PART III
ENZIO'S KINGDOM, AND OTHER POEMS

III
A LETTER FROM JOHN KEATS TO FANNY BRAWNE
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TO FANNY BRAWNE

Rome, December, 1820

I had not thought to ever taste again
The mellowness of living. But today
The fever's less, the creeping end is only
A warm tide of luxurious weariness
And steady, rich discernment, rare of late.
This mild Italian autumn of tarnished leaves,
The sunshine thick like yellow muscadel
With nectarous smell of overripe bruised fruits,
The autumn feel of pause, accomplishment,
Finality almost, and tears behind,
Have so infected me with their serene
That I experience wisdom without wisdom's pain. . . .
I can recall such hours before we met,
But none or few thereafter. . . No, that's not true:
No wisdom calmed my days before we met;
Their best was heartless crystalline delight,
Such as a bird must feel mounting the sunrise;
While this mood in its peace seems posthumous,
The spent year's spell, in which I see my life
And all our love rounded and closed like music. . .
Now in a day or two, at most a month,
I shall be sleeping in a dreamy place
Where Severn says the springtime is wet blue
With violets and smoothest red and white
With cool camellias, fit for tapestry.
You must not worry. 'Twill be a quiet sleeping
Under this sky, so beautiful, yet not
The sky of home. . . . Before that dull time comes
I must un Venom all my old reproaches
And tell you how, gauging the whole strange tale
Of our sweet love, I find there only comfort —
No anguish, no regret — and in my heart
Nothing of love except love's tenderness.

I thought, I tried to think, my suffering
Was passion's unfulfilment, the divorce
Of you and me by poverty, disease.
But now I know — I always knew, I think —
The cause was simpler and incurable.
That I have suffered from this love of ours
You know too well for me in kindness now
To half gainsay. But you could never know
How much your hand at rest on Brown's firm shoulder
Above my invalid's chair could torture me;
Or how, when your so longed-for letters came —
That never said enough — I had no strength
To open them, but covered them with kisses,
Like any scullery maid, and broke the seal
Each time with all the dreadful pang of heartbreak.
Ah, pain enough, dear girl, and pain to spare,
But through no fault of yours, for you are faultless!
At last I dare to recognize the cause
Of why I found love like a bloody sweat:
You could not love me but in your own way,
And that — that was a way that was not mine.
I had known much of grief, too much of death,
And never been the comrade of good fortune;
My passion had no lightness and no grace,
It burned me up — a death pyre by the sea
At night, its red light putting out the stars.
There was no moment of the day or night
I did not hunger for you. I saw your face,
Your throat, your hair, more real, more tangible
Than anything within my true eyes' vision;
Your rare low words of love, your thoughtless laughter,
Haunted my hearing like a song remembered...
I cannot think what my love meeting love
As fearful as itself had ended in!
Yours was the love it met, and so that thought
Is speculative.... Yours was the love, my dearest,
And you were just eighteen — not Guinevere,
Francesca, or Iseult, but merely Fanny —
If less than they in majesty of mind,
Their equal in the accident of beauty.
How could I hope that I could be to you
The rudiment and base of happiness,
The dovecot of all thoughts, the fold of dreams,
The desert fountain, as you were to me?
Who had expected, if the fragrant Psyche
Had fled from Greece and turned an English girl,
That she should mourn all day the missing Eros
And not be friendly with the English boys,
Touching their hands and dancing in their dances,
Laughing with them, untroubled by her love?
It was too much to hope that you should sicken
Because love wounded me. You loved me — yes —
And were as kind as mothers to their children.
But, oh, you loved me with a girl's light love,
And could have loved as easily another!
That was the unslaked thirsting of my life
And that the poisoned knowledge I abhorred....
You see how gentleness was difficult
And why oft times I blamed you without cause,
Conceding not at all that you and I
Were made to hurt each other, being made
By different gods, in different moods, removed
By nature and conjoined by cynic chance.

That's past; forget with me its bitterness,
Remembering instead that out of this
Impossible, precipitous, starved love
Came all that I may claim of worth and beauty —
(I'd like to think you'd care to read these words
Slowly and more than once, they mean so much) —
You, who took all I had, gave all I have.
You were not wholly Madeleine, perhaps,
Nor even that Belle Dame who wrought such woe,
But had your loveliness not pierced my soul
And stolen my peace and made me friend of anguish,
I should have written in their stead, no doubt,
Another and as poor Endymion.
Even the nightingale was poignant by
Your absence, and lacking you I learned of her
Her secret, and found me shelter from love's cold
In beauty's house.... My glistening perfect garlands,
Woven of ilex dark and polished bay,
Should not in justice lie across the threshold
Of that high temple of the god of song,
But on your doorstep, like a sweetheart's posy.
Then, too, love brings with his fine cruelty
Such fellowship of tears and sense of sorrow
Without you I was intimate with gods
And sylvan deities and fairy folk,
Wept at romances in a dog-eared book,
And found a song more moving than live pain.
But these last days, with all my singing stopped,
I am amazed to find stored up in me
Compassion's very substance and a glow
Of human pity never dreamed before.
I see my kinship with the dreadful world
And, healed of youthful blindness, recognize
The brotherhood of grief. There is no warmth
Of poesy or bliss so purged and fierce
As this that lives about my naked heart
Since I have made discovery of man.
I watch them from my window here at Rome,
And not a face but tells beneath its masque
Of some such commonplace as death or fear
Or passion starved or passion fed to grossness.
And in the night when Severn thinks I sleep
I watch the pale processional stream past —
Humanity, like wounded from a battle.
Oh, all the eyes quenched out that once were stars!
Oh, all the lips that sag and blench with pain!
Eternal loneliness in search of love!
I know their secret, taste their hidden tears,
And, one of them, to each one stretch my arms... . .
Aged twenty-four! And as I'm leaving it
I understand the world — because of you!
Shakespeare, you know, had fifty years or more,
Yet I could talk with him and not feel young.
Well, I'll not keep you longer reading words
That may or may not have a meaning in them.
Severn (who should be friendship's synonym
And lacks in nothing but a woman's touch)
Will soon be running up the stairs and stand
Aghast to find me wasting thus my strength.
When I have calmed him I shall beg for those
Light-hearted and ethereal filigrees
Haydn and Mozart made of silver sound.
They cool me . . . almost as much as one cool hand
That used to stroke my forehead. Oh, not yet,
Not yet, ask me to write the last farewell!
I wish it could be just one breathed caress,
Lingering, like a prayer, and unlike those
You were familiar with and maybe loved.
O Fanny, how I long for you to fathom
All, all the tenderness and thanks I feel,
Here turning in the doorway of dumb death,
For you. You are so far away and lonely!
I see you as the wistfulest thing alive,
So young and unadvised and full of joy,
Irrevocably travelling down the years
To meet irrevocable dark misfortune,
With beauty for your weak and sole defense
And lust of living for your only guide.
Not to be close where you could call to me,
Not to lean over you when tears must come
And you be trampled by the brutal world —
There's the one last regret that dying has! . . .
Someone will take my place in that respect. . . .
I will not say I envy him — O God —
But that I wish him some such gentleness
As mine, and power to protect far greater. . . .
Do not remember me if memory hurts.
Good-bye, bright star, good-bye. God bless you, Fanny.