My Father in the New World

> *Those Americans will, I am afraid, still fleece you.* —John Keats in a letter to his brother George living in Louisville, Kentucky, 1819

Those Americans will, I am afraid, still fleece you,
a covered bridge for sale, a little three-card monte.
A can-do folk, those Americans will please you

till you're back around your fire and all the increase you
had counted on (a penny saved) amounts to…
(check your wallet…). One flees, you

think, to a farther shore. The breeze you
dreamed of tumbles from its purple mountain.
But disembark and there's no one to police you

but yourself, the prairies you
gaze on wider than the ocean. Their shaggy monsters
turn their swollen heads away; the fleas you

thought too small to bite you bite you. Grease your
squeaky wheel moaning to
your shoulder, the grindstone polishing your

nose. Their music almost overwhelmed the pleas you
muttered once. Your letters: *With felicity, yours—*
Pay your money to

the boatman. An expert, soon his pole will ease you.

Statement of Poetic Research

John Keats's admonition to his brother George in an 1819 letter seems warranted: "Those Americans will, I am afraid, still fleece you." He continued, "I cannot help thinking Mr Audubon has deceived you." He meant John James Audubon, the great American naturalist and painter of birds. George Keats and Mr. Audubon were to buy a steamboat together, but George, ignorant of Audubon's insolvency, lost his investment. As Nicholas Roe notes in his fine biography, *John Keats*, "Audubon was already being pursued by five creditors…." George would lose money in another steamboat debacle a few years later.

George had sailed from London to Philadelphia with his wife, Georgiana, in July 1818, settling finally in Louisville, Kentucky. The Keatses moved up in Louisville society via much hard work, not all of it their own. Adopting, too well, the customs of the American South, George paid for slave labor in his sawmill and later purchased three slaves. Older brother John—whose sonnet "To Kusciusko" praised the Polish revolutionary and was published in the abolition-supporting *The Examiner*—would have, had he lived, denounced the cruel expediencies of his much-loved brother. But George had come, after all, to America, where Manifest Destiny would soon become a national autoimmune disease, and whose citizens, said de Tocqueville, would ask only, "how much money will it bring in?"

1. George and Tom Keats, respectively, each painted by Joseph Severn. Photo courtesy of Steve Kronen.

2. Life mask of John Keats. Photo courtesy of Steve Kronen.

3. Death mask of John Keats. Photo courtesy of Steve Kronen.

4. Fanny Brawne. Photo courtesy of Steve Kronen.

Slave ownership aside, George has not always fared well in various Keats biographies. Returning briefly to England in 1820 to buttress his failing

finances, George sailed back, with John’s consent, to America a few weeks later with over four-fifths of the siblings’ small, entangled, and dwindling inheritance. “That was not fair—was it?” John complained to his friend Charles Brown. John’s fiancée, Fanny Brawne, though mindful of George’s money problems, later called George’s pie slicing “extravagant and selfish.”

While in London, George attended the theater, dinners, and a party but, according to W. Jackson Bate’s magisterial biography, *John Keats,* he “did not even have time to see his sister Fanny…but wrote her a pleasant though hurried note from Liverpool.” (Denise Gigante in *The Keats Brothers* states that George did see 17-year-old Fanny once, but that Fanny came to George.) Brother and sister corresponded through the years but did not see each other again.

5. Fanny Keats Llanos later in life. Photo courtesy of Steve Kronen.

6. Joseph Severn, self portrait. Photo courtesy of Steve Kronen.

7. The Keats Shelley House and Spanish Steps in Rome. Photo courtesy of Steve Kronen.

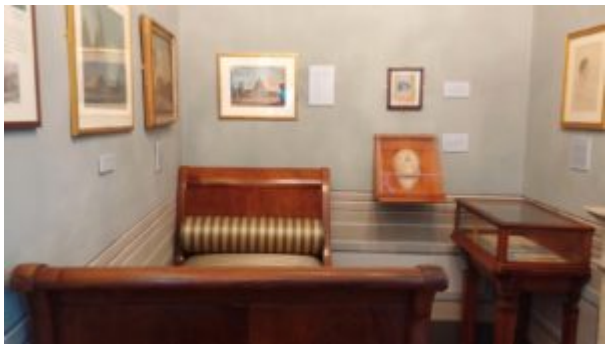
8. Keats's and Severn's graves in the Protestant Cemetery. Pyramid of Cestius under repair in the background. Photo courtesy of Steve Kronen.

John Keats never married Fanny Brawne, partly from lack of funds but mostly due to his failing health. The youngest Keats brother, 19-year-old Tom, had died of consumption in December 1818 and John, despite his apothecary surgeon's license and bedside attendance, could not help him. Nine years before that, the 14-year-old John had tried to nurse their mother dying from the same disease. By 1820, John, too, was infected. Retreating to warmer Rome, he died in 1821 at the age of 25; Fanny Brawne's unopened letters were laid with him in his grave. "[To] see her handwriting would break my heart…to see her name written would be more than I could bear."

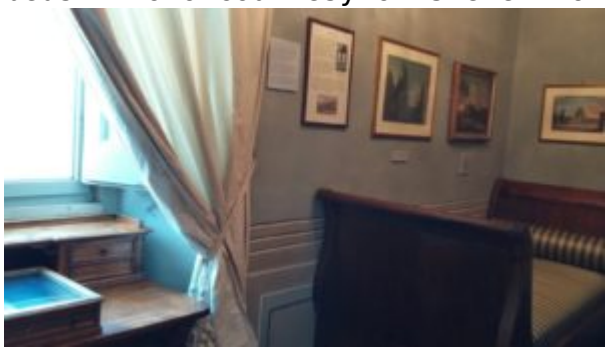
George, a month or so later, anticipating the worst, received the news in Louisville where his prospects via George Keats & Company would improve for some years as the country recovered from the 1819 panic.

John's warning about those wily Americans was the springboard for my poem, "My Father in the New World." It speaks of John's concern for his brother, but also speaks presciently of George's adopted home where hunger for gold would give rise to Goldman Sachs, where one could raid an Indian village or, some day, a pension fund. In a *caveat emptor* empire, opportunity knocks or knocks you out. My poem reflects how it knocked out my father, who couldn't much tell a jab from a feint. My father was the Cleveland-born son of newly emigrated Russian Jews, and had, I suspect, absorbed from his parents the unease of the outsider. Over time, he was a realtor, an insurance salesman, the purveyor of dime-store

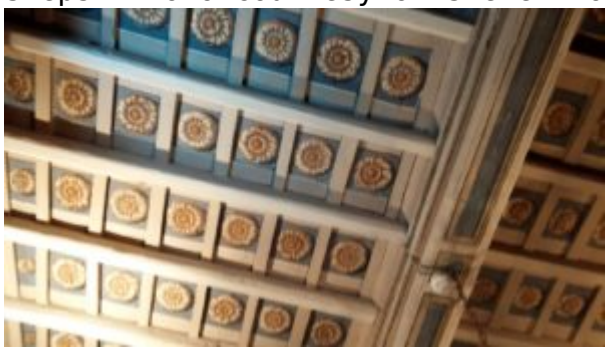
knick-knacks, and an ad hoc cab driver. He learned to speak a pidgin Business (the lingua franca of his parents' new home) but spoke it always with the hint of an accent and the forced bonhomie of one who masks (even from himself) a longing for the Old Country, which, for my dad, did not exist.



9. Keats's room in the Keats-Shelley House. The bed is a replica of the era's beds. Photo courtesy of Steve Kronen.



10. Keats's room in the Keats-Shelley House. The window overlooks the Spanish Steps. Photo courtesy of Steve Kronen.



11. Ceiling in Keats's room. Photo courtesy of Steve Kronen.

"My Father in the New World" is a villanelle (for celebrated examples, see Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle Into that Good Night," and Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art"). I've always found the form not only haunting but indicting. That is, each time the rhyming repeated lines (lines 1 and 3 of the first stanza) come round again in subsequent stanzas, they carry greater weight, and what might be an off-hand observation at the beginning of the poem becomes an undeniable and perhaps terrifying truth by the villanelle's end. I've played

with the form slightly in the last stanza here, and, likewise, instead of the designated rhyme words' prescribed repetitions in the subsequent lines, I have replaced them (for the fun of playing with the tradition) with homonyms. Thus, instead of the first stanza's respective *fleece you* and *please you*, I've altered them each time so that we get *flees you/ fleas you/ felicity, yours*; alternating with *police you/ polishing your/ pleas you/ pole will ease you*. I've loaded "My Father in the New World" with American clichés about diligence and industry, but end it with a reference to Charon, via the flatboat pilot who would eventually ferry all the Keatses, Fanny Brawne, Charles Brown, Audubon, my father, and, sooner or later, reader and writer, across his wide river.

Research has included two visits to Wentworth Place in Hampstead (now a London suburb) where John Keats lived for nearly two years with his friend Brown. For a while, the Brawne family shared the residence with the two young men, living in the house's larger, partitioned-off section. I visited, too, the beautiful Keats-Shelley House where Keats died in Rome. The museum hosts paintings and memorabilia of Keats and his immediate circle, but also of Shelley, Byron, others, and of Victorians who revered Keats. I looked up at the tall, square-patterned, flower-carved ceiling that Keats stared at for much of his three months there. Immediately outside one bedroom window is the famous Spanish Steps. From the other window of the narrow six-by-fifteen-foot room overlooking the broad Piazza di Spagna, Keats dumped the awful food prepared for him and his companion, Joseph Severn, in protest. The meals, cooked in the landlady's *trattoria* downstairs, improved thereafter.

The artist Joseph Severn had accompanied Keats to Rome from London, valiantly attending to Keats until the poet's death on February 23. Severn himself spent many years in Rome and died there in 1879. He is buried next to his friend at the very lower left of the Protestant (i.e., non-Catholic) cemetery laid out behind the Roman Pyramid of Cestius. Shelley's grave is close by, upward to the right.

Fiancée Fanny Lindon, née Brawne, (whose father and brother both died of consumption) passed away in 1865. Sister Fanny Llanos, née Keats, died in Madrid in 1889. Her future husband, Valentin Llanos, coincidentally met John in Rome three days before John died. George, ruined by the 1837 Panic, died in 1841 on Christmas Eve in his Louisville mansion, "the Englishman's palace."

Further Reading

I have relied here mostly on modern biographies of John Keats, starting with W. Jackson Bates's Pulitzer Prize-winning *John Keats* (1963), *John Keats* by Andrew Motion (1998), Stanley Plumley's deeply felt meditation on Keats, *Posthumous Keats*, Nicholas Roe's meticulous *John Keats* (2012), and Denise Gigante's *The Keats Brothers: The Life of John and George.* I have not yet read, but would be remiss if I did not mention, *George Keats of Kentucky: A Life,* by Lawrence M. Crutcher (2012).

The earliest Keats biography was *The Life of John Keats: A memoir by Charles Armitage Brown*. Brown worked on it intermittently and sadly from 1829 until 1841. He never published it, but sent it to Richard Monckton Milnes who incorporated much of the material into his 1848 *Life, Letters, And Literary Remains of John Keats*, digitally available in a PDF format. Other earlier biographies include Sir Sidney Colvin's 1917 *John Keats—His Life and Poetry, His Friends, Critics and After-Fame,* (digitally available here), and Amy Lowell's two-volume *John Keats* (1925).

The following sites are also helpful. The invaluable Harvard Keats Collection contains what for me is the treasure of a Severn sketch of a stark, dying John. This drawing, unlike Severn's famous Keats deathbed drawing ("28 Janry 3 o'clock mng. Drawn to keep me awake – a deadly sweat was on him all this night,"), is not in any of the Keats books or sites that I know of. As a bonus, the Harvard drawing contains, too, apparently, a list in Severn's hand of the books he and Keats were respectively reading or seeking. Other helpful sites are Keats House, Hampstead; Keats-Shelley House, Rome; and English History—Keats.

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Steve Kronen's poetry collections are *Splendor* (2006), and *Empirical Evidence* (1992). His work has appeared in *The New Republic*, *The American Scholar*, *Poetry*, *Agni*, *The American Poetry Review*, *Little Star*, *The Georgia Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Slate*, and *The Yale Review*. He has received an NEA, three Florida Individual Artist fellowships, the Cecil Hemley Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America, the James Boatwright Prize from *Shenandoah*, and fellowships from Bread Loaf, and the Sewanee Writers' Conferences. He is a librarian in Miami, Florida, where he lives with his wife, novelist Ivonne Lamazares, and their daughter, Sophie.