

A WHOLE GREATNESS ∞ Kathryn Gray

FROM MY RECALL, I FIRST met Douglas Dunn in early 1999, although this will likely be news to the great man. Back then, whatever the weather, every Saturday without fail, I went to worship at my church on London's South Bank: The National Poetry Library. I was living in a cold bedsitter during this period, barely making ends meet. Yet that hardly mattered at all. Poetry had entered my life, and the world seemed full of possibility. I was bold and tenacious (in ways that frankly astonish me now) and impossibly green and capacious, too—desperate to read and learn, learn and read, to transform. Articulating myself out of vagueness and towards a mission was an exhilarating if uneven journey—as it is for most poets, starting out. I was mostly directionless intensity. So many words, but what to say? Then: an important breakthrough, one of those rainy Saturdays.

When you're young, it can frequently seem as if the universe has specific designs on you. Or, perhaps, it only feels that way in retrospect, from the distant country of middle age. The way I remember it now, a copy of Dunn's classic debut, *Terry Street*, its striking vintage Faber cover facing out, was propped on a table in the library: unmissable, commanding my absolute attention. As it turned out, *Terry Street*, with its vivid portraiture of working-class lives in Hull, would play a key influencing role in settling my first beginning: I would focus, principally, on social dynamics, and attempt to invest ostensibly ordinary lives and environment with an extraordinariness, although not uncritically so. Dunn, of course, was an outsider in Hull, and this would be important for my own project. Despite being born and raised in Wales, I somehow never felt quite part of it: *looking* rather than *being*. *Well, how hard could this be?* I thought. Oh, youthful hubris! Once you come to find your subject, if left solely to their own devices, the poems very often seem to write themselves. For better and, indeed, for worse, mine certainly did. As was my general tendency then, I had failed to understand that Dunn's apparently effortless phrasemaking and the ease of his line were the products of a preternatural talent and painstaking discipline that were far, far beyond my capacity, in both proportion and temperament. But *Terry Street* was a great gift. I would likely never have written my first book without it.

Before my debut's publication, I emailed Dunn, seeking an endorsement—a somewhat audacious cold call, given that, up to that point, we'd only ever met in my mind, across the pages of his poems. I expected nothing but, of course, I hoped for everything. To my surprise, he responded, making no promises but agreeing to look at the manuscript. A few weeks later, true astonishment: an endorsement of such generosity. I have never forgotten that kindness or what it meant to me. At the time, I didn't know what I know now: Dunn is not only a master craftsman—he has also had exceptional form in supporting emerging voices through the years. It is perhaps the measure of a *whole* greatness—of poet *and* of person—to be an encourager, rather than to pull up the drawbridge.

Eventually, not long after, in 2005, we really did meet. At an awards afterparty, Douglas—completely unassuming amid all the poetry hoopla and jockeying, and with such warmth—turned to me and said something I'll not commit to the page, because I still hope that one day I can make it my truth.