

scratching

Troy Press

E. Peppers, Publisher
G. Athens, Editor
R. Scheu, Design Editor
J. Hirschman, Photography Editor

2707 Curtis Road
Champaign, Illinois 61821

Publishers of

ATHENA
literary review

Athena Literary Review and Troy Press © 1995
poetry © 1995, Janet Kuypers

all rights reserved

This work, in whole or in part, may not be reproduced
without express permission from the author



poetry and prose
by janet kuypers

troy press

Christmas Eve

we made dinner
fettuccini alfredo
with chicken and duck

vegetables
bread

we ate
couldn't finish everything

we were putting on our coats
getting ready to go
to midnight mass

i decided to pack up
our leftovers
give them
to some homeless people
on the main street

we got in the car
and drove
to broadway and berwyn

i got out of the car
walked over to a man there

asked him if he was hungry

i got the bowl of noodles
and the gallon of milk
out of the car
another man walked over to me

i told them to promise
that they would share

i got in the car
we were just driving

and all i could think of
was these two men
in the cold
eating pasta with their fingers

on Christmas Eve

Coslows

I am back
at my old college
hang-out

years later

sharing some beers
with an old friend

then i remember
being there
with a friend
who used to
work there

she told me about the
women's bathroom

in all my years
I had never
been there

she said
women write on the wall
at the left
of the stall
women write
that they've been raped

they name names

there were arrows
pointing
to other women's
messages
saying
"i've heard this before"

first names
last names

when she told me
of this

years ago
i walked in
read the names
and wrote down one
of my own

i forgot about that wall
until now
and i am back
just yards away
from the
bathroom door

i get up
walk
open the door
years later

all the names are still there
jake jay josh larry matt scott

i can even still see
my own writing
it didn't take long
to find it

brushes with greatness

Like when I was leaving the depeche mode concert and I saw the lead singer of Nitzer Ebb. I tapped his shoulder, and after I shook his hand I said, "I just wanted to say that you're awesome." What a stupid thing to say. His response was, "Uh, well, thanks." But at least I shook his hand.

When we were driving down Lake Shore Drive, it was December 23rd, and I saw a limo with the license plate, "Governor 1." I said to drive next to the limo, and there was Jim Edgar, talking on a phone in the back. It was only after we passed when I realized that I was wearing a red baseball cap with reindeer antlers and bells on it. I was so embarrassed.

Or when I met this soap opera star from Days of our Lives, he was signing autographs, his name on the show was Shane. There was this fat 40-year-old woman from Tolono, Illinois, standing in line and screaming every time she thought she saw a glimpse of him. He signed a newspaper clipping of mine, then took a picture with me. My mother thinks that in the photo we look like we're on our honeymoon.

And in the first grade, when the weatherman Harry Volkman, from channel Two News, came to our school, and I met him because I made him a card that said, "Columbus discovered America in fourteen ninety-two, and I discovered a weatherman when I discovered you."

Or like when I was almost in a band that opened for the Smashing Pumpkins. I sang with this band, but couldn't work with them because I lived out of town. I guess that's not a good one, since I didn't meet the Pumpkins or anything. But at least I saw the show.

And I photographed the lead singer of REM. It was September, I was only wearing shorts and a t-shirt when everyone else was wearing denim jackets. Michael Stipe was walking through a forest preserve, with a flock of people around him. I couldn't to him, but I wanted a photo, so I looked ahead and saw an empty picnic table. I ran, sprung up on top of it. and started shooting. He looked up at me, and waved. Later, when he was about to leave, I got real close, took more pictures. I was right next to him.

Or when I talked to the lead singer of King Missile after their show at the Metro. Told him it was a good show, he thanked me, and then I said they should have

played "Gary and Melissa." "Yeah, we keep forgetting that one," he said. Then he looked over at the t-shirt stand, pointed kind of blankly, then said, "You know, we'd make a lot of money... if we had t-shirts." I laughed, but then I tried to walk away.

Like when Joe took me to the engineering open house and his wooden bridge won first place for holding the most weight. Or when Lorrie brought me to the darkroom and showed me how to dodge and burn a print. Or Brigit. Or Bobby. Or Pat.

And when I won the American Legion Award in the eighth grade. Or when I published my first book. Or when I sang at the coffeehouse and everyone actually applauded. Or at the end of counseling at the retreat weekend "Operation Snowball" and I got a note from a participant thanking me for caring so much. Or when I felt happy.

guilt

I was walking down the street one evening, it was about 10:30, I was walking from my office to my car. I had to cross over the river to get to it, and I noticed a homeless man leaning against the railing, not looking over, but looking toward the sidewalk, holding a plastic cup in his hand. A 32-ounce cup, one of the ones you get at Taco Bell across the river. Plastic. Refillable.

Normally I don't donate anything to homeless people, because usually they just spend the money on alcohol or cigarettes or cocaine or something, and I don't want to help them with their habit. Besides, even if they do use my money for good food, my giving them money will only help them for a few hours, and I'd have to keep giving them money all of their life in order for them to survive. Once you've given money, donated something to them, then you're bound to them, in a way, and you want to see that they'll turn out okay. Besides, he should be working for a living, like me, leaving my office in the middle of the night, and not out asking for handouts. I'm getting off the subject here... Oh, yes, I was walking along the sidewalk on the side of the bridge, and the homeless man was there, you see, they know to stand on the sidewalks on the bridge because once you start walking on the bridge you have to walk up to them, and the entire time you're made to feel guilty for having money and not giving them any. They even have some sort of set-up where certain people work certain bridges.

Well, wait, I'm doing it again... Well, I was walking there, but it wasn't like I was going to lunch, which is the time I normally see this homeless man, because during lunch there is lots of light and lots of people around and lots of cars driving by and I'm not alone and I have somewhere to go and I don't have the time to stop my conversation and think about him.

Well, anyway, I was walking toward him, step by step getting closer, and it was so dark and there were these spotlights that seemed to just beat down on me while I was walking. I felt like the whole world was watching me, but there was no one else around, no one except for that homeless man. And I got this really strange feeling, kind of in the pit of my stomach, and my knees were feeling a little weak, like every time I was bending my leg to take a step my knee would just give out and I might fall right

there, on the sidewalk. I even started to feel a little dizzy while I was on the bridge, so I figured the best thing I could do was just get across the bridge as soon as possi-

ble.

I figured it had to be being on the bridge that made me feel that way, for I get a bit queasy when I'm near water. I don't usually have that problem during lunch when I walk over the bridge and back again, but I figured that since I was alone I was able to think about all that water. With my knees feeling the way they were I was afraid I was going to fall into the water, so I had to get myself together and just march right across the bridge, head locked forward, looking at nothing around the sidewalk, nothing on the sidewalk, until I got to the other side.

And when I crossed, the light-headed feeling just kind of went away, and I still felt funny, but I felt better. I thought that was the funniest thing.

decorating the lockers

Days when we sat in the gold gym,
Friday afternoons, hot Indian summer
days. Days with a pep assembly,
there would be a contest, which
grade could cheer the loudest?
Those were the days when the
cheerleaders lead us on in school
spirit, and we wished the football team
luck in the evening's game. The
cheerleaders even decorated the
lockers for each football player the
night before a game. Streamers. Signs.

I think of this now, one of those
players went professional, moved
across the country, made it big.
Had a friend from high school visit.
And they drove out on a road together;
could they still hear the cheering, the
screaming, faster and faster, down the
road, they're winning the big game,
faster and faster, then black.

The hero walked away from the twisted
mangled wreck, to find his friend
couldn't hear the cheering. No one
assembles for him now, for the loss
of his friend. Why did the hero get
all the attention?

There was no screaming, just the
low, dull moan in his head as he
ended his own suffering, his own guilt.

And we assembled again once more
for him, this time not on a sunny
Friday afternoon, not anticipating
something. The anticipation is gone.
All we can cling to are the lockers
covered in streamers, the cheering.

death

when he was a child, a little boy, he
would walk through the living room

over and over again
he would see the book on the shelf

a science book, a volume
from a set: a book about

how the world works

once he looked though the pages
found a drawing about the life

of planet earth, how it was
formed, how eventually the

temperature would rise, all life
on earth would eventually die

and reading that it was
millions of years away didn't help

with the fear, the instant panic:
so he took the book, hid the

one volume from the rest,
so he wouldn't have to see it

when he walked through his
own living room

ikebana

Rolled up sleeves,
Dark denim, strings pulled
At the buttons

Your hands, the
Rough edges, the nails
Jagged, not cut

Your fingers, I've
Noticed them: one has
A long scar

Along the tip, and
Your skin is rough
Along the nails

Your hands, they're
Skilled hands of an
Artist at work:

And like a
Conductor, you
Orchestrate

Bring beauty
From the dying
Flowers at

The table. They
Line up quickly,
At attention:

Fall into
Place so gracefully.
You create

Symphonies,
Move mountains, Seas
Part for you.

You can do
Anything. I
See that now.

You must be
My savior. Let me
Follow you.

Let me create
Beauty in your
Name, let me

Feel your power.
It's all in your
Hands, your heart,

Your mind:
I've seen you stop
Wars, feed the

Hungry. Why are
You so strong? Why
Are your flowers

So beautiful

last before extinction

Now he has so many opportunities.
He has nothing to lose. Why not
come out of the wilderness, attack
everything it sees. Kill something.
Suck the blood out, make him feel
alive for once more. Let them try
to restrain him. He has nothing to lose.

And for now it can fly to the highest
redwood, look out over the world.
Despise the world, the world that made
him be alone, leaving him alone. Who
will carry his name? Who will care
for him when he is old? Who can he
read bed time stories to?

Now it can feel death creeping upon
him, closer and closer. He wants to
scream. He calls upon nature; the
tides rise, earthquakes shatter homes.
He does not feel vindicated. He has lost.

And for now she can swim to the deepest
darkest cave in the Pacific, hide from
the solitude, swim lower and lower;
can she find where all of the other
animals of dying species hide, can she
find them. There must be others. They
can understand, they can live together,
at the bottom of the earth. Could they
show their pain for their species, share
what is left of their love, create a new race?

Soon they will be no more
and we will be taking their bones,
reassembling them, studying their
form, rebuilding their lives, revering
them more than we ever did
in life. This is what it all becomes.
This is what it all boils down to.
Study the bones. Study the mistakes.
Study the bones.

orion

Winter evenings I would look for you.
Dancing along the horizon. You were
always fighting; the great bear to the
north, the bull in the winter.

You were my favorite. whenever I
could I would look for you: out my
window, in my driveway. I remember
a nebula lived in the center of your sword.

You, spending millennia fighting. You
have taught me well. The other night, I
looked out my window again; you were
there. Receiving strength from me,

as I did so many years in you.

my father, shooting an animal

we sat in our
dining room, looking out
the sliding glass doors

onto the patio, the
expanse of concrete that
led to the pool, fenced

away from the ravine.
Father had a dislocated
shoulder, his arm was

in a sling. He had
a friend's shotgun, some
sort of instrument

and he looked out
the window, sister and I
behind him, looking

over his shoulder.
And then he saw a small
squirrel, walking

along the edge of the
patio, and father opened the
sliding glass doors

propped his gun
over his dislocated shoulder,
tried to look

through the sight and
keep the gun balanced. He
usually didn't use

guns, he seldom
borrowed them. And here he
stood, in his own

house, aiming at the
animal at the edge of our
property, with one

good arm. And then
he shot. We all looked; the
animal, hit, stumbled

into a nearby hole.
He hit the animal, despite all
his trouble, all his pain.

People wonder why
he shot the animal. I wonder
how. Could I do it, even

with two good arms.
Could I see through the sight,
could I aim well, strike.

paranoia

we sit here at dinner.
I try to breathe.
My hands rest on my thighs.
I must watch to be sure,
everything must be right:
the silverware, small fork,
large fork, plate, knife,
large spoon, small spoon.
Water glass. Wine glass.

I know no one else sees them:
the fish, the red fish, in
the curtains along the wall.
You have to watch them.
My eyes always glance there.

They are evil fish. They sit
in the curtains, they wait,
and then they come out.

And the yogurt, the yogurt
is the only thing that can
save me from them. throw
the yogurt, take a spoon,
use your hands. Anything.

And we sat there before
dinner, and he ate his
yogurt with his first spoon
before I could stop him.

How could you do this? How
can you save yourself from
the evil fish now? Will
I have to save you again,
do you even understand
the danger

poam

a conversation with Jimbo Breen

dedicated to Steve, a marine

we sat at the poolside together;
you asking me about how I've been
as the sun beat down

and we talked about nuclear war.
You said you didn't believe in it,
and I strained to understand

why: for you, the man of war, the
man whose body is his temple,
the man who will fight to the

death. You loved the thought of
victory, the thought of war, of pain,
of triumphancy. And I sat there

in the swimming pool while you sat
on the edge. I paused. Then it
occurred to me: you would want

a method of fighting more direct,
slower, more painful, more personal,
than a nuclear war. You'd want to

fight them one on one, man to
man, with your fists. And your eyes
lit up. I was beginning to understand,

now, only years later. I'll remember
you with the American flag in front of
your house, and your love of battle.

the martyr and the saint

they gave their daughter the name
of the Patron Saint of television

and the television's always been
one thing she hated about him

or was it the drinking that he needed
more than her

the business has gone bad
I'm a failure I'm not a man

he said he respected her
then he'd call her

a twenty dollar whore from Vegas

and the mother would hold
the child, the saint, the pure angel

hold her ears and hope she
couldn't hear

st. anthony's medallion

“A father brought his ten year old son to the cemetery where his mother was buried about a month earlier. It began to rain, and lightning struck the boy dead on the scene. It is believed a St. Anthony medallion worn around his neck acted as a conductor.”

The sky is weeping again.
For me. What have I done,
this is my punishment for
what? You did this to me,

didn't you, you unfair God?
Didn't I tell them I loved
them enough? I went to the
school play, remembered

our anniversary. How am I
supposed to go on now? My
wife first, take her from me
first, then take the only thing

in this world that looks like
her. That has her nose. Her
chin. Why couldn't I rip
that medallion off him, set

him free? Did I not watch
him enough? Did I not love
them enough? Why wasn't it
me? Why wasn't it me? Why?

twin

they tell me i was born
two months premature

the first of twins

they tell me it was difficult
my birth
i still can't hear in one ear

i have an indentation in my chest
on the right side
where they had to run a tube
in me
to keep me alive

they tell me they kept Douglas alive
for three weeks
but he just couldn't survive

i wonder what it would have been like
to have someone look just like me

we could switch places
fool everyone

we'd be inseparable

my family doesn't talk about
him much
but sometimes
i still think of him

maybe with the medical world
today
he would be alive

sometimes i feel
like i'm not whole

white knuckled

The hot air was sticking
to her skin almost pulling
tugging at her very
flesh as she walked
outside down the
stairs from the train
station. Just then a
breeze hot and
sticky hit her
in just the wrong
way, brushed against her
lower neck, and she
felt his breath again,
not his breath
when he raped
her, but his stench
hot rank
when he was
just close to her.
Her breath quickened,
like the catch of her
breath when she has
just stopped
crying. All the emotion

is still there not
going away. She
walks to the bottom
of the stairs, railing
white-knuckled by her
small tender hands,
the hands of a child,
and that ninety degree
breeze suddenly
gives her a
chill. They say when
you get a chill it means
a goose walked
over your grave.
She knows better. She knows
that it is him
walking, and that
he trapped that child in
that grave

walking home from school

once when I was little

I was walking home from school
filled with fear, like I always was

the other kids made fun of me
they called me names
sometimes they threw rocks at me
once they pushed me to the ground
went home, bleeding knees and tears

but once, I'll never forget, Patti
from 121st street was
walking behind me and threw
her gym shoes at me

they landed right next to me
as I was walking down
that first big hill

I don't know if I stopped
but I remember for a brief moment
looking up at the tall tree branches
next to the road

all the entangled dead branches

and I thought
that all I had to do
was pick up her shoes
and throw them

as hard as I could

and she would never
get her shoes back

I looked at the trees
for only a moment
and I continued walking
as fast as I could
as I always did
and suddenly the shoes
were long behind me

and the others were laughing

I look back now
and wonder why I didn't
do it

was I scared of them
was I scared of myself

I still keep asking myself that