

Eleven



Janet Kuypers

Buzz Mill poetry show

9 PM 2018 6/11

I was 9, just about 10, when I wrote my first poem.
When I was 11, it was published in *Read Magazine*.
So at 11 I was a published author with “*Under the Sea*”.

Under The Sea

Janet Kuypers
1960

I'd like to be
Under the sea
To watch the fish go swim,
I'd like to squish
A jelly fish
And then let go of him.
I'd like to grab
A soft-shelled crab
And take him for a walk
I'd like to hurdle
Over a turtle
And teach dolphins to talk.
I'd like to see
A manatee
And then go play by him,
I'd like to do
All of these things
If only I could swim!

Eleven years later, I worked as an acquaintance rape workshop facilitator, and I heard stories. Based on this are two Pushcart Prize nominated poems.

the Burning

Janet Kuypers

June 8, 1989

I take the final swig of vodka
feel it burn it's way down my throat
hiss at it scorching my tongue
and reach for the bottle to pour myself another.
I think of how my tonsils scream
every time I let the alcohol rape me.
Then I look down at my hands —
shaking — holding the glass of poison —
and think of how these were the hands
that should have pushed you away from me.
But didn't. And I keep wondering
why I took your hell, took your poison.
I remember how you burned your way
through me. You corrupted me
from the inside out, and I kept coming back.
I let you infect me, and now you've
burned a hole through me. I hated it.
Now I have to rid myself of you,
and my escape is flowing between the
ice cubes in the glass nestled in my palm.
But I have to drink more. The burning
doesn't last as long as you do.

Right There, By Your Heart (verses 2 and 6)

Janet Kuypers
Spring 1992

II

have you ever had that feeling before, you know, the one when someone is telling you something you don't want to hear, like if someone was about to tell you that someone died and you knew what they were going to say and you still didn't want to hear it, or if someone did something to you you didn't like, like when you were little and the kids at the bus stop shot pebbles and spit balls at you every day because you were smart and you still had to go to the bus stop every morning and just try to ignore them? and when that happens it feels like a medium sized rock just fell into the bottom of your stomach, and you don't want to move because you're afraid that the rock will hurt the inside of your stomach and so you just have to sit there and hope the rock goes away? or else you get the feeling in your chest, right between your lungs, it feels like someone is pressing against the bone there, right there by your heart, and you've got to breathe, you're not going to be able to take that pressure, that force any longer?

VI

i don't know how many times the idea of seeing him went through my mind. at least once a week i'd imagine a scene where he'd confront me, and i'd somehow be able to fight him back, to show him that he didn't bother me any more, to show him that the rock wasn't there any more. to somehow be able to prove that i wasn't a victim any more. i was a survivor. that's what they call it now, you see, survivor, because victim sounds too trying for someone who has been raped. so i keep saying i'm over it but i keep imagining mark all over again, not raping me, but following me on the street, coming to my door with flowers, or sending me a valentine. but once, when i saw him walking out of a record store as i was walking in, the rock fell so hard that i thought i was going to be sick right there by the cash register, right there by those metal things at the doorway that beep when you try to take merchandise out of the store, you know what those things are, i just can't think of what they're called. but if i did that, then he'd know he was still winning, to this day. how many years has it been? how many years since he did that to me? how many years since i've been wanting to fight him, since i've been feeling that rock in my god-damned stomach? i managed to hide my face from him in the store so he didn't see me as he walked out. when i saw he was gone, i wondered why i still felt the pressure in my chest. i thought the pressure was going to turn my body inside-out. i reached for my heart, grabbed at my shirt. maybe the pain was always there, right there, by my heart, but i try not to think of it until i go through times like those.

nothing ventured
nothing gained
nothing changes
nothing stays the same

so you go your way
and I'll go mine
maybe one day
we will find

what we need in life

what we need in life

I can't stay bitter and lonely and restless anymore and
I can't be here with you
I see the red in your eyes and it scares me half to death
and
I'll take this road alone

nothing ventured
nothing gained
nothing changes
nothing stays the same

you go your way
and and I'll go mine
maybe one day
we will find

what we need in life

what we need in life

On the car theme with that song, eleven days before July 11th, I wrote this poem.

Fantastic Car Crash

Janet Kuypers
7/1/98

and our life is one big road trip now
and we set the cruise control
and make our way down the expressway.

and most of the time we're just moving
in a straight line, and the scenery
blurs. there's nothing to see

but I know what's inside you and I
know what you're made of. I know
there's no such thing as a calm with you

you are a fantastic car crash. you stop
traffic in both directions as the gapers gawk and
the delay grows and they slow down and stare

everything shatters with you, you know.
it's a spectacular explosion. I try
to duck and cover as metal flies

through the air. and every time you leave
the scene of the accident
I am left picking up the shards of glass

from the windows. you know, the glass breaks
into such tiny little pieces. they look like
ice. it takes so long to pick up the pieces

even though I'm careful
I'm still picking up the pieces
and I'm still on my knees

and the glass cuts into my hands
and the blood drips down to the street.
think of it as my contribution

to this fantastic car crash
that is you, that is me, that is us
as I pull the glass from my hands

and I wave my hand to the line of traffic:
go ahead, keep driving, this happens
all the time, there's nothing to see here



Eleven days later, on July 11th, while driving my car and stopped at an intersection, a man who filed for bankruptcy was texting and driving, and knocked me into another car. My car left tire tracks for 108 feet. My mother had to come to the hospital I was born in to identify a body. I was then in a coma for 11 days.

The Things They Did To You (5/8/18 edit)

Janet Kuypers

(written 10/13/95, edited 4/4/08, then 5/8/18 for a 6/11/18 show)

When you hear that you were so close to death, you don't think about it, you feel fine, you couldn't have been that bad. But you were on a respirator to breathe for you while the doctors just hoped and waited for you to start breathing again. And you couldn't eat, you were unconscious for eleven days, so they gave you food through a tube that went straight to your stomach. There is a piece of metal in your body that the doctors put in there in case you had blood clots that tried to move through your arteries to your heart or lungs or brain. Granted, their being kind to place that vena cava filter in your body now means

an MRI you might need in the future to help you will only kill you with that vena cava metal filter in your body vibrating and destroying your arteries, but they say they were doing everything only in your best interest. They surgically attached an intracranial pressure monitor to your head so they could measure if there was too much pressure on your brain. So yeah, I suppose it was fair to say that you almost died, but you're fine now. No one will tell you any of this, but I'm sure you know all of that by now.

What does it feel like to be almost dead? If you had to think about your own life, and what it meant to you and to other generations, would any of this surgery matter? Well, you wouldn't be dead, I guess. But what if you were no longer here, on this planet, what if you were not alive? Would anyone miss you? Would anyone write poems about you, or cry for you?

Well, people might get used to the fact that you were gone. Time heals all wounds, as they say. You, if you were thinking about it after you were gone, you'd still be angry, I'm sure. That doesn't go away. It never does. Get used to it.

After that accident on July 11th, after I was in a coma for 11 days,
I was asked to start doing quarterly poetry features at an open mic
I later took over as host. The 1st show I did was June 11th,
and here are two poems from that June 11th show.

Looking for a Worthy Adversary v2

Janet Kuypers

(original written 1987, edited for 3/13/12 performance, 3/12/13)

I've been looking for a worthy adversary
someone I can lock horns with —
though my life makes more sense when I'm alone
it's not nearly as interesting

alone, it's not nearly as interesting,
so I look for a worthy adversary
someone I can battle to the death with
because it can't be about love, you see
love can't exist on the terms I demand
it's never that pure

what I demand is never that pure,
as I'm looking for a worthy adversary
I slither up to you like a snake
and I tempt you with a golden apple

I tempt you with that golden apple
but all I'm offering you
is fruit from the tree of knowledge

this snake gives you the tree of knowledge
because all this time I've been playing a part
an actress on stage, spouting lines on cue
but that role was tiresome,
those lights came on night after night
and I still had to play my part

I played my part
until my night off, where I saw your show
your protagonist was doing what I was doing
right down to faking it with those who don't matter
right down to going home and still feeling empty

I play my part, I still feel empty
but I liked to see your boiling emotion underneath
no one else could see

I know what that emotion really means

when I know what that emotion really means
I wonder if we can get together
and write our own play

if we wrote our own play,
it would be a masterful performance
curtains would close,
we'd hold each other's hands
as we leave the stage
and the audience would know there's a happy ending

when I know there's a happy ending
I walk out on to the set
and there you stand, in front, stage left
I wait for my cue to make my move
none of the rest of the scene matters

if the rest of the scene doesn't really matter,
I wonder if the audience would see what we have...
maybe they'd like our little play,
maybe they wouldn't
who really cares

who really cares
because after I tempted you
you now tempt me and tease me and torment me
and tell me everything I was afraid to believe

I was afraid to believe
and now you talk,
you reach your hand into my brain
and pull out my thoughts
and shove them into your mouth
and spit them back at me

you spit my thoughts back at me again
and instead of filling me with terror
it fills me with joy

it fills me with joy
because I thought I'd lock horns
with that worthy adversary —
but now every day is like Valentine's Day,
it's like candy and flowers and springtime
and hearts and cupids and sunshine

and these cliches are beginning to make sense

no longer locking horns,
and everthing making sense,
I stand here like a statue
after the performance of our lifetime
and wait for the reviews

as I wait for the reviews
I wonder what they'll say
though none of it matters

none of it matters
because I know what you are going to say
it's everything that I've always wanted to say

all I ever wanted to say
is now you, taking my thoughts again
and shoving them into your mouth again
and spitting them back at me again
so I will wait for you to come on stage again
where we have our happy ending
and you tell me what I already know

I read a portion of that poem during our wedding ceremony, which, has nothing to do with eleven. But *this* show poem was written 3 days before July 11th.

Death is a Dog

Janet Kuypers
7/8/18

Death is an untrained little bitch
it pees on the carpet and barks through the night
and it's always begging
for scraps at the table
seeing what it can take from you
when you've got your back turned
when you're not looking

when you want it to heal,
well, it never does
and it never rolls over
and it never plays dead

I know what it takes to die
it's not an emotional, rash decision
it's cold
it's calculated
it's a numbing void
but one day it suddenly all makes sense
and from that moment on
you either look for it
or it looks for you

Death is an untrained little bitch
and I've been begging for it, I tell you
but it doesn't come when you call

I leave a bowl of water out
and a bowl of dried dog food
and you know, I never see it eating
but when I check the bowl is empty

and I still refill the bowl

and vacuum the dog hair
that sticks to the couch
and spray air freshener
in the living room
because no matter how hard you try
you can never get rid of the smell

Death is an untrained little bitch, I tell you
and what it boils down to is this:
you won't get along with her
and she won't get along with you

she'll claim her territory
under the bed,
eating your slipper,
while you try to sleep
and remind yourself
that there are no monsters
waiting for you
to shut your eyes

Then three months later came September 11th...

September 11, 2001

Janet Kuypers
began 05/06/06, edited 05/07/06

i remember my husband
getting ready for work
and i walked to the tv in the den
and i thought he was watching a movie

he said,
i don't think this is a movie

i think the world trade center
has been struck

and we stared at the television
and watched a plane fly into the second tower

and then watched the towers collapse

i can't even remember
if my husband went to work that day
as i just stared at the tv

it took two days to get through
to everyone

my friend and one brother-in-law
rescheduled Pentagon meetings
and we tried to call his sister
in shanksville pennsylvania
our nephew heard news reports
say this if flight ninety-three
landed thirty seconds later
the plane would have hit his school

my brother-in-law in new jersey
was supposed to be
in the world trade centers
for meetings that day
but you see, he decided
not to go to the meeting

lucky him

and i remember watching the tv
like i was some sort of zombie
thinking this was bigger than Pearl Harbor,
more people died,
this wasn't a military base,
i had to do something
maybe i could go there
i'd traveled around
the country by car before
i could drive this
maybe i could stay
with my husband's brother in jersey
and train into manhattan

my husband couldn't go,
he had to go to work
so i took off on my own,
paid the tolls on i eighty
even forgot my camera
got to his brother's place
after one in the morning

he told me what train to take,
but said half of the subway lines
have to be closed

so i trained from jersey as far as I could
but I couldn't get close
but i thought,
i walked seven miles to work
that's no problem
and hour and a half
i can do that

i thought i could buy an
instant camera
at some small shop
on my walk to ground zero
and maybe i could take a film canister
so i could collect some of the building dust
because someone gave me ashes
from the mount saint helen's eruption
and i thought,
i lived through this
i should bring something back with me
i should
i should something
but every store was closed
when i tried to walk
anywhere that day
and everything was congested
businesses seem closed,
but you still couldn't go anywhere

so over four hours later
i got to ground zero
i was wearing gym shoes and jeans
had a bottle of sealed water
in my back pack purse
and wanted to get in to try to help
i don't know,
to shovel things out of the way,
to something

but no one had maps
of where everything was
there were so many people there
trying to help
that they told me
that the best way i could help
was to just clear the way
so people could do their jobs

and i just stepped back,
unable to do anything,
 unable to collect anything,
 unable to photograph anything,
only able to stare,
like i was watching it on my tv

###

i used only lowercase writing this
even when i said “i”

i’m only lowercase

when i watched the news
on that first day
they showed people
jumping out the windows
 these silhouettes of people
 looked like floating paper
 in a ticker tape parade
 in all the debris floating around
i had to keep telling myself,
“these are people”

and when i looked around
at all of the remains
from these towering office buildings
i thought of the dust
i was breathing in
i thought
i’m breathing in drywall
i’m breathing in paperwork
i’m breathing in people

so yes, i’m only lowercase
after what i’ve seen around me
i’m nothing

As for the 11th month, in November last year I wrote this next poem in Antarctica, that I read in my Bahai Faith Center show.

Ocean's Call to Dive

Janet Kuypers

11/24/17 (on flight from Ushuaia to R. o Gallegos)

the Gentoo penguins run down the mountain
to the rocky edge overlooking the southern ocean
they get into a single-file line at the edge
one jumps in
then another
then another
then a dozen more

the last penguin in the line gets to that edge
after all the other penguins dove into the southern ocean

the last penguin steps back and forth on his feet in place
turns around
looks at the mountain
turns back to the water
rocks once
steps in place twice
looks back again
then turns to the salt water and dives in



This last poem was based on a poetry series
I wrote eleven years after my wedding day.

Observer's Love Poem

Janet Kuypers

maybe I'm not a writer
maybe I'm not an artist
maybe I'm an observer
like an astronomer
looking out past the solar system, past the Kuiper Belt
looking out into the universe
trying to understand what makes everything
everything

I travel around the world
learning different histories, different cultures

I fly in airplanes
I jump from airplanes
I pilot airplanes
trying to get closer to the stars

molecule by molecule,
we originate from stars
and I know we are all linked,
our bodies formed from stardust

but outer space
is a violent place
violent explosions create the stars
and our earth has earthquakes,
avalanches, volcanoes
tsunamis, typhoons

and in all this madness
somehow I've found you

with you I have walked on the tops of glaciers
with you I have watched solar storms
from near the Arctic Circle
with you I have walked through the gates
of Hitler's first concentration camp
with you I have sailed from island to island
retracing the Origin of Species

I bought a balalaika for my guitarist in Russia
I've even held your hand at the Great Wall of China

as I said before,
I'm only an observer
and with these observations,
I thee wed
because I will never let you go

I've seen galaxies collide
I've seen comets smash into planets
I've seen supernovae and the death of stars
and in all of that, I still found you

as I said, I'm only an observer
but I've found what I've been looking for

I'll tighten my grip on your hand
because I don't ever want to let you go



bonus poem:

popular and useless

Janet Kuypers

5/17/18

a part of us wants to be famous
we want everyone to know us and love us

if I'm wrong, explain to me
the selfie stick

but think about it, the most popular things
I mean, more popular than people
are products

Coke
Harley
Kodak
Levi's
Nike
even 7/11

all these things are so much more known
than you or me

all of these things are so popular
and they all have no substance

so, maybe the selfie stick makes sense
if we all want to be popular
if we all want to be famous
maybe we've learned how to take our cues
for being perfect
by being generic
and having
no substance at all

so, let's go and start the show,
time to turn your camera toward yourself...
open your eyes wide
but don't smile too hard —
so you can be wrinkle-free
and post that perfect picture
on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest
to show everyone
how on the surface
you're picture-perfect

don't bother looking
for anything under the surface
just inject botulism into your face
so you can't even show expressions
because nothing's too far for surface beauty...
you want to be known?
Then focus on your outside
and don't worry about what's inside at all.

Eleven



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<http://scars.tv>

Janet Kuypers

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