

PART III  
ENZIO'S KINGDOM, AND OTHER POEMS

III  
A LETTER FROM JOHN KEATS TO FANNY BRAWNE

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A LETTER FROM JOHN KEATS  
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 unvenom 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 Iscult, 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 dovecote 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 ofttimes 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 laves 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.

