This book is dedicated in memory of my beloved, deceased grandmothers: Angeline Sutton and Anna Kowalski.
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- Kenyon Review: “No News Here”
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Also thanks to the editor of the anthology *On the Shores of Lake Erie*, where the following poems are forthcoming, for permission to print them here: “Teaching Composition in Erie, Pennsylvania” and “Again.”
Spot in the Dark

In love, he bought himself a laser gun, and used its spot of light to tease his dog. She lived three hours away, but they talked each night. Why did he always find these women, dark, a hot flash in a pan of trouble? “Sick,” he murmured, “I must be really sick.” His love twisted in his gut. “You’re not in love,” his ex snorted when he told her. They’d gone to lunch the week before. “It’s just a sick infatuation.” Nights, he’d take his dog and walk the graveyard. The breeze, the bluish dark would calm his aching heart. Why did the night appease him so? He thought about the night six months before, how fast he’d fallen in love. He met her in a dive, a smoky, dark hole of a place, where locals liked to gun their engines. He’d ordered fries, a foot-long dog. She’d been there with some friends. “It wasn’t sick,” he said out loud, remembered her eyes, “not sick at all,” the way he’d wanted her that night. They drank and talked until he heard his dog outside. “I better go. I’d really love to know you more.” They hadn’t even begun, he realized. She scrawled her number in the dark.

Now he lived for moments in the dark with her beside him: skin, wine, music, lips. She had to live in Michigan. She had to be the type that wants a knight in shining armor, that looks to every love to save her from herself. She tried to dog
him into moving. “My job, the house, the dog—
how can I move?” he pleaded in the dark,
the cordless phone, lifeline to his love.
It didn’t matter what he said. How sick
he’d feel when they hung up. Even the night
seemed unforgiving, his heart a loaded gun.

He heard his dog whining in the dark,
turned on the laser gun and fenced the night.
He wondered if love would always make him sick.
Letter, March 18

By now you have arrived home, 
leafed through your mail, heard 
the messages on your machine.

You have emptied your bag, 
thrown your worn laundry 
down the chute. You have changed.

Dark, pressed, you have backed 
from your drive, the front porchlight 
glancing yellow against the walkway.

By now you have arrived at the opera 
and you sit on red, padded chairs, 
beside her. By now the hotel bed sheets 
have been replaced, the bed remade, 
and someone else might lie there. 
He touches her face, or she his,

or maybe they’re watching CNN, 
or he is thinking about the arc 
of hills they just drove through,

or she is thinking about the sound 
the rain makes against a rooftop. 
By now I have pulled the blinds,

and the birds aren’t singing, 
and the train outside shrills: “Ohhh—oh.” 
And though it is still winter,

the crocuses in my yard are blooming purple. 
And though it is still winter, 
I can almost taste the heat.
Alone, Open Road

It was raining, a slow, persistent
December rain, the drops more like cold oil
than water as they spattered my face,
and the man by the roadside, held up
one Christmas tree after another.
All of them huge, I said, “I don’t know.
I don’t know. What about that one?”
“You’ll have to get your husband
to trim it down for you.” Usually I just smile,
nod, but this time, I admitted, “There’s no
husband.” Maybe I wanted to prove something.
He was short, dark-haired, greasy-looking,
with dirt-stained overalls and an orange coat
he wore unzipped. His eyes kind of bulged,
like creatures I’ve dissected in past
science experiments. I wondered if those were
blood-stains on his chest. “You’re single?
What do you do?” “I teach.” “You
want to go out sometime?” He paused.
“I bet you never dated a tree farmer.”

An eighteen-wheeler careened past,
roar of wheels and water and engine.
I stared at my boots, wondered how
to get out of this one. “I’m Stan.

What’s your name?” “Iris,” I lied,
avoided his eyes. He shrugged,
hoisted the tree into my neighbor’s pickup.
Back on the highway, I sang to the radio,
windshield wipers flapping, tree flouncing in the truckbed. Sometimes it's not so bad, traveling alone, open road, pedal to the floor. No one to betray—no one to forgive.
Teaching Composition in Erie, Pennsylvania, or Madonna Should Never Write a Dating Column

I'm trying to write a funny poem about Madonna, about an interview the star granted recently with a Hungarian who kept asking her about her sex life.
The interviewer, for instance, asks Madonna, “When you met Carlos, were you dating many other people in your bed at the same time? And what was your book ‘Slut’ about?” (The actual book title, you may remember, is Sex. and I wonder: does sex equal slut in Hungaria?) The Hungarians, says her interviewer, like to hear her musical productions and “move their bodies in response.” He asks if she’s “a bold hussy-woman that feasts on men who are tops.” “Yes, yes,” she affirms, but she is “a woman, not a test mouse.” It’s winter in Erie, capitol of antidepressants. My poem comes out like a mix between a cookbook recipe and a textbook assignment. I try it rhyming. But what rhymes with Madonna? Lasagna? You wanna? How about Hungarian? Librarian? I’m wearing him? I scrawl: “I’m a woman, not a test mouse. Put your fingers on my dress blouse.” It’s not funny that it’s been gray in town for weeks, that I spend my time reading poorly constructed sentences when I chose to study literature for the love of good writing. And besides, my body, dying to be touched, hates Madonna, whose men trail after her like dogs following a steak, who is not being ironic when she says, “In America it is not considered mentally ill when a woman advances on her prey in a discotheque setting with cocktails.” I’d sooner kiss a toilet than go to a discotheque, but even my grandmother’s giving me dating advice: “What about joining a gym? I hear you can meet nice young men that way.” I sit at home imagining the five single men in Erie
with long nasal hairs and halitosis, or pale and doughy
selling fake wood furniture at Value City,
which is unfair and ridiculous, but my therapist tells me,
it’s okay, I’m exploring new dimensions of myself.
Well, new dimensions have done nothing
for my social life. And writing this poem
about Madonna, who’s obviously having
way more sex than I am, is just depressing.
Worms Dancing

Just last week it snowed. The shroud of winter for months has hung above our roofs like oil, but now blossoms dot the yard with color. Lemon, orange, and red, they spring from the soil like children in brightly colored shirts bursting from under blankets. One neighbor’s already out and poking in her yard, coiffed hair, blue knickers hiking toward her knees. Here come some boys on bikes across the lawn, they shout and land on only one wheel, skid toward home. They’re crazy with the knot of sex that’s thrusting from every bough and petal, so thick and new that even the worms emerge from dirt and shit to writhe and double from the thrill of it.
Pilgrimage

We make our way to this park, the end of Lincoln Ave, this patch of well-coifed grass: me, the couple in khakis, their hands buried in each other’s back pockets, the man on a bicycle, some teens shivering in T-shirts, their brown lab snuffling at the end of his leash. Below us the bay: shifting, impatient; the boathouse with its sailboats leaning elegantly to one side. Meanwhile, the sun’s peach eye sinks quickly toward the bay’s-edge. A man holding a blue coffee cup stands to my left. A woman huffs to the curb pushing a baby carriage. We are silent, shifting foot to foot. White smudged lines of an airplane crisscross above the sun, whose bottom has melted now into the water’s lap. A green Porsche slowly cruises past. A bird hovers above us then dives, and the sun’s a pale half dollar in a yowl of plum and scarlet. How the sky seems to reel with it then: that heft of fire descending, now copper, now chartreuse, now a darkened smear of gold, and we’re dumb, straining, lingering to the end, when we will turn back into strangers, but now, transfixed, we are one eye burning with glory.