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BEYOND THIS DARK HOUSE

GUY GAVRIEL KAY is the internationally bestselling author of ten novels, which have been translated into more than twenty languages. He lives in Toronto. For more information, visit his website at www.brightweavings.com.

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BEYOND THIS
DARK HOUSE

POEMS

GUY GAVRIEL KAY



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Volarono anni corti come giorni . . .



FOREWORD

After the lines

*If you were here with me tonight
the sea's sound might shape itself
into your name ...*

Guy Gavriel Kay adds,

*... I have
a mild facility that lets me turn
such phrases*

and I'd like to look at that addition, and that *facility*, for a minute. The facility is nothing to be uneasy about: it's the acquired, hard-earned access, on the part of a writer, to those great fields of tact and nuance (based, as they must be, on a wide and still wider experience of literature), which, once entered, need never be left. The thing you don't want to do with it (i.e., with the facility for, in this poet's case, coming up with the sound of a sea shaping itself into a beloved's name: a wholly original, I think, moment in one of the best poems in this collection) is to beach it among near-similar moments where its soft-edged glow will be hard to single out amid all the competing sparkle. And that's just what too many poets, even the ones who are capable of such moments, never manage to figure out—they just blunder on among the pyrotechnics, and before they know it, they're doing this all by themselves, since everybody else has gone home rubbing his eyes. Or hers. In this regard, what do we find here? Well, in a poem called "A Northern Man," which shifts from Greece ("renderings of blue [never before seen]") to London ("sunshine [that] / ... is a pale, soft, small gift"), comes "There was / no stinting, where I have been." It's that word *stinting* that I'm holding up for you to appraise, to know the worth of. The poem was crying out for just such a hard-scrabble, tight-bitten sound there, the "renderings of blue" needed it as much as the "pale, soft, small gift" needed it—and right on its cue, of course, there it was. How nice it would be if, among the profusion of melting constellations that keep on, year after year, coming at us from their publishers, a few other poets would learn how to respond to this kind of cry, this need.

It's what I've been admiring for years in Kay's novels, where time and again he sets his characters up for what's surely, we at first think, going to be a rerun of some welltravelled mythic tale of olden tyme—and then, by virtue of, let's say, his *facility*,

the writer lifts them into an astonishing newness, bringing off scenes that I, an ungenerous, blade-between-his-teeth critic if there ever was one, am lifted up by as I recognize that this scene that I had glimpsed coming and was already regretting the glimpse, is, *bon Dieu*, against all my tired certainties, convincing, substantial, very often beautiful, moving, mind-halting. There's a passage in *The Last Light of the Sun* (it's the one where a just-slain prince is glimpsed riding his horse across a stream in the company of a fairy queen and her retinue—i.e., everything that you might think would spell disaster for the twenty-first-century writer foolhardy enough to attempt it) that I defy you to read without getting into the face-dampening thing we critics try hard to steer clear of. I don't know another writer in this country who could have managed those three or four pages. *Beyond This Dark House* lives off poems that come from the same unique sensibility.

—Don Coles

BEYOND THIS
DARK HOUSE

Night Drive: Elegy

Driving through Winnipeg this autumn
twilight, a sensation has lodged
somewhere behind my breastbone
(impossible to be more precise).
It is at once a lightness and a weight,
press of memory and a feeling
as if tonight has insufficient
gravity to keep me from
drifting back, so many
long years after leaving here.

Quiet streets, the slowly darkening
sky (it can take a while). I turn
on Waterloo and stop outside the house
where we first lived. No curtains drawn
on the living room windows. I can see
into the past, almost. The willow in front
is very tall now. My parents planted it.

We played football on this lawn
(and the next one down, and next,
as we grew older, needed room to run).
Used the willow sapling when cutting
pass patterns, slicing in front of it
to shake a defender. I hear
my mother from the porch, 'Don't
break the tree!' A car approaches,
slows, someone looks at me
in the gathering night, moves on.

So do I, gliding a little further
to Mathers Bay, where we'd race
our bikes, the finish line
right at the intersection,
so we'd be flying flat-out
and sometimes have to brake
in a squeal and sideways skid
(black tire marks on the road)
if a car was coming east.
I wouldn't let my sons do that today.

The houses along the bay,

down to the curve and back
up the other side, were homes of friends
or girls I longed for, and their
parents—men and women mostly
dead now. Each address marks
a grave. Ghosts water the night
lawns, rake leaves under stars,
look up as I coast by
and then turn away, as if politely,
not to seem to stare as this rented car
stops again, this time outside
our second home, the one
my parents built when I was nine.
I am heavy and light tonight,
entangled and drifting, both
at once. The city
is so full of my father.

I used to ride with him to Saturday
morning rounds at the hospital.
Proud, anxious not to show it (Why
was that? Did he know?) as we'd step
off the elevator and onto a post-op ward.
I'd read a book by the nursing station
then cross the street to the
Salisbury House (long gone now)
and order two sandwiches, a milkshake
and a coffee, but only at the exact
minute he'd told me to. And he'd
arrive from his last patient just
as the waitress set the food in front of me.
I'm guessing he'd watch from the window
or door, to time it so exactly, for his son.

East on Mathers now, imagining kids
on bikes careening into my path forty
years ago. Waverley, and south. I'd
hitchhike this route to campus, winter
mornings, dreaming of away, anywhere
away. My parents had their first
date at a nightclub out here on
Pembina Highway. My father just back
from overseas. She thought he was
phony-British, using words like 'chap'
and 'bloody,' all night long. Still, (she'd
later tell her sons), that night she

went home to Enniskillen Avenue and woke her mother. Sat on the edge of the bed and said she thought she'd met a man she could love.

We never tired of that story.
Our pretty mother, barely into her twenties,
her immediate certainty, the dashing
image of our father, home from away,
winning a woman for himself.

The city's quiet on a Thursday night.
The forecast was rain but the sky's been clear,
the air cooling down; football
games and burning leaves. Back north now,
on what seems to have become
a night drive entirely unplanned. I steer
with one hand at twelve o'clock and
an elbow out the open window.

The downtown 'Y' has been demolished.
My Uncle Jack would take me there
on Sunday mornings for a steam and
a swim. Such a sweet man. White hair
my father always joked of envying, ruefully
shaking his head in admiration. Dad's
was a duller, white-grey, nondescript. Except,
it seems, the morning of the day he was
killed in Florida, my mother said to
him over breakfast, 'Sam, look at your
hair! It's white as Jack's!' Salt water,
winter sun, had bleached it bright.
I imagine my father surprised
and pleased, and thinking of his brother
when he took that last walk
with the dog along the coastal highway
in too much twilight.

There seems to be no crossing of streets
tonight where I can avoid
hitting my father or myself. Wellington
Crescent now, west towards the park
where I first kissed some girls, broke up
with others, dreamed of going away. My father
took a troopship to England in the
last year of the war, stayed over there
in Scotland for five years, came back,

married, had three sons.

He taught each of us to catch a football, lost deliberately (to each of us) in table tennis, grimacing elaborately at a drive mis-hit into the net, not fooling anyone. He'd look shocked, shocked when we accused him of letting us win, as if the idea couldn't have even crossed his mind. He quizzed me before high school tests, tsking with dismay at wrong answers that were clear evidence of insufficient application. He worked so hard.

I think we knew that, even very young, but still assumed he'd have infinite time and room for us. I wince, tonight, remembering the absolute sureness of that. How did he elicit so much certainty? I wonder if he ever looked for and found clear signs of his own nature in three very different sons, or if that kind of thinking required too much vanity.

I liked coming home from a downtown appointment with him. Walking to the Mall Medical Building, waiting in the doctors' lounge, listening to the talk of football and politics, grabbing myself a Coke from the little fridge, and then the feel of the room altering as he came in, loosening his tie, hanging up the white coat, raising an eyebrow at my soft drink before dinner. The drive back home, just the two of us, end of a work day. He'd steer with one hand at twelve o'clock and an elbow out the open window. No one ever born had hands I'd ever rather feel enclosing mine. Then. Now. The day the son we named for him was born.

If it was summer, turning west on Grant, the sunlight would be on us. We'd put the visors down. (I was too short for that to help, but copied him.) Or it might have been

darker, cooler, under a prairie sky
in a twilight like the one that started
and compels these images,
if it was autumn then, as it is now,
above this ground of memories.

Heaviness, and that so-strange
sense of weightlessness. I thought,
before, I couldn't locate these feelings
precisely within myself. Not so,
in the end. They reside, together,
anywhere my father was in this city
and in me, which is pretty much
everywhere, and he's been
dead too many years now already,
with more years and more years
and more long years of being gone
still to come.



PART
ONE

Crystals

Diamonds overhead.
We walk on crystals
sharp as longing.
When you touched me
I thought my heart
would crash through
my breastbone to lie,
pulsing and impossible,
on your bed. A screen
door banged across
the lane instead.
We heard a late car
on the street. Summer,
that was. I wanted
the sea, an island, more.
You wanted tenderness.
I felt the bone and
cartilage that held
my heart. Dreamed
of crystals,
sharper, even.

No Strings

He will not let himself
need her. He has too far to go
he says, no strings.

Her hair that first afternoon
was afire with sunlight.
I thought it would melt the snow.
Walked home in winter twilight,
her name beginning in my head.

In dreams he moves along
distant beaches in fierce solitude.
He thrills to the tight hum
of the right words coming.

She writes, 'Convent education doesn't
make a hedonist. I must make this person
over in my own image.' I wish
she were with me tonight.
She called, very late, just to

whisper a good night that ran
along the humming wires
stretched from pole to pole

over the silver-white snow
and under the early spring stars
to us. No strings. Her hair.

Other Women, And You

I've written good bye songs
for other women.
Told how my resolve
was loosened with their hair.

Not for you. No poem
about your blue eyes
luring me from the blue
seas of Greece.

Too deep the knife
you have become.
Too near the place
that signifies
bone. Not for you:

remembering our last
meeting, your last words,
eyes on the glass of wine
in both your hands.

I wanted you so much,
shaken by the tenderness in me
for you. Not for you, those songs. This.

Ransacked

There are no shadows
in the dream. The sun
is very bright. The wind
exceeds expectation.

Ransacked, we watch
everything blow away
and everything, blowing away,
watches us recede.

Soon, without appearing to move,
we are far from each other,
and I seem to have arrived
where no one needs my love.

The wind is done. Shadows
slide into place, bringing stars.
And then, in the dream, she comes,

her hands spilling moonlight,
to accept the sacrifice
with the naming of her name.

Windrise

Agia Galini, Crete

Two hours ago,
moonlit with shadows,
I walked Libby down
to her room by the harbour.

The village dark, sea quiet,
slight chill and shiver
as we said good night.

Back up the hill alone,
through various provinces,
then an apparition in the street:

gaunt, bearded, Tomas
in a hooded robe, long-striding,
passing me unseeing, a dream.

Mine? His? Venus,
after I went by, was bright
as a wound in the eastern sky.

The wind rising now at dawn,
the waves white-edged.
Edge of day, of everything,
of absolutely everything.