

Janet Kuypers' 3/21/17
lengthy poem collection
for World Poetry Day
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Lengthy World Poems on World Poetry Day

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Freedom just past the Fence

Janet Kuypers

2002

After working for the Army
for years on repairing jet engines
I ended up being stationed
in Pennsylvania one summer
repairing air conditioners
and refrigerators.
I'd only do a little work
and then have nothing to do
for a day or two.
But the thing I remember
is that at the time Cubans
were defecting to the United States
by boat.
They'd sail to Florida,
most of them dehydrated
and all of them malnourished.
The U.S. government
didn't want them spreading diseases
in our country,
so when the Cubans would appear
off the coast of Miami,
the military would be waiting
to make sure they were healthy.
Well, all I knew
was that they got all these Cubans
into trucks we called 'cattle cars'
with only a few benches
and trucked them up to Pennsylvania,
where I was,
and the military gave them some shots
to make sure they weren't dying.

So these people, after
escaping their country
in a shoddy wooden boat
were taken by the U.S. military,
herded into a boxed-in truck
and shipped up the country
so they could be given shots
and detained.
These Cubans,
who came here wanting freedom,
now had to wait
in a fenced-in area
until they were tested
and given food.
And it was my job
to make sure that
their fridge and
air conditioner was working.
So I sat there for
a day or two at a time,
drinking cans of beer,
and looking out my window.
I had a view of the razor wire fence
and all I remember
was seeing all of these Cubans
leaning on the chain-link fence,
wondering if this was what it was like
to be free,
holding on to the metal,
looking out to what they were sure
was freedom.

My Kind of Town

Janet Kuypers

6/7/12

After walking through
the Forbidden City
in Beijing, China

(where all the palace doorways
had gold-covered risers
blocking people's way into rooms
4 inches to a foot tall,
because the higher
your level of authority
or royalty status
in the kingdom,
the higher the bar
people had to step over —
not *on*, but over —
to get inside
the royalty's room)...

But after the Forbidden City
I entered the Summer Palace

An old Chinese man
walked up to me
with what I believe was his grand-daughter
walking one foot behind
though who knows,
in China
this one young girl
could be one
of his concubines,
but it's really
not for me to judge).

But this older Chinese gentleman
walked up and asked,
in the best English he could muster,
where I was from.
So I told him the United States,
and then I said Chicago.
That's when this man's eyes lit up,
and he said,
"My kind of town!"
And I laughed,
nodding my head in agreement
until he leaned in toward me and said,
"Frank Sinatra sang that."
And I laughed again,
"Yes, he did," I said,
because even though
this world is so vast,
we will always find ways
to connect with one another.

Been a World Leader

Janet Kuypers

6/17/12

People can think
that Americans are cocky and arrogant
because we've been a world leader
for so long...
Because even though
our cars are from Korea,
our electronics are from Japan,
and we owe China Billions...
Better beers are from Germany,
better wines and champagnes from France...
Because even though
we've been thrust into this global economy
that Al Gore pushed us into
by creating the Internet,
us Americans still seem to
want to rest on our past laurels
through the next millennium...

Once I stopped for a beer
at a dive in Munich
(oh, sorry, *München*),
where the female bartender
tended bar for three old German men
and one
very
out of place
American.

Barely knowing German,
I figured I could sit here,
say a beer name on a tap,
pay in Euros
and leave it at that.
But at one point
after the juke box in the far corner
(that I never even noticed)
started playing some new
American-sounding pop song,
one of the old German men
turned to me, and started
yelling at me in German.

Holding my Franziskaner draft,
my eyes turned to saucers...
I was unable to say a word
to this old German man
yelling at me
in a language I could not decipher.

That's when the bartender
yelled back at the old man
in German, then English,
"*They* didn't play this song,
I did!"
So I smiled at the bartender
and finished my beer,
realizing that us Americans
can still get into trouble
without saying a word.

Enough's Enough

Janet Kuypers

6/17/12

Once when I was in Bad Gastein,
 where the Alps in Austria
 gave every street in town
 a sixty-degree incline,
I signed up for a bus tour
to go to the radon cave
at a nearby mining mountain.

Waiting outside for the bus,
I stood with something like seventeen
German-speaking Austrians.
There I felt so out of my element
that I was almost dying
for an American voice saying any words.

That's when I then heard
a boisterous baritone,
so I made my way
to the booming,
distinctly American voice.
I merely asked,
"American?"
The large man heard my inflection
and immediately spoke.
"Hi, I'm Frank,
and the little missus here is Mildred,"
and this petite, subservient Midwestern woman,
standing with this almost circular melodramatic man,
made this couple look
like the perfect ten...

Frank asked where I was from,
and when I said Chicago
he sprung up to start on his speech,
schlepping his speil:
“We’re from Detroit.
I Worked for GM for 35 years,
and now that the kids are gone,
with my pension
I thought I’d take the little missus here to see the Alps...”

And that’s when I realized
that I could have stood
at fifty paces
and still heard Frank
telling the entire neighborhood
the epic of his life.

That’s when it occurred to me
how loud us Americans could be.

Because when first traveling through Europe
after the “war on terror” began,
the United States governemnt and airlines
wanted to inform Americans traveling abroad
that if they were concerned
about being a conspicuous target
by looking *too American*,
they offered these simple guidelines:
Don’t wear a University sweatshirt.
Don’t wear a sports team baseball cap.
Don’t chew gum.
Don’t yell.

And I could imagine Frank now,
yelling, “*Mildred!*”

So I made a point
to not sit near Frank and Mildred
on that bus,
but that was okay:
I could still hear them
from rows away
as we made our way
to the mountain range.

And to the Austrians on that tour
who spoke English,
a part of me wanted to tell them,
“Not all Americans are that loud,”
because even if us Americans
want to rest on our laurels,
some of us know
when enough’s enough.

The Little Differences

Janet Kuypers

2004

I know things are really different in China,
but Shanghai and Beijing are urban areas,
so a lot of things seems really similar.

I mean, you saw signs on the walls and
in the streets in Chinese, but you understood
how to get around and what to do.

I swear, what I remember most are the
little differences,

like McDonalds, I got an
egg McMuffin because I've seen signs
in French for "Oeuf McMuffins."

So when I ordered one in Beijing, I got a
hamburger bun for a muffin (*egg McHamburger?*),
and it was covered in ketchup and mayo,

I swear to God it was fucking drowning in the shit;
I wiped *some* of it off with my index finger
and chalked it up to *knowing* the little differences.

Like in Shanghai we went to Starbucks (because
even in China, there's still one on *every* corner,

& John said I liked white chocolate frappuccinos,
so Jim asked if they had white chocolate.
The woman behind the counter said,

"No, we only have **black** chocolate."

(You'd never hear that in the United States...)

Knowing that a good part of China lives in squalor,
we saw that everyone hung their clothing to dry.
Jim said China'd have to build a ton of new plants
just to supply power to these dryers that people
can't afford, so clothing dryers don't exist.

China has no Medicare or government health care plans
(don't say the United States is free of government intervention...)
so people save their money for accidents. It's a good thing,

because we saw rickety bamboo stalks used
for ladders & scaffolding for Chinamen
for repairing & cleaning high rises.

But you have to remember these differences,
I mean, a stop sign is still a red octagon
even if you don't know the language it's in,

even Coke cans print both languages on them.

But you know, the funny thing about China
are the little differences.

Communication 2012

Janet Kuypers

1997/2005/2012/2017 edit

Now that we have the information superhighway
we can throw out into the open
our screams,
our cries for help,
so much faster than we could before...

But what if we don't want to communicate,
or forget how?
Too busy leaving messages, voice mails,
emails, pager numbers...
forgetting to call back.

What if we forget
how to communicate?

#

When I was young
I felt like the world was the size of a thimble,
because all I needed to know
was my back yard when I played with my neighbor,
and I know I wasn't allowed to ride my bike far,
though when I collected enough change
I'd ride my bike all the way
to my local ice cream parlour.

Once I was on my own,
commuting to my Chicago job on the “L” train,
I suddenly felt as tiny as a dot in this Universe,
crammed in like sardines in an “L” train tin can,
saving money for a road trip to Omaha, Nebraska.
The idea of buying a brie sandwich
to eat at a street-side table in Paris,
or skipping the nesting dolls for a balalika in Russia,
or photographing a finch in flight on the Galapagos Islands,
these dreams seriously seemed a solar system away.

But as time wore on, I learned
I could get myself out to the world
through the Internet —
being a magazine editor, I now interact
with people throughout the U.S., Canada, England,
Ireland, Italy, Belgium, Malta, Norway, Japan,
Russia, Slovenia, South Africa, Turkey,
India, Israel, Pakistan, Iran...

While selling photography sittings at my job
I’ve had to learn more Spanish as well...
and the last time I sang my song “What We Need in Life” live,
I wanted to try to sing it in other languages...

G translated it into Español:

“que necesitamos en la vida...”

Nate translated it into German:

“was wir auf das Leben brauchen...”

Karina even explained how to sing it in Romanian:

“ceea ce avem nevoie în via ...”

Irma, from the Phillipines, even translated it
into Tagalog for me:

“Mga Kailangang ispiritwal sa buhay...”

Because really,

now that I’m dipping my foot
into the global wading pool,

I should really learn

how to communicate a little better.

#

Because now that we have the information superhighway
we can throw out into the open
our screams,
our cries for help,
so much faster than we could before...

Our pleas become computer blips,
tiny bits of energy,
traveling through razor thin wires,
traveling through space —

to be left for someone to decipher
when they find the time.

#

I wanted to get in touch
with an old friend of mine from high school,
Vince, and the last I heard was that he went to
Marquette University. But that was years ago,
he could be anywhere.
I talked to a friend or two that
knew him, but they lost touch with him, too.
So I searched on the Internet,
to see if his name was on a website
or if he had an email address. He didn't.
So I figured I probably wouldn't find him.
And all this time, I knew his parents probably lived
in the same house they always did, I could just
look up his parent's phone number and call them,
say I'm an old high school friend of Vince's,
but I never did.
And then I realized why.

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