

More Praise for Kevin Pilkington's Poetry

"In clean lines and tenderly orchestrated sentences Pilkington lets the inconsequentials we mostly live among add up to a life known and accepted, and rendered into an urban lyricism that reminds of Frank O'Hara, cut with a splash of Raymond Chandler."

—**Eamon Grennan**

"In the Eyes of a Dog is a bluesy, belated love song—a little dose of O'Hara and a touch of island music—to the one who abides, the city."

—**David Baker**

"There is a wide and magical sky over these beautifully-conceived and choreographed poems . . ."

—**Carol Muske-Dukes**

"It's thrilling to watch a poet create a world—fascinating when it turns out to be the one we live in."

—**Dennis Nurkse**

"Kevin Pilkington's narratives of daily life are tender and melancholy, lightened with a gentle surreal humor and a steadfast affection for the people and the city he is kin to."

—**Jean Valentine**

Where You Want to Be

New and Selected Poems

Kevin Pilkington



Black
Lawrence
Press

For Jack and Lillian Pilkington

*“When we are in love, we love the grass
And the barn, and the lightpoles,
And the small mainstreets abandoned all night.”*
—Robert Bly

*“As I went along my street, which mounts steeply,
I was gripped by a rhythm which took possession
of me and soon gave me the impression of some force
outside myself.”*
—Paul Valéry

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New Poems

Cannibalism Isn't What It Appears to Be

Cabs are getting too expensive.

One had windshield wipers that kept going
back and forth in time with every song
on the radio. I wasn't impressed and told

the driver don't even think about my paying
extra for it. He turned, looked at me
opened his mouth and let rocks fall out.
I just don't want to waste money and try

to make a little extra wherever I can.
When I didn't need a question mark
at the end of a sentence, I wrote to an
ex-girlfriend, I turned it upside down

until it looked like a saxophone and
pawned it in a shop downtown. I also want
to explain why my hand looks the way it does.
Last winter I was eating a pretzel the same

color as my gloves. By mistake, I bit into
my hand then couldn't finish the pretzel
since I was already full on my thumb
and index finger.

I will never make a mistake like that
again and have become a lot more careful
over the past few months. I have.
I really have.

A Manual for Urban Living

Most things begin here in this city.
When the A train runs uptown
it rattles an orchard in Texas
causing fruit to fall from trees.
And when a glass of beer is knocked
over in a bar on Tenth Avenue the sunset
spills across the sky on the West Coast.
I quickly found out that any street
stretching across town is a kind
of rope that anyone can trip over.
And when I heard a neighbor on
the first floor was found in his
living room hanging from a piece
of Third Avenue wrapped around his neck,
I decided to find out what was hanging
over my head.

On the clearest night I could find,
I took an elevator to the roof
of a high rise then kept going to look
for a piece of moon, a bit of star
anything that resembled the sky
before I moved here. Later I learned
how to say no beginning with a woman
at a party who asked me to get her
a glass of wine. I told her she shouldn't
since she was pregnant. She claimed

she wasn't—the truth was she swallowed
the world. After she walked away,
I just hoped whenever her water broke
it turned out to be the Atlantic.

Healthcare

Everything keeps changing
that's why I like to walk around
uptown—it has looked the same
for years and most buildings
resemble Cole Porter.

I haven't been sleeping much
and now keep my eyes in bags
so I won't lose them. Last week
I heard music coming from a jazz
club I walked by. Tired as usual,
I tripped over a horn solo knocking
a few notes on to the street a car ran over.

I just need things to slow down
and plan to bring the next year
to the nearest church since nothing
moves slower than a sermon
and ask the priest to place it in
his next on Sunday.

I used to tell the women I slept with
that they should wear high heels
when we were together. It was really
another way to deal better with the curves
life sent my way. I've grown since then
and now tell them to keep wearing
those stilettos since the air is cleaner
up there and better for their health.

And I've discovered what it means
to be passionate and committed—
it happens when I go to the park
on the West Side that is big enough
for drugs but thankfully too small for rape.
When I walk through its dry leaves
they sound like a rustling fire,
and I make sure to keep walking
until I burst into flames.

The Other Guy in the Song

*“So make it one for my baby
And one more for the road”
—Johnny Mercer/Harold Arlen*

I’m sitting at the far end of a bar
in a tavern on Third having a beer
before meeting a friend uptown in about
an hour. At the center of the bar sits a thin
guy around fifty in a gray suit and fedora—
the kind of hat all guys wore in those forties
black and white movies—resting on the back
of his head. He was here when I walked in
to get out of the rain that has finally stopped.
Now it’s dark out and neon lights from store
windows and signs are smeared across the street
like mascara on the face of a woman
who just stopped crying.

The guy in the suit between sips of his drink
talks to the bartender he calls Joe even though
his name is Nick and slurs, it’s a quarter
to three nobody in the place except you and me.
It’s really a quarter to six in the evening
and he is too far gone to notice me. When Nick
walks to the other end of the bar, the guy keeps
talking into his glass about losing his girlfriend,
how awful he feels, then downs the glass and orders
another for her, his baby, and one more for the road.

He keeps talking and starts to raise his voice
about putting a nickel in the machine,
the jukebox near the door and play
sad songs to match how bad he feels.
Before he begins to annoy me, I remember
how it feels and what he's going through. The last
woman I lived with one night told me
she was going out to buy a bottle of wine.
I didn't realize the liquor store would be in Paris.
So I decide to help him out even if I can't recall
any song costing a nickel. I take two quarters
from my pocket, go over to the jukebox and find
BB King and Joe Williams.

As I pass him going back to my seat,
his hat falls off; I pick it up with both hands
as if it were a plate with a steak on it
and place it next to him on the bar. He glances
at me, says he's a poet with a lot to say, then
turns back to his drink. No poet could ever
afford the suit he is wearing. He mumbles
he'll leave soon since Nick must be anxious
to close. I almost tell him to relax, nothing
is closing for at least another eight hours.

I see its time to leave and meet my friend
uptown, pay for my beer and as I walk past
him, he looks at me claiming again he has a lot
to say but has to be true to some code.
I gently pat him on the back, hope he gets home
safely and walk outside. I stand near the curb,
the air hasn't felt this good for a long time.

For some reason I feel better than I did an hour ago
so I take a deep breath filling my lungs with all
the midtown they can hold. In fact I feel even healthier,
stronger and to prove it I stop the next cab that comes by
with nothing more than lifting my right arm.

Viagra

I walk to the end of the block to get a better
look at the river. Where the sun reaches for waves
diamonds float. A tug slowly pushes a barge
scattering some as others rattle towards the river's bank.
Gulls flutter and slide over the tug's bow
like the whitecaps waves lost in strong winds.

The apartment across the way is how people
walk on other peoples' heads without falling off.
The building in back of it is as tall as I am
since we stand eye to roof. I just signed a new
lease to my apartment for another year
and had to write my name in black ink
making it look like the New York skyline at night.
The factory to the left must be manufacturing
Viagra to keep its smoke stack erect for so long
without going limp.

I realize this is not a view for everyone.
That's why I'm taking it to the diner two blocks
over and ask the cook who I know to place
it on the menu in between the pork chops and brisket
so anyone can see it's one of the day's specials.