.

Ryan was the sort of kid who had a rock collection. Not a fancy one, she says. “A box with rocks.” They’re long gone, but rocks come up again and again in her poetry. “It doesn’t seem/ right to think/ blunt blows/ could do a thing/ like that but/ we do know/ arrowheads/ are knapped/ with rocks,” she writes in one poem from the new collection. She talks in terms of rocks, too. The deep rocks inside a person that sometimes need shaking or the rocks of words and sounds and metaphors. She still has one rock on display at home, a sliver of El Capitan, that big, sheer stone wall in Yosemite. She keeps it resting in the shallow bowl of a bent spoon. “It looks like the rock bent it, doesn’t it? I like that. But it didn’t really. I just dropped it down the garbage disposal.”

Ryan doesn’t have any sense of inheritance when it comes to words and her quickness with them, but she does know she got her “requirement for a simple life” directly from her mother. “She had to live very quietly. I made fun of her as a kid,” she says. “But then I turned out to be just like her.” This is one of the keys to her poetry. By “turning down the knobs” as Ryan once put it, she seems to be able to see deeper truths with a special clarity. “It requires focus to see into things.”

Over e-mail, Jane Hirshfield, a poet and a friend of Ryan’s since before her first published collection, wrote about a day more than 15 years ago. Hirshfield’s border collie was dying and she needed help digging a grave. “I couldn’t imagine asking anyone else to help or that any friend could be better to dig a grave with.” She and Ryan found a quiet spot in her garden and began to stab away at the dirt. “She didn’t feel she had to be extra somber or sad for me to want her there, or that she had to make the occasion somehow *matter*.”





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“for Carol” — “Elephant Rocks,” 1996

Poetry has always sat somewhere in Ryan, in the small, invisible things that make her up. She didn’t explicitly state this, but there are a few reasons to believe it is so:

(1) When she was about 11, she dreamed about poetry. She was chasing a piece of paper, but the wind was blowing it around, playing keep-away. “I knew what was on it, I knew that it was the most beautiful poem in the world, and I don’t think I ever caught it.”

(2) When she was 19, her father died unexpectedly. At the time, he was in a motel room in Redondo Beach (Los Angeles County), a 90-minute drive from home. He had a get-rich-quick book in one hand and a pint of ice cream in the other. He was 55 years old. A poem ripped out of Ryan, short and skinny like the sort she writes now. It read, in part, “When he was/ I was./ But I still am/ and he is still.” It would be at least a decade before she wrote anything like it again.

(3) When she was 29, Ryan sensed that poetry was laying claim to her. She’d read something and suddenly the words would begin to rhyme, to fit together and play in certain ways. She resisted. Being a poet meant claiming some sort of “exceptional status” that didn’t sit well with her, and writing poetry meant constantly exposing herself. (The difference between a poet and another kind of writer, she said at one point, was an “appetite for self humiliation.”)

In a last-ditch attempt at clarity, she set off on a 4,000-mile cross-country bike ride. The world would move, but she would not. She would force the question. As she came to Colorado’s Hoosier Pass, a place that straddles a continental divide, she felt her condition change. Did she like writing? Of course she did. “Fiddling around with words gave me deeper, more complex satisfaction than anything else in life, times 10.”

“for Carol” — “Say Uncle,” 2000

After the bike ride, Ryan entered into a sort of self-imposed residency. “I had to learn from myself,” she says. At first, she turned to volumes of “Ripley’s Believe It or Not!” She’d find an entry (like the one about the longest word, marked with a Post-it note in an aged red volume on her shelf) and use it as the base. Later, she picked up a deck of tarot cards. She never learned how to read or deal, but each day she’d flip over a card and write a poem. This lasted for years.

As Ryan wrote, Adair pushed her work out and into the world. In the very early days, Adair got Ryan's friends together to help publish her first book. Nobody bought it, of course. "It had the hopelessness of self-publication," Ryan says. But a beginning is a beginning, and Adair must have understood that.

Adair also became a test of sorts. She was the only person to ever read Ryan's words before they were sent off to magazines or publishers. If she spotted trouble, Ryan took that seriously. "Didn't mean I could fix it," she says. "A lot of times I couldn't fix it."

"for Carol" — "The Niagara River," 2005

It took more than a decade and three collections for others to learn what Adair always seemed to know, that Kay Ryan was worth reading. "I don't know where she has been. Presumably developing her considerable talent in relative neglect," George Bradley wrote in the first review of Ryan's poetry, published July 1995 in the Yale Review. "A shame, but then that's probably how her work got to be so interesting."

Now, Ryan — so often described as an "outsider" — has a National Humanities Medal, she's won the Ruth Lily Poetry Prize and the Pulitzer Prize. She's been granted a Guggenheim Fellowship and a MacArthur Fellowship. She's served two terms as the U.S. poet laureate. She's filled a shelf in her office with anthologies that include her work. "The Oxford Book of American Poetry," she says, is a "tough" one to get into. But there it is, on the shelf.

"Kay Ryan is a genius of the lyric form — her way to compress the strange logic of living into mnemonic gems," Robert Casper, head of the Poetry and Literature Center at Library of Congress, wrote in an e-mail. "She takes these delightful liberties that give her poems the kind of lexical richness and interest that we associate with Emily Dickinson," Alice Quinn, the director of the Poetry Society of America and former poetry editor at the New Yorker, said over the phone. Finally, from Dana Gioia (a friend, a poet, a critic, an early supporter and the first to write an essay about Ryan's work): "The key thing about Kay's work is that she takes you through a kind of linguistic game that leads you to a sudden insight about the nature of human existence."

"For Carol/ who knew it" — "The Best of It," 2010

Ryan says, very plainly, that had it not been for Adair she would not have been poet laureate. There's a lingering sense that without Adair she never would have written what she wrote. There's another more practical reason, though. Adair was dying. Not long before Ryan got the call, in summer 2008, offering her the position, Adair had begun a regimen of chemotherapy, an effort to poison the advanced-stage cancer growing in her bladder.

For Ryan, the position of poet laureate felt “much too jumped up.” But Adair insisted, and Ryan couldn’t say no. For the last 30 years, Adair had renewed her bet again and again. “She had believed in me utterly and now, guess what? She was right.” Ryan accepted a second term after Adair had passed away. This time it was less for Adair and more for herself. “I didn’t know what else to do. And of course it’s an honor and I don’t want to diminish that. It’s a great honor. So it was a luxurious, desperate act. ... A bad time with good linens.”

Sometimes, when things get hard to articulate, Ryan will knock on her kitchen table and go quiet for a few seconds. This happens while she’s talking about “Erratic Facts.” The fact of Adair’s death is everywhere in its pages. Not just in the lines of poetry, but also in its general coming together. This is the first collection Ryan has assembled without Adair as her test. “I had a hard time without Carol trusting my judgment.”

Many of the poems confront this loss. “I have to try to digest something so indigestible,” she says. (“Indigestible” is the same word she uses to describe the Grand Canyon.) But it’s also true that many of them do not. When you’re a poet, you must constantly reveal yourself, even the parts you’re not sure you want to show others, Ryan says. This book is no different. And yet, that people may read it with her loss in mind feels wrong. “Every poem has a motive for the writer, but that really is of so little importance to the reader.” In the end, Ryan is still doing what she has always done, getting at the mechanics and processes and thrills of the mind — the stuff “you can only see with some weird lobe of your brain that doesn’t even have any eyes.”

So if, in this collection, you come across a poem that speaks to loss, you should read it knowing that it is not about her loss, or even loss in general. “But your loss,” Ryan says. “That we may join —” She cuts herself off, trying to work out how to say it just right, settling, finally, on this: “Even if something is incredibly sad, if the subject matter is sad, the poem itself isn’t sad. The poem is free.”

“for Carol anyhow” — “Erratic Facts,” 2015

Ryan Kost is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. E-mail: rkost@sfchronicle.com Twitter: [@RyanKost](https://twitter.com/RyanKost)