POETRY ON THE EL TRAIN

of PERIODIC TABLE OF POETRY
poems by Chicago poet
JANET KUYPERS

POETRY BOMB
2012

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## Bio
Janet Kuypers is a professional performance artist, a writer, photographer, and a literary magazine editor, while running Scars Publications, which hosts two literary magazines, publishes books and releases CDs. She has had 76 books published (as of 4/27/11, of poetry, prose, novels and art), has sung in 3 acoustic bands, and worked with 8 music groups (combining her poetry with music. In 2010 she began hosting a weekly Chicago open mic “the Café Gallery” with weekly podcasts. Her CD releases (41 through 2011) appear at iTunes and other online vendors, and she also produced an Internet radio station (2005-2009), found online through http://scars.tv or http://www.janetkuypers.com. 

The poems are listed in this collection in the order they appear on the Periodic Table (not necessarily in the order read live on the el train during the Poetry Bomb. Their periodic number is to the left of the element/poem name in this Table of Contents.
when I thought of our relationship,
when I thought of your relationship to me,
I thought of a molecule of Hydrogen:

how you were afraid of me, but also
how you were so obsessed with me...
and although you always kept your distance,

you were always revolving around me.
and when we finally eventually fused together,
you were like a Hydrogen bomb:

forcing me to push away everyone I loved,
forcing me to hurt everyone close to me.
and that is when I snapped and lost it,

because I couldn’t let you use me like this.
I couldn’t let you cause so much destruction.
I couldn’t let everything I valued be destroyed.

I know it was a basic attraction with us,
but although you might not have liked it, I think
it was better when you just kept your distance.
HELIUM

I couldn’t help it.
I was attracted to you.
You elevated me.

You seemed so content, so light,
and when I saw you, you looked
so hot, like a solar flare.

Whenever I see you outside,
I feel you penetrating my pores
every single day.

But I didn’t realize
that outside like this,
we were never truly alone.

But being near you made me giddy,
I’d even raise my voice
whenever you’d come near me.

But only now I learn
That even though you’re hot, you’re colder
than anything I’ve ever touched.

So maybe
it wasn’t your heat
that drew me to you...

I think you’re truly unique,
but you tell me you’re common,
even though you’re still so hard to find.
I’d have to search the Universe for you to realize you’re not as special as you’ve led me to believe. So, I’m sorry.

I couldn’t help it. You have this effect on me whenever you come to me like this.

I’m always so tense, but with your low boiling point, and the way you connect with me you’ve calmed me down and shown me a new perspective. Because of this, I avoided the fact that we don’t really mix well together. Either way, I still hoped you could help me - I mean, you can make me feel like I can fly when I’m with you.

I just have to remember that even though, Every once in a while, I can literally breathe you in, A few second later, you’re gone.
LITHIUM

I know I needed you around me, I was desperate.
I know I wanted you in my life to calm me down.
I know I needed you to stop me from my manic episodes.

They told me it’s not an addiction I have with you,
but then they told me that if I broke away from you altogether
I would cycle back to my old psychotic, unhealthy ways.

So please don’t tell me I’m crazy for wanting you.
But I just couldn’t stand being me. I just wanted to calm down.
I was desperate for you. I wanted to feel normal again.

You were the one to calm ME down, but the thing is,
you were the one that was also supposed to help me
with my poor judgment and aggression.

Because when I was with you, I felt like my blood was on fire.
With you around I couldn’t eat any more. I felt dizzy with you,
I’d feel tremors and twitching. You made me unsteady.

On the surface, you seemed soft to me, with you silver-white hair.
With your lightness, I forgot how metallic you were when we joined.
And now look what we’ve become.

When we finally got together, when we fused together,
when we were finally ready to take each other in,
we became the source for the most violent explosion.

We became a part of a preordained cycle I couldn’t escape,
we became radioactive and caused something so unstable
that we destroyed everything we had.

You helped my destroy everything that was me.
CARBON

I used to see the magazine ads
and the tee vee commercials.
All I was taught
was that a big busted blonde
was all I could aspire to be.
So I would dye my hair.
So I could act the dumb blonde.
I could still beat them
at any mind games,
but men don’t like the truth
shoved in their faces,
because they refuse to believe
anything that doesn’t stroke
their ego.

So yeah, I was a carbon copy
of what the media shoved
down America’s throats.

And yeah, as time went on
the dark-haired women
started to gain some popularity back,
but they still had to be anorexically thin
and they still had to battle
the notion of all men
still adoring the dumb blonde.
And yeah, as the years wore on
I didn’t have to die my hair,
but I still had to be thin,
I had to be the carbon copy
of the dark-haired, gaunt,
soulless faces
plastered on billboards,
papers and screens.
I pass the magazine stands,
see carbon copies of the models
on multiple magazine covers.

I pass the media store
with rows and stacks
of repeated tee vee screens,
showing carbon copies
to the world
of what we’re supposed to be.

I don’t want to be
a carbon copy of anything.
I want my own thoughts.
my own ideas,
and I want to spill them out
for the entire world to read and hear.

But carbon copy or not,
I end up resigned,
knowing that despite our differences,
we are all carbon—
based life forms.
I mean, when scientists
look for life on other planets,
they always only look
for water first.
Well sure, hydrogen, oxygen,
life as we know it
needs it, I get it.
But carbon-based life forms
are all we know.
I mean, whether or not
they have arms or legs,
or gills, or a mouth, or a brain,
they all have carbon in common.

So when I see
the atrocities mankind causes:
when I see Adolph Hitler,  
the vegetarian artist wanna-be,  
when I see Adolph Hitler  
collect his cult followers  
to systematically slaughter  
millions...

when I see the stacks  
of the skin and bone emaciation,  
stacks of bodies in ditches,  
or in rooms, stacked in a pyramid  
to the small hole for air in the ceiling  
after their final “shower”...

when I see the pope  
visit Cuba  
and wear a sombrero...

when I see chickens  
crammed into rows of cages  
they cannot move in,  
for their eggs, for their flesh...

and when I see  
the rows of pre-packaged  
barely recognizable cow flesh  
wrapped in cellophane,  
row after row in the grocery store...

It is then I have to remember  
that despite everything,  
and as much as I hate to admit it,  
we are not all that different.  
I mean,  
if nothing else,  
we are all  
carbon-based life forms.
Nitrogen

I’m afraid to answer the phone today.
Ever since he called me before
to tell me he has AIDS,
I’ve been afraid to answer my phone
to hear that his condition
has turned for the worse
or that he just died.
His t-cell count has been at zero
for over 2 months now.
He lost his job.
The last word was that he was waiting
for the chance for entrance into a study
where he may get a new set of medications.

And waiting is something he cannot do.

So I’ve looked at homeopathic options,
but I sound like his mother
telling him to eat fresh fruits and veggies.
Don’t eat raw seafood, or raw eggs.
Cook your meat until it is well done
to get the protein you so desperately need.

And I’ve looked at the chemical compounds
in the drugs that are all too expensive,
and I was surprised to see
how many times I saw Nitrogen
listed in these drug compounds.
Nitrogen. I’ve only heard of it
as liquid nitrogen for super-cooling.
Dip a rose in liquid nitrogen
And drop it, so it shatters.
I’ve even heard of nitrogen capsule
“widgets” to carbonate stouts,
or that it’s mixed with oxygen
to make laughing gas.
Maybe I need nitrous oxide,
because yesterday was the first day
I hadn’t cried.
I might have been fine for a half hour,
and then something would trigger it in my mind.
I thought maybe I’m getting used to the news,
but I just cried again.

On the phone, you said
you can’t let the thought of death kill you.
And I was trying so hard
To not just start sobbing on the phone.

You see, this is why
I’m afraid to answer the phone now.

You were on the phone with me
saying that you just have to
get used to the fact
that you’re not going to grow old,
or have a family.
You said that some people
feel like they are on death’s door
with a T-cell count of four hundred,
and some people can run marathons
with a T-cell count of zero.
On the phone,
you first told me yours was at eighty,
and you felt fine.
A little run-down,
but that was to be expected.
Then it dropped lower.
And now I am afraid to answer my phone,
to hear the next round of news.
So now I sit here and read
about antiretroviral drugs
you may or may not be able to take.
Protease inhibitors. Integrase inhibitors.
And I look at the chemical compounds
of all these drugs, with hydrogen
carbon, oxygen, occasionally
fluorine or sulfur,
And the surprisingly ever-present nitrogen.
I stare at these compounds,
wish I could put the elements
together myself
and give you what you need.
Why did I have to learn
about compounds in chemistry class
if I couldn’t make these compounds
to help you live.
Because now I just sit here and read,
and fear my telephone ringing.
OXYGEN

In the South Pacific Ocean
I held my breath, plunged in
and swam deeper into the water
to get closer to the schools
of White Tipped Sharks
huddled at the bottom of the ocean.
With my flippers,
I pushed myself
deeper into the water.
The now useless snorkel
was my only reminder of air
as I kept going,
with only my mask for navigation.
Though the moving sand
did not entirely obstruct the water,
the sun grew less intense
the farther I traveled.

Just remember to not
get too close to the sharks,
I had to keep reminding myself.

I almost froze
when I spotted the Stingray.
They work so hard
to avoid being seen,
so they can surprise they prey
and have their next meal.
I spotted it,
but it made me stop.
It surprised me
that I had come this far,
and nothing but a little water
separated me from animals
that could seal my fate.

I stared for a while,
then realized
that I needed to get some air,
so I turned toward the light.

I had been underwater so long
that the oxygen was pulled
from my muscles,
and I didn’t have
the energy to kick.

I panicked.

When you become acutely aware
of your desperate need for air,
your body plays tricks on you.
I forgot about looking back
at the sharks and Stingray below,
I even forgot about the Sea Lions
and Lion Seals above.
I’ll deal with whatever’s on the surface
once I get there.

Now, get yourself to kick.
Think. You can do it. Push.
I managed to kick my legs once
and started to move my way
through the water.
I hoped momentum
could keep me going,
but nothing was fast enough
any longer.
You can do this,  
I thought.  
Push again.

I pushed, I moved,  
but the surface  
still seemed miles away.  
Now I know there’s twice  
as much hydrogen around me  
as oxygen,  
but oxygen is so much bigger  
than hydrogen...  
Oxygen is the most abundant  
chemical element by mass  
in our biosphere,  
in our air, sea and land.  
But I can’t get to  
the oxygen in this water.

I can’t let this be  
the death of me.

My chest started to tighten.  
My chest started burning,  
like someone lit a match  
and the last oxygen in my body  
was setting my lungs on fire.

I clenched my teeth tighter  
around that snorkel mouthpiece.  
I know I couldn’t breathe yet,  
but I couldn’t let this piece go free  
and possibly move my mask  
while I was trying to  
save myself.

Come on, I thought.  
Your legs are strong.  
You can do this.  
So I pushed again  
until I could see  
a few people  
trying to swim toward me.  
I tried to keep moving  
until someone threw their arm  
around my waist.  
I hoped they would be able  
to breathe for the both of us  
until we broke the surface.

###

I remember feeling  
wet sand being pushed against my skin  
as they dragged me out of the water  
until they let me lay on my side  
so I could cough.  
I had no water in me,  
but I had to do  
anything I could  
to give myself oxygen again.

Once I was able to breathe  
comfortably again,  
I tried to think of my breathing.  
I know I can’t get oxygen toxicity  
by breathing too deeply...  
Take a deep breath.  
Get the oxygen to my blood.  
Your toes are tingling.  
Inhale deeply. Now imagine  
your oxygenated blood  
rushing to your feet.  
The oxygen’s to your brain now.  
Keep thinking, mentally pushing  
the oxygen throughout your body.
When I got back inside that evening, they had started a fire in the fireplace for me. And I thought, how fitting. I was stuck in the water, with all that hydrogen and oxygen, until I could have some oxygen to breathe again. We are over half water as it is, meaning the majority of our mass is oxygen. And there I was, now at a roaring fireplace, with oxygen fueling the fire. It’s funny, how on this one day a basic element like oxygen could help me go when I’ve never been before, could warm me up at the end of the day, and could show me in it’s absence how crucial it was everywhere in my life.
NEON

Walked toward the entrance
of the now-closed dance club
I used to go to every weekend.

(You see, I’d get the free
weekly newspaper, with coupons
for free admission for girls before midnight.)

Now I go to the Vortex
look for Shelter
and only see broken neon signs.

It reminds me that neon
is common in the universe,
but rare on Earth —

and the only way we get neon
is by liquefying our air,
then actually distilling the neon out.

So I guess it’s fitting,
seeing the broken neon signs
of the once-popular dance clubs,

knowing that all I can do now,
everywhere I go,
is just breathe the neon in.
PHOSPHORUS

I didn’t know how much I needed you.
I didn’t know how essential you were to me.
I didn’t know how my creation depended on you.

Even though I barely see you,
even though you seemed barely there for me,
even though I got rid of you whenever I could...

I didn’t know that even though
you were barely there,
you were there... just enough.

Like Venus, I only saw you from afar.
Like what is in DNA, RNA, ATP, you are
like me, all the way down to my cell membranes.

When I think of you,
when I breathe in the oxygen around me,
when your phosphorescence illuminates me...

Then I realize your true power.
Then I realize you’re the light bearer.
Then I realize you’re my morning star.

Though you seem toxic,
though you seem explosive,
that’s apparently the spark that gets me going.

So, remember that you give the Earth life.
So remember, you can always light my fire.
So, remember that since you have that charge

you can also help us destroy ourselves.
“Nickel for your thoughts,”
he said to me.
So I had to ask,
“a Nickel?
Why?
Because the penny’s undervalued?”
And he said,
“Maybe it’s because
your thoughts
are worth
so much more
than a penny...”
And I thought,
‘great, five times more,
but it’s still
only a nickel...’

Besides, a nickel
is only about
twenty-five percent
nickel
in the first place.
But then again,
even though
it’s three fourths
copper,
the cost of the metals
is worth more
than the coin itself.

So maybe
I should take him up
on his nickel offer.
Then I could say
my thoughts
are worth something.
Arsenic.
Just the name sounds poisonous.
I know it’s an element
in the Periodic Table,
but this odorless, tasteless demon
can work its way into our water
and eventually kill us
from the inside out.

And the thing is, Arsenic
occurs naturally everywhere,
and we even use this poison
as a wood preservative,
it’s even used in paints, dyes, metals,
drugs, soaps. And even more frightening
for all you meat eaters,
high arsenic levels are in
animal feeding operations.

We seem to hunt down ways
to kill ourselves,
don’t we.

I read about Arsenic poisoning
and Napoleon’s death.
Breathing it in or ingesting it,
Dukes to Kings were poisoned...
Even impressionist painters
used the pigment Emerald Green
which contained Arsenic, causing
diabetes, blindness, neurological disorders.

Scary stuff, this Arsenic.

So then I heard NASA announce
that Arsenic-based life forms
were discovered on Earth.
Strange stuff, this Arsenic.

I mean, how could something that kills actually help produce life? How could this happen?

Okay, go back to my science book: in order for life to exist, we need these six elements: carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen, phosphorus and sulfur. So, where does Arsenic fit into the picture?

Well, it looks like NASA scientists were trying to see if any bacterium could ever live in an Arsenic-flooded environment. So they went to Mono Lake, California, to see if anything could thrive with a surplus of salts and excesses of Arsenic.

So, in that elemental sextet of life, they pulled out phosphorus, to see what any bacteria species might do. Lo and behold, the extremophilic species GFAJ-1 just decided to use Arsenic instead of phosphorus, and with all the Arsenic around them, the bacteria thrived quite well.

And the name “GFAJ-1” actually stands for “Give Felisa a Job”. Really. So I guess it’s not hard to believe that in their search they were able to find even more bizarre life in California than we were used to.

And Mono Lake has always had a productive ecosystem. And many bacteria can tolerate the high levels of arsenic, or even take it in their cells. But they just now proved, that when starved of phosphorus, some species could evengrow with Arsenic.

Hmmm. Perplexing stuff, this Arsenic.
I don’t know if we want to create
Arsenic life forms here on Earth,
but knowing this is possible
increases the probability
of finding life elsewhere in the universe.

Spooky stuff, this Arsenic.

And who knows,
Arsenic in place of phosphorus on Earth
may date back to the origin of life,
where it may have occurred
in arsenic-rich hydrothermal vents.

Fascinating,
this speculating
about Arsenic.

And Darwinism may show
that species can adapt to survive —
I mean, we have found that bacteria
can adapt to artificially stringent
environmental conditions.

And who knows, maybe the NASA claim
that arsenic had been incorporated
into the backbone of DNA is not
ultimately true, I mean, Arsenic
just stepped in for the missing phosphorous,
so there may be no Arsenic in the DNA at all.
So give NASA a break,
they’re trying...
Because scientifically supported
statements or not,
it’s nice to know
that we’re looking at all possibilities
when looking for what is ultimately
good for life in this universe.
Loving astronomy,  
I’ve always looked for images  
from outer space.  
My computer desktop background  
and screen saver images  
are NASA and Hubble telescope images.  
Near my desk I keep a poster  
of the planets,  
and I’ve tried to find miniature globes  
all of the planets  
for my living room.  
Saturn. Jupiter, and four of it’s moons.  
Mars. Our moon.  
Too many globes of Earth.  
The weather patterns of Venus.  
Even a W-map of the universe  
just after the Big Bang.  
But planets like Neptune,  
the farthest from the sun,  
and Mercury,  
the closest to the sun,  
(speeding at over one and a half times  
the speed of Earth’s orbit),  
those globes are hard to find.

Mercury’s eccentric orbital speed  
changes throughout it’s fast orbit,  
with the fitting, fast-moving name  
of the Roman messenger god.  
They equated the planet with the Greek Hermes,  
because it moves across the sky  
faster than any other planet.  
Mercury’s astronomical symbol  
as a stylized version of Hermes’ caduceus.  
The symbol for the planet Mercury  
is even used to represent the element...  

We can’t land anything on Mercury  
because of it’s hostile environment,  
like the volatility of the liquid element  
(the only liquid element  
considered a mineral).  
People shy away from using Mercury  
in thermometers any longer  
because the toxic mercury can leak.
Historically they tried to use mercury for mirrors (they use silver now), and ancient cultures used cosmetics containing the poisonous mercury that often disfigured women’s faces. Ah, the ways women hurt themselves to make themselves beautiful — you can still find mercury (you know, because it stays liquid) in eyelash mascara.

Putting a toxic element so close to your eyes, that sounds like a good idea...

Then again, someone just told me that doctors used to give mercury antibiotic eye drops to babies just after birth, to prevent eye infections from Gonorrhea / Chlamydia bacteria.

Ah, the many ways we can use toxins to supposedly help us.

We want to learn about the planet Mercury? We send unmanned ships through space to photograph Mercury as much as we can, remotely check the atmosphere levels, the temperature, the speed. We use mercury in our make-up, mercury is used in dental amalgams. Mercury has also been used in traditional Chinese medicine, and we used mercury in thermometers to regulate our temperature, and used it in blood pressure devices.

Because, we want to learn, and we want to do anything, to use anything to our own ends, no matter how toxic.
Radon

Went into Austria,
to the Gastein Curative Tunnel
where the ambient temperature
was close to one hundred degrees,
the humidity was almost eighty percent,
and the natural tunnel also contained
a shocking amount of radon in the air.

Now, I know the EPA reports
that radon exposure in the home
can lead to up to twenty thousand
lung cancer deaths per year.

And you know, I kind of
don’t want to get lung cancer.

But in the Gastein Curative Tunnel
in the “Hohe Tauern” mountains,
first explored to mine for gold,
they noticed the extreme heat and humidity.

But then they noticed that mine workers
with rheumatic problems
were getting better when there,
and they all had more energy.

After discoverig the Radon in the air,
they found that staying in the tunnel
for certain lengths of time
helped their ailments.

The Radon in the air helped
make their body heal itself faster.

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I mean, people today still use this tunnel for curing assorted ailments, so I thought, one visit won’t give me lung cancer, maybe this is something I should try.

So I went to the Radhousberg tunnels, wore a swimsuit and rested in the tunnel for 45 minutes in silence with other attendants.

From breathing training, I tried to take deep long breaths as I lay in the tunnel to get all the air I could and soak in as much Radon as possible.

I saw someone opening and closing their hands while they were laying in the Gastein Curative Tunnel; it made me wonder if it would help my hands from typing so much on the computer.

Yes, I was dripping wet from the heat and the humidity, and drank a ton of water, but it was probably novel to travel four thousand seven hundred miles, to defy the EPA and overload myself just once with a radioactive element.