

Kay Ryan Poems:

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.

(1965)

Turtle

Who would be a turtle who could help it?
A barely mobile hard roll, a four-oared helmet,
she can ill afford the chances she must take
in rowing toward the grasses that she eats.
Her track is graceless, like dragging
a packing-case places, and almost any slope
defeats her modest hopes. Even being practical,
she's often stuck up to the axle on her way
to something edible. With everything optimal,
she skirts the ditch which would convert
her shell into a serving dish. She lives
below luck-level, never imagining some lottery
will change her load of pottery to wings.
Her only levity is patience,
the sport of truly chastened things.

(1994)

Flamingo Watching

Wherever the flamingo goes
she brings a city's worth
of furbelows. She seems
unnatural by nature—
too vivid and peculiar
a structure to be pretty,
and flexible to the point
of oddity. Perched on
those legs, anything she does
seems like an act. Descending
on her egg or draping her head
along her back, she's
too exact and sinuous
to convince an audience
she's serious. The natural elect,
they think, would be less pink,
less able to relax their necks,
less flamboyant in general.
They privately expect that it's some
poorly jointed bland grey animal
with mitts for hands
whom God protects.

(1994)

Any Morning

Any morning
Can turn molten
without warning.
Every object
can grow fluent.
Suddenly the kitchen
has a sulfur river
through it;
there is a burping
from the closet,
a release of caustic gases
from the
orange juice glasses.
The large appliances
Are bonding in a way
that isn't pleasant
on linoleum as friable
as bacon. We never
fathom how we caused it,
or why we
never see it coming
like Hawaii.

(1996 collection)

TUNE

Imagine a sea
of ultramarine
suspending a
million jellyfish
as soft as moons.
Imagine the interlocking
uninsistent
tunes of drifting things.
This is the deep machine
that powers the lamps
of dreams and accounts
for their bluish tint.
How can something
so grand and serene
vanish again and again
without a hint?

(2005 collection)

We're Building the Ship as We Sail It

(2010 collection)

The first fear
being drowning, the
ship's first shape
was a raft, which
was hard to unflatten
after that didn't
happen. It's awkward
to have to do one's
planning in extremis
in the early years-
so hard to hide later:
sleekening the hull,
making things
more gracious.

Felix Crow

Crow school
is basic and
short as a rule—
just the rudiments
of *quid pro crow*
for most students.
Then each lives out
his unenlightened
span, adding his
bit of blight
to the collected
history of pushing out
the sweeter species;
briefly swaggering the
swagger of his
aggravating ancestors
down my street.
And every time
I like him
when we meet.

(2005 collection)

HERRING

*A thousand
tiny silver
thoughtlets
play in the mind,
untarnished
as herring.*

*They shutter
like blinds,
then sliver,
then utterly
vanish.*

*Is it unkind
to hope
some will
eat others,
is it uncaring?*

(2000 collection)